

## Alphabetograms

The first moment in which Jan Mladovský's paintings catch the viewer's eye is their technical execution, which has an effect even before the viewer realizes what they represent. They are painted on fine silk, which is so transparent that it reveals the edges of the lower frame, which would remain obscured using a normal canvas. This initial characteristic, concerning the relationship to the substrate on which the artist applies the paint, determines his approach to the painting and, in parallel, to the image on the edge of the object.<sup>1</sup> On silk – a fabric that has a centuries-old history in the visual arts – the coloured glazes spread out, holding the directions and traces of the stroke, in such a way that the visitor to the exhibition can see himself in them. They have thus become a unique statement about the relationship between silk, colour and light on the one hand, and the artist, the image and the viewer on the other. They bring an immaterial sensory experience to the elaborate compositions that makes the painting an exceptional visual experience, an intuition that transcends any predetermined plan. They materialized versals, capital letters of the alphabet. They transformed them into three-dimensional, arbitrarily tilted and rotatable objects, devoid of earthly gravity, representable from different sides and angles, having not only their height and width, but also their thickness, as well as their backside. The paint hits the edges of the letters, defining them in relation to their surroundings. Although the letter is the main mover, Mladovský considers the image as a whole, growing out of the tension between shape and background, conditioned by the transition between light and dark, gloss and matte. One can consider whether this open relationship between them was arbitrary, or depended on the artist's momentary state of mind, or whether it was premeditated. Mladovský was always concerned with a unique, precisely expressed whole, inherent in itself, linking all the thematic and formal components, but also extending into social reality. He touches on freedom with his paintings, considering how far he can go in the representation of writing, where the limits of its legibility and comprehensibility lie, to what extent culture, by discovering writing, has deprived man of his nature, shackled him and given him no chance to express himself without it.

As a starting point for meditative reflections on the changing world in which words have lost their meaning, Mladovský chose letters, which Ferdinand de Saussure called the "signs" of the alphabet. Initially, he was drawn to short words such as DIE (1994), which is represented in its entirety in the current exhibition, or SHIT (1994) and FUCK (1995), of which only some letters whose overuse has long since lost its punch are included in the exhibition. Each letter of the adopted word has acquired its own form, has become its own portrait, not just a link in the series to which it belongs and from which it can be isolated. Almost immediately the English pronoun "I" began to assert itself among the letters of the alphabet, and it became Mladovský's long-standing subject, represented by a vertical quadrilateral prism, giving the impression that it leans slightly, that it is not a precise stereometric shape but a living mass,

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<sup>1</sup> In order to explain this unique way of painting, I asked Jan Mladovský to briefly explain the characteristics of the colours he uses: "These are mainly the well-known Lascaux company, which has succeeded in creating glazing transparent pigments of various interesting mainly natural ochre shades, which are otherwise normally strongly opaque, and then synthetic very permanent pigments developed recently, I think mainly in the automotive industry, which can also be safely diluted into transparent glazes that preserve lightfastness, which was not possible before. We remember faded car roofs that we don't see today."

not a body but a body. The "I" is always the first to appear in the title, as if uttered by the painting itself, speaking for the artist, followed only by three state verbs, expressing a present attitude, avoiding change, as if it were permanent and shifting the representation out of time. The "I" paintings, representing a solitary being establishing his or her own life dimension, had a separate development in Mladovský's work between 1996 and 2001, during which the top side of the prism, differing in colour from its sides, turned towards the viewer (I Drew See and Go, 1999; I Fly Try and Fight, 2002) until it took the form of a square or rectangle (I Fall Rise and Glow, 2000). The notion of letters as living beings emerged from the artist's earlier angular drawings, hung in the gallery corridor, from the 1984 Elysian Revierie series, which, although the title points towards timeless bliss, the angular or rounded human figures taking the shape of letters are more reminiscent of automatons or robots.

The images of letters represent only one position of Jan Mladovský's work. An introduction to his work would be incomplete if the exhibition omitted the lightboxes and the videos created in parallel with them. Their technical qualities have enabled the interconnection of the word with the environment through which they grow, float above it, turn over in it. Digitization turned letters into mirrored objects that became part of their environment, which was reflected in them. They are connected to the action, to immediate life, to everyday events, to all sorts of truisms and ephemeral documents. The intertwining of the inscription and the photographic or filmic record brought into tension two separate planes of meaning, each of which came with its own time and space. Their underlying dependence opened up transitions between opposing modes of perception.

The interweaving of the paintings, hung on the wall, and the lightboxes, placed on the floor, within the same exhibition, coalesced the juxtaposition of Mladovsky's double-dominant approach, whose unifying feature became illumination, a fragile value, revealing in fleeting outlines the world it obscured and absorbing the world around it.

Karel Srp

Jan Mladovský (born 1946) lives and works in London and Prague. He studied graphic arts at the UMPRUM in Prague in the studio of Antonín Strnadel, after emigrating in 1968 he studied painting and printmaking at the Slade School of Art University College in London with Bernard Cohen, Tess Jarray, and Bartolomeu dos Santos, then sculpture with Luciano Fabro at the Academia di Belle Arti do Breda in Milan. He has exhibited in many galleries throughout Europe, in Italy, France, Great Britain, Iceland and Sicily, Germany and Japan. He has taught at Oxford Brooks University, Croydon College of Art, Art Schools Aachen, Kiel, Hague, Rouen, Karlsruhe, Lisbon, Oporto, Seville, Norwich University College of the Arts and the Visiting Teacher's Studio at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague.

