

Alfonsas Andriuškevičius

Destiny of Two Myths

[Translated from Alfonsas Andriuškevičius. Dviejų mitų likimas/ Lietuvių dailė 1975-1995, Akademija, Vilnius, 1997, by Laimutė Zabulienė]

[4.075 words]

Lithuania



EUROPSKA PRIJESTOLNICA
KULTURE



Republic
of Croatia
Ministry
of Culture
Republika
Hrvatska
Ministarstvo
kulture



REPUBLIKA HRVATSKA
Ministarstvo
turizma



This text was archived at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Zagreb collection, as part of the **Research project** conceived in 1997 by a SCCAN – Soros Centers for Contemporary Art Network, funded by the Open Society Foundation, New York.

The purpose of the project was to select, collect and disseminate texts on contemporary art practices in the Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia, around Soros Centers for Contemporary Art, written in and about art of the 1990s. The coordination of the project was carried out by Janka Vukmir, SCCA – Zagreb, today the Institute for Contemporary Art, Zagreb.

We did not intervene in any of texts more than just correcting obvious typos and spelling. On the occasion of collecting texts, we were given permission from all authors, to rightfully use them. If anyone now has different instructions, please, contact us at the info@institute.hr.

All of the texts we have collected at the time have been later published on the website of the I_CAN, International Contemporary Art Network, the short-lived successor of the SCCAN.

On the occasion of the exhibition **90s: Scars**, revisiting the art practices and social and political context of the 1990s in the postcommunist countries, the Institute for Contemporary Art is now reoffering a collection of **89 texts and a comprehensive list of then proposed further readings**, on the website of the Institute for Contemporary Art, www.institute.hr.

The exhibition 90s: Scars is curated by Janka Vukmir and organized by the Institute for Contemporary Art and the MMSU – Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rijeka, on the occasion of the **European Cultural Capital Rijeka 2020**. Originally planned to open May 14, 2020, at the MMSU in Rijeka, due to COVID-19 crisis, is postponed until further notice.

Alfonsas Andriuškevičius

Destiny of Two Myths

When looking from my subjective tower at Lithuanian contemporary painting, I can see that the changes, which took place in the current few years, can be successfully characterized on the basis of two myths, which had regulated our artist's creative activities and destiny for a long time. These myths can be christened Inspiration and Paint. They were flourishing at the late 60's and are not yet withered at present, however, their regulation power and their shade seem to be much weaker. But I would like to start, touching upon another point.

The problem is as follows: were there any valuable works of painting created in the latest decades of the Soviet period or not? In other words, whether the second independence took us unawares in the ruins of painting or in the city, province, forest or at least the bush of painting? To pose this problem and to give an answer publicly, I suppose is necessary at least due to two reasons: first, in order to know in what situation the changes under discussion were taking place; second, to make professionals, who have come to certain conclusions about the situation in their spheres of culture, realize the state of painting. I am not going to prognosticate about the answer to this question at the end of epochs, when according to Rudyard Kipling Earth's last picture is painted and the tubes are twisted and dried; anyway, at present my answer is as follows: Lithuanian painting of the poststalinist period was not ruins.

A broader argumentation concerning the answer is simply inconvenient here. Therefore, I would like to make only two motions. First of all, I would like to recommend to my readers my previously written article¹, which contains some, though not quite direct, arguments. Then, I shall present a few facts, which can perform the function of argument. Here they are.

¹ A. Andriuškevičius. Metaphysical Dimension of our Painting // Kultūros barai. 1992, N 4, pg. 8—11.

Several rather solid European museums and collectors have acquired some works of Lithuanian painting created in the poststalinist period. The type of museums and rank suggest that they were concerned not about “Soviet anomalies” but just about normal art; it should be also mentioned that the acquired painters (with the exception of possibly one) were not some prominent representatives of the underground (it was making slow headway in Lithuania on the whole). The museums: the Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam); the Stadtmuseum Nordico (Linz); The Museum Ludwig (Cologne); the Magyar Nemzeti Galeria (Budapest). The painters: Povilas Ričardas Vaitekūnas, Vygantas Paukštė, Jonas Gasiūnas, Antanas Gudaitis, Augustinas Savickas, Leopoldas Surgailis, Aloyzas Stasiulevičius, Eugenijus Antanas Cukermanas, Jonas Daniliauskas, Rimas Bičiūnas and others. And more. The painters of an older generation, who remember prewar times, when comparing the painting of that period with “today’s”, state that the latter is no worse at all. Here is the answer of Antanas Gudaitis given in 1988: “Our painting in comparison with the prewar is not weaker now. Then and now there are varied works. More diverse. First of all, due to a greater number of people”². And more. We ourselves (I mean art critics) have already seen the world and exchanged a few words with its artists and critics. Therefore, we can witness ourselves (I suppose that besides me, some other three or four are sure to have the same opinion): it is not ruins.

One more point should be added here: the state of Lithuanian today’s (i. e. postindependent) painting is not analogous to the state of literature as it is presented by Albertas Zalatorius³: there are no signs of confusion, anemia or other symptoms of quick end, creation, exhibitions and trade do perfectly well. No matter how much I would like to make use of the title of Sherwood Anderson’s short story (“From Nowhere to Nowhere”), making an attempt to characterize Lithuanian painting of the 90’s of the 20th century, I simply cannot do it, indeed. But come on to myths.

Myth of Inspiration. This myth, including the second as well, was particularly luxuriant in the 70’s and 80’s, when Lithuanian painting seemed not only to have slightly forgotten the restrictions of the Stalinist period, but when it also spoke of its diverse forms. A myth, now leafless, now coming into leaf again in various gardens and parks of European culture since ancient Greek times, came to rustle powerfully in a collective garden of Lithuanian painting. Its essence is as follows: an artist is only a medium, who performs certain subconscious movements, when he is told to so by a higher power; the moment of such order is called Inspiration.

² A. Gudaitis. No Perfection in Art and People // Kultūros barai. 1993, N 12, p. 16.

³ A. Zalatorius. Depression in our Literature: Symptoms, Reasons, Prognoses // Metmenys. 1994, N 66, pg. 3—22.

It is not true to say that this myth was supported by Lithuanian power. On the contrary, instead of talent and inspiration it was constantly offering labor and the studies of social and natural reality. Thus, a myth should be considered as a kind of antipode of the doctrine regarding the official art creation. On the other hand, it is hard to determine how much the artists believed in it personally: it seems to remain an eternal mystery. The Myth of Inspiration essentially functioned at the middle, unofficial public level (on top - official publicity, at the bottom - a secret, purely personal sphere). It is reasonable to think that artists (possibly without any evil aim) used to transgress it in one or another aspect (the same as an honest Christian performs some antichristian actions daily). Anyway, I would dare to state that the influence of this myth and particularly of its conscious and unconscious "derivations" was solid and has left deep traces in Lithuanian painting in the course of the mentioned period.

Now, a word or two on those "derivations", the marks of which regarding creation can be easier discovered in scarce considerations of the artists of that period than a properly formulated myth itself. One of them - that an artist (as mentioned) as a medium is supposed to perceive something and convey it. What? In the lexicon of the artists and critics of that period dominate two words denoting the object of perception and fixation (conveyance): mood and character. Whose? Of various phenomena. An interesting fact should be also mentioned that when continuing the traditions of anti-mythical thinking, artists could add to the word "mood" the words: sea, forest, evening, spring, age, etc. The word "character" is also treated in a similar way. Without going into more details concerning this point, I would like to highlight that a great attention to "mood" and "character" signal a hypertrophied care for a sensuous sphere: to be in a certain mood, then to "catch" the mood of the object, to fix it in the picture and last but not least to infect the spectator with it. Even in the case when the work does not fix the mood of another object, it must be there by all means. Here is how in 1979 Vincas Kisarauskas answered the question what makes a piece, a piece of art: "That means much - a temperament and originality-novelty, without which no new trends can exist in art, also stylistics and a kind of fury or sadness or sharpness, i. e. the mood of the piece"⁴. Some time later (1973) Algimantas Kuras answered the same question as follows (the answer has not been published): "A form to convey emotions"; speaking about another question, he mentioned: "A picture is an icon, expressing a certain mood".

Another "derivation" of the Myth of Inspiration, which formerly was rather popular - anti-verbal, anti-conceptual and even anti-intellectual disposition of artists. First of all, it found its expression in their avoidance to frequently

⁴ Answer Given by Vincas // Šiaurės Atėnai. March 4, 1994.

comment on their paintings and to transform their plastic language into the language of words. It should be considered to be the sphere having nothing to do with the artists' competence. If asked what one or another artist wanted to say in his work, there were cases when the artists would answer that the one asking such questions should look for an answer in the work himself, it is not the artist's business to explain his work in words. Such an attitude, incidentally, was rather logical in respect of the creator, holding the position of a medium: where from might he have known what a higher power wanted to reveal through him? Anyway, it (the) attitude) also had some advantages: if somebody started to comment on the work in a dangerous way, the artist would claim that it was the critic's fiction, and he did not want to know anything about it. It is interesting to note that this kind of distribution of roles (the artist - sensuous, subconscious sphere, the critic - his consciousness), was legalized at the official level and was valid even in Moscow: in 1980, the academician A. Lebedev, when criticizing the creation of Algimantas Švėgėda in the newspaper "Pravda", laid the blame not only on the artist but rather on the critic who supported his erroneous path⁵. The anti-verbal, anti-perceptive attitude sometimes would advance so much that some artists used to consider their conceptual consideration of creation (it was popular to say that painters "think in colors") to be dangerous for themselves and threatening both their artistic abilities and talent; though very few of them had cast a glance at psychoanalysts' works, still there was a prejudiced opinion that a verbal articulation of the "darkness" of creation was able to "cure" of the talent. While discussing this question, I cannot help citing Kisarauskas, who formulated the relationship between subconscious phenomena and mind as follows: "First of all, intuition, imagination and emotion. The place of the mind is behind the scenes, only sometimes it is allowed to appear on the stage, most often when the performance is over and it is closed"⁶. Therefore (it is clear not only due to it), very few phenomena in Lithuanian painting of the period (because the described prejudice, as mentioned, has left its traces in paintings) are the works which "started" from a "logical idea" with a stronger articulated manifestations of discourse thinking: philosophical, social and culturological ideas.

Thus, summing up one can say: under the regulations of the Myth of Inspiration (more exactly - its mentioned "derivations") Lithuanian painting of the last two decades of the Soviet period stood out for its orientation to a sensuous sphere and a skeptic attitude in respect of intellectualism (and particularly - rationalism) in art. It is common knowledge that the greater part of Lithuanian art historians agree with greater or smaller reservations

⁵ A. Lebedev. Exacting Judgment // Pravda, February 9, 1980.

⁶ Answers given by Vincas, ibd.

that the trend of our painting, which dominated in this period, can be considered expressionist. And the luxuriance of the expressionist tendency is, undoubtedly, associated with traditions and the prewar activities of “ARS”.

Therefore, I would like to cite in this context the words said by Antanas Gudaitis (one of “ARS” initiators) in 1988 about the weak points of our today’s painting: “I suppose that an exceedingly frequent recurrence of that ARSists’ romanticism is just a ballast here”⁷.

The Myth of Paint. The essence of the second myth can be expressed in the following way: “painting” is derived from the word “paint”. Looking at the matter from the aspect of estimation, the formulation can be expressed as follows: a good piece of painting must be painterly. In other words, a painter should first of all care for a painterly character, which is closely connected with paint. Indeed, the category of painterly character had previously served as the category of appraisal. What did it embrace? At least four things. The practice was to avoid detailing, and the represented objects had to be painted in a “broad” and “generalized” way (incidentally, it was a kind of resistance to naturalism, which was hardly imagined without detailing). Great was the joy when the surface of the picture looked in relief, the paint was rather thick and laid in several layers. (Anselm Kiefer proclaims that: “To paint is to burn with fire”, but Lithuanian pillars of painting of that period might have often declared that: “to paint is to plaster”). The works with an obvious trace of the painter’s hand used to be favorably appraised (qualified as painterly). This was the way to express the protest against the requirement by Jacques Louis David, the great French revolutionary artist, not to show the brushwork in the picture as well as to cling to bourgeois representatives of Western painting - from Edward Munch to Pierre Soulages and Jackson Pollock. The last “must” was coloring. If (using Charles Baudelaire’s terms) not melodic, at least harmonious. Whose creation more or less corresponds to these painterly requirements? Obviously, the creation of the representatives of the older generation - Antanas Gudaitis, Augustinas Savickas, Leonas Katinas; that of the younger - Jonas Švažas, Jonas Čeponis, Leopoldas Surgailis, Stasys Jusionis, Silvestras Dpiauškštas; even more younger - Algimantas Kuras, Povilas Ričardas Vaitekūnas, Rūta Katiliūtė, Arvydas Šaltenis; further - Mindaugas Skudutis, Adomas Jacovskis, Raimondas Martinėnas, Jūratė Bagdonavičiūtė, Dalia Kasčiūnaitė, Henrikas Natalevičius, Henrikas Čerapas, Jonas Gasiūnas; then that of - Arūnas Vaitkūnas, Ričardas Bartkevičius, Vytenis Jankūnas, etc. Very few more prominent painters from this period used a sprayer (“painting” is not a derivative of “to spray”). And those, who

⁷ A. Gudaitis, *ibid.*

had a bend for assemblage (American pop artists exploiting this technique make an attempt to escape from “handwork”), for example, Valentinas Antanavičius and Vincas Kisarauskas, coupled the assembled objects in the picture with rich painting... I would like to adduce some characteristic ideas concerning the issue of paint and painterly character. Algimantas Kuras: “The principle thing is a natural and complex, like in nature, intricacy of regularities and chances! How can one do it without copying the forms “word for word”? How to find a many-layer structure? How to avoid a banal subject, which instantly appears, when a thing is painted in a too concrete way? (...). A real subject is that, for the purpose of which I paint a picture, but not what is depicted there. It is not a bicycle wheel but the spoiling of smooth dark by a restless movement of a pallet knife”⁸. Henrikas Natalevičius: “Most often I find in my thoughts a plastic idea of the picture, i. e. coloring (of warm reddish tones, white or dark), the approximate number of figures and their placement in space, and then improvise and turn everything upside down even several times. It is not the correction of forms but the means to form a many-layer surface. I greatly value it in my painting. I think that real painting is not only covering a certain space with a coat of paint, but painting in the full meaning of the word, which makes possible to feel a pulsating many-layer painting in every centimeter (..)”⁹. It should be mentioned that the criterion of painting had blocked the way (of course, together with the first myth and its derivations) for an apparently scientific language, widely used by painters at that time in the West: tables, schemes, diagrams, etc. Therefore, not only true intellectuality and rationality were avoided but also the use of the language, seemingly associated with science (it is hard to tell whether science, i. e. brainwork will not pace to painting after scientific language).

Destiny of myths. First of all, two things should be acknowledged. First, that the shadow of those two myths cast on Lithuanian painting had never been blank, i. e. every generation of painters boasted talented or gifted artists, who wholly or partly did not yield to their requirements. For example, as early as almost Ėvapas’ generation, to such painters belonged Igoris Piekuras, Teresė Roņanskaitė, who were followed by Algimantas Švėgþda and Linas Katinas in Kuras’ generation, then Romanas Vilkauskas and Pranas Griušys in Skudutis’ generation, further in that of Sauka - Šarūnas Sauka himself and Romualdas Balinskas, etc. Second, that the power of myths has not yet been exhausted: today, besides still creative senior artists, we can boast of talented youth (and what is of great importance that they are graduates or undergraduates of the Vilnius Academy of Arts), who wholly or to a certain extent yield to the will of the mentioned myths.

⁸ A. Kuras. The Most Subjective Drawings of Thought // Kultūros barai, 1994, N 5, pg. 32, 33.

⁹ H. Natalevičius. The Pulsating Many-layer Painting // Kultūros barai, 1994, N 7, pg. 33.

Incidentally, there are cases when one or another older or younger artist “regulated” by them (myths) couples with abstraction. And now, after such confession, I dare to say: anyway, the potential of the two myths has become much weaker at present. I would like to make an attempt to prove it on the basis of the following “arguments”.

One cannot help noticing and feeling the growth and manifestation of the painting, which only slightly if at all observes the requirements of the myths. For example, the number of ironic works has increased, and it obviously means a decline in sensitiveness. Besides, the character of irony has also changed. The paintings created by Valentinas Antanavičius and Arvydas Šaltenis with a clear doze of irony, still remain painful and dramatic. Raimundas Slipys was the only painter among more prominent ironic artists who had demonstrated his witty attitude for a long time, doing without drama. Today, he is followed by Romualdas Balinskas, Palemonas Gintaras Janonis, Aleksandras Vozbinas, Giedrė Lilienė, Vytenis Jankūnas and others, who possibly show less witticism, but anyway do not dramatize. At present, there are more painters, who exploit past artists and styles in a demonstrative way (thus, with a distance, impossible without the play of intellect). And what about other old and new type deviations? Irony and “culturology” (i. e. manipulation with the phenomena of past culture), as the manifestations of intellectually-oriented painting, are frequently followed (incidentally, older artists also lose fear in this respect) by verbal texts: manifestos, statements, answers to questions, etc. (the truth is that one can hardly avoid the critic’s certain compulsion; I should consider myself to be one of such critics). There are cases when both in the texts and painting one can notice a stronger articulation of some philosophical and social ideas¹⁰ Such is the relationship with rather the first myth.

The most painful blow, however, seems to be struck for both myths in the following way: quite a big number of painters “betray” painting, i. e. start to exploit the means of expression which have little to do with paint: they create actions, objects, installations. Here, again, a word or two should be said about two groups of persons. The first - the painters who do so without neglecting painting for good (at least as yet). The creation of Jonas Gasiūnas, who has painted some large-scale pseudomythical splendid canvases with a broad brushstroke and even broader gesture, can serve as the best example: he had been paralelly creating various semi-painted objects for a long time, when finally he presented a brilliant installation “Garden of Ashes” of a jungle form¹¹. It should be mentioned that quite recently he has stated that he perceives the present situation of art as the

¹⁰ See for example: I. Antanavičiūtė. An Interview with Giedrė Lilienė // Šiaurės Atėnai, March 18, 1994.

¹¹ See: T. Račiūnaitė. The Zone of Memory // Šiaurės Atėnai, January 7, 1994.

end of painting¹². Besides Gasiūnas, the painters who manifest themselves not so vividly in their “new post”, are Eugenijus Antanas Cukermanas, Povilas Ričardas Vaitekūnas, Vytenis Jankūnas, Giedrė Lilienė. The second group - the painters, graduates of the Vilnius Academy of Arts or other establishment, who after a longer or shorter period of time (some of them still undergraduates) have abandoned paint. First of all, I can mention from senior painters Aleksas Andriuškevičius (not my relation), member of the group “Post Ars”. Some time ago, he made debuts with his hyperrealistic canvases, now he hardly ever takes a brush into his hands for “painting purposes”. However, he is quite a success together with other members of the group or alone, following the path of conceptual art and mainly employing various ready-made spiritual and material products of culture¹³. Further - Linas Liandzbergis, who a couple of years ago presented a good graduation work of painting, and immediately joined the group “The Green Leaf” known for its installations. And more - Darius Girčys and Aistė Kisarauskaitė (also graduates in painting of the VAA). The first of them, due to his interest in the problems of vision (physical and metaphysical) has plunged himself in the creation of wooden pipes (“glances”)¹⁴. The second - creates objects and arranges performances (I perfectly remember her in a bride’s white dress sitting on the floor of the gallery “Langas” and cutting her small fingers with a fairly blunt knife until they started to bleed). This year, many of us have enjoyed the installation-action “Painting from Nature” created by the last year’s graduate in painting Pilvinas Kempinas (belongs to “Good Evils” formed by Kęstutis Zapkus)¹⁵. The artist has produced impression in many respects: both non-shallow ideas (I interpreted his work as a talk about a radical shift in “thickets”, i. e. physical and spiritual environment surrounding man) and unseen material in Lithuania (his created “thicket” - the “trunks” formed from films), and the splendid architectonic, plastic understanding. Last but not least, three this year’s graduates in painting of the VAA (Giedrius Kumetaitis, Simas Tarvydas and Mindaugas Ratavičius). They presented the collective piece “Graduation Work”: it is a multinomial installation with rich semantics (the idea of transit with its diverse aspects seemed to me the most vivid) but less painting (incidentally, in one of the parts, the artists manipulated with certain scents, stating that they were exploiting the fragrant aspect of painting). It is interesting to note that Arvydas Šaltenis, rector of the

¹² “Angis”. Proclaims a Moratorium in the Presence of the Painting Exodus // Lietuvos rytas, September 16, 1994.

¹³ See his works in the book of texts issued by the group “Post Ars”: Post Arts, Texts. 1992.

¹⁴ See: A. Andriuškevičius. The Anatomy of Glance // Šiaurės Atėnai, May 27, 1994.

¹⁵ See: A. Andriuškevičius. On Thicket; I. Antanavičiūtė. Painting from Nature by Pilvinas Kempinas // Šiaurės Atėnai, April 22, 1994.

Written in 1994.

Academy (he was head of the Painting Department not long ago) on the occasion of the presentation of the work could not help joking: “So now on, nobody will ever call the Painting Department the nest of Expressionism...” The category of “painterly character” with its four aspects can hardly stick to those objects and installations, which have recently charmed the painters-traitors. Together - it is hard (sometimes impossible) to characterize this creation in the terms of “mood” and “character”. These words can be rarer and rarer heard in the lexicon of both young artists and not yet stiffened critics or those who have just spread their wings; but there is no end to the word “idea”. It goes without saying that it is impossible to do without (I mean the artist’s creation) inspiration, intuition, but I would better shh... about them!

Thus, gentlemen, the situation is changing. The former juicy and glistening leaves of the Inspiration and Paint myths are beset by worms: irony, intellectual tricks, verbal texts, unseen structures and materials, etc. What is this shift stimulated by? The first layer on the surface is, of course, the abundance of information from the West and unavoidable fashion. It is also obvious that the following two institutions act as great stimulants: the Contemporary Art Centre (directed by Kæstutis Kuizinas) resolutely orienting its activities to modern arts and the Soros Center for Contemporary Arts - Lithuania governed by Raminta Jurėnaitė; our contemporary avantgardist would find life hard without their support. One more thing is evident: no matter what fashion and support could be, they would not manage to “import revolution”, i. e. to inspire a great amount of talented new type works; certain changes should also undergo in the psyche of society. Then, it strikes you: can it possibly be a house-louse that has found its way into the sphere called the mentality of nation?