

## Jože Slak - Đoka: Kmetske slike (Peasant paintings)

Opening: Thursday, April 5<sup>th</sup> at 8pm

KiBela, space for art / Multimedia centre KIBLA

*Peasant paintings are not paintings intended for peasants, but paintings created with common sense in a peasant (rural) environment. They are the opposite of 'urban' paintings that are being pushed forward by the Slovenian cultural community, which, however blinded by the splendor of foreign works, is really peasant in itself. They reflect a child's view of the naked emperor and his courtiers, just as they have put on their new, sublime, imported clothes.*

*In a land where opinions triumph over facts and orthodoxy is more important than faith art too has become but an empty form, intended only for 'historization' and 'raising funds'. To serve this purpose effectively, it has to comply with the ideology of global capitalism: eat or be eaten, regardless of how much you can digest. And so we are drowning in a verbal diarrhea of superficially understood quotes and slogans that has transformed art into political speech and that prevents an insight into reality, instead of providing it. Incomprehensibility has even become a sort of a sublime aesthetic principle.*

*My paintings wish to convey the cerebral veils that cloud our views, prevent understanding and communication between diversities and cause dissociation, the decay of the social organism. We have turned into a blind society, a consequence of an utter misunderstanding of the essential role of culture in the life of the social organism. Culture is the skin holding together the flesh, bones and guts of the society.*

*Jože Slak - Đoka*

Texts dealing with Slovenian painting of the final quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century usually place Jože Slak - Đoka among the artists that have broken with the tradition of high modernism in the eighties, declined the demand for minimalism and intellectualization, and embraced a more narrative, eclectic and lively, often baroque and 'impure', expression. In other words – they have led painting into the era of postmodernism. Playing with the canon of high modernism and subverting its postulations often forms the formal common thread of Đoka's works. This is no surprise – he is a child of a place and time in which painting was considered an important means of exploring the boundaries of art and authorial expression, as well as testing the limits to which the concept of painting can be stretched, while still remaining a painter. The detachment from trends or from repeating once successful and innovative ideas, together with a persistently critical and somewhat ironical attitude towards his own position as an author and the world of art as such, have contributed greatly to the immense diversity of Đoka's opus, which nevertheless still functions as a uniform entity, inside of which every work carries an unmistakable authorial mark.

Đoka's paintings are sometimes closer to a statue wedged between two dimensions than a classic easel painting; they are perforated wooden panels covered with luminous, metallic, almost insect-like colors; the format a vague reminder of the standard, or rather standardized rectangular shape that begins to disintegrate, to dissolve according to the laws of entropy that rule the universe. Other incarnations take on a completely organic form – appearing like spread animal skins, a sign of the remains upon which civilizations were built. But in spite this impression of demise, or perhaps because of it, they impress with their uncomfortable presence. They stare back at the viewer like a demon suspended in air; they appear dead, but are undoubtedly threatening. The works on wood, or rather wooden works, in particular, are marked by an almost totemic quintessence. They are an echo of something ancient, pre-civilization – common to all, yet forgotten with the escape from nature to the concrete of civilization.

The material impression of the works on fabric is the opposite of the wooden ones – the paintings are distinctly airy, ephemeral, the painting surface virtually non-existent, and consequently the paint assumes life of its own. The dematerialization of the support – most visible in the works that pay homage to the East Asian calligraphic tradition and translate it to a new medium, which is really very alien to calligraphy – stretches from seemingly floating images on transparent fabrics, to a complete

abandonment of the painting surface, like in the meaningfully entitled *Grenka svoboda (Bitter freedom)* – with complete emancipation of the acrylic paint, which functions without a traditional support base. The work, like some sort of quote, is nailed to the wall, stretched like a trophy – liberated from the traditional painting surface, but attached to a new one.

The paint in the works based on calligraphic sketches is scattered in drops and spots of different sizes and densities, depending on the speed of the calligraphic brush stroke. The impression is that of an emulsion, i.e. paint that has formed into drops due to a surface tension. This element is also present in some of Đoka's tabular paintings, which do not build their tension so much on the perversion of the standard rectangular support, but on the dialectics between realism and an abstract veil, stopping the view on the surface, behind which a landscape painting opens up. Across the realist motif spreads an organic epidermis of abstract color forms, which sometimes act as a reflection of the painter's gesture, and sometimes as harbingers of space decomposition. The forms have a relief quality and are marked with reflective colors, which give the work a distinct tactile quality and at the same time open it up to the effects of light that forms, depending on the point of view and angle of light, an endless number of versions of the same painting.

The exhibition *Peasant paintings* presents Đoka's production over the past few years. Many of the works have already been exhibited on various locations; others will be showing for the first time. The latter are mostly easel paintings, briefly described in the last section – works that build up the tension between organic abstract forms and a realist motif in the background. Recent paintings show a decomposition of the realist motif, which is ultimately transformed into a background for the dance of the pulsating organic forms, at times flat and at times distinctly relief, but always a challenge to the viewer and the view.

*Žiga Dobnikar*

**Jože Slak - Đoka** was born in 1951 in Jablan in the Dolenjska region. After finishing elementary school in Koper and secondary school for chemistry in Ljubljana, he enrolled at the Faculty of Chemistry, but soon left, disappointed by institutional science, to join the Faculty of Fine Arts in Ljubljana, where he graduated in 1975 with mentor Gabrijel Stupica. In 1980 he left for the USA where he worked as a carpenter, but returned soon to Slovenia, and later completed the post-graduate study of western painting in Kyoto (1985–87). His stay in Japan was one of the fundamental formative experiences that marked both, his work and his lifestyle. After returning to Slovenia he first operated in Ljubljana, trying for a long time to get a studio, lived in more or less picturesque shacks, got the studio, lost it and returned to Dolenjska – to the village of Jordankal, across from the humorously meaningful Globodol (something like Downville; Upper, Middle and Lower). He has exhibited in a number of national and foreign galleries; with a sort of culmination – at least in the eyes of the locally established institutional hierarchy – at the Modern gallery in 1993, with a large retrospective exhibition. He is also the winner of numerous awards, most recently the Prešeren foundation award in 2007 for his exhibition *Slike za slepe (Paintings for the blind)* at Mala galerija.

*Kindly welcome! Admission free.*

The exhibition will be showing until May 7, 2012.

April 5 – May 7, 2012

KiBela / KIBLA Maribor

**KiBela – space for art is open on weekdays and Saturdays between 9am and 10pm, closed on Sundays.**

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