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Grounding a painting by exposing its fall

The bit of eco-poetic light that emanates from Krzysztof Mętel's paintings, which are part of his recycling project entitled *Dowód, że deszcz także rysuje prostokąty* [The Proof that Rain also Draws Rectangles], reminds us of the gravity of the long-lasting death of colour field painting – the idealistic tradition of modernist art developed seven decades ago, which today is associated with moral decay: the purchase of noble, humanist ideas by the market and the vegetation of paintings in the cemeteries of the Western mausoleums of art.

In the Curator's Lab Gallery run by the University of the Arts in Poznań, which is a niche place to present the great narrative of this kind of painting, you can see a corpse almost completely stripped of concepts, such as the sublime or metaphysical abyss. The Polish artist, with a caring hand of a nurse and without vulgarity, has secured the body of this respectable deceased. Not only has he emphasised the tardiness of the passing, but he has also breathed a spark of life into the dying process. He has prepared material images of atmospheric and meteorological phenomena, created by exposing a found object to sunlight. The object is a photosensitive, linen tarpaulin impregnated with copper hydroxocarbonate, which has influenced its decayed green colour. The paintings may be deceptively similar to some gloomy grandmaster artworks by Mark Rothko, except that the stains visible in the darker parts of the tarpaulin photographs look decayed, resembling de-sublimating nature rather than uplifting art. Contrary to the American painter, Mętel assumed from the very beginning that he would create works that accept their own passing and are thus not artificially separated

from the natural order. Due to the exposure process, these paintings are also of transmedia nature – they oscillate between painting and post-photography and take root in a system in which the division into art and nature is no longer relevant.

The origin of the perforated and corroded tarpaulin is not certain. The artist supposes that its sides once corresponded to the walls of the barracks in Nysa in Opole Silesia. If this hypothesis was confirmed by specialist material research, the tarpaulin would open up the field for speculation about the war industry or illegal trade in items east of the Iron Curtain. It is certain, however, that when the material found its way to his grandparents' garden, it was pacified. It accompanied the field work, serving as a cover for the harvested grain, the smell of which has remained in it for years. The folded tarpaulin was also used as an artificial cover for the boards stocked in the garden. When the pile of boards was removed and the damaged tarpaulin was to be put into a waste container, the artist's attention was drawn to the regular brightening that appeared under the influence of solar energy on the bends of the surface that protected the boards against bad weather conditions.

Before the material was used to create minimalist landscapes with a clear horizon line, the artist removed the blackened and damaged fibres from it, hid its abdomen cut with a scar – a reminder of the joints of the strands from which the tarpaulin was sewn – from the viewers' eyes and then stretched the remains on the stretcher. The effects in the form of exposed images in shades of grey and rotten seaweed green can simultaneously evoke associations with drying ponds and wetlands, drought and environmental devastation.

The project weaves threads related to the posthumous life of colour field painting into the fate of post-humanist art. The indivisibility of human authorship associated with this tradition gives way to authorship shared with light, rain, snow and inexorable time. The artist has turned the aesthetic planes of paintings, which have an ambivalent status and the melancholic aura of resignation from claims to universalism and timelessness, into a medium

that moves the attention of viewers from the macroscale of ideas accompanying colour field painting into the microscale of biochemical processes resonating with the fatalism of the world institutions perceived from the perspective of the anthropocene – the epoch in which overproduction is criticised and the meticulous examination of the impact of artistic objects on the environment is postulated. What is intriguing in Mętel's project is that the recognised artistic format, whose respect and prestige have been greatly weakened in the long process of deconstructing attitudes essentialising the creative process and capitalising the privileges of white heterosexual men, encourages us to reflect on the fate of paintings in the twenty-first century. In Mętel's project, this reflection has been translated directly into artistic practices involving funeral customs related to paintings.

The project is a peculiar synthesis connecting issues that seemingly cannot be connected. How to combine a clear materialistic element in the form of the dilapidated tarpaulin with the tradition of colour field painting, bursting at the seams with ephemeral and dematerialised planes manifesting strictly humanistic ideas through optical truth? How to combine the luminism of Rothko and his colleagues, related to the surplus of human meanings, with the accidental artistic agency of the photosensitive tarpaulin and the aesthetics of non-anthropogenic origin? How do the feelings of fear experienced by artists saved in a world devastated by World War II relate to the coarse tarpaulin saved from total disintegration? How does the exhibition of the inexorable acts of rain and snow relate to the celebration of the implacable rights of patriarchy and the annexation of artistic expression by man? However, the more carefully we analyse the discrepancies, the more we observe the link between Mętel and Rothko: even the subtle gloom of the dark purple, monochrome paintings created by the American artist for a chapel in hot Houston, Texas, did not manage to avoid the sun. The whitening and utilising effect of its light on these paintings has been described by many experts as the disfigurement of the original and the failure of painting!

And yet, perverse relapses are possible in art – both experiencing mourning in a place where infinity is contemplated, and changing the proportions in the composition of human narratives, where what is small and inconspicuous in other planetary and cultural circumstances unexpectedly begins to mark a new course in history. The change in the focus of interest in artistic activities is also visible in Meţel's decision to recreate the conditions of exposing the tarpaulin in the gallery space to sunlight, so that no piece of it is wasted. The place of the light projection has been marked on the remaining green rectangles, devoid of any traces of discoloration, creating a metaphorical space for experiencing the physical presence of not-only-human stories of the reanimated artistic format. In this way, the transformation of art has been emphasised. The art that was turned into priceless gold, associated with greatness, succession and timeless success, and created with the conviction that time would not consume it has been turned into the art that arouses interest in abject aesthetics, aware of the environmental risks, threats and pollution. Made of neglected surfaces, the artworks carry a taste of the ominous silence of drying swamps and make you feel sick when you recall the ideas that were theatricalised during the spectacle of social inequalities in which the famous colour field painting took part.

The remnants of the original format of the modern tradition of abstract imaging in Meţel's project seem to stem from the belief that the fight against death is sterile, and when living with death becomes our new reality, even the most immodestly neurotic recesses of art history receive one more chance to emerge beyond the avant-garde mission to save human civilisation – even in a flash of consciousness or when adapting to changes. If the process of global warming is not stopped, it seems that images created with human hands may inevitably face whitening. Meţel's project, embedded in Rothko's aesthetics, makes people sensitive to these issues, indirectly and with mediating attention.

Time-resistant art proves to be an absurd and excessively bold expectation today. The tarpaulin project is one of those that ground it. It deprives us of illusions, maintaining the potential of transforming an artistic image into a participant in contemporary discourses.