

**Wilhelm Sasnal**  
***Columbus***

**08 – 24 October 2015**  
**9 Balfour Mews London W1**  
**Tuesday – Saturday, 11 – 6pm**

This October at Sadie Coles HQ, Wilhelm Sasnal presents a new film, *Columbus*, in the gallery's 9 Balfour Mews space. The half-hour composition is the latest in a prolific body of video works that has evolved in parallel to Sasnal's career as a painter, ranging from short experimental pieces to feature-length films.

*Columbus* interleaves sections of film with title cards telling the story of Christopher Columbus. The explorer's voyage to the New World is distilled into laconic statements in which historical fact blurs with otherworldly fable. Shot on a 16mm camera in the artist's hometown of Krakow and in San Francisco, the film compounds the listless, meandering mood of the story. Its disconnected sequences and motifs – a boy wandering through parkland, shaded squares on graph paper, radio masts rising above trees – also transpose the quixotic events onto an abruptly ordinary plane. In parallel to the visual and atmospheric shifts, an instrumental soundtrack – collaged from recordings by classical, electroacoustic and experimental composers – fluctuates between ceremonial chimes, oppressive discordance and expressive interludes reminiscent of film scores.



In this way, Sasnal sets film, text and sound in a mercurial dynamic – the three elements synchronise and splinter over the course of the work. As in his previous short films, the small-scale, occasionally claustrophobic vignettes point to the influence of Polish avant-garde and neo-avant-garde cinema. Footage of the artist's family occasionally dovetails (as if by accident) with the events of the tale, in an echo of the genre of 'Personal Cinema' which proliferated in Communist-era Poland. According to critic Lukasz Ronduda, this style of filmmaking – often linked with the short films of poet Miron Białoszewski (1922-1983) – “developed close to the artist's life and focused on recording the banalities of everyday life, fantasies, masquerades”.

In *Columbus*, as in Sasnal's paintings, such “banalities of everyday life” are endowed with a heightened yet open-ended significance – abstracted away from their context, made pregnant with unresolved meaning. The razor's edge of a spinning record becomes a metaphor for the flat earth envisaged by Columbus's sailors as they venture across the sea. As the ship stalls on becalmed waters and the sailors descend into madness, a needle suspended on a thread descends over the spinning disk. In reference to Columbus's ship of “irrational design”, Sasnal's camera pans over the Modernist interior and exterior of the Arka Pana church in Krakow – a modern-day vessel of the Catholic faith whose architect, Wojciech Pietrzy, conceived of the building as Noah's Ark resting on Mount Ararat.

The story alludes at various moments to Columbus's manic-depressive state of mind (his trip to the New World is inspired, Sasnal relates, by a phase of mania or megalomania) and his recurrent headaches; and a kindred quality of neuralgic fitfulness permeates the entire work. *Columbus* produces a sense of mundane reality being coerced into the fanciful shapes of myth, or conversely of myth dissolving into shapeless reality (supporting the theory, perhaps, that even the most fabulous tales find their historical basis in real-life phenomena). A melting sugar cube evokes the frothing water around Columbus's ship; and later, sugar cubes arrayed in Minimalist formation on a table stand for the settlements established by his men in the New World (a glancing reference to the fact that sugar was first exported to the New World by Columbus on his 1492 voyage). Yet as much as they 'illustrate' the tale, these everyday spectres interrupt and resist the narrative flow. They jolt viewers out of the annals of history and fiction, and into the concrete realm of the here and now.

Wilhelm Sasnal (b. 1972, Tarnow, Poland) has had solo shows throughout Europe and the USA including *Take Me To The Other Side*, Lismore Castle Arts, Ireland (2014); and those at Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany (2012); Whitechapel Art Gallery, London (2011); K21, Düsseldorf, Germany, and Centro De Arte Contemporáneo, Málaga, Spain (both 2009); *Wilhelm Sasnal - Years of Struggle*, Zacheta Narodowa Sztuki, Warsaw (2008); *Matrix*, The Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley, California (2005); and Kunsthalle Zürich, Switzerland (2003). He was included in the XXVI Bienal de Sao Paulo, 2004, and was shortlisted, with four other finalists, for the 2004 Vincent Prize at the Stedelijk Museum, 2004. With Anka Sasnal, the artist has written and directed four feature-length films, *Huba* (2013), *It looks pretty from a distance* (2011), *Fallout* (2010), and *Swineherd* (2009).

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