**Two interviews with Petr Veselý**

**Fragments of a Tiziano Cadalora interview (c. 2006)**

*How did Corpus/In a Tree come about?*

Many years ago in Jeseníky, I stumbled across a Crucifixion with Angels in very poor condition. All that was left of the original painting on sheet metal, attached to a wooden cross, was rusted metal on rain-worn beams, the whole creating a beautiful new formation. At the time, I just sketched a small drawing. I recently found this verse in a poem by Emil Juliš: “They daubed the crucifix with asphalt up to the breast / in profile it was barely there – cut from sheet, merely a flash of hairline on a beam.”

*What are the main themes that you have incorporated into the picture?*

The motif for the corpus is taken from the early-14th-century Gothic sculpture Crucifixion in Polná.

I painted it on a base I had originally used to sketch a tree. I had long contemplated continuing the painting and in the end I started painted the Crucifixion over the tree. In terms of its content, then, the picture forms a link, for example, with the iconographically influential mural of the crucifixion in a tree from the Augustinian monastery in Roudnice nad Labem. I exhibited in Roudnice last spring.

*Is the content of the work of universal value, or should it be limited to the work itself?*

I am not sure I am able to gauge that. The actual body of Christ is specific enough, certainly, but it references universal tidings (“as all crosses, they are only the one cross” – Vladimír Holan). In addition, there is also a relationship here between the fragment and the whole, *pars pro toto*. There may even be an element of timidity here, a realisation of inadequacy. I am unable to finish the narrative, I cannot “tell the whole story”. It is not mine to own, I barely come close to it. What is more, the figures in Gothic frescoes are frequently preserved in fragments, often in several layers. Yet they are readable, perhaps more insistent, more “universal”.

*Does your work aim to move beyond reality or to represent – portray – it?*

Again, this brings us to what reality actually is, what the relationship is between the subject and object of perception. Touching an item is reality itself; the item is real. And yet that touch opens up infinite space, literally an abyss. Kaliopi Chamonikola, in a review of one of my exhibitions (which she called, incidentally “Veselý’s Geometry”), discusses the sacrality of reality.

*What is the story with your pictures of rooms, what drew you to them? (Kitchen/ Secret Heart, Bedroom)*

Roots can sometimes be very difficult to trace all the way back. That holds true here. I have lived in my attic room intermittently since about the 1960s, and I painted it and drew it even back then. However, my current paintings of rooms have been immediately preceded by drawings and paintings based on the photographs of Jindřich Štreit. It was these which first provided me with the motif for the theme, and only then did I open my eyes to notice my own room and other interiors. It also dawned on me that, for me, his photographs evoke rooms in the way I remember them from my childhood. The films by Andrei Tarkovsky also plainly had a certain influence on my perception of reality and specifically (among other things!) interiors.

*Why are your rooms entirely empty, devoid of any human presence?*

Various fragments have been drawn into the present – a headboard, part of a cupboard, the remnants of a pattern on the wall (I subsequently applied an authentic pattern – from a roller found at home in the attic – to my pictures), other items, and a colour-printed image of the Madonna or Christ hanging on the wall. They give an impression of urgency. I “airbrushed” people – essential for Štreit – out of the photographs. Perhaps they are present in my pictures by other means in this case. In the memory of those items. In their wear and tear.

*The rooms are depicted almost minimalistically, with just a few lines. What do they imply for you in this way?*

I often become aware of what makes a specific reality vital for me – what makes it essential – by starting with a cursory sketch observation, a few strokes. The philosopher Miroslav Petříček writes “it is like truly seeing”.In a fraction of a second. In a way, it is as though I can only see what is before me once I have drawn it. Despite the fact, for example, that it might be my room – something I know intimately. “Simplicity of shape does not necessarily equate with simplicity of experience” (Robert Morris). That said, Vladimír Holan also notes: “you make your way from the sketch to the work on your knees”. That is something I can confirm based on my own experience, and also that there are many times when you will not reach the end! Nevertheless, what makes a sketch valuable is the lightning, the vision. Accompanied by a certain obligation.

SOUNDS

As though someone inches something

Desperately to a spot

To see again

the yard with fallen leaves

to rake, to burn

time in and of itself

I still know about those steps. It is something that must be withstood. One way or another. In the meantime, eternity.

**Fragments of a Šárka Komedová interview (2015)**

*Does your work forge a conscious connection with Gothic murals and panel paintings? There seems to be an evident link, for example, when I look at GLASS, CORPUS, and other works from the LAYERS cycle.* In some cases that is indeed the case. You could also add Gothic sculpture (the Corpus picture, for instance, is an interpretation of the Gothic statue of Christ’s Body in Polná). The clear fragmentary nature of these words can also be linked to Gothic frescoes, often handed down – and yet still readable – in preserved fragments. The same can be said on a general level. As far as layers are concerned, in the sense of overlapping time and memory on the one hand, and, on the other, in the sense of traditional technology used to structure a picture, where the wooden base first has a canvas attached to it and is then prepared with layers of priming coat until the painting itself emerges. It is common for there to be many layers, from the base and then passing through the individual stages in the process of producing a picture. In Glass, there is also the ambivalence of covering and uncovering, image and reflection, and so on. I have also addressed the theme of layers in structures.

*You say that one of the sources for your almost exclusive use of a colour range comprising shades of grey can be found in your childhood memories, when, after the floor had been washed, the “cooling water in the metal pail turned grey”. Would you say that this monochromatic means of expression also forms a bridge with sculpture? Your pictures often spill over into the form of a structure.*

Grey figured in my paintings before I even became aware of it as anything specific and before I tried to identify the causes. I initially viewed it as a neutral tone important for colour composition. It was not until later – and here there is a connection of sorts with sculpture or structures – that I became aware of the properties of colour, essentially all of them, but frequently white, as a substance. Both in terms of moulding a shape and in the sense of the relief on the surface of a painting and its material nature. As far back as the early 1980s, shortly after I left school, I stuck fragments of certain materials (bark, glass, metal, ceramics, wood, string, and so on) into paintings, and here the substance of the colour played a similar role in that it was not intended to convey an image, but to express a material. My first wall structure, Rain, along with drawings and paintings with a perforated base, saw the light of day here, too. I did not start to recall the very tenderest of memories from childhood until much later. But I think there is one other factor relevant to my gradual inclination towards grey as a fundamental means of expression. In the 1980s, I had a lot of responsibilities and duties to see to, and it was not unusual for me to get to my studio only after nightfall. Faced with time constraints and working under artificial light, it was natural for me to concentrate more on drawing, which became my main means of expression for a while. Paper, pencil, diluted ink, reservage, and soon frottage. The range was limited, but it was fit for purpose – it suited these practical conditions while providing a more essential perception of reality, objects and phenomena (much like black-and-white photography). And perhaps even a “taste of the time”.

*Some of your paintings are based on photographs. How do you view the unending debate on the relationship between painting and photography?*

I would say we have to make a difference between a situation where photography initiates a vision which need not even have anything to do with the actual content – it can provide a spark and also be morphologically binding in a way – and the practice commonplace in schools where we reach for a photograph basically without thinking, out of desperation, or laziness. This can have a detrimental effect in terms of the need to study form and space…

*Your paintings are often accompanied by short texts, descriptions or poems. Reading them gives the work an extra dimension that is not always apparent at first glance. Would it be fair to say that the work as a whole does not become coherent until connected with the artist’s comments, or is this completely independent, with the interpretation of the work depending on each viewer.*

I made my first “text drawings” shortly after leaving school. I am aware of a certain fumbling after leaving school and after completing military service, wondering how to proceed – we told ourselves it would be best to forget everything. This was a time that was essentially embryonic for a lot of people, all the more so when I consider that role models we could learn from, be inspired by, were few and far between – or I did not know about them. I can’t remember my truly first written drawing. I can say, however, that my drawings with rain as a theme were among the first. For example, I wrote Halas’s or Deml’s poem about rain. I would produce a full-page structure, interrupted, say, by means of a reservage technique or by engraving, and even by other means.

*Could we view the recurring motif of a door as an attribute indicating entry into another reality?*

No. I shy away from using such terms and I would be ashamed to enumerate them. I respect secrecy, but I perceive it – or it is somehow revealed to me – through reality *per se*. What is more, the absolute majority of the doors I have painted are specific doors, although they are articulated, perhaps, in their essence. The shape of the door evokes the format of the picture – it is a sort of a picture in a picture. In them, I mostly also need to coax the space of memory, the traces of time, into the present.

*In your description of INTRODUCTION, you mention being influenced by listening to Mahler’s symphony. What role does music play for you in your work?*

It has no direct influence on my painting. The “Mahler” painting is an exception. I had originally started painting a landscape, but then put the painting to one side for several years. One day, I suddenly saw a link with Mahler’s Symphony No 1 – the Introduction. It was as though the surface of the music had spilt into the painting.

*How do you view the relationship between the form and content of a work? Is the colour grey a leitmotif of your work?*

Yes, as I have mentioned, grey has become a theme of sorts for me and, in it, I am constantly discovering new ways to look at this phenomenon. So perhaps it has become, in a way, a theme – or one of several themes. There has also been an attempt (which has evidently yet to be completed) to trace, against the flow, where this inclination might have its roots. The list of possible causes is long and reaches back into my early childhood and various specific situations. That said, I do not think there is any agenda – certainly no conscious decision. On the other hand, there can probably be no denying a deep-seated need to express myself through this means. Even if only because I view grey as some sort of ancient matter in which everything can be found in its embryonic form. And perhaps – this is one of those experiences from childhood – in the form of ordinary mashed-up plasticine. I have a fragment of a rainbow on a tempera painting from the 1990s. I see it as a complementary relationship to grey. Yes, I would say that grey is something I can rely on, but I would also stress that this feeling of certainty is unsteady, unstable, and ambivalent.

*Time, eternity, triviality, the everyday – some of your remarks are designated by precise dates. How important for you is anchorage in time – the time you devote to a single theme you are coming to grips with...*

I wonder if the root cause is perhaps anxiety, based in part on an awareness of transience. Pictures, words, a recorded date, a specific time, a simple record of a fact. These are stops on the way, but also more than that. More a mooring evoking a sense of duration.