

FUNNY GAMES

Karolina Jabłońska

Tomasz Kręcicki

Cyryl Polaczek

Curator: Cornelis Van Almsick

Gussglashalle, Wrangelstraße 28, Berlin

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Text: Arkadiusz Półtorak

The exhibition *Funny Games* features recent works by Karolina Jabłońska, Tomek Kręcicki and Cyryl Polaczek – three young Polish painters who exhibit collectively as *Potencja* and run an independent art space bearing the very same name in Kraków. Despite their history of close collaboration, *Potencja*'s first joint presentation in Berlin is built around themes such as rivalry, competition and miscommunication. Originally, the show was meant as a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the collective's internal dynamics and, in a broader perspective, an account of how tight-knit bonds of comradeship and solidarity dissolve within late capitalist culture. Although many works presented at Gussglashalle allude to these matters, the final selection might also be read as a broad enquiry into painting conceived as a conceptual practice. Displaying affinity to cinema and reiterating characteristic motifs over and over again, *Potencja*'s works challenge the communicative potential of figural painting.

Jabłońska, Kręcicki and Polaczek began their collaborative work in 2012, while working towards their diplomas at the Fine Arts Academy in Kraków. At the outset, they were presenting their works at unusual places such as the post-communist milk bar *Wiarus* in the city centre. In 2016 they opened their first project space in *Zabłocie*, a post-industrial district of Kraków, and in the following years they achieved critical acclaim and widespread interest in the Polish art scene thanks to their collaborative shows across the country (including *Potencja* at Raster Gallery in Warsaw, 2017). Dubbed “the future of Polish painting”, *Potencja* have quickly become a brand in the national art scene – but the brand's strength stems from the group members' distinct personalities. Although *Funny Games* participants act as a collective, they mobilize distinct sensibilities and draw inspiration from different sources. Jabłońska often borrows from vernacular culture and overcodes her paintings with feminist overtones; many of Kręcicki's works are reductive and theatrical in the post-minimalist manner, while Polaczek's – most symbolic and heavily mediated with cultural references (as well as relying on the tactile qualities of the canvas and paint themselves).

What unites Jabłońska, Kręcicki and Polaczek's practices in spite of their idiosyncracies is their slightly surrealist approach to figuration. Whether it is a cigarette stub, a mouth, a light-bulb or a human leg, in their paintings such objects often become enlarged, distorted or ripped out of the usual context; in short – defamiliarized. It is because of this trait that *Potencja*'s works have been compared to the oneiric videos of Berlin's *Preis der Nationalgalerie* winner Agnieszka Polska or ethereal paintings of Tomasz Kowalski. Many of their pieces might be anecdotal just like works of Marcin Maciejowski or Wilhelm Sasnal – former members of Kraków-based *Grupa Ładnie* and two of the most influential contemporary Polish painters – but *Potencja*'s anecdotes differ substantially in terms of content and style of delivery. Whereas Maciejowski dabbles in Polish history and fashions his paintings on comic strips, Jabłońska, Kręcicki and Polaczek pay more attention to direct human interactions and employ the visual vocabulary of cinema. They capture movement in freeze-frames, depict their protagonists in extreme close-ups and capture some scenes from multiple angles. Relying on repetition and shifts of perspective, their painting series reflect the logic of film montage and thereby correspond to their actual attempts at film-making (including *Złe rekiny* and *Interstelaż* – the collective's parodist takes at sci-fi and horror movies).

The title of *Potencja*'s exhibition in Gussglashalle alludes to the controversial 1997 movie directed by Michael Haneke. An epitome of mindfuck cinema, *Funny Games* confronts the viewers with absurd, sadistic violence and incessantly challenges their expectations that concern the protagonists' behavior. Similarly to Haneke's film, Jabłońska, Kręcicki and Polaczek's paintings depict scenes of brutality and gore – yet the affinities do not end here. The Austrian director's movie is set in a desolate place, if read allegorically, it

might be said to envision the social world as a closed system whose inhabitants can seek no external legitimization for their actions and might well feel entrapped in their solipsistic perception of reality. Re-painting disturbing scenes and seemingly banal objects over and over again, the Polish painters evoke a similar sense of entrapment. Instead of introducing more meaning to the depicted world, the slight shifts of angles and moments of estrangement in Potencja's consecutive takes on the same motifs only amplify the impression of anomy and lack of direction. In their painterly worlds, there are no significant plot twists and moments of recognition – in lieu, there is ever more doubt and neurosis.

If anything counterbalances the neurotic quality of Potencja's painting, it is – just like in Haneke's case – slightly humorous moments of reflexivity. In one of the most memorable scenes in Haneke's *Funny Games*, a sadistic protagonist grabs a TV remote and presses the rewind button, which results in the actual reversal of the movie's action. Jabłońska, Kręcicki and Polaczek often use similar devices (for instance, showing an object well-known from their previous works in front of a camera lense) – such tricks do not, however, serve to provide 'strong' interpretive keys to their oeuvres. The artists suggest no guidelines, no moral codes and no easy justifications. In the age of social media whose algorithms project our mirror images on smartphone screens, the trio choose to confront the viewers with the sheer oddness of 'looped' perception.

Arkadiusz Półtorak (Poland, 1992) – curator and writer; PhD candidate in the Faculty of Polish at the Jagiellonian University and graduate of De Appel Curatorial Programme (2017/2018); co-founder of Kraków-based art initiative *Elementarz dla Mieszkańców Miast* and contributing editor at "Magazyn Szum".