

# METRO PICTURES

Latimer, Quinn. "Paulina Olowaska at Kunsthalle Basel," *Artforum* (September 2013): 407.

## ARTFORUM



From left: Paulina Olowaska, *Teatr (The Theatre)*, 2013, oil on canvas, 55 1/4 x 39 3/4". View of "Pavilionesque," 2013. Foreground, from left: *Pavilionesque*, 2013; *Toda-miracle in children's language*, 2013; *Chatka, Children's Imagination, a Box*, 2013. Background, from left: *Groteska I*, 2013; *Krajské Bábkové divadlo v Rabce-Zdrój*, 2013; *The Foyer, Rabcio Puppet Theater, Rabka-Zdrój, Poland*, 2013; *Shadows Mady Alive I-V*, 2012. Photo: Serge Hasenböhler. Paulina Olowaska, *Herta Frankel, y sus marionetas*, 2013, gouache on canvas, 78 3/4 x 59".



### Paulina Olowaska KUNSTHALLE BASEL Quinn Latimer

**STYLE NEVER REALLY GOES OUT OF STYLE.** Paulina Olowaska knows this. She also knows resurrection—its rules and its rust—which she uses as a speculative tool, invoking a litany of historical, elegant forebears, mostly women (finally and thank God). But in order to resurrect something, a stage must be set, a room prepared and fixed. And the rooms in which we make our way and our work—bars, studios, theaters, parlors—have long occupied the Polish artist (or she has occupied them). Take her 2004 exhibition "She Had to Discard the Idea of the House as a Metaphor," at Kunstverein Braunschweig, Germany, with its salon-style séance of female modernists. Or consider this summer's exhibition at Kunsthalle Basel, curated by Adam Szymczyk, which conjured—via Olowaska's pointedly elliptical methods and media—the history of modern Polish puppet theater.

Olowaska's concern with creative shelters seems to be twofold. If puppet theater is an obvious metaphor for the increasingly staged arena in which we all live out our quotidian and creative lives, the artist's specific locus here was the Rabcio Puppet Theater: a famed establishment in Rabka-Zdrój, Poland, near where she lives and works. But the theater's history also offers a startling view of the twinning of Polish modernism and vernacular folk art and of the ideologies and visual codes of each, as well as of experimental theater's Brechtian breakdown of the wall between art and life, all of which have long been her oeuvre's *raison d'être*. The critic Jan Verwoert locates in Olowaska's practice "the desire to celebrate fashion and consumption outside of—and independently from—the workings of the capitalist

system." So it goes with her interest in high performance, popular theater, and fine art. As with all of the artist's endeavors, this one finds its roots in the modernist socialist state of Poland and the life and art that grew in its shadow.

"When I started working for the theatre in 1953 . . . the same typeface was used for election posters and for theatre posters," designer Jerzy Koleccki tellingly recounted in 2011. Koleccki's pioneering posters and stylized scenography for the Rabcio theater form the basis for the Basel show; Olowaska deftly re-created many of his long, lean prints with their distinct typography and graphic admixtures of modernist and folkloric forms. She also displayed large canvases featuring scenes from theater productions in monochrome matte paint, works suggesting both the prosaic and something more shadowy and noir—the memory of a film still, perhaps. These pieces and others are strewn with the shadows of political exhortation, advertorial spectacle, vernacular culture, and experimental theater itself—a strange, spectral commingling.

The magisterial gouache *Niebieski Ptak* (*Jan Dorman wg M. Maeterlincka 1963*) (*Blue Bird* [*Jan Dorman After M. Maeterlincka 1963*]), 2013, presents male and female figures on a stage, each leaning stiffly to the right, as if their strings are being pulled just so. Behind them, a shallow set tries to indicate depth. The composition and its elements are theatrical, artificial, and human: One feels unseen hands manipulating them, once and twice removed. (And the female figure looks not unlike Olowaska.) Elsewhere there were portraits of famous female puppeteers, such as Spain-based Herta Frankel, and collages of anonymous Polish puppetresses intelligently at work. But such two-dimensional pieces only formed one pole of the exhibition. The other was indicated by the show's title, "Pavilionesque," and by an actual wooden pavilion in the gallery's center—a shaky, roughshod structure redolent of a Grimms' fairy tale. Smaller shelters also appeared in weird, wondrous ceramic. The size of gingerbread cottages, and often resembling them, the works are approximations of buildings near Olowaska's home, albeit cast in a fluorescent-yellow glaze, offering the mix of the postwar and the provincial that composes her region's built environment.

If the theme of the pavilion and the national vernacular has a humorous topicality (one series of collages was proposals for the Polish pavilion at this year's Venice

Biennale, a commission that inexplicably went instead to Konrad Smoleński's heavy bells), its more important genesis is located in Olowaska's combination of the history of the social, the collective, the singular, the fashionable, the avant-garde, the rural, the urbane, and the gendered with the shelters that have held them—and, crucially, *might* hold them again. Here, however, the additional theme of the puppet pointed to the specific kinds of theater and spectatorship unfolding within such sites. Olowaska's play with size and scale—the toylike ceramic houses on too-tall plinths; the monumental paintings and posters placed behind plastic toys arranged like chance-based collages on the floor—indicated a departure from the explicit questions of gendered architecture that have previously occupied the artist. Although the idea of mother and child was implicit, these works move toward something broader: the incalculable need for connection to one's work and to

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one's community, and the ways in which this need can be satisfied (or not) within both the specific scope of the local and the universal project of international modernism. Indeed, if Olowaska's forms point to utopian possibilities, they seem to locate them at that unruly moment before the local and vernacular are deadened—made generic—by the homogenization of international style.

The show's installation, by turns casual and hyper-composed, functioned like a *tableau vivant* in which its characters—both human and simulacral—were absent, frozen. In conveying the alienation and alienating tendencies of these puppets-*cum*-artworks, Olowaska evoked, for me, Rilke's famous essay on his terror of dolls, figurines who lay about "in their earliest uncanny lonelinesses, as in the midst of empty rooms." Yet for Rilke, as for Olowaska, the possibility of resuscitation remains: "You have been left untouched too long," the poet writes, addressing the doll directly, "Now a hand both careful and mischievous is shaking you." □

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