

The Ur-Landscape of my Husband

Blanka Altová

Although I think about the art of others as part of my everyday profession, it is not as easy as it might seem for me to speak about my husband's art in public. For me, suffering and joy in the history of art are a message about the past that I try to interpret – but I do so with the safe distance of time and with personal detachment. In my life with someone who paints pictures I experience all the things from which these pictures spring forth within him. They tell me how he is feeling, what he is thinking about, what he thinks of me in the same way as his words, gestures, and deeds. I can tell when he is painting something that is alive and when he is painting something he merely wishes for. Some of his pictures bring me joy and contentment; they arouse new questions within me, new ways of seeing. Others I am angry at or they cause me suffering or fear.

When Jaroslav began to consider the subject of the Seven Last Words of Christ, I was worried that it was too final, and perhaps too presumptuous, a subject. And also very loose. It does follow a clear storyline on which all the Gospels agree. The order of the seven words and their meaning will forever be open. To what extent can we understand the relationship between God the Father and God the Son – a Son who is both God and Man; a Son who is predestined by the Father to be a sacrifice? How to express this interplay between eternity and the everyday? To what extent can Man compare his story to that of God?

In his visual thinking, Jaroslav uses the opposite approach of personification. He does give his stories or feelings human form, but converts them into pictures of the landscape (or rather a kind a ur-landscape) in which all the geological stages of its evolution are layered in the layers of coloured glazes: red-hot, molten magma; cool, dark and unmoving massifs; silently flowing water and wind; a grain of sand, halted for just a moment. The memory of the Earth and of people settles in the layers of his paintings and submits to the regular latticework of a higher order. Man and God are insistently present without being physically visible.

The paintings of the Seven Last Words sedimented in a similar manner, except that they are not layers of earth but layers of light. The nature of the subject caused it to be depicted in a lucid landscape filled with light and Divine Order. The series has not yet been completed, nor is it exhibited here in its entirety. Instead, it is represented by drawings, and it would be premature to make an assessment. Even so, you may judge for yourselves how difficult the subject is to grasp. It contains something that cannot be fully understood and appreciated. So how to come to terms with it?

While I was worried sick that Jaroslav was tempting God, he was also working on his series *Minor Injuries*, in which he tempted himself and those of us around him. This is what I should have been worried about, but at I first I didn't even notice the connection, and only later did I see those restless little landscapes all at once with their abrasions, scars and drops of blood in all their urgency. Images of suffering caused by Man and suffered by Man – small in format but oppressive in the vastness of the final balance. A confrontation of many minor human sufferings with the one great suffering of Christ's sacrifice.

In connection with his paintings, Jaroslav wrote: “No suffering is definitive. The flowers of our trees die with the flowers of the Virgin” – he wrote more than he knew at the time. In the same way, he sometimes paints more than he can divine. It was spring and the trees were blooming in our garden; our last tree to flower is the Bohemian Virgin. The flowers of our trees truly did die. It was the strange summer of year 1 and the Bohemian Virgin apples were infested with worms. And in every man are Adam and Christ, just as in every woman are Eve and Mary. Both pay for the apple by their suffering.

Introductory word to the exhibition at the Paseka bookshop in Prague 1 November 2001