

A Return to the Light

A few notes

In art there are revivals that allow us to discover a natural reaction to the past, present and future. These serve as our attitudes to the world around us and as our sources of inspiration. In an era, such as our own, marked by dynamic progress in the field of telecommunications - the existence of ever faster, more convenient modes of interpersonal communications, authenticity, "naturalness" gains new value. We often look disdainfully upon the artificiality of contemporary civilization. Artificiality seems to us rather superficial, disingenuous and we have the impression that artificial objects are somehow impermanent, disposable. Artificiality is also troubling to us because, in its excessive perfection, it seems inhuman, it lacks human frailty. This belief provokes a number of reactions: from absolute adoration of artificiality all the way to the complete rejection of it. Rigid acceptance of only classical forms, material and content in art is a de facto rejection of artificiality and is evidence of the uneasiness we feel when confronted with artificiality.

Artistic revivals, however, have profoundly influenced and inspired modern art. This influence is most strongly felt in connection with discussions about the so-called "literary quality" of the visual arts. This issue has also significantly shaped contemporary thinking about modernism. The fundamentalist period of shrill announcements and manifestos, from which we have inherited a number of theories and methodological procedures in the field of art history, belong to an irretrievable past. The concept which characterizes the 90s is tolerance, the co-existence of various styles. The 1990s are also years marked by varied fusion and experiments in art. The possibilities created by this more liberal outlook led to new chapters in film, in music, and of course, in the visual arts. For those who are open to it, contemporary art can be a rich source of inspiration.

This liberal attitude facilitates an environment ready to accept countless revivals, which defy simple classification into categories as narrow as classicism or academism. Wilfried Prager's approach, from the view of the authentic avant-garde, goes heretically against the grain. Pioneers of deconstruction of the renaissance perspective used those who opposed them to define their work. In this respect, Wilfried Prager's paintings connect what used to be inconsistent and harmonize elements which once clashed.

Prager's art reached its pinnacle in the sphere of geometric abstraction. His search for personal expression led him to experiment with the shapes of the canvases on which he painted. In this way, his work is continuous with American abstract art of the 1960s, especially the work of Frank Stella, who during those years experimented as well with shaped canvases. Both Prager and Stella were to eventually reject this style, however.

For Prager, the contact with American abstract expressionism and its offshoots led to him to experiment with color. Frequent visits to New York allowed him to overcome his original fascination and discover another route. This meant not only the conclusion of one stylistic attempt for Prager, but simultaneously the end of an entire phase of his work. His fascination with nature led him away from the artificiality of shaped canvas and back to the traditional format. This renewed interest in the natural was to affect not only the shapes of his works, but also the content within the frames, the light which shone on them and from them. "For too long I worked under halogen and neon lights, I came to live in the countryside to see things differently." (In 1996, Prager moved to Vlle de Chevreuse, 40 kilometers from Paris.) His sojourn in the French countryside was a quest for light. Light itself is one of the main themes in Prager's work. In 1997, he wrote the following about one of his paintings: "something is missing, but what? As

always, light, shadows...The light in colored photographs is chromatically flattened, for this reason black and white photographs are often more interesting. In my current work I interpret photographs of landscapes." In so doing, Prager was combining authenticity with the artificiality of the photographic process. This tension is visible especially in his black and white landscapes. His previous experiments with "artificial" light, however, stayed with him. The countryside afforded him a natural setting, a natural spectrum of possibilities. It is here that the existential drama of individual isolationism is played out.

Prager's landscapes are subfusc, almost monotonous, his paintings usually feature trees, which invite a variety of interpretations. The tree was traditionally "... worshiped as the fountainhead of nature, as a holy object inhabited by God. In the Middle East it was connected with the cult of the earth goddess..." The tree has always been a basic theme in the visual arts and during the renaissance it gained even more symbolic meanings, a trend which gathered momentum at the beginning of the 19th century. From this time, the tree has come to represent a continuity in the visual arts, from the visionary drawings of William Blake, through the windswept trees in Caspar David Friedrich's canvases, to Arnold Böcklin's cypresses, Frantisek Bilek's sculptures, the landscapes of Egon Schiele and Josef Sima, all the way to Joseph Beuys' conceptual work entitled "7000 Oaks".

The artists who most influenced Prager and his work do not comprise a specific artistic school, nor are they all from one era. Romanticism, of which Prager often speaks, is for him not only several decades of modern art at the beginning of the 19th century. Romanticism for him is an attitude, a "method" which fascinates him. Despite his interest in romanticism, Prager has been most inspired by painters from the last half of the 15th and the beginning of the 16th centuries, at a time when art was strongly and equally influenced both by middle age mysticism and by "pure" science. The artistic work, the painting, became encrypted with clearly defined structure and terminology. A perfect example of this is Dürer's engraving "Melancholy." This era was also one in which a change in the understanding of nature was expressed in art. The fascination with the natural sciences, with nature, brought philosophy and science together. Fresh discoveries about the laws which govern human existence prodded people to explore their relationships with the surrounding world and universe in new ways. Many artists who were to influence Prager lived during this time, when renaissance thought pervaded practically the entire European continent. Giorgione (Giorgio da Castelfranco), Joachim Patinier, Albrecht Dürer, Vermeer van Delft are but a few of their names.

Prager's landscapes are settings for intimate reflection, one can penetrate them only through concentrated contemplation. A solitary figure wanders through them and, in the end, slips into the mist. Most of Prager's works are without titles, which would enable the viewer to orient himself in Prager's world. His refusal to title his works is really Prager's refusal to demand a definitive interpretation and explanation for his works. Who are these beings made of nebula? It is as if the Earth and the surrounding universe have merged into one. The contours are blurry and begin to disappear in sharp light. From time immemorial, the universe has fascinated us with its secrets of light in darkness. The universe is, for its observers, a grand stage on which they can watch the drama of a multitude of shining planets and stars. "They are thousands of light years away from us and contain sufficient material to create 10 or 100 stars. The description of the nebulae in Orion's belt is significant in connection with Prager's paintings, They are both gaseous and dust. They shine only as much as the stars around them shine. If there are stars behind them, the nebulae absorb some of their light."

Prager spent the end of the century mostly in Prague, a city of many lights, colors and extremes. However, the theme with which he began working while in the country remained in his art. Only the light changed. He gradually began to create landscapes lit by the muted light of his own memories. His figures started to take on definite outlines. Mastery of his theme allowed Prager to work with larger formats. His paintings were now marked not only by their grand scale, but as well by the subtle tension within them. Prager reached another pinnacle in his work; his last pictures signal this change. The figures in his paintings begin to take on distinct shapes, become more clearly defined. And what direction will Prager's work take in the future? If he is to return to abstraction, influenced by his

experimentation with light, or if he will work more with figures, one can only speculate. There is no nostalgia for a lost world in Prager's most recent works. Aware of the complexity, dangers and disappointments of the world around him, Prager is creating paintings which reflect his acute consciousness of both the past and the present.

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Wilfried Prager, Geneze. Galerie Bayer a Bayer

number I, year II. Praha 1998, p. 1. Wilfried Prager, *ibid.*

James Hall, Slovník nmetu a symbolu ve vtvárním umen. Praha 1991, p. 427.

Carl Friedrich von Wiezsacker, Dejiny prrody. Praha 1972, p.67.