

Presentation on the Work of Włodzimirz Książek at the Polish Consulate, New York City,
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Commentary by panelist Linda Norden

I am really honored to be here and I am flattered to be part of this gathering. We've had many conversations about Włodek's work. Like everybody at this table, I have known him for many years. When I was a graduate student at Columbia University, back in the early 1980s, Richard Brilliant was among my teachers, I am happy to say, so I am a bit daunted.

I am going to start with Richard's [Brilliant's] idea of wanting to find language for painting, which created a parallel struggle for me to move away from academia, from scholarship, to curating. In curating, I found I could stage something through which I could compare and find analogues and experiences that I have with works of art. In my effort to stay longer with a work of art, the challenge of the work is to stay there, to not be afraid of it, to not be in a hurry, rather than to find explanation in words, as if words were something other than the work itself, a truer account of what is attempted in the art.

Włodek's work, I agree, is committed to abstraction, to a kind of abstraction that refuses to be representational, and yet, it partakes of being a structure and feeling literally like a wall rather than a painting. But in the ways that Włodek's painting approaches themes in the world, and what I want to stress, actions taken in the world, a temperament, a mindset is made manifest through the way the painting is painted, through the aggressiveness of not just the paint on the surface and the treatments of the paint on the surface, the scraping, the thick layering, the violence of some of the strokes but, importantly, also the beauty and the tenderness, the range of emotions that one can aesthetically feel if one stays long enough with the work. All of those things approach experiences in life, and my understanding of the urgency in Włodek's works. I don't know why I feel the urgency, but I always have and I think most of the people who have written about Włodek's work seem to find this as well, an urgency to find a simile, and if not a simile, a metaphor, an analogue, something that relates these paintings to lived life, because the paintings seem to demand that, and not all abstract paintings do.

The history of mid-20th century abstraction spends a lot of time on both the action entailed in the making of the painting and on various theories of their expressivity, the capacity for a gesture to adequately convey something experienced in actuality, not a representation of an experience, but the experience itself, that degree of authenticity, or directness, of something psychological or something felt, and something made or something put on the canvas, a mark made, for example something that was said to be sought by a painter, say, like Jackson Pollack.

But for me, there has been an urgency to compare Włodek's painting to other art, to not want them to be special cases, but to be put in dialogue with other art being made today. Nonetheless, there is a simultaneous urge for that painting, in spite of the spoken desire, not to be analogous to any other art that is out there right now, or to look like anything or behave like art that would be more conceptual, or a style of abstraction, in order to make comparisons

between the look of his painting and the look of another painting. You don't get very far if you do that.

Years ago, I attempted to do an exhibition, or I spent a lot of time talking about a possible exhibition, with a mutual friend, David Moos. Both of us kept throwing out the idea of our desire to show Wlodek's work with somebody unexpected, like a conceptual artist like Bruce Nauman. The work of his I most want to invoke here is a neon piece (he also did a version of it as a video) that says: "Please Pay Attention Please." Above all else, what transpires in Wlodek's paintings is this demand for attention.

In addition, the way that that plays out in the painting is in part the paintings' aggressiveness: I like what Richard [Brilliant] said, that we were met by the paintings. We were indeed met by the paintings in this space at the Consulate. They are sitting smack in the middle of the room. You can't miss them. And I think that is fantastic, I love that.

So, foremost about Wlodek's paintings for me, the consistent thing, in all their variety and consistency, is that they never don't demand attention, and they never don't repay attention. That is a double negative, which is meant to be positive. The longer you spend with them, the more time you want to spend with them. There is tons of stuff to look at in every single square inch of the surface of his work. There is a *horror vacui*. There is also a building that then undoes itself so it becomes a perpetual process. There is a mix of things that are painful and ugly, both in terms of the action taken, such as the scraping, the cuts, and the incises, as well as the introduction of beautiful lyrical moments of color or glimpses of what appear to be light.

The other thing that has been a constant in the work for me is its approach to architecture, which I started to say at the beginning. And that is in part, I think, because the very first paintings I saw of Wlodek's were at the John Gibson Gallery, even before I met him, and they were, correct me if I am wrong, but they were things that looked almost Pompeian and looked like plans for ancient architecture. They looked like floor plans. They were much thinner. They were the closest of anything I've seen of Wlodek's to something representational, and yet, I've never felt anything that approaches representation in the work. I also don't read them as abstraction *per se*, they don't seem to participate in the dialogues of abstraction as much as they create a dialogue of construction and destruction.

It's the time element that Richard [Brilliant] introduced, which if I understand it properly, is the time we spend looking at them, a time that is a very active, that forces you to enter your own mental space, and to move in and out of both the physical presence and interiority of the work, as well as the emotions the work arouses. It asserts a desire to want to know the artist's biography. And anyone who knows Wlodek, knows that the biography is inescapable. But, if you don't, the paintings assert the presence of the figure without ever picturing a figure. They introduce the figure that is making the work, but you don't even think of the making figure *per se*. You simply feel that a space that active has to be occupied, or activated.

The last comparison I am going to make is to another artwork, and it is again to Nauman. In 1968 he made a black and white film called Walking in an Exaggerated Manner Around the Perimeter of a Square. In it Nauman has a fixed camera. He lays out two concentric squares on the studio floor and proceeds to traverse the white outline of the outer square. He is wearing a white t-shirt and black pants, so it is clearly a costume, like a dancer, which makes you want to watch his movements.

That need to watch the movements is reinforced because they are choreographed, and he walks almost like a model on a runway, one foot in front of the other with his hips swinging back and forth in timed repetitive intervals. What is most conspicuous about the piece that while it is uneventful, even boring to watch, you can't look away (it is not half as interesting as Wlodek's surfaces). But the violence of Nauman's work is that as soon as your mind wants to wander, you are forced back to look at him because you have to pay attention to movement of that hip. So in doing something that is incredibly banal, even infuriating that you are spending this time looking at something of so little interest, and that he is deflecting any possible association, you are kept absorbed in the work.

Wlodek's paintings are similar violent in their unswerving demand for attention. But I think Wlodek does one better, because he demands that kind of attention, but he makes it pleasurable, and he introduces the array of human emotions through the variety of his painting.