

Max Podstolski: Saying the Ineffable

The phrase “*My Art Instinct*”, which gives its name to this exhibition as well as the title of its centre piece painting, “The Art instinct (Mine)”, is more than a statement about the artist’s own inner creative process. The concept of “instinct” is a pivotal aspect of Max Podstolski’s artistic production. Instinct and subjectivity – understood here as the expression of the self – constitute the core elements of Podstolski’s art. It is precisely the combination of these two elements, the presence of instinct and the appeal to the viewer’s own instinct and subjectivity, that establishes a point of commonality with the viewer, thus creating the possibility of an intersubjective dialogue which, by virtue of the non-representational nature of the paintings, is not constrained by the limitations of rationality.

About Art

The traditional answers to the question “what is art?” are based on the creator – in the case of Nietzsche, or on the perceiver – Kant’s and Schopenhauer’s perspective. From Heidegger’s point of view, however, in either of these two answers the essence of art is no more than a psychological state. For Heidegger, then, the artist is the causal origin of the work of art, although not the origin of its status as such, which is why he instead focuses on the work of art itself. Heidegger describes art as an act of unveiling, as the “happening of truth”¹. Thus, he relates art to the act of seeking truth and refuses the idea of art for art’s sake. In consonance with this, in Podstolski’s paintings, the creative process and the revelation of being are intrinsically linked together. There is much of this Heideggerian position in Podstolski’s work, since his paintings – as revealed by some of his titles such as “World in the Being” and “Facing the Thing-in-Itself” – seem to be driven not just by his art instinct, but by a perpetual pursuit of this Truth, of Being.

Nevertheless, the thought of a twentieth century Spanish thinker, María Zambrano, offers a better framework for understanding Podstolski’s art and its significance. Zambrano describes art in the following terms:

El arte parece ser el empeño por descifrar o perseguir la huella dejada por una forma perdida de existencia. Testimonio de que el hombre ha gozado alguna vez de una vida diferente².

Art is the determination to decipher or pursue the footprint left by a lost form of existence. Testimony that man has at some point enjoyed a different life.

In the case of Podstolski, resonances of this sense of loss can be found in his painting “Lost World”. This reveals an element of yearning, of looking back to the past. At the same time, this past is firmly connected to the present by means of the instinctual, primitive component to Podstolski’s paintings, as

can be observed in “Subterranean Instinct Blues” or even more strongly in “Spirit Dance”, to mention just two.

Although Zambrano agrees with this initial definition of art as the happening of truth, from her point of view this involves the happening of personal truth, that is, art as a means and materialisation of self-discovery; in other words, in her view, art has the capacity to access and connect us with a primordial knowledge which we cannot otherwise – or very rarely – access, and which in time has a transforming effect on the self. Moreover, having this access holds a potential for transformation for both artist and viewer, as we shall see below. Similarly, as the title “The Will to Flower” – a pun on Nietzsche’s will to power – indicates, Podstolski’s painting also holds a key for personal transformation, for self-actualization.

For Zambrano, in contrast with Heidegger, the nature of art rests on the artist and the receiver as much as on the work of art itself, for none of them could be understood without the others. A strong affinity can be found between Podstolski’s artwork and Zambrano’s *poetic reason*. Poetic reason constitutes an alternative, inclusive rationality whose aim is to access existential truth, Being itself, and communicate the otherwise ineffable by means of associations, imagery, and symbolism; a way of expression which surpasses the limitations of conventional reason. In Zambrano’s view:

El verdadero ser creador en arte como en pensamiento ha de transcribir la experiencia del ‘secreto’ mediante un lenguaje activo³.

In art, as in thought, the true creative being must transcribe the experience of the “secret” by means of an active use of language.

It is my contention that this is precisely what Podstolski achieves in his painting.

Firmly rooted in a primitive instinct, Podstolski’s use of shape, colour and line has the capacity to trigger associations and communicate concepts and emotions which ordinarily escape us, as a result of the constraints of rationality and the limitations of verbal language. For Zambrano:

El arte verdadero disipa la contradicción entre acción y contemplación, pues es una contemplación activa o una actividad contemplativa, una contemplación que engendra una obra, de la que se desprende un producto⁴.

True art dissipates the contradiction between action and contemplation, since it is an active contemplation or a contemplative activity, a contemplation which engenders a work [of art]; a product stems from it.

By conceptualising and expressing his own art in terms of instinct, the undefined shapes and symbols which comprise his paintings invite the viewer to engage with a process of a shared creation of meaning, that is, the viewer becomes engaged in an active process of contemplation and creation. Hence, each painting ultimately offers a unique and personal meaning with each viewing.

Instinct versus reason

In the context of Podstolski's current exhibition, "instinct" must be understood in relation to Nietzschean philosophy, that is, in reference to its opposite, reason. Reason constitutes the conceptual counterpoint to instinct and primitiveness. This reason, however, is questioned by the artist, who draws attention to its fragility and limitations, as well as to the imprisoning effect that it may have upon the individual, as the titles "Web of Logic" and "Howl of Minerva" indicate. Hence, this exhibition establishes a dialogue with Nietzschean and Heideggerian philosophy not just through its approach to the concepts of art and instinct, but also by means of the titles to some of the paintings, as can be observed more explicitly in "Niche for a Dionysian", "States of Becoming (Nietzsche's Moustache)", "Apollo and Dionysus", and "The Will to Flower".

Although different in nature from the painting and physically separate from it, titles form an intrinsic aspect of Podstolski's artwork. These titles – the result of thoughtful consideration – offer the viewer a path through which to engage with each painting, a framework of meaning from which to approach it; that is why his paintings are not relativistic statements, but intersubjective acts of self-expression. Given the non-representational nature of this work, these titles supply a frame of reference from which to interpret and engage with his painting, by positioning it in a deliberate socio-cultural context, while at the same time offering the viewer an insight into the artist's intention or understanding of his own production. This duality, between painting and verbal language, already reveals the tension between the Dionysian – instinctual, free expression – and the Apollonian – rational and constrained expression – present in Podstolski's artistic production, as the artist himself indicates in his article in the present catalogue.

Ordinary language, as prominently argued by Heidegger, is ill-equipped to talk about Being, for such discussion is often blurred by the polysemy, inaccuracy, and subjectivity which are characteristic of any language. The Dionysian aspect of Podstolski's paintings, the free nature of its non-rational component – inasmuch as it defies the coordinates of Cartesian reason, by-passes the limitations of verbal language; it communicates at instinctual, emotional, even existential levels an inherent aspect of human existence which – yet – remains inaccessible for the most part. The Apollonian, on the other hand, the presence of a verbal component, creates a connection between the instinctual and the rational, teasing the viewer to seek an interpretation which can only be made sense of at an instinctual level. Thus, the communication of the ineffable – the unveiling of truth, in Heideggerian terms – may

take place only as a result of the active engagement of the viewer, as discussed above in reference to Zambrano's position.

Hence, it must be underlined that although these two aspects – the Dionysian and the Apollonian – express a tension present throughout Podstolski's artwork, they do not constitute a straightforward duality. Far from it, these elements intertwine in dynamic interaction, as revealed on the one hand by the necessary limitations to absolute creative freedom that are inherent in any medium and, on the other, by the wit and irony contained in his use of language, which is to say that this duality is only apparent. It is precisely by containing the possibility of the reconciliation of these two aspects of his work, of reality itself, that Podstolski's painting, much like a Buddhist *koan*, holds the key to its own resolution. In this sense, by daring to express and share *his* art instinct, Podstolski's art exhibits a deeply subversive quality. Just as is the case with Zambrano's poetic reason, Podstolski's artwork takes the viewer beyond the binary rationality that Western culture is traditionally associated with and, instead, suggests an integral form of art, an integral rationality.

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¹ Martin Heidegger, *Off the Beaten Track*, edited and translated by Julian Young & Kenneth Haynes, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, p. 33.

² María Zambrano, *Hacia un saber sobre el alma*, Alianza, Madrid, 2004a, p.45.

³ Zambrano p. 42.

⁴ María Zambrano, *La confesión: Género literario*, Siruela, Madrid, 2004b, p. 97.