

# METRO PICTURES

Kosciuczuk, Krzysztof. "Paulina Ołowska," *Frieze d/e* (December 2015 - February 2016): 133-134.

frieze <sup>d/e</sup>



Paulina Ołowska, *Oksza*, 2015

Taking the worn, the refused and the outmoded as points of departure, for *Needle/Nadel* Paulina Ołowska crafted a set of works that employ the formal language of artistic textiles to surprising effect. This micro-survey – held on the occasion of the Aachen Art Prize, awarded to Ołowska in 2014 – comprised new and existing works in various media, all bound by a common thread: the link between mass-produced items, applied arts and the artist's own objects.

In *Oksza* (2014) – a thick, opalescent deep-purple tapestry – discarded chunks of industrially produced plastic fibres collected from a factory in Tarnów, in southeastern Poland, were stitched together with fragments of a hand-knit rug. More imposing was *Poliamid* (2015): weighing several hundred kilogrammes and made of tangled fibre, it formed an abstract assemblage that – in spite of its arresting presence – appeared surprisingly airy and fragile. Displayed in the same space was a group of macrame textiles salvaged from art schools across Poland, where they often serve as the dreaded end-term assignment. Here, Ołowska transformed them into tattered sculptural forms and palced them – like remnants of ancient busts – on polished rose marble plinths. With names like *Little Sheep* and *a Drowsy Devil* (2015), they nodded to once-popular children's plays staged by puppet theatres. The seemingly defunct languages and styles referenced by the works resulted in objects looking back at the legacy of collaboration between artists and industrial workers as well as traditions such as textile-making and technical and art education.



Paulina Ołowska, *Needle / Nadel*, 2015,  
installation view

This nexus, too, was explored by a series of paintings, in *The Tychy Plant* (2013). Within the same room, a black-and-white photographic print of two women working an assembly line was incorporated into a larger view of an industrial interior painted in broad strokes. Running across the canvas was a dark trace of an airbrush, snaking down from the factory ceiling like a power tool hose. The composition was based on a photo from a 1970s airline magazine depicting the manufacture of a Fiat automobile – a sought-after consumer good in the Polish People's Republic. In Ołowska's painting a Pop staple – the automobile – was treated not as a fetish, but bleakly, as an item in the making, devoid of lights, paint and decals. As such, the work functions as a portrait of the women whose labour produced the automobile: one of the workers is seated in the car's trunk, smiling, apparently posing for the camera. As much as it can be read as an attempt to focus on female labour, the scene's highlighting of the juncture of mass-production and individual industriousness also highlights the tension between the finished and unfinished that recurred throughout the show.

A parallel tension between craft and mass-production was brought to the fore by the second room's centrepiece: the installation *Collage for the Machine* (2015), which combines ceramics, painting and textile. There, Ołowska recalled an earlier project, *Attention à la Peinture* (2008), in which fashion designs by Elsa Schiaparelli served as inspiration for her own oil paintings that were subsequently used as tailoring patterns – cut out and made into a collection of garments, with the remains of canvas, still on stretchers, displayed alongside. *Collage* featured several such cropped-out paintings on the wall next to two pieces of ceramics formed to resemble similar off-cuts. Laid out on a nearby table was also a larger set of ceramic elements, glazed and painted to mimic the chalk-traced shapes found in tailors' workshops. In this apparent confusion of purpose and form, Ołowska draws on fashion design and manual craft not only to untangle the connection between the two – but also to reflect on her own role as an artist whose practice juxtaposes allusive quotes and stylistic citations with the tactile physicality of traditional media.

Ołowska's continued interest in artistic idioms and languages of the past had propelled her to examine prominent figures of feminism, fashion and art. She has been focused not on the output of only one artist, but more generally on the processes – individual and industrial – through which work comes into being. Ołowska, in turn, emerged here as an artist both critically reflecting on and deeply concerned with the craft and production of objects. Placed in front of *Collage* was a small, pitch-black ceramic figurine (*Saint Catherine*, 2014) holding a skein of orange wool – a likely reference to St. Catherine of Alexandria, protector of craftsmen who work with a wheel, though perhaps also to St. Catherine of Bologna, patroness of artists.