

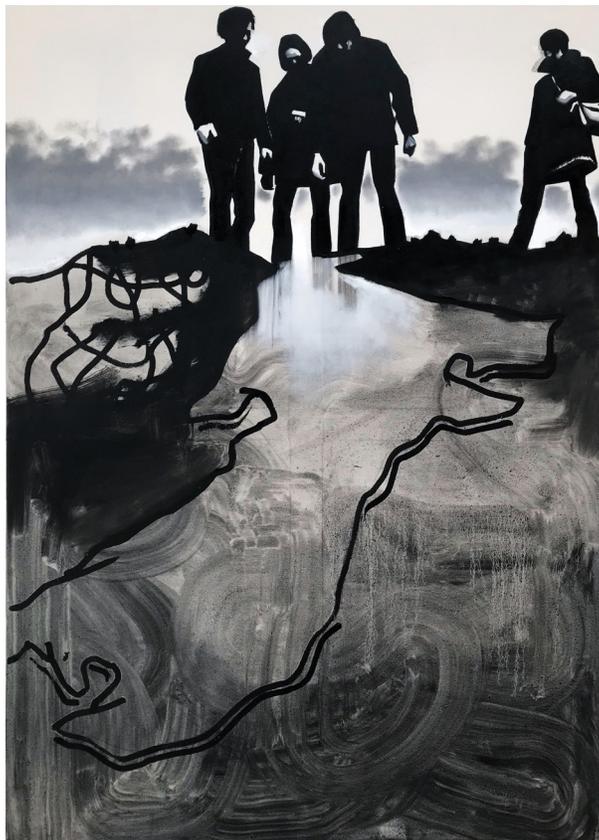
Wilhelm Sasnal

For Immediate Release

April 8 – May 15, 2021

March 26th, 2021—The eighth exhibition by Polish artist Wilhelm Sasnal at Anton Kern Gallery presents fifteen paintings and one film. Known as a painter of individual, lucidly formulated images (rather than of explorations in theme and variation, or in process) and a maker of films that speak a measured and moody language, this exhibition proposes a kind of associative way of looking. A theme or a narrative emerges only slowly. This however, does not suggest capriciousness. Quite to the contrary, these paintings and the film create a generative field of ties and connections that come closer to a nuanced and subtle analysis of the world than any predetermined credo could.

There are paintings of figures walking in landscapes, or rather, interacting with nature. There are wide horizons and vast skies, and there are seemingly traditional still-lives composed of fruits, plates, and flowers. And there is the occasional portrait of a youthful face for example. As has been frequently noted, Sasnal employs various modes of painting, from just about naturalistic to bold and improvisational, supported here by a palette that seems silently artificial. His motifs are based on visual memories, notably of the artist's stay in Los Angeles in 2019/20, on precise image moments, often recorded with a camera or a mobile phone. These image ideas are directly translated onto the canvas without much preparatory sketching, a process that infuses these distinct paintings with a great sense of freedom. Sasnal sees himself as a painter, not as a creator of mediated images. It is the artist's touch of the paint-filled brush onto the canvas that activates manifests the work.



Wilhelm Sasnal
Glue Rundown, 2020
Oil on canvas
55 1/8 x 39 3/8 in
140 x 100 cm

Sasnal's paintings are rooted in the desire to dissect the past and to engage with present events. Evidently, two still-lives in the exhibition are direct allusions to paintings by Cezanne and Mondrian. Why does the artist paint such direct references? Why are there two large canvases depicting well-known artworks by the American land-artist Robert Smithson, "Glue Rundown" and most famously "Asphalt Rundown"? Why does Sasnal paint an alluringly windswept "Roosevelt Park" in Los Angeles alluding to the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in the New Deal era of the 1930s and 40s? Why is there a painting depicting the silhouette of an aircraft wing in front of an intensely blue night sky and marvelous reflections of the moon? Why does the skyline of Los Angeles float like an oversized spaceship?

Perhaps the unapologetically smiling face of a youth expressing happiness and hope speaks to the notion of faith in reform and transformation alluded to in Sasnal's paintings. Is it religious faith (there is a rather dark painting of the pope), or spiritualism as suggested by Mondrian, or, towards the other end of the spectrum, faith in progressive politics as exemplified by the New Deal? Now, the two paintings about Smithson come into sharper focus. Smithson, who realized "Asphalt Rundown" in a quarry outside of Rome, the Eternal City, demonstrating what he called the "crystalline structure of time," arguing that time does not pass so much as it builds upon itself. The resulting sculpture is time frozen, mid flow. An astonishing commentary on Sasnal's project of making paintings about the interconnectedness of history and the present.

A medium size painting of dreamlike clarity, depicting a large anthurium plant, gives this exhibition yet another twist. The painting's reds, greens, and yellows seem hyper-saturated and emphasize the startling effect of a flower that looks like an artificial plant, an effect that the French novelist JK Huysmans describes in *Against Nature*. A thought that brings the viewer back to the question of the relationship between art, nature, and politics. But let's leave that thought for now and take another look at Sasnal's paintings, in particular his painted surfaces.

Sasnal often uses devices in which thick creamy paint protrudes from the surface of a painting, or where thin fluid paint reveals the surface structure of the canvas. A reminder of the material existence of his work. In other words, the artist blasts the illusion of a depicted scene, of what is being shown, and draws our attention to how the image is made. Not only does this make the onlooker aware of the time and location in which painting and viewer interact, but it also emphasizes the touch of brush and canvas as an element of activation, which is based in the duality of the sense of touch: it takes two to touch, two surfaces, two objects, two selves. For just as Sasnal touches his painting, so does the painting touch him. This reciprocal dimension of touch should encourage the viewer to consider the painting itself as the agent of process, and to explore how this interactive object behaves rather than merely what it looks like. Sasnal's touch, just as Smithson's act of pouring, reshapes our understanding or reading of Sasnal's paintings and their position within reality.

The five-minute film "Paintings and Bikes," which the artist intends to make accessible via mobile devices, was shot in Sasnal's studio in Krakow two years ago. We see the artist cautiously circling the inside of his empty studio trying not to step down. While the door to the outside is open and while the artist presents his favorite means of transportation and engagement with the world beyond the studio walls, a group of paintings is hung, one by one, on the studio wall. The developing narrative of the paintings, the artist's careful maneuvering, the hypnotic soundtrack, and the repeated view to the world outside the studio create a dynamic and allegorical portrait of Sasnal's studio practice.

Wilhelm Sasnal (b. 1972, Tarnów, Poland) studied architecture at the Krakow University of Technology (1992-1994) followed by painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow (1994-1999). Sasnal has emerged over the last two decades as one of Europe's preeminent painters. His work has been shown in solo exhibitions at the Kistefos-Museet, Jevnaker, Norway (2018); Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel, Switzerland (2017); Lismore Castle Arts, Lismore, Ireland (2014); Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany (2012); Whitechapel Gallery, London, UK (2011); and K21 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, Germany (2009). His work is included in the collections of the Carnegie Museum of Art, the Guggenheim Museum, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, the Museum für moderne Kunst in Frankfurt, SFMOMA, and Tate Modern among others. The films which he creates together with his wife Anka have been shown throughout the European festival circuit in Linz, Warsaw, Locarno, Berlin, Rotterdam, Bath, and Glasgow. Sasnal lives and works in Krakow, Poland. In May 2021, a large survey exhibition of Sasnal's work will be presented at the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews.

Gallery Hours

Tuesday through Saturday
10am – 6pm

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