

frieze

POLAND

PAULINA OŁOWSKA Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw

It was a warm May night some ten years ago when, completely bewildered, I walked into a place just off Warsaw's Nowy Świat high street looking for an art space that Paulina Ołowska and Lucy McKenzie had just opened in the former gallery of the National Artist's Club. What I found was a room packed full of people, music, Polish art nouveau-style wall paintings, and mismatched pieces of Zakopane, or highland-style, furniture. The short-lived space was called Nova Popularna and it was the first work I saw by Ołowska. Given this introduction, it did not surprise me that her recent exhibition at Zachęta, *The Spell of Warsaw*, her largest to-date in her native country, featured a fully fledged womenswear store.

Taking its title from a 1960s Warsaw fragrance shop, which once boasted a neon sign in the shape of a perfume bottle (until this was replaced by a run-of-the-mill billboard, shown on the show's poster), *The Spell of Warsaw* brought together ten years' worth of paintings, collages, photographs and installations, which speak less of the city itself than of the ways in which its imagery has changed over the decades.

Warsaw's spell, then, is a certain aura perhaps best embodied by the glow of the neon signs that once lit its streets. For *Palimpsest* (2006), Ołowska commissioned a number of neon signs combining geometric forms and slogans from historical and modern examples to be manufactured by what is today a modest company, but which, in the 1960s and 70s, was the city's major supplier. *Natasza* (2010), with the red and white outline of three Matryoshka dolls (oddly resembling squat Coca-Cola bottles), is a remake of a logo that once sat over the entrance to a store offering merchandise from the USSR. In another room, the painting *48HG 2 Mi* (2006) lists the names from hundreds of neon signs for stores, merchants and services – most of which have since disappeared. In *Nocturnes (Night Paintings from Warsaw)* (2005–08), two near pitch-black images of the city's Palace of Culture and Science and a view of the River Vistula, seem austere, if not downright gloomy – much like *Warsaw Belongs to Bourgeoisies* (2006), a monochrome collage in which streetlights and buildings emanate a pale light.

The exhibition leaflet compares Ołowska's concept of bringing together fashion, design and photography from the 'East' and the 'West' to the aesthetics of *Ty i Ja*, a Polish women's monthly published from 1960 to 1973, whose carefree tone brought a whiff of the West to the otherwise lacklustre magazine market of the People's Republic of Poland. Ołowska's approach seems also to have been inspired by that of *Ty i Ja*'s editorial staff, who had no qualms about quoting and reprinting materials published abroad. In her 'Crossword Puzzles' (2009–ongoing), a series of large panels featuring black and white squares superimposed with images of young women – a frequent feature of Polish brain-teasers to this day – the artist cites →



a painting by George Grosz (*Crossword Puzzle with Lady in Black Coat*, 2009), as well as Taschen's album on erotica (*Crossword Puzzle with the Surprised One*, 2014). These juxtaposed quotations can also take on a more comprehensive character, as in *Café Bar* (2011), a massive installation originally commissioned for the National Museum in Kraków, which combines furnishings from the museum's former café with a large painted panel inspired by the theatrical designs of Natalia Goncharova and images based on scenes of bohemian life made by the artist.

Fashion, a key motif in Ołowska's work, also had a major presence. From the series of collages featuring various themed photo shoots of garments ('Untitled', 2004), through *Applied Fantastic* (2010), a collection of postcards of home-knitting patterns (taking its name from a term coined by the Polish writer Leopold Tyrmand, who used it to describe local re-creations of Western styles), to the series of curious, tattered pieces of Macramé clothing displayed on steel frames – a testimony to a DIY clothing industry based on ingenuity.

For Ołowska *The Spell of Warsaw* is the story of a city that is imagined as a woman. And women artists, performers and designers have always been a major source of inspiration for the artist. It is through these female figures that Ołowska explores the overlapping territory between high and popular culture, mass-production and craftsmanship, the past and the present, as well as the fantasy and the real. Tinged as it was with nostalgia, the show was not a swansong to historic design and faded glitz. Rather, it showed how a certain representation of a place – once brimming with the signboards of cobblers, tailors and textile stores, illuminated by neon lights – has succumbed to a wave of billboards, international magazines and services.

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