

KRZYSZTOF GLISZCZYNSKI

A RETOUR AUTO PORTRAIT text by Urszula Szulakowska

Gliszczynski's work is concerned with retrieving memory. He explores the origins of his identity in the psychic and social processes by means of which subjectivity is acquired. He does this through a ritualistic means of pictorial construction in which he attempts to reverse the natural progression of time. His signifying system is derived from alchemical hermeneutics, which is a most unusual venture for a Polish artist. Alchemy is a historical discourse which has been explored more frequently by German or French artists, such as Beuys or Klein. In his laboratory the medieval alchemist practiced an art that was intended to illuminate the psyche of both himself and of his society, transmuting their base natures into a divine consciousness.

More specifically, Gliszczynski employs the concept of synergy, derived from the psychologist Carl Jung's interpretation of medieval alchemy as being a proto-psychology. According to Jung, unrelated events occur simultaneously in trajectories parallel to each other, but to the human mind they appear to inter-act, often with very strange results. This process seems to be a magical one, since natural laws of cause and effect are contradicted. The ancient magical practices, such as alchemy derived their knowledge from the intuitive processes of the human psyche. Gliszczynski's practice could be described as liminal, exploring the border between material and immaterial states of being.

There is some inheritance in his thought from the late nineteenth century Symbolists, especially Edvard Munch for whom life was a fragile membrane, disrupted by the malevolent irruptions of desire, sickness and death. Gliszczynski's early encounter with Munch was fundamental to his formative process as an artist since Munch's paintings underlined his own realisation of the finality of death; the shock encounter with the void and the dull permanency of loss, grief and suffering. This realisation led Gliszczynski to an existential enquiry into the origins of his own finite nature, such as is reflected in his recent series of self-portraits. These works express a tentative possibility that in art and history, as in dreams, in a meta-space beyond gross physicality, loss may be conquered. The dead can live again. His art-practice is an emblematic process reflecting the human life around him.

The enquiry into the structure of his own identity is extended by Gliszczynski to that of a society and a nation, specifically Poland. Ultimately, he brings the issue round to recent history and his personal involvement in the upheavals and street protests of the *stan wojenny* during the Jaruzelski era. He alludes to a photograph showing himself being arrested with his friends by the militia, an event that caused an enduring fear of further reprisals. The psychic pressures of the *stan wojenny* are symbolised in his work by the manner in which he destroys the painted surfaces. He forces an alien text onto the imagery by the pressure of his thumb.

Trauma is a fundamental theme in his work. The self-portraits are a meditation on the traumatised memories of an entire society and their effect on the identity of the contemporary Polish character. Prior to 1939, Polish identity had been constructed on the basis of cultures that had evolved historically two hundred miles further east of the present border. History has demonstrated that there were many different ways of being 'Polish,' whether within the country itself, or in the diaspora beyond. However, who are the Poles now? For example, in Pomorze over the past sixty years a new identity has arisen out of a patch-work of traditional local cultures and those of dispossessed peoples, mostly from the lost and forgotten Kresy.

In Hannah Arendt's study of the effects of Nazism and Stalinism, Gliszczynski has found a resonance to his enquiry into political identity. These totalitarian regimes had caused permanent fractures in historical continuity, resulting in the disintegration of humane moral codes in the body politic. Arendt perceived that modernity was characterized by, what she termed, the loss of the world, that is, the elimination of individual involvement in the public sphere in favour of retreat to a private world of economic concerns. Politics and action had been replaced by bureaucracy, laborious toil and the manipulation of public opinion. Arendt argued that significant fragments had to be redeemed from the past by means of a selective, critical appropriation. This process could revivify the past and re-establish some degree of continuity with history so that it could serve as the foundation of a positive future political order.

In the context of the creative arts, Gombrowicz had also insisted on the necessity of temporal continuity both with the past and with nature, describing the world as 'form in motion.' In his well-known iconoclastic discourse, he questioned the ability of a painting to convey vital movement.

How is one to express himself in a painting deprived of movement? For existence is movement, it takes place in time. How can I pass myself on, or my existence, operating only with combinations of immobile shapes? Life is movement. If I cannot render movement, I cannot render life._

In response, due to Gliszczyński's passionate concern to validate the integrity and social necessity of painting as an art-form, he attempts to address Gombrowicz's demand for an art-form that is dynamic and for image-building as a process that constantly evolves in time._ This is achieved by means of his working-method which is fluid, ever changeful, never reaching a final goal. He regards his materials as being an alchemical materia prima (first matter), so that he retains the volatility of his medium, keeping it in a state of flux. Prime matter was believed to hold all forms in potentia. The seventeenth century English alchemist Robert Fludd had described prime matter as

darknesse, the darke Abysses or potentiall Principle ... Plato calleth it Hyle ... foreasmuch as it is invisible and without form ... _

Gliszczyński regards his current series of self-portrait paintings as being indexically related to his own physical presence. His paintings have become metonyms, not metaphors. Their surfaces are a network of rudimentary vertical and horizontal marks, imprinted with his thumb-nail. He continues to add layer upon layer of colour in a wax base. The resulting effect is that the materials of the work, their formal composition and the subject-matter become integrated into a unity. The form of the network has evolved from the geometrical grids employed in his earlier paintings. In those works, the geometry had been a purely metaphorical, intellectual system. The current network of jagged marks, in contrast, is a visceral response to his meditations upon the loss of personal subjectivity. In these indexical networks the cross line of the horizontal imprint cuts across the vertical one, reducing the authenticity of the original mark. However, its identity can be rebuilt. Nonetheless, in the quest for an authentic 'I,' it is possible to conclude only that an 'I' exists merely in a temporal sense. It is difficult to argue objectively for the existence of an 'essential I.'

In fact, a further dimension has become apparent in the self-portrait series that has arisen out of the initial inquest into the fractured past. Hovering around the painted self-image is an uncanny atmospheric. Freud and Kristeva have defined the phenomenon of the Uncanny as caused by the return of the familiar made strange. In Gliszczyński's self-imagery the phantom semblance is and is not himself. The actual identity of the form has become indefinite due to the constant process of reworking the image. The form has become objectified and some other phenomenon seems to intervene. The empty field of the face and its dense painterly surface absorb natural light as into a black sun. The lights seem to go out and the viewer sinks into the silhouette of the face. As Gliszczyński paints and repaints, the silhouette of the head grows larger and larger, spreading out beyond the frame of the original canvas. Eventually the portrait transforms into a field-painting. Gliszczyński transmutes his self-portraits from an icon that is centred and enclosed in a border, to that which has no border and which extends indefinitely beyond the token frame.

From being a symbolic image set within the paint, the paint becomes the image. Put another way, the particular has been absorbed into the universal, the individual psyche dissolved into the cosmic prima materia. Gombrowicz's observations on the 'cosmic significance of man for man' could be relevant for comprehending this uncanny quality of the self-portraits. Gombrowicz imagines the effect of seeing another human-being for the first time:

an analogous creature appears in my field of vision, which, while not being me, is nevertheless the same principle in an alien body. Someone identical but alien nevertheless. And suddenly I experience, at precisely the same moment, a wondrous fulfilment and a painful division. Yet one revelation stands out above all the rest: I have become boundless, unpredictable to myself, multiple in possibilities through this alien, fresh but identical outside._

Gliszczyński's artistic labour is deeply obsessive and time-consuming, a ritual act of surrender to the toil of making, consciously acknowledging the emergence of each mark. The artist is in a state of total withdrawal into the web of the microcosmic world of the painting. He regards art-making as being similar to the contemplating of a mandala, a slow, deliberated process, composed of minimal, low-key interventions (typical of the anti-rhetorical nature of much contemporary Polish painting.)

He emulates the laborious arts of the alchemists in their laboratories. As the eighth century alchemist Jabir ibn Hayyan explained:

You must sustain labour, because the work will be long ... every natural action hath its determinate measure and time ... For this Work three things are necessary, namely, patience, length of time, and aptness of instruments ..._

The medieval alchemists imagined that they were emulating God's creative actions as recounted in the first chapters of the Book of Genesis. Their laboratory was effectively a temple and their benches were an altar on which rites were performed identifiable with those of the catholic mass. This idea of a sacred space in which a commemorative ritual takes place is conceptually related to an ancient philosophical argument the 'Eternal Return.' This is an idea encountered both in the philosophy of Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, as well as in the religious anthropology of Mircea Eliade. Originating in ancient Egypt, it was believed that time moved in a cyclical manner and was, thus, of infinite duration. In contrast, the material universe is endowed with a finite amount of matter that changes all the time into a limited number of forms. This process never ended and it had no origin.

Eliade developed the notion of the Eternal Return still further. He considered that all world cultures had divided reality into two discrete realms, those of sacred and of profane space and time. Hence, myths and rituals were not merely memories of sacred events (hierophanies) that had taken place in the past, rather rituals were means for participating in the original events. Hierophanies were manifestations of the sacred order. They provided the world with its moral code. In contrast, the profane spaces of everyday life could only be divided up geometrically according to the laws of reason, but could not offer any guidance as to how life should be lived.

These ideas are loosely paralleled in the meditative, low-key surfaces of Gliszczyński's earlier works, such as *Labirynt*, 2001, or *Lewitacja*, 2000 and the related *Trzy Przestrzenie*, 2001. In such works, the field of the canvas takes a grid-like format. These geometrical structures are stricken across by horizontal and vertical gestural marks, or there are lines engraved into the canvas. In some works, such as *Lewitacja* and *Trzy Przestrzenie*, these rational geometries contradict and almost eliminate from view another underlying order, consisting of Gliszczyński's self-portraits, facial, as well as full-figure. Among these self-images there is an almost invisible allusion to Holbein's recumbent figure of the dead Christ. (*Dialog* series, 1985 and *Materia Prima*, 1995-96, encaustic on canvas). These works express a similar view to that of Eliade concerning sacred and profane time and space. Gliszczyński's geometries signify a system of reason and logic. They dominate and almost eliminate the ritualised figuration beneath, symbolic of the sacred human quest for self-knowledge. Sometimes these figures are visible only under specific lighting conditions (*Lewitacja*, 2000).

The grid could be described (in Rosalind Krauss's terms) as the iconic logo of modernism._ It is an anti-historical signifier, since its meaning as a form is that to deny the authenticity of a particular phenomenon. Instead, the form of the grid suggests the process of squaring-up, that is, laying a grid over the original image in order to transmit its form by means of copies. The grid signifies the mechanical processes of reproduction by means of which imagery is commercialised._ Moreover, the grid is also derived from the repetitive and politically-dominating spatial geometry of the academic painting with its controlled viewing-points. Whether in academic classicism, or in modernism, the grid operates so as to produce a hyper-reality replacing that of the real world.

In Gliszczyński's self-portraits, once the original iconic image has been lost in the process of over-painting, his subsequent intention is to recover some trace of that image. In ancient magical beliefs the power of a thing was believed to lie in its first manifestation, not in its subsequent forms. Through a process that Gliszczyński calls 'leucosis,' he attempts to regain the original image. By covering the field of the painting with white paint, the original form re-appears.

In alchemy 'leucosis' was one of the final stages in the making of the philosopher's stone. After the spirit had been separated from base matter and both had been purified, they were re-united in a procedure that produced a white crystalline liquid. The base matter had been transmuted into the highest possible form, one in which spirit and matter had become one substance, the quintessence. The seventh century alchemist Khalid ibn Yazid explained that

the Spirit will not dwell with the Body, not enter into it ... until the Body be made subtle and thin as the Spirit is ... then shall it be conjoined with the subtle Spirits ... so that both shall become one and the same thing ... become like water mixed with water, which no Man can separate._

In actuality, however, Gliszczyński's ideas diverge significantly from those of Eliade who believed that sacred space lay beyond temporal nature. In his spiritual system, humanity was obliged to escape the illusionary order of the everyday world in order to attain spiritual insight. In contrast, Gliszczyński's vision of material reality is conceptually related to tantric systems and processes, specifically in his reference to alchemical ritual and symbolism. Indeed, Gliszczyński is not directly influenced by the historical traditions of Indian Yoga, or Chinese Daoism. Rather, he has intuitively grasped the unificatory 'spirituality of matter' underlying the alchemical world-picture.

Gliszczyński's materialist spirituality (or spiritual materialism) like that of Yves Klein, Joseph Beuys and Sigmar Polke, is quite distinctive from that of the earlier modernists influenced by the theosophists and Rudolf Steiner. According to Francois Lyotard, the paintings of Malevich, Kandinsky and Mondrian were abstract signposts indicating an absent Other. They sought to reach beyond their material limits to the Sublime, as in Kant's association of emptiness of form (the abstract) with that of the Sublime._ In contrast to this rejection of material reality, tantrism identifies the 'prima materia' of the world with divinity itself. The human psychic forces are essentially of the same order as the universal power that has manifested the physical world.

The essence of tantrism is the view that there is no difference between psyche and world, for the world is the psyche materialised and, hence, it is the incarnation of the divine itself. Alchemy attempts to end the conflict between psyche and matter. These opposites were represented in alchemical symbology by the imagery of the sun and moon pair whose offspring was the philosopher's stone. It was the strangest substance on earth; matter spiritualised, the 'quintessence,' an aetherial matter described by Aristotle. These ideas had been expressed in the Emerald Table, a cryptic text of the 2nd century AD that was interpreted in alchemical terms.

That which is above is like that which is below_

This text describes a microcosmic process in which the materials in the alchemical flask are circulated as if they were the human soul rising to heaven and falling back to earth. This circular procedure in the alchemical laboratory was intended to purify the base chemical materials, as well as the psyche of its operator.

For all things are interwoven and separate afresh, and all things are mingled and all things combine ... When all things ... come to harmony by division and union, without the methods being neglected in any way, the nature is transformed; and it is the nature and the bond of the virtue of the whole world (Zosimos of Panopolis, ca. 300 AD)_`

Every point on Gliszczyński's canvas constitutes the all, as in William Blake's desire 'to see the world in a grain of sand ... and infinity in an hour ...' Blake had inherited this vision from the sixteenth century spiritual alchemist Jacob Boehme. This same vision can also be found in Jorge Luis Borges Book of Sand in his alchemised world-picture._

Gliszczyński's work-in-progress Urny was commenced in 1992, first appearing as an installation entitled Residuum. This series is intimately related to the processes of art-making in the studio and constitutes a record of the artistic procedures and events as they gradually evolve in time and space. Initially, Gliszczyński gathered the residues of dried-up paint from his palettes and paint pots and pressed them into tall glass vessels that recall alchemical alembics and stills. More recently, he has eliminated the glass containers and has collected the drops of paint that fall onto the studio floor. He simply compresses the fragments of fresh paint in order to create a free-standing monolith. On occasion, where the paint has lost its elasticity he has placed the fragments of paint and wax into a pan and boiled them down to collect the sediment

the unified trace of what once used to be presence_

The re-appearance of the dregs of the painting process, recycled into a new art-work, is a type of alchemical resurrection. Gliszczyński, thereby, alludes to the retrieval of history into a form of

permanent commemoration. The vases are like Egyptian stele, marking the passing of the living from one world to the next.

The urns are just another speck of the fragmentariness which surrounds me.

What is elusive here, too, is the sense of its time. It becomes universal and increasingly more similar to an aftermath of some calamity. _

He refers to its 'colour of destruction and degradation.' The procedure is modelled very closely on that of the alchemists who aimed to reduce the primal substance to its elemental components. It was then possible to imprint a new Form onto prime matter, thereby giving it an entirely new identity.

In the subsequent works in the series *Cinisbacillus* (2000-2004), Gliszczyński has re-examined the nigredo stage of the alchemical process that he had reviewed in earlier paintings. The nigredo is the dark night, the death of the prime matter prior to its resurrection in perfected form, the black sun, the crow, the shadow self, purgatory. Gliszczyński describes the manner in which he used to collect ashes from friends' houses, carefully recording their origins. These ashes symbolised the disposed culture of everyday life. He takes frequent recourse to the use of ashes, as in his earlier paintings concerning the mythology of red pigmentations, *Mitologia Czerwieni* (1996), as also in his grey-toned works, *Residuum* (1998-9). _

Gliszczyński's practice constitutes a genuine type of alchemical text. As John Moffitt has argued in his studies of Duchamp, there are very few artists who employ the alchemical process itself. Many have a vision of their work as being some type of alchemical procedure (Paul Klee, Salvador Dali) but they only refer to the general concept of artistic transmutation. The nearest comparison to Gliszczyński's working method is that of Yves Klein's I. K. B paintings in which the blue pigment is both the subject and the material. Gliszczyński, in fact, has referenced Klein's colouration, as well as the mystical themes that he had explored. There are no stratified levels of material, composition, sign and content, as in a theatrical production. Instead, the surfaces speak as a unified integrity, operating as one seamless surface. (This had also been achieved by Malevich.)

Gliszczyński has long left his modernist mentors behind in his insistence that the art-work does not seek to escape its own boundaries but instead becomes an instrument used to investigate of the painful borders between life and death, memory and forgetting, gain and loss, history and its obscuration. The materials employed are the waste refuse of memory:

I started to collect scraps of my work because they made me realise how fragile everything we do is, how fragmentary and elusive. This is the image of what is left behind us. We cover everything with layers of unnecessary things and, finally, become dust ourselves making another layer (1992)

And yet, this is not a totally bleak situation, since while remaining 'residuum, scarp, useless refuse,' the collected dross becomes the 'painterly quintessence,' the soul of the work.

That is a truly alchemical vision.

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 - For a complete account of Gliszczyński's work see Dominika Krechowicz (ed.), *Krzysztof
 Gliszczyński*, exhibition catalogue Galeria "Kolo", Gdansk; texts by Aneta Szylak, Iwona Zietkiewicz
 and Krzysztof Gliszczyński (2002)