

# METRO PICTURES

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## ARTFORUM

### Paulina Olowka

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During the mid-2000s, Paulina Olowka worked ardently to revive a cast of women excluded from the canon of European modernism (for instance, the British Pop painter Pauline Boty in 2006 and the Polish artist Zofia Stryjeńska in 2008); more recently, her overt references to art history have slowly transformed into subtle hints and traces.

Olowka has returned to concerns that have been central to her work since her earliest exhibitions: the fashions, styles, and subcultures of late-communist-era Poland—particularly those that defied Soviet austerity, sometimes by imitating the West. Her stunning 2007 debut at Metro Pictures, for example, featured large-scale collaged paintings that blended photographs and text from American and Soviet propaganda magazines with imagery from Poland's 1980s punk scene. Attractive and nearly glamorous, Olowka's adept handling of paint in some of those works leaves a stronger impression than her pastiche of graffiti and agitprop. In this recent exhibition, she presented a suite of canvases that showcase her uncanny ability to assimilate various painterly approaches via a celebration of an entirely different DIY practice from Polish history: the knitting of fabulous sweaters.

Six paintings in one gallery showed figures (most of them women) culled from home knitting patterns that appeared on advertisements and postcards published by Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza in the 1980s. Sourced by Olowka from Polish flea markets, the postcards

were originally sold at kiosks and newsstands and often included an illustration, instructions, and inspirational text (“ . . . in times when there is hardly anything in stores to buy, you can create an outfit from hand-me-downs or your grandparents’ closet”). This material, in Ołowska’s reading of it, pertains to the “applied fantastic”—the title of this show and a term coined by the Polish writer Leopold Tyrmand in his 1954 collection of essays *Dziennik* (Diary). Writing in the journal *Dot Dot Dot*, historian David Crowley explains that Tyrmand used this “paradoxical compound” to describe Western styles that had been copied or improvised by Eastern Bloc women; it implied these women’s “dedication (in the effort required to produce the intended effect)” and their “escape (in the pursuit of exotic style).” Picking up on this thread, Ołowska’s painted translations of these images boasted a compression of appropriated styles, most surprisingly in her various kinds of mark-making and gestures to art history. In the somber *Wool Mark* (all works 2010), for example, two women wearing heavy coats amble through a barren winter woods. The peculiar mix of realism and gestural abstraction, as seen in the coats’ crisscrossed patterns, added another conceptual layer to the show, prompting an unexpected “painting about painting” dialogue.

Around the corner were seven more works, each showing a model wearing a chunky sweater above a Polish title bearing the name and inspiration for the knitwear: *Pszczola* (Bee), *Torcik* (Cake), *Pejzaz* (Landscape). In the same room, Ołowska displayed handmade versions of the kitschy-gaudy sweaters. Executing (rather than merely representing) applied, or “low,” methods from Polish history, Ołowska here recalls her own earlier works—“Asymmetric Display,” 2004, for instance, an installation made by following the abstruse rules once used to decorate Soviet storefront windows.

The colorful patterning of these sweaters echoes works by a wide range of artists one could find on Ołowska’s *Inspiration Wall*, a cluttered arrangement culled from the artist’s studio, with images by Niki de Saint Phalle, John Currin, Eva Hesse, Andro Wekua, Sara VanDerBeek, Sherrie Levine, and Michael Krebber. Piecing together the implied puzzle, one could find a little bit of each of these muses in Ołowska’s works. (Rosemarie Trockel came to mind, too.) But beyond this reading emerged a more critical, and contemplative, view of Western consumer capitalism as a jumbled grab bag of styles one could choose from, passé to some, fashionable to others.

—Lauren O’Neill-Butler



Paulina Ołowska,  
*Hunting*, 2010, oil on  
canvas, 69 x 49 1/4".