



Nature as Device

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Lately, I've been thinking about strata, stratum and stratigraphy. Not only in the way that sedimentary material is shaped, either naturally or artificially, but how materials and substances accrue, counteract and propagate beneath the soles of our feet, whether it be trails of smut and grime forming thin beds or folds, or asphalt fissures that open up space for oil to drip into. This is partly due to my fascination with sediment or, by extension, the permafrost that is currently melting to the extent that a vast silo of preserved inhabitants are re-emerging from the bowels of the earth. In the permafrost, life doesn't rot, rather it sits, half sleeping, in wait. I recently read that liquid blood was discovered inside a Lenskaya foal this year, marking the discovery of the oldest blood in the world – certainly a species that will be resurrected once we have warmed by three more degrees. Yet we mostly don't know this, we don't think about the morphing ground below; nor do we actually comprehend the radical (catastrophic?) imaginaries that the future holds, just as we don't exactly understand what we are looking at when peering into that debris-filled encrusted pavement mentioned above.

This logic of association is where Jakub's works emerge from, and as I pen this, I am pondering how strata are relevant to his paintings, both technically and contextually. In his canvases, which one could label "abstractions", he coats thick layers of oil paint and glaze, adding lacquer, varnish, and occasionally ink or spray paint to subtle transparent or semi-transparent surfaces. I am dubbing them abstractions because the artist is constructing something that is not clearly based on recognizable visual culture or reality; instead, he is hinting at the history of the medium, his

personal mythologies, and the intertwined relationships between space and time. Many of his works wrestle with the core traits associated with painting as we know them – motion, action, colour – and from time to time he attaches three-dimensional objects such as plant foliage, fruit skins, textiles (such as cotton t-shirts), credit cards, or household items such as kitchen utensils and light bulbs attached to the canvas support. In a frenzied repetition, blotchiness or improvisation, his brushstrokes tell us that something else is there, hidden from view. The layers disguise, or on the contrary, they accentuate.

Czyszczon is an avid observer who is interested in making art using the disparate and impersonal matter of everyday life, the castoffs of commodity culture. Some of his abstractions reveal trademarks or brands, or maybe newspaper clippings contrasted with organic matter. And they play with reversal, too. Whether it is by literally upending the canvas support and painting on its underbelly, or juxtaposing newsprint on aluminium and canvas in a diptych display. In the lead-up to this essay, he sent me a handful of images that inform his practice and again, there is a nod to the notion of strata: one a snapshot of discarded palm fronds on a sidewalk in Los Angeles; another, a take of rubbish and scrap (random electronic parts, dirt, melded plastic and aluminium amongst other materials) melting into the crevices of a Trastevere street in Rome. While the term strata covers the sum of geological layers that have developed and moved over billions of years, by extension, these layers and folds allude to the way ancestral materials meet contemporary materials, bringing elements into contact that were not in contact before. Both images are alluring in their compositional disarray and they capture the spirit that pervades his abstractions. They also assimilate the concept that writer Isabelle Graw calls “the emphatic embrace of life”, where real life enters the pictorial space materially and metaphorically. Here, Graw is considering the role of “life” as a less essentialist conception of life – a form, in other words, that consists of interrelations between matters of life and matters of art. This emphasis on interrelation brings the dynamic interaction between life and art into view and allows us to understand artistic practices as processes in which both art and life continually reconfigure each other.¹

Czyszczon graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Poznan in 2008, where he studied with Wojciech Łazarczyk, and has been actively making work in Poznan ever since, as well as co-leading the painting studio with Łazarczyk at the Academy of Arts in Szczecin since 2013. I first met Czyszczon in Poznań around 2010 when I curated a show at Stereo, Czyszczon’s main gallery, which has since relocated to Warsaw. Stereo was a vital force in the Poznań artistic scene, backing an entire generation of artists who have since garnered international attention, including

Czyszczoń, who also collaborates with *Ermes-Ermes*, a unique gallery hailing from Rome and Vienna. Czyszczoń works out of his studio in an old tenement house (where he also lives) filled with piles, stacks, old fabrics and paper remnants on tabletops – a miscellany of material giving the impression of an assemblage or collage; this is not far from the depiction of Giorgio Morandi's studio, his bedroom, where he slept, dreamt and contemplated – or Dieter Roth's studio, whose floors were later exhibited as artworks – positioning the studio not merely as a locale, but also as a concept of ultimate, central meaning. In Czyszczoń's practice, the work comes together inside and outside the studio, whether when speculating on the end of the world as documented in the news, uncanny scenarios in nature, the detritus of industry and agriculture, or the remains of post-tourism.

Czyszczoń titles his works "Untitled", exerting an atemporal character intrinsic to the practice of painting. In a sense, there is no beginning or end to the work. A deliberate unnamings. Furthermore, it relates to the artist's studio practice where "it is hard to identify the reasons for setting a work aside and later coming back to it after three to five years to reassess it, to establish its equilibrium, to see its completion."² His exhibitions do have titles, however. These are remotely retrieved from the work of literary figures and poets such as Paul Bowles (*The Eye Wants to Sleep, but the Head is no Mattress*), John Ashbery (*Late Echo*), Frank O'Hara (*If the Room is Full of Smoke*) and Robert Walser (*Microscripts*). I would argue that the titles directly allude to the body in its habitat, potential conflicts or contradictions when occupying these environments, and ultimately the paradigmatic question of nature.

Why nature? The artist's conscious approach to nature is the result of directly interpreting the observed world. Why, then, abstract? Why fragment nature and reassemble it in an apparently arbitrary fashion? Czyszczoń does not desire transcendence through abstraction. Rather, he is vowing for a greater embeddedness in the world through materials, work and life itself. All the paintings share his proclivity for the indirect and the distilled. Abstraction then becomes a logical tool and nature a device, since to abstract is to distil, and to distil is to intensify. Nature, here, is more than a convenient storehouse of forms, colours and symbols; painting is a means to an end, whereas the end is an exploration and revelation of this ultimate meaning to whatever limits it can be penetrated by reason and intuition. Such an attitude is in fairly direct opposition to the exaltation of "the primacy of the medium". In fact, the question of the medium is lurking as I contemplate his work. It seems that painting has some kind of justified pull, at the apex of the hierarchy of forms. Finally, thinking about Czyszczoń's paintings conjures up what art historian Carol Armstrong emphasises as a "go-between" or what Graw

considers a form of life, mimicking a profoundly material operation. I would vote for a merger of the two – a space for communication that is neither singular nor autonomous. A negotiation of the problems of the medium, its specific history and legacy, but also the means for circumscribing personal experience and “aliveness”. It is within this matrix that Czyszczoń’s work subsists and perseveres as a means of channelling, as opposed to a conversation with a purely abstract, self-reflexive entity.³

1 See Isabelle Graw, *The Love of Painting: Genealogy of a Success Medium* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2018), 45.

2 Email exchange with the artist, 2019.

3 Graw, 44.