

MARTA ZGIERSKA'S BLUSH

"ASPIRACJE", WARSAW, POLAND, JULY 2019

At *Blush*, her exhibition at Lublin's Biała Gallery (Feb 8–Mar 8, 2019), Marta Zgierska presented four series of photographs—*Post* and *Numbness*, both of which have been shown to the public before, and two new efforts, *Afterbeauty* and *Drift*. In terms of visual forms, Zgierska's pictures vary considerably. In adjacent halls, attendees can find abstract forms in candy colors, plaster casts, black, shimmering fabrics carrying faint outlines of faces, and minimalist objects with somewhat disquieting natures. The matter is different, however, when it comes to pictures put on display, as identity, self-insight, and self-analysis are all a recurring motif in Zgierska's overall *oeuvre*. While the titular blush, as the artist herself explained in an interview, is usually considered a manifestation of embarrassment or discomfort, it is, first and foremost, a visible symbol of what is happening just underneath the surface, and it is precisely those aspects of existence that are concealed from view that Zgierska seems most interested in exploring.

The creation of *Post* was prompted by a student report drafted by one of her school teachers, in which Zgierska is described as capable, conscientious, and hardworking, liked by other children, with a broad range of interests and abilities. The juxtaposition of the report with pictures dealing with fears and obsessions immediately establishes the dichotomy through which the entire exhibition may be examined. Under the smooth veneer of the student report hide tumultuous experiences and a bevy of obsessions. Sterile in form, the pictures – show abandoned interiors, a crumpled car body, a hand slashed down the life line, a ball of the artist's own hair, and figures in uncomfortable positions, such as the artist laden down with a stack of chairs or a little girl drowning in an oversized black coat – call on past trauma. This incessant balancing act between the surface and what's happening underneath it produces a measure of discomfort and a disquieting atmosphere. Paradoxically, the very aesthetics of the pictures, with their scrubbed white-and-grey backgrounds against which we're shown objects carrying some connection to the artist's own traumas, all reveal a sort of nervousness, a morbid attempt to isolate things from their attendant contexts.

While references to past personal trauma underpin the *Post* series, we ought to mention that Zgierska's pictures can be said to carry a great degree of universality—they interrogate specific fears and events—but the artist does not readily provide clues to help with the process of interpretation. A bent piece of wire might be read as a piece of metal inserted into the body in the course of a surgical procedure or a tool of oppression. The artist's willingness to reveal her own fears, to allow others to gaze inside her by showing empty spaces, a dead animal, and the jacket bloodied from the accident, is only illusory. What we actually find, when we peel back layer after layer of meaning, is not Zgierska's intimate

experience but private projections of her own well-concealed obsessions. Already featured in her prior exhibitions in the form of a photograph, this time the aforementioned student report was presented in the flesh, as the artist wanted to tap into its personal, location-dependent context. *Blush* is Zgierska's first solo exhibition to be held in Lublin, where she was born and where she received the student report at age seven. By embedding the *Post* series in a real context, the artist closes the distance between herself and her incredibly intimate photographs, letting the viewers deeper into her own personal world. A mindful and mature artist, Zgierska takes on difficult subjects—personal trauma, complex emotional states, attempts at taming realities that are often less than friendly. In her work, she keenly abstracts multidimensional narratives into aesthetically sparse forms.

Self-portraits are another important, recurring motif in Marta Zgierska's *oeuvre*, but the visage in the pictures rarely implies an obvious meaning; instead, it often serves as a layer concealing the artist's true face. In *Face and Mask: A Double History*, Hans Belting wrote: "The expressive achievement of the living face lies as much in its ability to show and proclaim as in its ability to conceal and deceive. [...] In life, expressions change the face we *have* into the face we *make*. This dynamic triggers a *perpetuum mobile* of many faces, which may all be understood as masks once we expand our concept of the mask."¹ In *Afterbeauty*, however, proclaiming a visage proves ultimately impossible, because the presented forms include nothing that resembles a face. The visage itself is processed so extensively that we have to trust the artist's own account of its creation, as the form itself holds no clues that would help us trace it ourselves. The face remains impossible to identify, the mask unrecognizable. The viewer sees only pastel-colored abstract forms suspended in neutral space. They resemble professionally photographed designer sculptures, a piece of high-end interior design we'd find on the pages of *Kinfolk* magazine.

The artist proves herself a precise artisan, a craftswoman producing forms that pull the viewer in with their appealing shapes. *Afterbeauty* is seductive on a variety of levels: the depicted object, highly aesthetic photography, the whole exhibitory entourage, even the sleek pink catalogue. What we're actually seeing, however, are beautifying face masks. The three-dimensional objects stand as cosmetic reflections of visages, a product of efforts undertaken by the artist herself, as she used the masks until they seemingly lost their beautifying function. Once again, Zgierska embraced a peculiar interplay of the overt and the covert.

Likewise, *Numbness* documents Zgierska's creative process during which she repeatedly cast her face in plaster and then placed the forms in isolated spaces and photographed them. Although taken at brief intervals, each cast face is different from its predecessors, bearing a different configuration of marks and deformations. The plaster visages bring up images of death masks, once used as representative fragments of a deteriorating body. Once again, the artist hides her own visage behind a mask, photographing only the intermediary layer sitting between the camera and her own true face. Eventually, all of the casts photographed for the

series were destroyed by the author, and then, as precursors to the final photographs, arranged on display in a chaotic pile. This significant gesture may stand as an attempt to transcend the limits of photography and preserve these transient, elusive installations in not only their visual, but their substantial form.

¹ Hans Belting, *Face and Mask: A Double History*, trans. Thomas H. Hansen and Abby J. Hansen (Princeton–Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), p. 17.