

Taming of the bad rooster

Manifestations of animalistic male power supported by testosterone "output" in a rooster is triggered based on simple mechanisms that result in "switching" of the animal's entrenched behavioral patterns over to the level of vain, sadistic and lethal energy. Andrej Dúbravský (1987), in his paintings presented as a solo exhibition at the DSC Gallery in Prague under the name *Birds and Winds II*. (which follows exposition of the same name shown at the Dittrich & Schlechtriem Gallery in Berlin in the fall of 2017), varies the image of an ecstatic fighting rooster, accompanied by several canvases with figural motifs, loosely connected to the main topic.

Rooster as a potent symbol of primary instincts became an attractive topic for Dúbravský having experienced a cockfight in the Philippines, the local fights being some of the most savage in a region where this form of making money persists as a part of the local folklore. The animal genus in general combines prominent bipolar affects, which is projected mainly into symbolic interpretation of its animal characteristics: on the one hand being caring, protective, selfless, signaling danger, seeing the night off as the harbinger of the new day, on the other hand being arrogant, pompous, egocentric, with exaggerated sexuality. Gamecocks are specially fed and the care they are given gives the care top athletes are given a run for its money: they are looked after to maximize their energy and strength. Roosters of this kind have an innate aggression which is manifested in its concentrated form vis-à-vis all males of the same breed.

On his return from the Philippines, Dúbravský did not start painting this motif immediately – on the contrary, he spent the rest of the year producing collages and artworks, experimenting with new materials, techniques and procedures (integration of chemicals, sausages, grains or sunflower seeds) which he presented in the same year in three group exhibitions in New York (Bridget Donahue Gallery: *On Empathy*, with, among others, Sarah Lucas; *Romeo NYC: Tie His Hands Gently*, and Nathalie Karg: *Boy & Girls Can Still Draw*). At the beginning of 2017, when he settled in Berlin for a time, he returned to the idea of cockfights and made it into painting of fighting birds, which he has carried on with until the current exhibition at the DSC Gallery. The study material used was the rooster he acquired along with a few hens for his village house in Rastislavice, Slovakia. There he was able to delve deeper into the mentality, psychology and behavioral models of the animal in various situations.

Cockfights are a "sport" with a 6,000-year history. They were documented and recorded in writing for the first time at the time of discovery of the Philippines by Ferdinando Magellan in 1521. One of the first depictions (6th century BC) was found on a seal in the biblical city of Mizpah in Benjamin, close to Jerusalem. Other seals, a century older than the one mentioned above, had roosters as symbol of fertility. In southeast Asia, rooster was a strong symbol of fertility in general – the shamans worshiped it precisely by holding

cockfights. In the Christian north of the Philippines, Catholic priests were found themselves powerless when trying to stop them. In the rural north of Thailand, animals formed a part of religious rituals, honoring the souls of ancestors by means of dance and cockfights as the spiritual medium.

In Dúbravský's depiction, wherein he strove to capture the rooster's instinctive reactions, their dynamics and other accompanying features of the bird's behavior at the threshold moment of fighting for its life, the anatomy of the bird disappears in an explosion of ruffled feathers. The trajectories of its movement are hinted at only by the head with a pronounced stare and the feet in the air. The captured poses completely colonize the space of the canvas, they dominate the composition. The color palette is ecstatic, it does not correspond with reality – the artist reveled in using toxic colors on the one hand and gentle pastel shades on the other: the spectrum ranges from ultramarine through purple, dark violet, orange, "washed out" pink, light blue and cyan (the "panties palette" – AD). The selected contrast supports the liveliness of the theme and the composition. In the result, the attempt to capture male power in the sense of a narcissistic exhibition, which the author metaphorically applies to a more globally conceived connotations with market mechanisms, capitalism and its fading campaign of conquest, the apocalyptic state of ecological issues, violent disruption of environmental hierarchies and the failure to do anything about it on part of top politicians, escalates in images of birds vibrantly set in motion in separate choreographies of the acts of attack and self-defense.

The effect of the presented opus is amplified by the number of scenes painted: the author produced several dozens of canvases with dedication that borders on the obsessive. He approaches the rooster in depiction and handling of the theme as an object, or even fetish, integrating aspects of worship, adoration and substitution (a Freudian concept) – much like a gamecock represents a fetish object for its owners, who project in it their vision of welfare and financial security. Also potentially understood as bordering on fetish could be the continually present motif of naked adolescent boys in Dúbravský's works, found on several canvases which in a contextual relationship complement the majority of paintings with roosters also in the present exhibition. In these paintings, the excited bird is calmed down in the arms of a young man. A cathartic calming down of the raging hormones, a gentle power taming the ego, a submission in trust and dissolution of aggressive tension in the affection of an embrace. Balance and calm are restored. Looking at them "quiets" the eye of the spectator, aroused by the all too intense concentration of heightened emotions present.

Dúbravský's erotically charged paintings of young homosexuals (including the author himself) are – framed by the general conventions of depiction of nudity in visual arts – given aesthetic and erotic dimension in objects intended "to be looked at", offering a source of pleasure primarily in the act of observation. While visual culture is dominated by representation of female nudity serving primarily to stabilize phallogocentric male fantasies, in case of Dúbravský's depictions the absenting dichotomy of man/woman with the asserted

equivalence (man/man) find fulfillment in genre attributes, storyline, captured situations or environments, which combined into one whole with the figural motif capture the spectator's attention. What is being fetishized here is in this case the physical, appropriating the regulating function of a certain stereotype. Dúbravský confidently enters the shared space of spectator fantasies, leaving the spectator with a free choice in completing the story of what is being shown. This aspect of his creative method is reflected in painting of the roosters themselves: the author's attitude towards them remains within the limits of what can ultimately be read as ambivalent; he is not interested in giving a clear-cut opinion on the issue of cockfights, which is not something he aspires to anyway. He draws from their visual attractiveness, whereas it is not clear whether he undermines or amplifies the meaning stereotypes of the fights the protagonists of which he chose as the object of depiction on the metonymic level. The binary character of the question is reflected to the spectator to be dissolved there in the effect of enjoyment of the visual experience. These are the basic, tried-and-true principles of Dúbravský's painterly game.

/ Lucia Gavulová