

Ivana Lomová interviewed by Milena Slavická

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What does reality mean to you?

Well, you start with a diabolical question. As quantum physicists have explained to us, the reality we perceive doesn't exist de facto. That is an assertion which, when I try hard, I can just about understand purely theoretically, but I can't relate to it personally.

In the material sense, reality is for me what I see, feel, what my senses simply tell me. It becomes much more interesting when it's a reality that has already happened, something from the past. The constant photographing and recording of our lives distorts reality and actually alters and reshapes our memories. We remember just the pictures but not what really was.

According to psychoanalysis, we only remember things that are important to us, those with a strong emotional charge. That is something I fully agree with and can confirm from my own experience.

So-called reality depends on sensory perception. But how do dolphins or bees perceive reality? I deliberately give examples of animals whose sensory parameters are very different from ours. But the problem is not only the parameters of our senses. There is not even a precise imprint of sensory perception in the brain. The impressionists were wrong about that. Bill Viola examined the perception of the human eye and convincingly proved that what we see is not only related to the parameters of the eye, but to the subsequent processes in the visual centre of the brain, where optical data of the eye are transcoded.

Not to mention the mysterious problem of individual perception and individual memory. So there is most likely no "objective reality". In other words, what we see and how we see it is related to many things - emotions, imagination, memory and more. So our psyche sees, not our eyes. How does your psyche see?

Let me give you an example. In my childhood, I spent a year in the United States, in Chicago. Seen through the eyes of the gloominess of Prague in 1970, it was a colourful world, full of freedom, games and children's delight. Later, for a long time, it became a lost and forbidden paradise. After a quarter of a century, when I finally found myself there again, I was curious how it would feel. First, we flew to Canada to visit our relatives. It was pretty similar to the US, it was great, but there were no big emotions. Later, when we were crossing the border to the USA by car at night, I spotted a piece of "American sidewalk" with an "American fire hydrant" in the shadows. My emotional reaction was huge. I had forgotten the fire hydrants, they had no importance to me, but when I saw one again, it sparked off all the associations. Suddenly I was really there. Things can carry a huge emotional charge and trigger long-forgotten memories.

To understand how our memory works is perhaps even more difficult than to understand the processes of sensory perception. I'd rather speak about it in a non-professional way. Sometimes it seems that our experiences are imprinted on things, often on seemingly secondary details - the pavement, front doors, a fan, dry grass in the backyard. It's as if we were imprinting or stamping them with our emotional experience. And then, much later, looking at some of the things we stamped this way, we can break this sealed letter, and read what we have sent to ourselves, as it happened to you with the hydrant. What's more, the sealed letter can be read to someone else, through a short story, a poem, a picture. Remember how Proust describes the panorama of Venice? He claims that Venice depends on how he thinks of it in the afternoon. Does it occur to you to think of Prague so intensely?

It's the same with Prague as with the American fire hydrant. I mean, the reasons why I started doing these paintings of Prague. In fact, I probably paint them more as a child than adult urban dweller. As you say, experiences are imprinted on things. And I'm trying to capture them and my past "reality of the city" through shapes and details - the way it's under my skin and I don't know exactly how it looks. I guess I'm sorry it disappears so quickly and I want to keep it. I think children perceive the city in which they grow up subliminally, without thinking about it too much. It's ingrained in them. The ground-level is especially important to them. Sidewalks, stairs, battered walls, railings, canals, parks and benches, the scenes of their games, adventures, dramas, and discoveries. At least that's the way we experienced it. (I don't know about today's children who sit in front of screens all day).

I've lived in Prague all my life, in one neighborhood, so the city has become such a part of my everyday life that I don't usually think about it. Well, only if I don't approach those dreadful touristic areas where you truly feel like crying.

I think of Prague when I am far away, or when I come back from someplace after a long time and the city seems to me like a lovely garden full of greenery and low, old and friendly houses. Like an unreal historical backdrop bordering on kitsch. A miracle that hardly fits today's world.

Yes, there are times when you marvel at its beauty. But then the thought creeps in that that we don't deserve it, that its beauty is in blatant contradiction with its current inhabitants.

That reminds me a letter of Albert Einstein. While living in Prague, he wrote to his friend Bess: Could you visit me? The city of Prague is wonderful, so beautiful, that it alone is worth a journey. Only people are strange to me. They lack natural feeling; they show numbness and a strange blend of arrogance and servility, lacking any kindness towards others.

That's interesting... I don't know if I should be glad that there is nothing new under the sun, that we didn't 'get worse', or despair that we will never be different. Maybe the latter.

Let's go back to Proust. What triggered his memories was, as we know, the sense of smell. In your case it's sight. While Proust 'smelled' the world, you see it, as indeed all visual artists do. I think that the particular type of sensory perception plays a large role in what the final work looks like.

We're talking about paintings, so I'm not going to talk about sniffing. However, the smell of some books or print in general will bring back memories instantly. It's well-known that smell works the best. Apparently, the path of this sensation is the shortest. Is there any art using smell? There must be, but I can't remember a concrete example.

Once I saw such an exhibit. It presented the smells of wax, honey or coffee beans, substances, that were used as materials for the displayed objects. Their scent was more important than the shapes, intended to invoke associations in the viewer. But let's get back to visual sensations, to seeing and images. I admire how carefully you perceive shapes. You perceive them very intensively, perhaps they interest you more than colour.

In your paintings, not only the choice of objects, but also their specific shapes play an important role, such as the shape of cobblestone or a railing. I know, you studied architecture, but I'm talking about something else. More precisely, I'm referring to what we've talked about because it's significant for your art. I'm talking about the communicative power of shape. About its emotional drive. Objects and their shapes are the main actors in your paintings, not people. For example, in one painting, we see a man passing through an arcade, almost as if he was walking to your exhibition, but otherwise, no human figure as far as the eye can see.

Sometimes, when my sister and I go for a walk through our neighborhood Střešovice, we have fun identifying its former - or 'correct' ('original') urban elements. We're checking if current reality corresponds to what it looked like when we went to school. Like this: 'This railing is okay, but it should be red, and this fence shouldn't be here. The stairs are supposed to be taller and less comfortable. These benches are awful, and there should be a hole here, and the old crumbling summerhouse is missing,' and so on. It's kind of a silly game in search of the past. Obviously, it's becoming less and less possible to play. I'm mentioning it because sometimes I do something similar in my paintings. A work of 'restoration'. I pick a scene in its most 'original' form possible and, in case it's disrupted by some annoying 'new things', I replace them with the original elements. I change plastic windows for wooden ones, skip the new house and replace it with the one next to it, or remove the additionally suspended ceiling and substitute the new bulbs with the original lamps.

You're right, the shapes of things have an emotional charge, and I'm afraid it's not just my nostalgia for childhood. It seems to me that the current forms are less interesting and increasingly sloppy and soulless. Today, shapes are shallow, universal and interchangeable, nothing lasts for long. Now I speak as a utterly hopeless pensioner defending the old order. But I was like that even in my twenties, if that's an excuse.

In short, you follow in your own footsteps, and those are mostly in Střešovice. You're not interested in the attractive corners of Prague with a reliably financially exploitable emotional charge. What you explore, photograph and paint are much rather the inconspicuous, ordinary houses, streets, office corridors and so on. The magical Prague of a hundred spires, bearing traces of famous historical events or touches of Rabbi Loew, does not attract you. Your Prague stands aside, ordinary, silent. When it speaks, it speaks very quietly. Who would notice such Prague? You perceive the body of Prague and are intrigued by, for example, its swollen foot, its scraped heel, broken nail, dandruff in its hair.

Soon, these imperfections will be removed, and we will have the perfect Miss Prague. It terrifies me. At least in your paintings, this once loved Prague will remain.

I have to say that the way you work with those 'imperfections' is brilliant. They function just like a rightly chosen word in your paintings. That's why they're so urgent. There's something in them that is as scarce as hen's teeth today. I'm talking about something very important, but words fail me...

That's why I paint it...

But the idea of a perfect 'Miss Prague' is terrifying. Hopefully, it will never happen. And Rabi Low's magical Prague is so worn out that I'd rather walk past it. Most importantly, it doesn't have much to do with my life. Whether I want to or not, what I paint is more or less my own diary. It's a search for feelings, atmosphere, smells, the spirit of 'my' old times. And certainly, I like details, I notice them, maybe too much. Sometimes I force myself to put down my glasses not to see so much, but it's futile, they usually land on my nose without me noticing.

Your paintings remind me a little of some Dutch painters, their views of yards and narrow streets, for example, Pieter de Hooch. I wanted to ask you a question, well, actually, I'd like to ask it myself too. Whether your paintings will also affect young people who are not familiar with this old Prague. And I guess, the comparison with Dutch paintings of city corners that just occurred to me answers it well.

Seventeenth-century Dutch painters are wonderful, I like to dive into their paintings when I can. If you observe them carefully they carry you into their time and reality, which I enjoy. But I think that Pieter de Hooch and others have tried to portray contemporary life as faithfully and comprehensively as possible. Sometimes they have even improved it a bit, although it might not seem so. They weren't interested in scraped heels or dandruff in the hair so much.

Given the omnipresence of photography, such things aren't needed anymore. I'm more a specialist occupied with chasing old ghosts and matters on the margin. I don't have the ambition to capture contemporary life as they did.

You perceive light as intensely as you do place and detail. For example, the elevator, I mean the paternoster lift, God knows in what shabby office you found it, where light plays a vital role. What does light mean to you?

No shabby office, it's from the Prague City Hall on Jungmanova street. There's lots of childish fascination in this painting. Paternoster lifts were, probably not only for me, very engaging, mysterious and dangerous. Those black holes that spin over and over and people get out of them. What happens if we disobey the horrible, big sign: 'EXIT!'? Will it scrape us? I exaggerated the light, that's true, it was much more prosaic in reality. It helped me to create a sort of horrific expectation. Originally, there was a passenger here, or more precisely, a head and a part of the body sinking down into the darkness. Then I got disturbed by it, maybe because it was too concrete, so I removed it.

Light, of course, plays a crucial role, it sets the whole atmosphere. In my paintings of the facades, I used mostly scattered light, one that echoes a melancholic and moody Prague. Later I used direct sunlight as well, such as in one of the last paintings titled 'Apartments'. Here, the houses are there in their nakedness, not obscured by anything, looking so definitive.

Since I've already compared your paintings to literature, I'd like to add that they are not poetic, more precisely not lyrical. Rather, they can be compared to prose, although I'm not saying they have a narrative. I just want to point out that what's typical of them is a specific prosaicness or ordinariness. Although one can also find nostalgia and a certain amount of sentiment and melancholy, it's always a moderate melancholy and a sober nostalgia. There's even distress, sadness, loneliness and sorrow, but these emotions are also held in check, presented subtly and incidentally. I think that emotional restraint is at the heart of your expression. Is that right?

That's a nice question. I like that you see it that way. I don't hold anything back, it's just the way how I feel. It probably stems from my natural shyness, almost distaste for exaggeration, excessive exaltation, grand gestures and pathos.

Perhaps it has also something to do with my generation that grew up in times that steered us to irony, humour, a mocking grin, protecting us from the desperate reality around us. Grand words like peace, truth, love, friendship, fidelity, or even eternity aroused extreme distrust. When we happened to mean something serious, we said it as plainly and quietly as possible.

We talked about reality. Now I'll try realism. Realism is an artistic movement and also an aesthetic method that emerged at the same time as photography. Painters began to learn from photographers almost immediately (without photography Impressionism would have probably never happened) and began to use it as a tool. Many painters purchased photographs of female nudes - they were cheaper than models. Or pictures of distant cities - they didn't have to travel there. Soon, however, strong opposition and animosity arose towards photography. It was not only a fight against the competition, there were other serious reasons, some of which we've already touched upon. The painters knew that the painting is never a copy of 'objective reality' for which photography was wrongly regarded.

After that, however, photography and painting walked alongside each other, sometimes in a friendly and beneficial conversation, other times in a hostile fight, and contemporary art is the result of their common pilgrimage.

You execute your paintings with the help of your photos. What is your relationship to photography? Do you think it obscures your own vision? That it imposes specific coordinates on your thinking, your understanding of the world?

I use photographs every day as a tool. It saves a lot of work. When you want to paint something, it's much faster, easier and more accurate to rummage through your photos than sketches. But it's necessary to be careful of the photographic representation of the world. The lens distorts not only colour and perspective but also light contrasts are different, usually much sharper than in reality. Thanks to present-day technology, however, the lens often sees more than the human eye. So when I can't identify something in the distance, I take a picture of it, enlarge it, and recognise it immediately. So I use photographs but treat them very freely. For example, sticking to a one-point perspective doesn't do any good for painting since as we move in space, our vanishing point also changes and shifts. Regarding perspective, I often cheat a bit if the painting requires it. Sometimes I make up more than it seems. In short, my kind of paintings can't be photographed anywhere.

I was always taking pictures, long ago I used to enlarge my black and white photos at home in the bathroom. Later I tried to learn the 'proper' way of taking a picture without automation. But digital technology is so perfect today that I give up, it's actually enough for me. I don't have the ambition to be a real photographer.

I'm moved by old photographs, especially family portraits, not necessarily of my family. The poses of people, the atmosphere of an extraordinary ceremony and the knowledge that they may survive us. Well, yes, the old photos are so high-quality that they don't change even after 100 years.

And if you ask about photography as an artistic discipline, I have a quite casual and reserved relationship to it. Perhaps it's because the world is flooded with so many pictures and photographers that in general, the quality isn't anything special. Almost anyone can take good pictures today. But still, coming across an exceptional photographic exhibition it a great pleasure. For example, recently I was moved by the Josef Koudelka exhibit at the UMPRUM museum, his famous theatre photos from 1968 - those I knew, but his photos when he was just starting out, in the 50's - I had never seen them before. They look like beautiful paintings,. Or recently, Dušan Šimánek had a gorgeous, intimate exhibition displaying photos of old

damaged walls from various Czech pubs and interiors, an absolute treat. Or Libuše Jarcovjáčková, Irena Stehli and others.

And why don't you build a stepladder on the street and paint directly? Streets and houses don't move. They're not a plane. I bet you could paint well.

That's what I used to do, although I didn't paint on a stepladder but in a notebook on my lap. Sometime in the early 1980s, I found out that Old Střešovice, the landscape of my childhood, was to be demolished. New houses for our then friends from the GDR were to be built there. I went there spontaneously and started to document this beloved old village by making detailed drawings. Let that be proof that the tendency to preserve the visual testimony of one's own life is nothing new to me. The demolition took place much later and for other reasons, but I have a small set of drawings capturing the state of Střešovice at that time. Back then, I used crayons and pencils, at most some gouache, and a small format, so it really went well.

Today, I'm sitting at the computer, going through “my catches” on the monitor, thinking about the best combination of photos and points of view. I make sketches, omit or add something, and put it all together. I don't need prints anymore, only a screen, it's easier to work with. I enlarge details, ambiguities are clarified by another photo. Mostly it takes time to make a decision. Those direct hits when I take a picture and know it'll be a great painting are only a few. Such kind of work wouldn't be probably possible in the field. But maybe I'll try to do something outside sometime again.

I understand. Let's keep in mind that realism, which relies one way or another on photography (we won't talk about photorealism, that's a chapter for itself), represents a painterly method that results from the logic of civilization. In other words, it most closely corresponds with the current omnipresence of photography and also allows the artist many things. However, there are different branches of realism: Courbet's realism, Thomas Eakins' realism, Norman Rockwell, Alex Katz, Gerhard Richter, all of which occasionally use photography. What differences do you see?

Gerhard Richter is definitely the most interesting one for me. The fact that he paints not only according to photos but sometimes the photographs themselves, portraits of family members such as “Uncle Rudi” or “Family by the Sea”, is something I can relate to very well. Extraordinary images, they are so packed with content. I even found my way to his abstract art. And that's something to say.

Alex Katz used to impress me with his beautiful colours and juicy paintings, but now I find it somewhat simple, shallow, too poster-like.

Norman Rockwell was more of an illustrator, doing those typically American illustrations, sometime around the middle of the 20th century. They depict pretty well American society at that time, its spirit and reality. I loved it as a child.

I appreciate Thomas Eakins for his thoroughness and the scientific approach with which he approached painting by photographs. He made studies of phased motion, running, jumping, and the like, using his own body to do that. However, I haven't seen many of his paintings.

Speaking of the Americans, you forgot another of my favorites, Andrew Wyeth, a gentle realistic painter of the vast American plains and countryside (and an excellent draftsman). His portraits are also beautiful. When he no longer knew what to do with the painting, he turned on the lights in his large studio, and then walked around it, taking a peek through the windows like a random passerby. I think of him when I have a cigarette at the balcony in the evening and look at my paintings through the door window.

And Coubert? Excellent paintings, beautiful and important. I like to appreciate them in galleries, but they are a bit remote from my everyday life.

And the last question. What is your relationship to Edward Hopper, David Hockney and Richard Estes?

Thanks again, a great question, this time about my favorites. I learned a lot about them, but I don't know everything, so I'd like to talk more about my idea of them than claim any objectivity.

Edward Hopper is closest to me, as you may guess. He has the most powerful drive. His paintings are about life the most. Perhaps he was also the most complicated and the least "happy" person. I imagine that he suffered from a kind of inner loneliness. Not even his devoted, helpful, loving wife could ease it, perhaps on the contrary. I think that because of this loneliness, he had particularly well-developed sensors for observing the world around and exceptional sensitivity. It's like when you travel alone, to a foreign country, you perceive everything three times more strongly than when you are in the company of others. That's why his paintings have become such a symbol of the then-new modern American life, alienation of man, loneliness and the resulting isolation and melancholy. Because he lived it himself.

He hesitated over his paintings, probably struggled with them, made many sketches and variations, painted slowly, only a few paintings a year. Some of them make you shiver. His use of light is fascinating, look at the image of a naked woman standing in a light bar next to an unmade bed, "A Woman in the Sun". He often used sharp casting light that cuts into the rooms and intimate scenes.

He was a silent introvert and hated to explain his paintings, didn't want to talk about them, "everything is already painted there," he used to say. I fully understand and sympathise with that. I'd like to see how he would sort out the guided tours that are so common today.

But he must have been difficult. His wife wrote in her diary: "he starts to look at his watch as soon as we start talking." She was a painter as well, but he pushed her to gradually give up her career. And so she mainly took care of his work. After his death, she donated her and Hopper's entire work to the Whitney Museum. When she later passed away, the Whitney Museum destroyed all her work.

I'm envious of David Hockney, he's like a Mozart in painting. Anything he touches is easy for him. He is an example of an artist who, whatever he does, looks like it should have been exactly and only THAT way. It's bursting with the joy of painting, colours, lines, shapes, life. He seems to be drifting by accident, experimenting, living the present.

For example, I wondered for a long time about his famous painting "Portrait of an Artist" from 1972. What led him to such a bizarre composition. A fully dressed male figure (artist Peter Schlesinger) gazes down into the pool at an underwater swimmer in white shorts, all set in the beautiful countryside of southern France. It was a mistake, as I recently discovered at his exhibition in Paris. Hockney found a damaged photo where these scenes were in double exposure. He thought it interesting, so he painted it.

And then, the large compositions of English landscapes that emerged after personal reasons brought him back from Los Angeles to England. He had to stay there till the spring, the first one he'd see in 35 years. It enthused him (since there's no spring in California, he forgot what it looked like), so he decided to stay in England and paint nature there. No "planning", no doubts and worries about whether it's worth painting at all, as I do. He simply drifts with life and creates as he can't do otherwise.

Or his iPhone art. When he started using an iPhone, he discovered that he can paint on it, in a new and quite interesting way. So he started creating small pictures, sending them to friends, just like that, for fun. What a happy man.

And then there is Richard Estes. Initially, Richard Estes made his living from illustrations, engaged in painting only in his spare time (as Hopper did too, after all). The period in which he grew up - the 1950s in America - is usually described as an absolute terror of abstract expressionists. Whoever did something else was completely out. To break through this must have been extremely hard. As opposition to them, a group of American photorealists was formed in the late 1960s. A bunch of neat fellows who carefully and slowly painted according to photographs versus those party animals indulging in drugs and alcohol. Realism is coming back because art has come to an end, they proclaimed.

His early paintings of New York are absolutely brilliant. Full of those tricks with mirroring the city in windowpanes, billboards, cars, and on the smooth surfaces of the city. They had to notice him eventually. His paintings also have a high painterly quality. When you see them in reality, they are superbly painted, enigmatic and ambiguous, such as his "Telephone Booths".

Later, he began to paint vast landscapes of various other cities and places, such as Hiroshima, Florence, Machu Pichu. That's where it becomes more complicated. Suddenly, the

paintings look like perfectly painted postcards, like an exercise in how perfectly you can make it, a proof of immense precision and skill. As paintings they are no longer interesting, they are completely emptied out. Also, the subject matters that are outside of his natural environment don't seem to work very well for him. Somehow, he got caught up in his own trap. Occasionally, when I get caught in my traps and continually "refine" my technique, I think of it, that I have to be very careful not to end up like that.

Indeed, something similar is happening to one of my other favourite realists, John Currin, who is my peer. An American virtuoso in figural painting, he soon managed to create his own unique style, you can recognize his paintings immediately. His female figures, portraits and scenes from life are incredibly funny and provide a great comment on contemporary society. Its social and sexual aspects. He draws much of its inspiration from Mannerism, Fragonard, Boucher and Chardin, while making a little fun of it, with ease and elegance. But then he started to paint even more beautifully and perfectly, got far more immersed in it, so that the satire almost disappeared, his beauties became more and more beautiful and less clothed, till he arrived at a sweetly painted, fancy half-pornography. It's been a long time since I've seen his new works, so I don't know what he's doing now, if the "decline" continues.

What I want to say is that there seems to be a tricky danger in the realist way of painting. The slippage to perfectly executed, sweet pictures that have little to do with art is often at your fingertips.

Yes, of course. But such a danger lurks in any "skill" if an artist is not paying attention to his heart, his fatigue, or his greed for fame and money. So please take care.