

ON THE WORK OF ANDREJ DUBRAVSKY

BY NORMAN ROSENTHAL

The orthodoxies of art today are surprisingly puritanical. Many of the subjective realities that lie buried in each and everyone of us—and in the psyche of each sensitive artist especially—are lost in self-conscious searches for essentially abstract and critical metaphors, where the alienation principle seems to reign supreme, disguising subjective realities and obsessions. Directly expressive figurative painting seems to play an ever more marginal role within the large field of legitimized contemporary art. We clearly now live in a world of exponentially expanded technological possibilities of making and reproducing imagery. Where can old-fashioned painting—oil or acrylic color on often large duck canvases, such as are employed with a very idiosyncratic style and subject matter by the young painter AD—fit into the scheme of art today? It is not as though the world of art is not on the constant lookout for young talented practitioners of painting, still one of the most direct ways of expressing a subjectively obsessive world picture. Part of the problem might be the difficulty of confronting the reality of the painting itself in an age of endless reproduction on the screen, which, even more than in a book or magazine, makes the true quality of surface and touch, even simple size, so all-important in determining value, difficult if not impossible to assess. The only way of looking at a painting is direct contact with the original to fully understand what used commonly to be described as its tactile value.

AD comes from Bratislava, the capital of a small central European country, far from the centre of art things, even if Vienna—that once glorious capital of a great Empire—is very nearby. The more famous city's dreams of cultural significance—which paradoxically even now likes to believe it invented the modern world, exposing sexual neurosis and tension as the driver and locus of the contemporary as we understand it—culturally became marginalized one hundred years ago, now almost to the day, with the outbreak of World War I. In that sense of delayed time and provincial place in the best sense, it is unsurprising that AD's ambitiously conceived painting should be so suffused with hedonistic contemporary danger. It has thus special attraction to the likes of myself, who has also long been transfixed by the subjective realities of an artist such as Georg Baselitz. For all his fame achieved after a lifetime of work and exposure, the latter great artist's worldview, as expressed through his art, is still possessed by an Antonin Artaud-inspired sense of direct sexual confrontation that has little in common with the orthodoxies of the modern art industry of today.

How does one stumble upon a young artist today? Usually through the mediation of another artist, and in the case of AD, I was introduced to him by a well known Chinese-North American artist living in New York. They had made contact via social media, became friends, and admired of each other's art. AD had already, whilst still a student at the Bratislava Academy of Art, been taken up by a well known art dealer from Prague and Berlin, and has shown his paintings in both cities, and his work recently has been bought by the museum of his hometown. He was in New York, showing at an art fair, and I liked both paintings I saw. The person I then met was attractive and intelligent in his understanding of art and its earlier history. In this world of thousands if not millions attempting to make their way in the business of art, the only true way of establishing new intelligence about artists is through the grapevine meeting, however chance-like that might appear on the surface. I was impressed, and continue to be impressed with his highly charged paintings of naked or near naked masculine figures—executed in a thinly and rapidly painted palette of browns and blacks with touches of white, giving the paintings themselves a ghostly, yet fearless, bravura quality.

AD's paintings indeed hark back to earlier expressive worlds, a century ago, of an artistic revolution inhabited by Egon Schiele and Oskar Kokoschka in Vienna, and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Otto Mueller in Dresden, the latter two part of the groundbreaking group of artists based around 1910 in Dresden and known collectively as Die Brücke or the Bridge. In so far as a sense of place is important in art, and it is, one can indeed observe that Bratislava lies halfway between Vienna and Dresden. The best paintings done in that now seemingly quite distant past were invariably filled with

naked bathers and other scenes of subjective sexuality and tension that reflect the transgressive obsessions of that age. Although there are human constants in the representation of sexuality, there is also that intangible thing known as the zeitgeist that reflects in both style and content the particular nuances that characterize a time, its freedoms and its repressions and a genius that lies in a place. Freedoms such as AD is able to enjoy and depict are reflections of these imperatives—he is both an expression and even a prisoner of his arguably dangerous and personal modes of thinking—from which he has no intention of letting us, his viewers, escape, any more or less than did Vladimir Nabokov, writing in an other age, when describing Lolita and those who surrounded her. Political incorrectness is indeed sometimes required in order to arrive at genuine truths about the human psyche.

As it happens, AD shows extraordinary empathy and knowledge, uncommon in his age, of the history of European painting, which, in his paintings and deliberately lascivious collages made with the modern techniques of Photoshop, playfully places the present onto the past—or maybe the reverse, the past onto the present. These collages, with prescient precision and cultural connectedness, come with memories of Correggio—a painter and contemporary of Michelangelo who, living like AD in a context of relative provinciality far from Rome, Florence, or Venice, was in his own time, now centuries ago, able to advance both compositionally and technically into daringly charged new territory. AD also instinctively senses affinities with Watteau and his younger near-contemporaries, Boucher and Fragonard, great masters of 18th-century French painting, always endlessly erotically suggestive in their choice of subject matter. AD's infectious connections with such aspects of the imagery and art of a European past stem from a delightful inquisitiveness concerning the hedonism of vanished ages that, for instance, in pre-revolutionary France, that “allowed” a writer like the Marquis de Sade to fearlessly write down his transgressive, radical thoughts. But it is on the painting of past masters that AD draws in his own painting. He visits museums and picture galleries with genuine interest—one of the greatest of all old master collections is in Vienna, just half an hour distant from Bratislava—but equally draws from books, the new ubiquitous media resources of the imagery of old master paintings now so easily available. AD examines this endless world with intelligent discrimination. He does the same also with the nature around him, also writ large in his painting, as he roams Bohemia's woods, fields, and rivers. He gazes with fascination at the habits, forms and colors of small fish and insects, such as the preying mantis, which becomes for him a half-sinister equivalent of the skinny young men that wade through the waterways of the artist's imagination. Also there are the bigger fleshier guys that recall in their human shapes the big Flemish women of Rubens and his lesser known but magnificent student Jacob Jordaens. If you do not know their work go to your nearest picture gallery or, easier still, check out images on the web. There you will find amazing artists of the seventeenth century with a deliberately restricted palette, but an unending voluptuousness and unashamed joy in the depiction of lovemaking they were able to translate into painting. AD emulates this in a very modern way, with his self-imposed restraint to shades of black, gray, and white, with only an occasional touch of color, to give us a perspective of the world drawn from within his imagination. It is perhaps not without coincidence that Rubens was the main influence on the delicate Watteau, who towards the end of the nineteenth century came to epitomize the absolute refinement of French taste. Crudeness, as it were, transmogrifies into extreme delicacy—as recognized by the famous-infamous Brothers Goncourt, Edmund and Jules, inseparable in life and in death, the one straight, the other gay, wealthy decadent aesthetes. In late-nineteenth-century France, the Art Nouveau and Symbolism they supported were in competition with Impressionism for supremacy as modern taste. It is not coincidental that recently AD has been making his own sexy versions of Art Nouveau vases, the glazes not without affinity to post-coital liquids.

That battle for the modern moral high ground at the end of the nineteenth century is now, with the passing of time, largely seen as redundant except by certain ideologues. But the same game is still being played today by self-righteous puritan critical opinion, as it emanates largely from New York and its imitation art worlds that have arisen now around the globe. The interface between high and

low life—high and low culture—takes time to gain acceptance. There were those at the time who violently dismissed Pop Art, and others who regarded Philip Guston's return to crude imagery as a betrayal. Oscar Wilde's famous remark that "We are all in the gutter but some of us are looking at the stars" is pertinent here. AD has his own vision and style that anyone, even just looking at the reproductions of his art presented here, can identify with pleasure. His is ultimately a consciously refined painterly art of instinctive talent, dedicated to a beauty that is found ever both in nature and in human existence, and that he, as a natural colorist, finds in an absence of color. That comes as a relief in this high-resolution, highly colored reproductive world in which we all live today. The modernity of the art of AD and, one hopes, its potential—he is after all still very young—is that it takes delight self-consciously and pleasurable in an almost vanished past, and yet in its concerns is ambitiously committed to its own most contemporary present.

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