

Stanislava Kovalcikova

Psychroluta

Mar 31 – May 6, 2023

Caprii, Orangeriestraße 6, Düsseldorf

Ah, my sweet darling! What heavenly gifts will we not have to entrust to each other.

– Madame in Marquis de Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, 1795

Act 1: Entrance of the Cold-bathing Woman

Scene 1: *A fur coat. A bathtub. Candles. A curtain.*

Madame takes a bath. She casts a piercing glance at the audience. The Cold-bathing Woman enters. She shyly avoids their gaze. Forgive me, I don't wish to disturb you!

Stanislava Kovalcikova's visual worlds and theatrical settings are intimate, psychological spaces. They draw the audience in before repelling and shutting them out at the very next moment. What remains is the uncomfortable feeling of intruding into a private realm of withdrawal. These spaces not only describe physical, but also mental states, whose density triggers an almost claustrophobic tension. Their protagonists are not meant to be pleasing. Rather, they make themselves vulnerable, open to attack; liberated from expectations, they seem to be removed from all worldly concerns. They describe precisely the (im)possibilities of human existence—in a way that is unmasked, fearless, abysmal, and riddled with complexity and contradictions.

Drawing on Christian panel paintings, Kovalcikova's allegorical images quote from art history, mythology, spirituality, religion, and psychology. The artist employs the stylistic medium of the grotesque to suggest transgressive models of hybridity and metamorphosis that defy all morality, custom, and conformity: surrealistic compositions of dysmorphic bodies, fluid human-animal hybrids, smirking grimaces, nude bodies making love, hedonistic heroic figures and tragicomic antiheroes, and fleeting instances of gathering, caressing, contemplation, and debauchery. *Yankee Magdalena* (2023) shows a female nude sitting on a rock. One skull is placed on her lap and another to her left. A baseball cap is pulled over her face, covering her eyes. Her facial expression, a Mona Lisa-like smile, gives the impression of being relaxed and satisfied. In the background, a person is pursuing an undefinable action in the surrounding landscape, equally at ease. In *Cosmic runners high* (2023), a nude protagonist wears a purple superhero coat, a hat, and sunglasses. Bearing the same contented grin, this figure runs from left to right across a cosmic scene speckled with stardust. Despite inhabiting an acutely personal visual universe, these characters and their social relationships with one another come across as anonymous and interchangeable. Interactions between them, insofar as they take place, seem fleeting and incidental. The resulting narrative is rather a juxtaposition of detached actions than an interconnected whole. Through a process of defamiliarisation, Kovalcikova's depictions shift from the homely to the uncanny. But notwithstanding all their hermeticism, these morbid distortions of reality function as a mirror image: they summon the audience's confrontation with their own shortcomings.

Make a large bowl of agrimony tea, about a gallon, then let it cool enough for you to rinse your head and hair with it. Alternatively, mix some agrimony with some oil (olive oil works well in a pestle and mortar or blender, then, when you have a quiet hour, gently place this mixture on to your body, particularly in the heart region; also, affix some of it to your arms, left and right, with wide strips of fabric. We advise doing this in a warm room with low lighting and perhaps while playing soft music.

– Christina Oakley Harrington, *The Treadwell's Book of Plant Magic*, 2020

Leather, latex, foil, dried orchids, dried contact lenses, lipstick marks, cigarette butts, dead ladybugs, hair, gold leaf, eyelashes, copper: while this can read like instructions for magical spells, it is actually a list of personal and organic materials and objects that recur on Kovalcikova's assembled painting surface and assert themselves in the surrounding space. This approach reveals once again that there is no dividing line between painting, imagination, and reality in her work. Inspired by rituals of mysticism and magic (and channeling figures that range from Mary Magdalene to Saint Hildegard), these private objects formulate and manifest earthly-celestial desires and instigate healing processes. The lengthy creative processes involved—it sometimes takes several years before her paintings are completed—can be read analogously. As a result of continuous reworking, destruction, and overpainting, her works harbor layers upon layers of memories and experiences that are buried in the subconscious. Something hopeful resides in their tragedy and urgency.

Candles are the only light source in Stanislava Kovalcikova's exhibition *Psychroluta* (psychroloutes = someone who takes a cold bath), which makes the dark, matte, primarily brown and red tones dissolve further into the surface. This resembles a gradually fading dream image slumbering in the subconscious, or even that brief moment when the bather submerges and water shields all external stimuli—just before she needs to come back to the surface, gasping for air.

The Cold-bathing Woman gets into the tub. Good evening, Madame.

*If it be laid under a man's head,
He shall sleep as if he were dead;
He shall never dread nor waken
Till from under his head it be taken.*

– Margaret Baker, *Discovering the Folklore of Plants*, 1969

Text: Miriam Bettin