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Poland's Most Optimistic, Backward-Looking Artist

Faded utopias have served as the greatest inspiration for Paulina Olowaska — painting, living and believing in a forgotten past.

By EMILY WITT SEPT. 22, 2016



Paulina Olowaska, sitting in front of her in-progress oil and acrylic painting "Hysteria (After Eggleston)," 2016, at her studio in Rabka, Poland. Rafal Milach

For the Polish artist Paulina Olowska, Warsaw in the 2000s was a city of ghosts. Walking through neighborhoods, she would notice skeletal and darkened neon signs for shops that no longer existed, the legacy of a centrally planned “neonization of Warsaw.” She would pass shuttered storefronts with elaborate papier-mâché dioramas, a decorative tradition left over from a time when shops had little to display in their windows. She saw an expired idealism in the library for the blind across the street from her apartment; in the Modernist buildings, constructed with a utopian society in mind and yet unlivable; in the defunct socialist monuments.

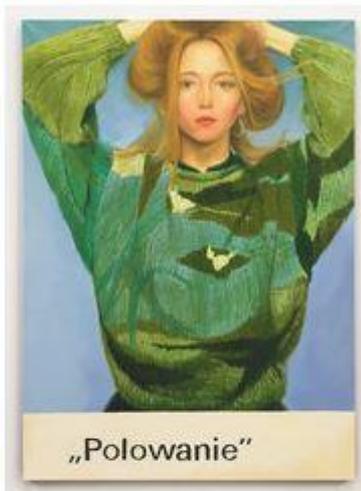


Olowska's "The Painter," 2016.

Paulina Olowska, "The Painter," 2016, oil and acrylic on canvas, 86 5/8 by 66 15/16 inches, courtesy of Metro Pictures, NY

In painting, sculpture, performance and collage, Olowska began to weave these “failed” visual cultures into art. Her work quotes from a wide range of utopian Modernisms: the Russian avant-garde, Bauhaus, Esperanto, Polish cabaret theater. But it is those projects that deal specifically with the lost visual symbols and cultures of Poland during the Cold War for which she is best known. Her art often infuses quixotic optimism into visual relics of life behind the Iron Curtain, such as a project

she undertook to relight an iconic neon sign of a volleyball player in Warsaw's Constitution Square. Her most famous series of paintings, exhibited in 2010 at Metro Pictures in New York, adapts a series of postcards from the 1980s of women modeling homemade sweater patterns in stylized shoots. The show's title was "Applied Fantastic," a term proposed by the writer Leopold Tyrmand in 1954 to describe do-it-yourself renditions of high-fashion looks that were unavailable to Poles under Communism.



"Hunting," from Ołowska's 2010 "Applied Fantastic" series, in which she reimagined fashion postcards from the 1980s. Paulina Ołowska, "Hunting," 2010. Oil on canvas, 68.9 by 49.21 inches, courtesy of Metro Pictures, NY

"From a personal perspective it was a negotiation of my childhood past that I saw in front of my eyes disappearing," she said of her search for source material in everything from archives of Poland's underground punk scene to Soviet propaganda magazines. "I was trying to understand it. Was it really necessary? Was it really so utopian that you cannot really live in it?"

I met Ołowska on an afternoon in late May in Krakow, where she now lives part-time. She wore a long flowing navy blue dress and has short dark hair. Her round doll's face was framed with a kerchief in primary colors, and she had a faceted red rhinestone heart on a gold chain around her neck. We explored the city on bicycles, a tour of selective memorialization. The factory of Oskar Schindler has been preserved here, but his villa looks abandoned. Some

Brutalist buildings have been turned into work spaces, others have been covered with advertisements. The squares of Krakow, like so many European cities, now have Zara and H&M in their ornate and crenelated buildings.

But Ołowska takes delight in showing off the layers of the city that have resisted globalization, and she gives an enthusiastic tour of the lost aesthetics that she uses in her art. We visit a 1930s-era patisserie and cabaret with grotesque paintings on the walls, proscenium intact; a coffee shop with 1960s-era industrial stools, a cafe that sells rainbow gelatin cocktails in parfait glasses. Krakow is sunlit, green and vibrant. Monks and nuns stroll in their habits. We pass an open window through which Disco-

Polo, folksy 1990s Polish pop music, is playing, and Olowska stops so we can listen. She is pleased with a Modernist sculpture of an owl in Planty Park that has recently been restored. In the National Museum, she laughs at a painting, once considered pornographic, of a young woman astride a frothing stallion, then discreetly photographs art students who are copying other 19th-century paintings in the galleries.



A photographically manipulated Olowska with friends in front of her inspiration wall. Rafał Milach

Olowska was born in 1976 in Gdansk. Her father, a speechwriter for the Solidarity movement and its leader Lech Walesa, resettled in the United States as a political refugee. In 1985, when Olowska was 9, he sent for the rest of the family. Before she left for Chicago, a school friend told her to be sure to go to a restaurant that had playgrounds and served tiny little chickens made especially for children. Olowska's first understanding of the aesthetics of ideology came by way of the shiny colors of McDonald's, the marketing of Rainbow Brite, Jem and the Cabbage Patch Kids and in the "fluffy tops of hamburgers."



From left: her house in Rabka; found objects dot the exterior of her studio. Rafal Milach

Her parents' marriage ended and she returned to Poland after only a year, chubbier and with the first experience of being an outsider imprinted in her memory. She was in her last year of grade school in 1989, and entered adolescence amid a swell of underground culture. A whole visual world was being discarded, and her generation became the first that could view what she calls the "crappy aesthetics" of 1980s Poland with some irony. "I describe sometimes what I do as working with the leftovers or dusty aesthetics," she said as we had lunch in Krakow. "They don't need to be dusty because they're old, but they're kind of not really in the center. So minor kinds of aesthetics, and I try to renegotiate them on the platform of art."

Since 2008, Ołowska has spent most of her time in a village of 17,300 people called Rabka-Zdroj, 40-odd miles outside of Krakow, with her husband, Bartosz Przybył-Ołowski, and their cat, Guitar. Rabka was once famous in Poland for having clean air and a tuberculosis sanitarium for children. In the 1960s it was, Ołowska said, a "vibrant, socialist place," home to its own amusement park for children, Rabkoland. When she arrived, she lamented the village's slow process of homogenization. Half the amusement park was to be torn down, to be replaced by the French supermarket Intermarché. She began her typical hunt for the dusty forgotten things. Her first

project was to paint a mural on what she called “the only place of culture” in Rabka, a decrepit puppet museum for children. She rescued a sculpture that had been in a Communist-era fountain from the town dump. She turned on an old neon sign that had been sitting dormant over what is now a pharmacy. She made ceramic sculptures of the area’s “haunted houses,” the gloomy 1930s country villas that dotted the countryside. And then she bought a gloomy country villa for herself.

She and Bartosz don’t live in Kadenowka, as the villa is called. We stepped into the chilly baronial dusk of its front hall. The house had belonged to a spa developer who had come to Rabka for its healing thermal waters and built his home with wood imported from Romania. Later, the property had been nationalized and divided into apartments, then mostly abandoned. Moss grew on its gabled shingle roof. A wall painted with a picture of Donald Duck was left by one of the former residents. Olowaska wanted to turn the house into a cultural center for visiting artists. To promote her idea, she hosted what she called a “Mycorial Theater” for three summers. The gathering of artists featured art installations and performances, tarot card readings, lectures on fermentation and outings organized around the traditional Polish pastime of mushroom hunting. The third festival, in August, had an astronomical theme, focusing on the annual Perseid meteor shower. It is likely the last.



From left: Olowaska in front of her inspiration wall; the remains of an installation at Olowaska's artist-residency house in Kadenowka. Rafal Milach

Poland's turn to right-wing nationalism and the government's revived cultural emphasis on Catholic morality have lately dampened Olowaska's optimism for what Kadenowka might become. "The current situation doesn't create good vibrations to work on things like that," she said. Any appeal for government arts funding would now likely have to be made under the guise of nationalism, a bad-faith gesture she does not want to make. "We would have to put up a cross," she said. "We wouldn't be able to do esoterica and have experimental theater people running around."



"Wisteria," 2016, a painting from her upcoming show at Metro Pictures.

Paulina Olowaska, "Wisteria," 2016, oil and acrylic on canvas, 102 3/8 by 131 1/8 inches (overall), courtesy of Metro Pictures, NY

Olowaska keeps a studio in Krakow but her main work space is still here in the countryside, a light-filled backyard studio with a lofted library. She shows me paintings in progress that are the distillation of her eight years of artistic experimentation in a nonurban setting. They are large, striking portraits of women, romantic and even narrative in nature: In one, a maiden in a feathered hat gathers mushrooms in a forest, a raven flying behind her. Another stands under the golden blossoms of a wisteria tree in front of a 1930s Polish villa built in the dark and shingled style of Kadenowka. The paintings are rife with witchy symbols: gold coins that were part of a special animal-themed series of the Polish zloty, a snail, the wings of a bat. These works, along with a performance piece that Olowaska will have at the

Kitchen in New York this coming January, in which she will paint the set and design costumes for “a form of ballet” in collaboration with composer Sergei Tcherepnin and choreographer Katy Pyle of Ballez, have her grappling with a different set of aesthetics: the Romantic symbolism of the 19th-century painter Jan Matejko, the idealized folk characters of the Art Deco painter Zofia Stryjenska (Olowka jokingly describes her as “the Polish Norman Rockwell”), the pantheon of Slavic gods and goddesses. Having abandoned the city for the countryside eight years ago, Olowka also discarded her investigation of utopian urban Modernism for an inquiry into the ancient, the pagan and the feminine.



“The Lepidopterist,” 2016, another painting from her upcoming show at Metro Pictures.
Paulina Olowka, “The Lepidopterist,” 2016, oil and acrylic on canvas, 86 5/8 by 63 inches, courtesy of Metro Pictures, NY

The day before, in Krakow, we had run into some young friends of hers, recent graduates of the Krakow School of Art and Fashion Design, lugging photography equipment and wearing extraordinary outfits, like a trio of California surfers from the 1990s who had suddenly landed in the Old World. They had, they cheerfully told us, been taking photographs for a “post-avant-garde survival guide.” Olowka complimented one who was wearing a multicolored workout outfit from the Polish brand 4F, which designs the Olympic practice gear of several Eastern European countries in precisely the off-kilter aesthetic Olowka likes best. Later, sitting and drinking the local soda Oranzada with straws in a community art space, one of the young artists described the philosophy of their collective creative endeavors. “We make art based on luck and coincidence,” he said. As we walked through Krakow later, Olowka repeated this with admiration, and hoped the young people might have an idea for a decaying villa in a tiny town.