

Subcultural Cartographies: Radek Szlaga

“The elements that make up history—including the story that can be told about it, because there is no history without storytelling, without the possibility of storytelling—escape us because information about what is happening takes hold too quickly and passes ever more through image media, not even through that of text or written memories: it is too fleeting, too volatile, and this dilutes it to form a space that is no longer our own.”

Jean Baudrillard, *Pataphysics*, 2006

Maps, galaxies, clumps of fragments and visual citations. Cartographies and aesthetic fusions. Universes of pictographic caricatures bordering on the grotesque. Connective flows of hypertextual languages and stylistic manipulations that make up a kaleidoscopic atlas of layered images: testimonies of a throbbing and hammering present.

For Radek Szlaga, painting is a platform of experiential accumulation, a terrain of constant formal research and identitary exploration, on the edge between reality and simulation, where the inner “method”—intuitive and reflective, expressive, representational, and emotional—combines into hybrid scenarios that become spaces for revising both the social and the historical, religion and the media. In his narratives, stories chase one after another, in a script without a predetermined plot, where linear dialogues and defined aesthetic boundaries seem to have left the stage in favor of the chaotic channels of imagination, dreams, and memories. It is the polyphonic body of everyday life that emerges here, in all its lively multiloquy that comes together and unravels in the very moment of its appearance. It is the beat and intermittence of the images that pulsate, oscillating on the pictorial surfaces that emerge simultaneously with the disjointed and timeless flow that underpins the artist’s gesture.

“My work documents a process; it is a record of a state of consciousness, a reflection of mythology that I create on an ongoing basis and update. It is an endemic and complex world. I speak about a small section of reality seen through culture, its scraps and its fragments, both highbrow and pop culture.”¹

¹ *Culture.pl*, 2011, <https://culture.pl/en/artist/radek-szlaga>.



Szlaga is a storyteller and chronicler of our time. He is a patient collector and skillful assembler of emotional states. He is a blender of events and imagery drawn from the iconosphere of pop culture, history, politics, and mass media, with a focus on the visual culture of Eastern Europe and the US—“post-communist underdevelopment and late capitalist dystopia” respectively²—places that shaped his childhood, and which the artist defines as: “Two pillars melting in me and creating a creole amalgamate, oftentimes difficult to co-operate with but which gives you a particular ability to speak a lingo nobody fully understands yet finds familiar.”³ There is also a profound sense of humor which underlies and links his work neatly, an ironic vein that doesn’t come across as overly obvious and cheeky.

Caught between the anthropological—and sometimes rather nostalgic—need to seek out mythical-narrative footholds among the ruins of our society and the urge to record the forces of the contemporary world (where legends, icons, and mythologies imbue not only an emerging autobiographical past but also a present made up of stories written by the new generations), Szlaga has always experimented with a syntax so personal—yet at the same time overlooked by most people—that it is universal. His stylistic cipher is one that proceeds more by intuition than by compositional and cognitive rigor, and one so laden with non-conventional and incomplete ingredients as to prove elusive and perpetually unfinished, deliberately open-ended and evocative.

The exhibition *Kill Your Idols*, presented at the Basilica di San Celso in Milan, is a prime example. Consisting of a series of paintings titled *Noriega Mix Tapes* (2022), and a sculpture, the exhibition reflects and confirms not only the method of “mixing” as a proven processual and aesthetic approach that informs much of Szlaga’s practice, but it is also the restitution of a “way of thinking,” processing and returning broader phenomena in a symbolic, abstract, and simplistic manner. Here the specific event is a historical fact almost bordering on the absurd, an episode that the artist takes as a “pretext” to imbue his canvases with a mediatic and personal note: a layer of collective memory filtered through an autobiographical lens. In 1989, Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega escaped the US invasion by taking refuge in the Vatican Embassy in Panama. To capture him, the US Armed Forces Command chose to adopt an unconventional method: it deployed a dozen amplifiers outside the embassy to flush out the dictator—a big opera fan—to the sound of heavy metal music.⁴

² From an email exchange with the artist, September 2022.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Songs such as *Enter Sandman* by Metallica, *Welcome to the Jungle* by Guns N' Roses, or *Paranoid* by Black Sabbath resonated for days until Noriega, exhausted, surrendered to US forces. (from the exhibition press release).



In *Kill Your Idols*, the recurring motifs—ones that find genuine comparison with one another—are the fantasy album covers the artist drew as a child for the mixtapes that his father and Uncle Joe sent over to him from the United States, while he was still in Poland. “Trash Metal / Hard Rock tunes from American radio affected my taste. I loved them, then years later I realized they had also been weaponized to enforce an imperialistic agenda.”⁵

Szłaga’s pictorial gesture, his idea of *Malarstwo* (painting in Polish) and the choice to “examine” the sense of being contemporary through the lens of the hero/villain in Noriega’s story, thus became the symbolic bearers of a distant historic event which in the artist’s eyes turns into a metaphor for possible change, brought up to date here in the close connection with the Western popular culture and the “plot” of hard rock music, used to globalize the world, as taught by the episode concerning Noriega.

From this repeated sequence of album covers, a series of informational and communicative “scraps” mingle with one another on the pictorial surfaces, in an immense universe where different narrative levels coexist: a mental landscape of forms that toy with forms, of emotions that evoke their own moods, of historical memories that fluctuate between the “mismatchedness” of personal and collective recollections, and where the single event, as Baudrillard puts it, “...is further multiplied, centrifuged [. ...] and thus loses its own meaning through its own diffusion: it is the media effect, the vanishing effect”⁶.

Giovanna Manzotti

⁵ From an email exchange with the artist, September 2022.

⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *Pataphysics*, 2006, p. 16.

