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IN THE REFLECTION OF AN IMAGE – THE WORKS OF JOANNA TRZCIŃSKA

Abstract: The article focuses on the last decade of artistic experiences and activities of the painter, graphic artist, and academic Joanna Trzcińska, affiliated with the W. Strzemiński Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź. A formal and content analysis is carried out on the series of works: *The Image*, *The Lulled* and *The Passions*, as well as large-format self-portraits. Based on interviews with the artist, an analysis of her statements and publications to date, her views on the concept of the artist and the image are outlined. The process of creating the individual series and its influence on the final work is presented. In the creative process, Trzcińska allows for chance – in this case, randomness of what the matter she is working with entails. Independence and control over the creative process become an important aspect of her work. This independence may surprise the viewer, when juxtaposed with the large format and number of works produced. The human figure plays a dominant role in the works: observed, materialized and reacting with space. The artist's works, made using shuttering plywood are sensory, affecting sight, smell, and touch. She conquers the minimalism of her means of expression with scale and multiplication, eagerly reaching for the found object, the artefact.

Keywords: Joanna Trzcińska, contemporary printmaking and sculpture, maker's workshop, makerteacher, artefact

The attempt to analyze an artist's thought is always accompanied by a degree of subjectivity, a kind of a triangle of the artist – work – receiver relationship that can be considered individually or in part. The form of reception can be twofold: superficial or in-depth. The interpretation of the artist's thought will always be incomplete and open to interpretation. It is a truism to say that the artist-human matures throughout his or her life – this maturation,

in the context of creative thinking, should be seen in many aspects, often overlapping, and influencing each other, such as: practical experience, knowledge and views, relationships with the world, the environment and oneself.

Joanna Trzcińska (born 1968) is a painter, graphic artist, and educator. Her artistic path has been associated with the W. Strzemiński Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź, where she graduated with honours from the Faculty of Graphic Design and Painting. She obtained her PhD in 2007 and then her habilitation at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts in 2018. She has combined her entire professional career with teaching, initially at the K. Kobro State High School of Fine Arts in Zduńska Wola and currently at her home university, where she runs the Studio of Painting Expression at the Institute of Painting and Drawing.

The very definition of herself as an artist creates a certain dissonance for Joanna Trzcińska. In her presentation of herself, she uses the word 'artist' in a neutral, even official sense because of her profession.¹ She is more willing to use the term 'creator', which in her perception has a more material character, thus presenting herself as the person who creates the works in question. As she herself points out: "Artist capitalized refers to a narrower group. I even think they are isolated cases".² From this constructed semantic relationship, it can be inferred that in her perception of the term 'Artist', the title is a value that we are more likely to give (externally) to outstanding artists whose achievements in the field of art have been subjected to positive criticism and have withstood the test of temporary tastes and fashions. "The Artist is a slightly different person. He or she treats life not as a biological chain, as there is another reason why he or she lives. He or she can make the greatest efforts and sacrifices for Art (...). It is difficult to talk about the Artist in the context of the whole industry that Art has become, in a world where anyone can do anything. In the noise of modern times, silence is fine, but hardly anyone talks about it".³ It is in this last sentence that one can find the reason for the distance Trzcińska feels to defining herself as an Artist. Being an Artist is a kind of vocation, forcing certain

¹ *Rozporządzenie Ministra Pracy i Polityki Społecznej z dnia 27 kwietnia 2010 r. w sprawie klasyfikacji zawodów i specjalności na potrzeby rynku pracy oraz jej stosowania* (Dz.U. 2010 no. 82 item 537), <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU20100820537> [accessed: 14.04.2023]. The regulation classifies this occupational group in Poland under code 2651 (visual artists). She also used this meaning of the word „artist” in her publication: *Obraz, Joanna Trzcińska*, curator of the exhibition: Janusz Knorowski, 10.02–1.03. 2016, in: *Wystawy sztuki współczesnej 2006-2016, Galeria -I, Polski Komitet Olimpijski*, Warszawa 2016, p. 17, pointing out: „She refers to herself as a multimedia artist in the traditional sense of the word, as she combines the experiences of a painter, a graphic designer and, more recently, a sculptor (...)”.

² Interview with Joanna Trzcińska, 20.04.2023.

³ *Ibid.*

sacrifices. "It is impossible to be one until 4 p.m. and then live a normal life (...). An artist works even when he or she is not working".⁴ Trzcińska approaches the actions of 'modern artists', who choose the desire to create scandal as their main tool of expression, with great distance. The mere use of such an action without its technical, content, or ideological justification contradicts her perception of the concept.

Elaborating on the creative process, the painter's/graphic artist's/sculptor's workshop, the term creator as well as the artist herself are made more specific. This is related to the spectrum of values guiding Joanna Trzcińska in her artistic work. It is also important to realise the inseparability of her own approach to the process of image creation from her approach to teaching. In a sense, it is difficult to draw a clear line between Trzcińska-artist/creator and Trzcińska-educator/teacher. It was a coincidence that, having started her work as an artist after obtaining her diploma, she became a teacher at the same time, first at the Katarzyna Kobro Secondary Art School in Zduńska Wola and then at the Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź. One can speak of the connectivity of these aspects of her professional life, as Trzcińska does not enter the role of a teacher, does not put on any mask, becoming a different version of herself for the purposes of the educational process. She is coherent as an individual.

She treats teaching as a space to bounce her abilities off, a platform to exchange views and experiences.⁵ "Art education has to have a sequence, so that someone doesn't do joyful creativity later on, which doesn't come from anything or give anything".⁶ Central to this statement is the need for informed, coupled technical and theoretical education, tailored to students' development. On the one hand, it introduces students to aspects of theoretical (workshop) knowledge. On the other hand, it makes them aware of the complexity of creative work, as she points out that "they choose their own path",⁷ by which no one can lay claim to their achievements. She sees the role of the teacher in terms of a guide, sometimes an observer. She builds relationships based on her practical knowledge and experience, emphasizing the importance of showing young students the complexity of art. She fuels their curiosity, encourages them to consciously formulate their own language of expression and stresses the significance of nurturing individuality. This points to the constant need to overcome one's own barriers and fears of the outside world. "Without awareness and self-esteem, nothing is possible. Technique alone is not enough".⁸

4 Ibid.

5 Interview with Joanna Trzcińska, 14.05.2023, Kolumna.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

The artist encourages self-assessment, not understood as selfcriticism, but rather as self-reflection – an analysis of the choices made and their ultimate outcomes. She dares to experiment with new materials and media. She points out that, as a teacher, she does not know everything, as she is constantly learning and developing herself.

This aspect of teaching translates directly into her creative work. As she points out, "moving within only what you already know does not lead to success. By stepping out of our comfort zone we can achieve progress and development".⁹ This approach requires courage. She realises that it can lead to numerous technical or formal mistakes, but for artistic development "there is no better method than making mistakes (...). This can lead to a work not being created at all, but the process itself, the experience gained is often more valuable. This is what constitutes a person, it is very important what kind of a person an artist, or rather a creator is".¹⁰

It is necessary to begin with the artist's definition of the term *image*, which she relates more broadly, not linking it only to the medium of painting itself, but generally to the created work, image, regardless of the technique used to create them. Joanna Trzcińska creates mostly figural large-format works, which, despite their scale, she makes entirely on her own. The aspect of independence, full control in decision-making at every stage of the creation of her works is very important to her. She mostly avoids giving titles to individual works. As she herself emphasizes, "it is not my intention to tell an anecdote which the title might suggest".¹¹ The human figure plays a dominant role in her work. "I find it difficult to work beyond this subject to paint landscapes or abstractions".¹² Such subjects are rare, and even in the apparent absence of the human figure one senses their presence, their causality.

The most recent works are a continuation of considerations carried out since her studies – the human being in relation to space. The material that Trzcińska is now keen to use is shuttering plywood. The outer layer has a machine-applied grid pattern. The board consists of several layers of different types of wood (including poplar and birch), glued and pressed together. These layers have different softness and color, depending not only on the properties of the wood, but also on the glue that joins them together. Each matrix is different and the successive colors of the layers cannot be predicted. This element is discovered by the creator, it is varied at random. "I have been building work-paintings for some time based on the technology of creating a wood-

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.



Fig. 1. Joanna Trzcińska, untitled, woodcut on digital print, 100x120 cm, 2014,
photo by J. Trzcińska

cut matrix. The works are still representational, but also the matter, the third dimension becomes important, which brings the realizations closer to sculpture. In addition - I use paint, for the preparation of which I use graphite, which evokes drawing and graphics".¹³ Works made using this technique also affect the viewer's senses of touch and smell. The resinous smell of wood and ink is well perceptible, and the artist herself always encourages viewers to touch the matrixes.

¹³ Interview with Joanna Trzcińska, 20.04.2023.

The evolution of the series *The Image* focuses not only on depicting the human figure as a whole, its fragments or groups in different shots. As the series evolves, the artist experiments with the painting substrate, scale, and the relationship of the work to space. Several series of works created since 2009 and, on a larger scale, since 2014: *Nudes and Erotica*, *Faces*, *Hands* and *Janki*¹⁴ can be included in *The Image* series.



Fig. 2. Joanna Trzcińska, untitled I, digital print, 140x140 cm, 2009,
photo by J. Trzcińska

The most common figure appearing in *Faces* is the artist herself. "I presents myself as a human being, sometimes for mundane reasons – I am always an available model".¹⁵ She often uses a representation of a face itself, looking directly at the viewer. Different substrates give individual prints a different

¹⁴ https://www.joanna-trzcinska.pl/pl,motto_2.html [accessed: 30.05.2023].

¹⁵ Interview with Joanna Trzcińska, 14.05.2023, Kolumna.

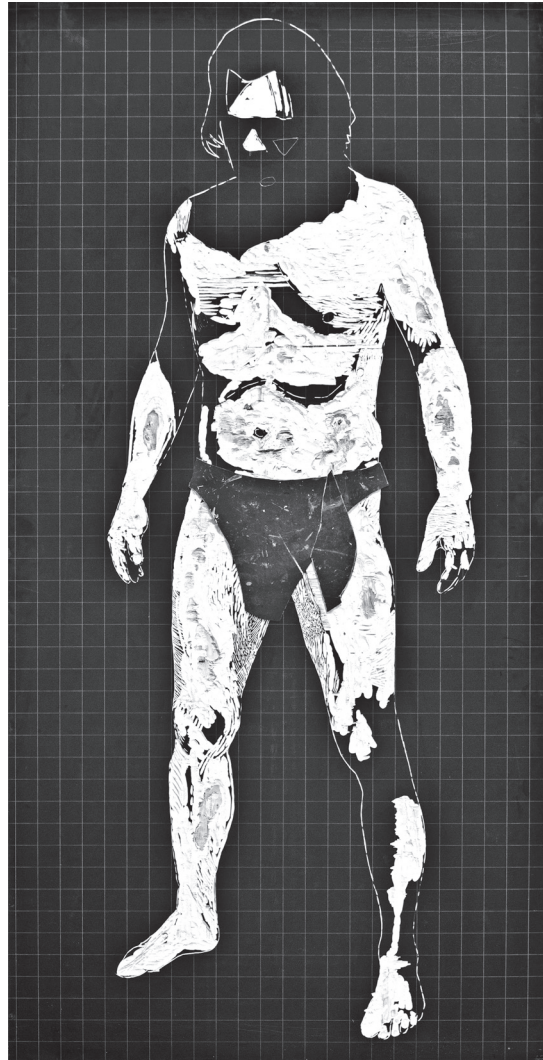


Fig. 3. Joanna Trzcinska, V,
250x125 cm, shuttering plywood,
2015, photo by J. Trzcinska

character, as is the case with the use of plywood, once used as a board to support the surface of scratched cardboard boxes. The board as a witness to the creative process bears signs of exploitation – a surface cut with a paper cutter, with remains of the outline of a formerly painted paper plane with thickened paint applied in the corners. It is a kind of a record of the work. The former life of the object, reused in a different context, completes – creates the new object.

The presence of the artist herself as a model is also evident in works from the *Hands*¹⁶ series, forming an antithetical arrangement resembling the positive and negative. They are made of shuttering plywood, each measuring 250×125 cm. These works can be interpreted in many ways. This freedom is given to us by the artist herself, who does not impose a narrative. She, as the artist, is interested in the figure – in this case, its fragment – the hand. However, this form is strongly associated with many cultures, e.g., as the *manus Dei* – the hand of God, the hand of Miriam or the hand of Fatima, and has appeared over the years in the works of numerous artists, for example in Auguste Rodin's *The Scretet* and *The Cathedral*.¹⁷ The human hand, the artist's hand, becomes a carrier of many meanings, associated with protection, work, or creation – bringing into existence. The use of the woodcut technique, which is crude in expression and where gouges are made with a chisel and chainsaw while being scaled up and duplicated, enhances the effect of duality: the physicality of the object and the immateriality of the meaning.

Each painting changes its context depending on where it is exhibited. This is evident not only in the works discussed earlier¹⁸, but also in the *Janki* series. The given space adds to/alters the context in which the works are perceived and creates a new narrative. Along with the exhibitions of the *Image* series, the *Janki* series has been presented in a variety of spaces – from small galleries (*Galeria Na Rogu*¹⁹, Zduńska Wola) through the broader spaces of *Gallery (-1)* of the Olympic Centre in Warsaw,²⁰ to the open-air areas of the railway station in Garbatka.²¹

The author of the work depicts an over life-size male figure (250×125 cm). "Presenting them in different spaces results in a different image."²² At one time they may have a more didactic dimension (*Galeria Na Rogu* at the Secondary Art School); at the Olympic Centre, the silhouette of a man, almost naked, in his prime, may evoke associations with athletes; at a railway station it is a travel cliché, a momentarily fixed image of a stranger, a blurred contour in the eye.

¹⁶ https://www.joanna-trzcinska.pl/pl,image_dlonie.html [accessed: 17.04.2023]

¹⁷ <https://rodinmuseum.org/collection/object/103428> [accessed: 30.05.2023]

<https://rodinmuseum.org/collection/object/103413> [accessed: 30.05.2023].

¹⁸ Exhibition of Joanna Trzcinska's works, *Powtórzony czas początku*, January-March 2021, Dom Praczek, modern sacrum art gallery, Kielce.

¹⁹ Exhibition of Joanna Trzcinska's works, *Obraz*, Galeria Na Rogu, Katarzyna Kobro Secondary Art School in Zduńska Wola, December 2016-January 2017, Zduńska Wola.

²⁰ Exhibition of Joanna Trzcinska's works, *Obraz*, Galeria (-1) Olympic Centre, February-March 2016, Warsaw.

²¹ Garbatka Station – exhibition within the framework of the 9th International Plein-Air of Creative Expression in Painting and Sculpture, July 2016, railway station in Garbatka Letnisko. https://www.joanna-trzcinska.pl/pl,stacja_garbatka.html [accessed: 13.04.2023].

²² Interview with Joanna Trzcinska, 14.05.2023, Kolumna.



Fig. 4. Exhibition of works by Joanna Trzcińska, *Image*, Gallery (-1) Olympic Centre, February-March 2016, Warsaw, photo by J. Trzcińska.



Fig. 5. Joanna Trzcińska, painting from the *Passions* series, photo by J. Trzcińska

The themes of the series are intertwined. *Passions* and *Lulled* build up *The Image* series. Some themes are planned by the author, while with others "the images just come into being while she works".²³ The connecting element between these two series of works is the deconstruct, a cast image of the crucified Christ. Figures of various scales hung on tombstones, often already incomplete and worn out, become an artefact in her works – a remnant of the sacred, implying old meanings and at the same time acquiring new ones. Observed in a stonemason's workshop, the accumulation of these artefacts, unconsciously orchestrated, became the impetus for subsequent paintings. Trzcińska has always been "moved" by folk art, the need to create it, the immaterial element linking nature, human beings and God, its naivety and coarseness.²⁴ A kind of an assemblage – multiplication and the use of an industrially created element has a different dimension here than in the works of, for example, Arman. There may be closer associations with the works of Władysław Hasiór, but Trzcińska's works are dominated by the minimalism of means. "I limit the means of expression. The fewer, the easier. The fewer, the more difficult".²⁵ As Trzcińska says, the impulse for creating these works was not religious; as the author herself points out, the question arises as to whether this is still sacrum or already profane – as the form of Christ and its cultural significance in the context of a worn-out object is still perceptible.²⁶ This parallel presence in both aspects, and the resulting respect and sentiment (the desire to "take care"), translated into the creation of these two series. Like the previous works, *Passions* became an observed form transferred onto a woodcut matrix; the enlarged, incomplete images of Christ are further legible to the viewer. Some of them, encased in silver plate, evoke associations with holy images, with their richly ornamented gold or silver punctuated dresses.

The *Lulled* series is different in technique. Here, too, the artist uses artefacts and multiplication. She places broken, incomplete, fragmented, "sore" and discarded images in fields of soft down quilt. At other times, she places them on several cushions cast in artificial concrete. The process of changing the form

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ For more on the characteristics of folk art, see: Henry de Morant, *Historia sztuki zdobniczej od pradziejów do nowoczesności*, ed. Stefan Hołówka, Arkady, Warszawa 1981, pp. 415-433; Jarosław Eichstaedt, *Ludowy wizerunek Jezusa Chrystusa, Muzeum Ziemi Wieluńskiej w Wieluniu*, Wieluń 2016, Ewa Klekot, *Kłopoty ze sztuką ludową, słowo/obraz terytoria*, Gdańsk 2021.

²⁵ Joanna Trzcińska, a virtual exhibition entitled *The Image* in SMTG in Kraków, 7-30.10.2020.

²⁶ Presentation entitled *Sacralization of matter as a result of the creative process*, delivered by Joanna Trzcińska on 6.12.2019 in Rzeszów at the 7th National Scientific Research Symposium on Sacred Art of the 19th and 20th centuries. *Sacrum and Matter. Expression and symbolism of the material in sacred art*.



Fig. 6. Joanna Trzcińska, installation from the *Lulled* series, photo by J. Trzcińska

from a finished cushion to its cast was not planned: "how many of these cases have to be generated, met, provoked, so that something in the image appears, so that it prompts what to do next (...) it has to be controlled, that is, watched".²⁷ The cushions, developed in this way, sometimes have the color given to them by the fabric used for the form. This experimentation with different mixtures of stone and granite flours introduces interesting incongruity between the form of the object and its use: a soft cushion is hard.

Does her work correspond to Hans Belting's formula²⁸ – the image as a commemoration of a person's life? Her works are such a testimony in many ways. Through the presentation of the human figure, indirectly through the reflection of herself, she creates a kind of anthropocentrism. She builds a new image – a new contextual layer by not hiding previous meanings. She thus accepts the possibility of diverse understanding of her works. "The work lives its own life and is reflected in the eyes of the viewer",²⁹ so the author leaves the decision to the viewer.

²⁷ Interview with Joanna Trzcińska, 14.05.2023, Kolumna.

²⁸ Hans Belting, *Obraz i kult: historia obrazu przed epoką sztuki, słowo/obraz/terytoria*, Gdańsk 2010; *Antropologia obrazu: szkice do nauki o obrazie*, UNIVERSITAS, Kraków 2012.

²⁹ Ibid.

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Rozporządzenie Ministra Pracy i Polityki Społecznej z dnia 27 kwietnia 2010 r. w sprawie klasyfikacji zawodów i specjalności na potrzeby rynku pracy oraz jej stosowania (Dz. U. 2010 no. 82 item 537), <https://isap.sejm.gov.pl/isap.nsf/DocDetails.xsp?id=WDU20100820537> [accessed: 14.04.2023].

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W ODBICIU OBRAZU – TWÓRCZOŚĆ JOANNY TRZCIŃSKIEJ (streszczenie)

Artykuł skupia się wokół ostatniej dekady doświadczeń i działań artystycznych malarki, graficzki i pedagoga Joanny Trzcińskiej (ur. 1968 r.), związanej z Akademią Sztuk Pięknych im. W. Strzemińskiego w Łodzi. Analizie formalnej i treściowej poddaje się cykle prac: *Obraz*, *Utuleni* i *Pasyjki* oraz wielkoformatowe autoportrety. Na podstawie wywiadów z artystką, analizy dotychczasowych jej wypowiedzi i publikacji nakreślone zostają jej poglądy na pojęcie Artysty, obrazu. Prezentowany jest proces tworzenia poszczególnych serii i ich wpływ na finalne prace. W procesie twórczym Trzcińska dopuszcza przypadek – losowość, w tej sytuacji tego co niesie ze sobą materia przez nią opracowywana. Ważnym aspektem jej twórczości staje się samodzielność i kontrola nad procesem kreacji. Ta niezależność może zaskakiwać odbiorcę w zderzeniu z dużym formatem i liczbą wykonywanych prac. W pracach dominującą rolę odkrywa postać ludzka: zaobserwowana, zmateralizowana i reagująca z przestrzenią. Jej prace wykonywane na sklejce szalunkowej są sensoryczne, oddziałują na wzrok, zapach i dotyk. Minimalizm środków wyrazu podbija ona skalą i multiplikacją, chętnie sięgając po obiekt zastany, artefakt.

Słowa kluczowe: Joanna Trzcińska, grafika i rzeźba współczesna, warsztat twórcy, twórca-nauczyciel, artefakt

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