

Patmos – The Revelation of Light

Jošt Snoj's art draws on his rich and diverse intellectual, academic, and life experiences. In the course of two decades of activities as an academic painter and theologian he has made a name for himself, especially with numerous paintings for sacral premises, and by combining in these works theological, liturgical, and confessional painting in an original way. Parallel to these activities he also continued to create a cycle of landscapes, marked by the special symbolism of the transcendental. Over these two decades Snoj developed his own art of painting, allowing it to grow isolated from constantly changing art trends and directions. This is how he created a special, honest, and quite unique approach to painting.

By its contents and themes the installation of Snoj's paintings in the Church of the Virgin Mary in Bovec moves from the sacral to the profane and back. *Patmos* is a place on Earth, but it also a place of divine presence, a metaphor for the contact between man and God, a symbol of revelation (from outside) and enlightenment (from inside), a juncture of apocalyptic suffering and the mercy of redemption. These essential contrasts resound in visual contrasts: light struggles with shadow, warm colours with cold ones, fire with water, sunrays with earthly abysses. The paintings thus embody the metaphorical relationship between matter and light.

Snoj's canvasses, painted with expressive strokes, on the other hand, contrast with the architectural lines of the exhibition space. The spiritual impressions are in harmony with the spirit of the sacral ambience, situated in a natural temple at the foot of the Alps. A century ago the immaculate landscape along the Soča River was desecrated by the horrors of war, which cut deep wounds in it. The exhibition's installation is therefore a kind of temporary memorial symbol, which tells us in a universal language about the harmony of nature and the cruelty of man, the relationship between the beautiful and tragic, the struggle between good and evil.

Snoj's cycle of paintings *The Cave of Evil (Huda jama)* is a response to historical and current events, but he does not interpret them in a socially critical way, but in a very personal, intimate one. His view expresses the search for Justice, which is not a universal and all-embracing category, but one that reveals itself to each of us in a unique way. In Snoj's opinion, beauty, harmony, similarity, colours, and melodies can make it easier for the message of light to enter the viewer's soul. When the viewer flinches in the face of tragedy and evil, this experience will lead him to the light, because it is wrapped in light.¹

The bitterness of searching and the joy of beauty thus meet at the horizon of Snoj's landscapes. The *Patmos* cycle opens a new chapter in his creative work, in which he seeks to solve universal and personal existential questions. *Patmos* is an island in the Aegean Sea. In the Roman era it was home to a prison for political and other exiles, and John the Evangelist was exiled to the island from Ephesus. He lived in a cave and that is where he wrote the Book of Revelation (The Apocalypse). The book tells us about the ultimate fate of the world. It tells us about judgement, retribution and punishment, and about the ultimate revelation of the divine, the good, and God himself. It tells us about the transformation of the whole world or creation, when all elements of the world will disintegrate and decay, and that a new world will rise, a new sky, and a new Earth. The Revelation thus brings hopes for this world and Earth. It reveals to us mysteries, which our mind and faith find hard to understand. Where would we be without this vision, this message and this hope?²

Fire and light are visually reflected in flickering strokes and twinkling colours. Snoj's paintings reflect the Slovene modern painting tradition as set down by Ivan Grohar and Rihard Jakopič, symbolism, and the modernist view of images as two-dimensional surfaces covered with colours. Snoj also shows his affinity with the aesthetics and philosophy of Anselm Kiefer. His colours, light

and texture, which convincingly substantiate the materiality of the painting, breathe pure artistic delight. They create a bridge between the painter's gesture and the viewer's eye. However, Snoj's colour masses and artistic reflections always contain keys to (hidden) contents. These derive from the rich intellectual and spiritual traditions of the Christian and global ethos, and are simultaneously universal in space and time. Snoj's painted radiance is a fire, a passion that transforms, that can change. Fire is light, fire is hope. Besides human hope his paintings express above all infinite trust.

The sacral scenes on gold backgrounds (*The Crucifixion*, *The Descent from the Cross*), drawn with sketchy strokes, appear like intangible visions of the Passion. Because they are imbued with light, they exalt, instead of tragic death, the transcendental meanings of sacrifice and death as a new birth. Snoj achieves a similar effect with his profane depictions of flower explosions in his spring motifs. In his most recent paintings the symbolism of rebirth and eternal life takes the shape of an embryo's image. This human embryo is set in the landscape as a surrealist vision, premonition, or mirage. It takes shape from the soil on a ploughed field, sprouts as a bud on a blossoming meadow, springs to life as a cloud in the sky. The round shapes of the embryos, which somewhat resemble the skulls in the older *Cave of Evil* cycle, suggest an optimistic turn – Snoj's painting moves in its contents across to the other side, from death to life, winter to spring, darkness to light, expression to impression. In the context of the Bovec exhibition, we can also read them as a bridge between war and peace. This idea is enhanced by extensive painted panoramas in which the landscape is lost in a radiating light, in which the Holy Spirit hovers – the Dove of Peace. This allows us to understand these painting also as symbolic depictions of emancipation and (inner) peace.

Throughout history artists have longed for transforming the world, the victory of the good and beautiful. For light that will be revealed, although the more sensitive among us already feel that it radiates throughout the creation and the world. It is the light of the Revelation that also appears in the exhibited paintings. They are about our search, our inner feeling of things, reflections and traces of what has already been experienced. They are about fumbling around, about darkness and light, and about revealing. By its nature, art seeks to find light under the shell of appearances and in the same way these paintings seek to suggest that light seeps through the creation. They want to show the origin and traces of the final transformation, which in the words of Cézanne, our "fragile mind" attempts to perceive.³

Text by Monika Ivančič Fajfar / Translation by Franc Smrke

¹Jošt Snoj in the catalogue of the exhibition *Slike/I dipinti* at the Slovene Museum of Christianity 2015, p. 5. | ²Jošt Snoj in the folder accompanying the *Patmos* exhibition at the Finžgar Gallery, Ljubljana, 2016. | ³Ibid.

Jošt Snoj, born in Ljubljana in 1967, studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts, where he graduated with a series of paintings on the theme of Imago pietatis in 1993. He later, in 1998, graduated from the Faculty of Theology in Ljubljana. From 2004 to 2008 he studied Christian art at the Faculty of History and Cultural Heritage of the Church, Papal Gregorian University, Rome. Under the mentorship of Fr. Marko I. Rupnik he completed his formation in sacral art and achieved his master degree on the theological theme of Saint Ephrem of Syria. From 2000 to 2015 he served as a priest, while continuing to paint, exhibit, and lecture on art, and he now dedicates himself exclusively to painting. Snoj lives and works in Ljubljana.