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Theme: Symbols in art – In the world of spirit.

“It is through symbols that man consciously or unconsciously lives, works, and has his being “¹

Thomas Carlyle

1836

The main impulse to choose this topic of my curatorial exhibition is to show the importance of influencing the emotions of the viewer through the visual language of symbols as well as the stimulation of critical thinking through reanalysis of the meanings of individual symbols that have mutated over time or their original meanings become obscured.

I am inclined to say that the original meaning of ancient symbols should become a form of communication again, and the role of contemporary artists should be incorporating them in art in order to restore their functionality. The language of symbols should be redefined by contemporary art and reemploy in a greater scale in order to convey original truth and create new ways of thinking, perceiving and connecting between the people in the common goal of creating a better reality and value system.

“ An idea, in the highest sense of that word cannot be conveyed but by a symbol”²

Samuel Taylor Coleridge

1817

I believe that the basis for such a reconstruction should be the knowledge of theories and works in the history of art that are distinguished by their rich symbolism and importance for the development of the recipient's consciousness through their influence on souls.

The concept of symbol leads to the definition of symbolism as a movement in art. Robert Goldwater in his book Symbolism (1979) defines it as follows: "Symbolism can be described as a reaction to

¹ Symbols in art, Matthew Wilson, Thames and Hudson Ltd,17sep2020

² Symbols in art, Matthew Wilson, Thames and Hudson Ltd,17sep2020

naturalism, which took its classical form around 1870, but had its roots in the 1960s, and seen in a broader perspective was itself the last stage of realism carried already far away by the previous generation. In a broader sense, it can be taught as part of philosophical idealism in rebellion against the positivist, scientific attitude that has influenced (infected) not only painting but also literature.³ " In my opinion, realism, the aim of which is to objectively reflect reality, is only an eternal striving for perfection, an attempt to capture the elusive, an imitation of something that cannot be recreated.

Symbolic painting was opposed to objectivity, matter-of-factness, material depiction of things, avoiding unusualness and fantasy. Symbolism, emphasized the role of imagination, subjectivism, independence of things from sensory cognition. He argued that years of faith in the unquestionable power of intellect and science did not bring man closer to the insight into the true nature of being.

In the symbolic manifesto, published in 1886 in the journal "Le Figaro", Jean Moreas emphasizes the importance of the idea which, requiring external analogies, traces, impressions accessible only to the subconscious mind, somehow forces a symbolic form. For the basic assumption which guided symbolic art was that ideas are never fixed conceptually or expressed directly⁴.

Metaphorical calling of artists "artistic souls" is not accidental. My feelings about how we receive the content hidden in a work of art are unequivocal. A work of art gives a direct insight in essence of things through the language of symbols that speaks to the soul and then evokes emotions that affect the shape of thoughts.

My exhibition embrace six powerfully symbolic artworks, which i choose among traditional and contemporary artists, following my research but in trust to my spiritual intuition. They all reveal mysterious, magical, metaphysical and spiritual side of reality, that we all searching for consciously or subconsciously. *In the spirit world* take as its starting point work of famous symbolist Odilon Redon.

Suggestion , mystery and dream are a crucial concepts of symbolic aesthetic for this French painter . He created in the spirit of symbolism, describing his work as a suggestive art.." is like illumination of things for dream toward which thoughts is also directed..."⁵

³Symbolism, Robert Goldwater,Harper&Row ,publishers1979

⁴ magazynsztuki.pl/symbolism

⁵ Symbolism, Robert Goldwater,Harper&Row ,publishers1979



fig1. L'œil comme un ballon bizarre, se dirige vers l'infini, 1882. Redon

In the picture above Redon uses a traditional and repetitive in his oeuvre concept of eye as the window of soul. It is one of many lithographs which refer to the presence of ideal, invisible world by using the theme of heads or eyes as remaining parts of the human symbolising pure intelligence trying to free itself from matter and carrying the mind towards a union with infinite. Also, Redon was fascinated with using black in his lithographs as well as crayons and charcoal as a means of expression. His influences draw from the artist such as Delacroix, Gauguin, Khnopff, Seurat, Munch or Pissarro despite he objected literacy of impressionism saying that they neglected the mysterious center of thoughts⁶.

Next to it I placed artwork of the most prominent of Duch symbolist Jan Toorop created based on earlier drawings, in strong English gothic atmosphere of interiors, with the skulls in Redon style

⁶ Symbolism, Robert Goldwater, Harper & Row, publishers 1979

floating by the window. Symbolist orientation manifest in subject more than in style.



fig2.Organsounds. c1889.Toorop

There is figure sitting by the organs playing music and the organ-tones are "... translated into tremulous outlines which suffuse the atmosphere."

The unprecedented expression of the lines is in fact nothing more than music, the living vibration of sound shimmering in the air. Music hidden in lines opens and feeds the souls much more subtly than music in its obvious form.⁷

Next the viewer can immerse himself in the mystical work of a largely forgotten Victorian spirit artist Georgiana Houghton.

"An alternative way to paint mental experience is to direct the viewer towards what cannot be painted. If the mind is prolific and inexhaustible this is because it can reach for what cannot be seen. Our thoughts touch on infinity while our vision stops on the surface of things .. "- wrote Julian Bell in his book *What is painting referring to a picture which is placed here*.



⁷ Symbolism, Robert Goldwater, Harper & Row, publishers 1979

This picture had great potential to be classified as abstract due to the lack of reference to the features of the outside world, long before abstractionism was initiated by Vasili Kandinsky considered to be its precursor. For Georgiana drawing a spirals filling all space was guided by the spirit that was beyond her own area of control⁸, she said. In the light of an ancient, spiritual meaning of the spiral which represent connectivity with divine, spiraling from outer ego into the inner soul, we can conclude about a special connection of artist with her higher self .

Another image that undoubtedly contains a divine element in the visual presentation of the subject, in the way of expressing color, and lines, is The Sun , mural originally situated in Oslo university assembly hall,⁹ painted but Eduard Munch., which a copy the viewers can see here in the large format.



fig4.The sun, c.1911-12. Munch

An almost surreal light literally pouring out from beyond the horizon floods the entire space, evoking a feeling of being in transcendental union with divine radiating energy just by looking at the picture.

Physically felt silence, space, warmth of the sun's rays , captured in the metaphysical aura of the picture, which spontaneously put the viewer in a meditative mood.

“...Munch come close to abstraction ...it is a new kind . Much closer to that of the contemporary works of Delaunay and Kandinsky, than to the style and meaning of an earlier symbolism. “¹⁰

At the end of this extrasensory journey into the world of the spirit, the works of contemporary artists who refer to symbols in their works are presented. First of them is indigenous Australian painter who I discovered following the inspiration and references of other contemporary ,admired by me artist Edouard Baribeau.: “ I try to incorporate the motifs, stories, and myths i gather on my travels into my works, combining them with scenes and objects from everyday life.”

⁸ Symbolism, Robert Goldwater,Harper&Row ,publishers1979

⁹ www.wikiart.org/en/edvard-munch/the-sun-1916

¹⁰ Symbolism, Robert Goldwater,Harper&Row ,publishers1979



*Fig.5 Dick Pantimatju Tjuporrula Serpent Dreaming at Yippa
1980*

A creature depicted (in a style of graphic on canvas with using technique of polymer on canvas); snake refers to the indigenous people of Australia's so called rainbow snake which as a symbol of life and death plays a major role in creation myth.¹¹

By adopting in his own work motives of great importance, such as this one, the artist not only emphasizes the cultural context and aesthetic patterns but smuggles the way of seeing, thinking and understanding reality through the language of symbols, reducing them to the universal essence as for instance, snake means rebirth, immortality, center of creation, kundalini which is cosmic energy referring to Hindu philosophy and tradition.

The ending point of the exhibition present a videoart of contemporary artist Bill Viola, who use water in his work like a symbol to give it a sense of heightened impact and immediacy.

¹¹Baribeaud, Hatje Cantz, 2018



fig6. Bill Viola, *Tristan's Ascension (The Sound of a Mountain Under a Waterfall)*, 2005

This 10-minute video projection evokes a feeling of “paradise” showing a waterfall in reverse with body rising slowly of a bed, soaring upwards with a column of water. Water is being used in a way that making Tristan’s transcendence simultaneously a drowning, a baptism and a rebirth. Modern media is combined with ancient symbols of water which signify suffering, redemption and purification. The subject matter is also linked to Christian tradition when saints ascend to heaven after their deaths.¹²

The exhibition of selected works does not require very sophisticated conditions of the site as physical space.

I would say as little accompanying stimuli as possible so as not to distract the viewer. White walls, relatively long distance between the individual sections, ambient light, a chair in front of the picture to sit down and very quiet music bringing the viewer into a meditative mood. Ideally, the work should be distributed in several separate rooms. Video presentation on a large screen in a dark room with several chairs scattered around the room.

¹² Symbols in art, Matthew Wilson, Thames and Hudson Ltd, 17sep2020

