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THE PATHWAY OF CREATION



MAGDALENA ZAWISZA

Wave, 2022
110×140 cm,
artist's own technique

What creative process is involved in creating a painting? Where does artistic inspiration come from?

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In the contemporary world, where it is increasingly difficult to define one's identity in the social and political realms, my paintings focus on the general idea of an individual's identity – on the moment when the genetic material we are born with encounters the flowing currents of reality in the form of places, people, and events. I am particularly fond of the metaphors of stone and water.

Water currents – representing life – vary in their force, and they exert various impacts on stone – representing humankind. Water can take the form of a stream, a river, a lake, a waterfall, an ocean; it can crush, destroy, transport, shape, enfold, cradle, conceal, protect.

I examine the relationships between people and their surroundings, including the natural world. This attempt to show their unity involves invoking certain symbolisms. The problem in itself is not new, so it is difficult to give it a new, original twist. Rather, it is a universal question which has been faced by humankind and artists for eternity, and it continues to ask fresh, fundamental questions. For me, my paintings are mainly a way of understanding myself, examining my inner self and understanding and accepting it. The creative process is reminiscent of a daily journey. Perhaps that is why so many of my inspirations come from landscapes, in particular at the intersection of water and stone. I am fascinated by the encounter between these two elements, by their interactions, intertwining, and relationships. I would say that the primary reason for this almost unconscious selection is its physicality, almost demanding to be painted. Water manifests in myriad ways: it gleams and shines, it can be an abyss, it shows the full spectrum of colors. Stone is mysterious: it can take on various forms and preserve traces of the past while appearing unchanging and eternal. When brought together, these two elements create incredible spectacles, from silent and subtle to unrestrained and terrible, depending on the might of the water and how it interacts with the stone. In my images, I limit myself to narrow close-ups focusing on a dynamic fragment of the landscape evoking the ocean, stream, or waterfall.

Direction

I discovered a new formal artistic direction quite by chance. One evening I was facing a muffled paint-

ing, exhausted with whites. The way the lightbulb shone on it cast highly defined shadows. It occurred to me that these shadows within the canvas could be its salvation. I took a small knife and cut out first one hole, then another and another. The stones became three-dimensional, and the shadows added a semi-real component to the painting. Suddenly everything started to make sense, and my new motif gained clearer and very different aspects. It was that evening, in that painting, that I saw a direction which I had always been subconsciously following, but it was only then that I found the right way of expressing it. The new third dimension revealed secrets within in my paintings.

That evening marked the start of a new stage for me, which still continues today. Ever since then, I have been formally transcending the canvas surface – breaking the taboo of a painting's sanctity which I took from my original studio, and trying out non-standard means of expression. However, this is not simply a formal experiment – more than anything it is about the content arising from this specific action.

In the metaphorical sense, I use stone and water as illustrations of humankind and the reality in which we live – and in my work the concept of “reality”

Black Beach Anima Mundi,
2017, 120×140 cm,
mixed media on canvas



MAGDALENA ZAWISZA

ACADEMIA INSIGHT Painting



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Black Waterfall, 2018,
170×300 cm,
mixed media

frequently steps beyond the world experienced by our five senses. It reveals a world as it is perceived, implied, a spiritual world – a question of reasoning or *anima mundi*. I started to gradually discover the wealth of meanings concerning the symbolism of stone and water in theories of culture, religion, and philosophy.

Creative process

I record the inspirations I find in nature by taking photos. I use my phone – I always have it with me,

and I treat it as a kind of sketchbook. I take pictures of mountain streams, waves washing over seashores, and mossy rocks in lakes. I find it especially important to note the impressions made by light, reflections on water's surface, play of shadows. Most of my “notes” relate to the quality of light. They serve as the first impulse giving direction to my exploration, and I start working directly on the paintings.

At some point along my creative path, I started looking for an equilibrium. The stage when I cut the canvas comes and goes as I need it. I always try to be deliberate with the means I use, and having tried a full spectrum of styles of cutting, it has become second nature to find some kind of antithesis for delving into the deep. As a result, I have been using a familiar medium – papier-mâché – to construct spatial objects. Pulped newspapers mixed with the right proportion of glue create a kind of a dense, structural paint – it serves as a negative to the cuts and a form of matter which almost hyper-realistically symbolizes stone. There is also another, unintentional aspect of this process. I make papier-mâché from daily newspapers which I have delivered to me – but I do not read them, wanting to avoid the toxic content. My “stones” are the result of a transformation of out-of-date mundanity, unpalatable for me, into matter which has real value, even though at first glance it resembles mud.

To balance the Earth's structural matter, I have found a medium to captivate the nature of water.

The way I create my images does not force the viewer into any particular way of reading the landscape. In a direct confrontation with the audience, without introduction, it turns out they perceive myriad phenomena, ranging from visions of outer space to microscopic images of living tissue.

Humankind's state-of-the-art techniques of observing space and looking deep into individual cells frequently reveal similar visual structures, whether on the micro- or macroscopic scale. For me, the image should just crack open the door, and the viewer must find their own direction to follow. I am delighted by the seemingly endless interpretations – that is precisely my aim.

The art of viewing

My paintings frequently evoke associations with the micro- and macrocosm; at times, the same viewer perceives them both at once. The multidimensionality and ambiguity of my works is very important to me. As I said earlier, I am only interested in propping open the door. In a way I would like my paintings to operate on a philosophical level: it is not about finding specific answers, but asking fundamental existential questions. For me, the key question is “Who am I?”, and my work reflects this closely.



Fig. 1
Ebbing Tide Anima Mundi,
 2017, 140×160 cm,
 mixed media



Fig. 2
White Waterfall, 2018,
 120×140 cm,
 mixed media

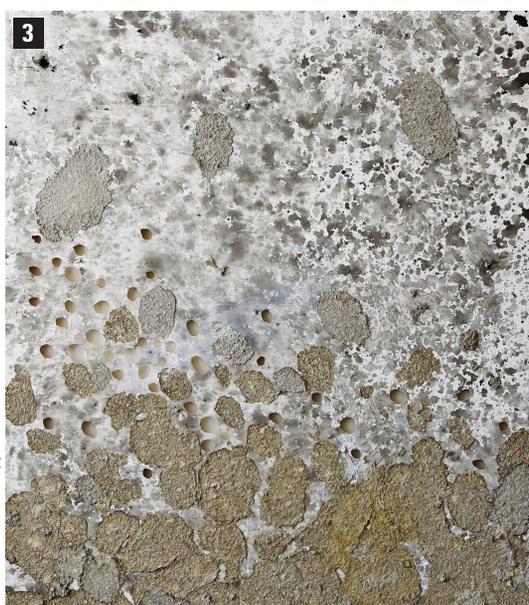


Fig. 3
Ebbing Tide, 2018,
 120×140 cm,
 mixed media

One of the earliest tenets of Greek, and more broadly European philosophy is the assertion by Thales of Miletus that water as the first principle of the Universe, suggesting symbolically that everything is one. It is impossible to know where the metaphor originates from, with Aristotle himself having pondered its roots. In any case, Thales' notion is widely seen as the original philosophical thesis, and thus serves as a reference point for others that followed. Heraclitus of Ephesus famously said, "No man ever steps in the same river twice," a position encapsulated in the phrase *ta panta rhei* (everything flows). By painting pictures which evoke streams or rivers, I am envisaging real inspiration from nature and this very thought. Life flows through us, and each new moment and the events and emotions it brings change us irreversibly.

In the wake of ancient philosophers, Johann Gottlieb Fichte posited the formula

$$\text{Me} + \text{not-Me} = \text{Me}$$

indicating how the environment affects the individual. Fichte marked a clear distinction between realities, dividing them into the inner "Me" and outer "not-Me." Today, quantum physics shows us that such divisions do not exist: if everything is made of energy, it follows that by understanding its properties we can state that everything is one. Here we return to Thales and his idea of the first principle of the universe, symbolically described as water.

Those of my canvases which tend more towards the abstract, which no longer make a clear distinction between stone and water, are a reflection of these theories and of ideas expressed through Taoism. This is linked with the ancient concept of Wu Wei, meaning "inexertion" or "effortless action" in harmony and free-flowing spontaneity of the Universe. If we replace the concept of the Universe with God, we see clear similarities to Christian scriptures. In essence, spirituality in different parts of the world and in different cultures is rooted in trust in life/God/Universe/nature.

In a sense, the concept of stone reflects this idea. It persists wherever it is taken by water, and it surrenders itself to its effects: slow and patient, or violent and destructive, depending on water's whims. I should note that destruction – or, perhaps more accurately, transformation – is not meant pejoratively; it simply describes the shift into a new form of existence. Stone turns into smaller shards, and they eventually become sand. Many people perceive death to be a similar transformation; perhaps into a different dimension or a new life which is a consequence of the past. For me, images with the waterfall motif are a reflection on the idea of passing, the final transformation, death, which is never the end but simply the closing of a certain chapter. ■

Further reading:

Bauman Z., *Identity: Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi*, 2004.

Copleston F., *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 7 Fichte to Nietzsche, 1963.