

Tibor Zalán

Walls

Artistic renewal – or fulfilment – begins where one relinquishes all he knew to learn and do something he will be the only one to be able to know and do from that time onwards. No doubt, this is not the only valid observation one can make about art, there are many others to make, but this one is very important for me because it may help decode the world of Ádám Gáll. We might ask why a world needs decoding, and we can even leave the question unanswered. And so we do. Instead, we begin in the middle, *in medias res*. “This one is eroded enough,” dropped the artist irresponsibly once in his studio. Is this where he has reached, where we have reached? Where? Drawing the line from the starting point to where we now seem to be would assist in answering the question. A former student of Sarkantyú, a deviator from what he had learned there, Gáll began his career with figural works. He found his mode of expression in artful, life-brightened figural compositions. With these painterly manifestations consciously alluding to the renaissance world, he was able to cover actual moments of life, to grasp emotional crises and/or traumas, to unravel artistic problems, and to create a functioning art world. We would not be mistaken to suppose that the expansive consciousness of youth and early manhood was the driving force behind these highly dynamic works. After a while, however, Gáll’s relatively harmonious, finding-a-place-in-the-world pictorialness manifest in renaissance imitations was interfered with by the increasing transparency of the various layers on top of each other and by the related problematic of mirrors and mirroring, which stimulated his art to progress in some direction. Borders, the borders of visibility, the spectacle framed by these borders, were blurred, and as a result the possibility of statements was also limited. This called into doubt the possibility of the existence of an ostensibly visible world, and simultaneously there arose the possibility of it being found and replaced by another world or several others. It was only one step from this to acknowledge that the existence of forms, colours and spectacle proportion is dubious, and thus artfulness and life-brightened surfaces have irretrievably become subject to plaster stripping; a world that could be conjured up through figuration has now been buried; and if we wish to remain within the terminology of the Christian iconography of winged altarpieces: there is no saviour, there is no salvation, and there is no end of the world, it merely goes wrong, slowly wearing away, wrecked layer by layer to come to its final obliteration. The illusion of being naturally smiles up at us from under the plaster layers, but the slag factures in modulations from green to black and the monochromatism replacing the colour of life and taking possession of everything leave no doubt that it is only the memory of life that

transpires through these works, it is only the scent of story that rises above obstinately through the chill of the surfaces, contours and forms.

The question, or, the nature of questioning, is not quite so obvious for the careful viewer of these pictures. If we look at them not from the point of view of the mechanism of shaping, but from that of completeness and readiness, it becomes difficult to distinguish between what the artist wants to cover and uncover, whether figuration wants to fight out its former strong positions, or there is a strong drive to eliminate figuration, and noteworthy experiments in it. That is to say there are figures in almost all pictures, either as negative figural forms blurring in the walls or figures hiding within the walls, whose walled-up presence enables interpretation. These plastered surfaces that can be associated with external forms in reality are no doubt internal spaces, bringing messages of man going round and round in time, sensing his own story in the ruins, but who has no more than an indicative presence in his own life. Imitation, wherein man can be perpetuated, is replaced by a meaning-providing surface treatment where architectonic order and materiality play the main roles, and where man is afforded merely allusive form or rather memory impressions.

In all probability, *Ádám Gáll*, apparently burying or covering, digs layers out from time; in other words, while he progresses in space, he moves back in time, and scrapes layers off some more archaic form of being. For clarity's sake, let me refer to the time structure of the cross clefts in the walls.

“One needs cunning to be able to undergo a re-nativity,” said the artist in another studio comment thought innocent. Starting at the existential form of these works, we thus arrive at their genesis. Translating this sentence into the language of creative work, it implies to me that the one question to be answered is whether artistic creation is making or becoming. For it does make a difference. If it did not, we could give a precise and clear answer to the question left unanswered throughout: which is more important, that which is under the plaster or the plaster that covers what is underneath? This question echoes the dilemma of another system of signs, language: which is more important – language or that which we cover with it (and call reality); is it language that shapes us, or do we shape language? In this light, *Gáll's* current experiment and choice of direction seems to me to be both heroic and interminable, because where does plastering end: where the facture so desires, or where the covered world yells up for an ending? I call these works walls of time covered in memory plaster which converge on genetically determined spaces and surfaces all the more so because, underneath the plaster, we have not only time buried, but also culture mixed; when pondering these

picture-like figures, we can therefore speak of no ornamentation, only happenings, submerged stories, minuscule shifts towards happening or the ability to happen.

Now, is there any building behind the plaster, or is it only time that holds the mortar and slag-covered surfaces? Of course, there is. We have already mentioned the burnt-in human forms, the ones appearing in negative figural forms, present somewhere, taking cover, having a walled-in presence. In *Diabolicon*, we have the silhouette of the Romanesque monastery burning in crimson (purgatory) that we could discover in several of Gáll's early paintings. Under the facade of *Defining a Space*, it is as though the characteristic figures of Bosch and Breughel were bustling about. The applied material of *Pre-* allows the map of a mediaeval town glimmer through it; the primary challenge of the picture is the act of recognising the map: as if the painter had found the outlines of the odd and great properties of Apollinaire's desire. The entire being of *Image Traces I* is a transposition into a Renaissance and Baroque world; while the dissection or division, the medium-light gushing of the surface of *Image Forgetting* makes the viewer-receiver associate it with elements and pictorial memories of both the Baroque and Futurism. And then we have not even mentioned the human figures that occur in the pictures by way of absolute chance; we find numerous faces and figures apart from the ones purposely built into the compositions.

We cannot beg the question: Is this exhibition an irate proclamation of war by Ádám Gáll against perspectivity, or are these works merely irritative transparencies, *fleurs du mal* on the cover of an opened veneer coffin? One thing is certain, Gáll is moving in the direction of cutting out and forgoing signs. No, we need not be worried, he has enough signs he can use, even turn into metaphors in his pictures, on his walls; but he certainly is pottering about around the absolutely necessary amount.

"A beautiful surface can't inspire me," says the artist in another studio slip. "Only let the material live, be present only to the extent that the material speaks for itself."

I could hardly rake out from my mind any *ars poetica* more poignant and more important. Just one more point, I have used far more fragments by Gáll than I have pointed out when explicitly quoting him.

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