

Presentation on the Work of Włodzimierz Ksiązek at the Polish Consulate, New York City, January 28, 2010

Commentary by panelist Richard Brilliant

Like James, I have known Ksiązek for many years, and have written in other exhibition catalogues before, and spoken at other gatherings like this before, and I have no intention to repeat what I've already said or written.

Therefore, in thinking about Ksiązek's work, which I have long enjoyed and admired (and in fact, we have some in our home), I began to consider ways to address some more critical issues about his work. I would like to address the nature of his work in the realm of the nature of abstraction and abstract painting.

Abstract artists are not necessarily tied to the observation of natural reality, or to its transcription in works of art, or in figuration that seems to reference the world outside of the artists themselves. And yet, we have little trouble recognizing the peculiarities of style or patterns of performance in artists who profess to be or are abstract artists, like Ksiązek. That means of course that there are recognizable elements, biographical or otherwise, which may be called his style, marked by certain favored figural forms, through which representation occurs.

In looking at the scale of a painting that met us all at the entrance into this chamber, there are issues of scale, space, and something else that had not occurred to me before I began thinking about the nature of his work: time.

Large canvases like this one are paintings that occupy not only our attention, but occupy the action of perception through time. We struggle to become knowledgeable about the work, and to relate to it in some effective way so that we have the beginnings of understanding: the very process in which these elements that crisscross before and under the surface of the paintings become also elements which we have to peruse through time itself. They become a means of representing temporal elements, not just aspects of a topography of the surface created by the artist and placed for our vision on these large canvases.

I hadn't thought before about the significance of the perusal of the canvas, which requires not only an effort to respond to this figuration of time in action. Viewing large canvases, including canvases of the 17th century by Rembrandt and others require an effort on our part to see the whole, and to see the whole, as our eyes move over the surface, is also an experience in time. And that experience in time, it seems to me, becomes one of the elements in the dynamic of creation of Ksiązek's work, especially in his large scale paintings.

The embedded pictorial nature of that journey through time, through the avenues that he has allowed us to follow in the paintings themselves, becomes a way in which indeed a pictorial ideology becomes embedded – embedded not without our access to it, but nonetheless embedded - and one that demands that we respond to it visually. In my view, it is a kind of "ideogrammatic" expression, not only of notions of time, but also more overtly about aspects of time in passing.

There is a marvelous essay by W. J. Mitchell, published in 1984, entitled "What is an Image?" This essay deals with the nature of imagery, especially abstract imagery; and in dealing with imagery as a whole, Mitchell addresses the way we approach imagery through language. This allows us not only to express our response to images, to identify them, but also to comprehend them, to make them ours: images created by the artist and then displayed for our delectation and comprehension.

The linear accents, those avenues of form that have been so characteristic of Ksiązek's work for many years, represent the graphic sign coursing through the large field of the painting itself. They also encourage us to develop a kind of mental imagery in correspondence with these elements of time and of abstract form so that we become, and are forced to become, conscious of that transition.

I was thinking about the transiting gaze largely because of the way in which I have become accustomed to his paintings and to being conscious of the passage of my eyes across the large field, given direction through the canvas, or around the canvas, or above the canvas. It is of course a passage in which the transit of the eye is also a kind of transitory marker, whereby we are not imprisoned by these forms but escape the lines to contemplate the nature of Ksiazek's imagery. We are in a gray zone, an intermediate zone between the kind of imagery we can follow easily with our eyes and the kind of imagery which exists mentally in our response to his work.

His works are about display and it seems to me to think of them only in representational terms is to think of them incorrectly – not that representation itself is not a part of abstraction, nor of Ksiazek's paintings. To think of them in terms of display is to recognize Ksiazek's recognizable style of painting, an instrument of his expression, by which the inward experience he has himself enjoyed, re-experienced as it were and translated into a pictorial language, becomes extended by the work so that we have access to it. So, the issue of his particular mode of expression, which we may interpret on the one hand, is a kind of recognizable style, and on the other is an expression of those thoughts that have come to him, now revealed to us, but which have not been manifested.

We might say, of course, many artists, whether they are figurative in a recognizably traditional way, or in abstraction, that they develop a manner of approaching the subject of painting and of the creation of imagery that is itself reflective and expressive of self. I am not saying it's necessarily biographical in intension, but it becomes an instrument of self-identification. It is one of the reasons why it seems to me that in Ksiazek's painting, we come face to face with an artist who is not only interested in the expression of himself, as a good artist often is, but at the same time is one who is able to present that expression in meaningful pictorial forms, accessible to the viewer.

Gerry Fodor, a philosopher whose work is known to many of you, developed a theory, the representational theory of mind, which has influenced me in my approach to Ksiazek's work. In a sense, it is a reflection of the coming together of Ksiazek's thoughts, and those of the viewer. And that is why his emphasis on display is so important.

Imagery has many qualities. We use language to describe images. We use language and mental apparatus to define images and to locate them in a mental space and in a mental environment, so that they become not only recognizable as forms in the world, but become recognizable and meaningful to us as images of value. In experiencing this kind of representation, this kind of coming together of different systems of reflection and of abstraction, we have to work; we have to work as viewers without finding something that is necessarily easily familiar, or derived from the world outside in nature, but something that is provided for us in systematic ways by Ksiazek.

In a sense, we become aware of a kind of transformation, a transformation in which a kind of existential life (his) becomes accessible to us as we can experience not only the nature of that life, but something of its complexity. Explanatory transfers from vision to language are always difficult because to find words to describe these mental processes of perception as well as to do justice to the pregnant possibilities that lie within imagery requires an effort.

In the case of Ksiazek's work, we are confronted with the necessity of doing just that. They make demands on us, and works of art, pictorial art, that make demands on us are never satisfied by easy responses.