

***The title of the exhibition doesn't matter much, just make sure you avoid the word 'desire'. That's kitschy as hell.***

text: Michal Stolárik

**Everything you wanted to know about Dúbravský's work...  
and have probably read about it already**

When it comes to presenting the youngest generation of visual artists, the texts of contemporary Slovak art theory and criticism often tend to repeat certain facts and attributes that, however, are valid only for the early activities of these artists. Thus, what has formed a certain trivia about this group is now outdated and irrelevant. The same applies to Andrej Dúbravský (\*1987, Nové Zámky), whose work is continuously evolving not only from exhibition to exhibition but also from canvas to canvas. As a result, you are probably familiar with or have already read some of the following: he is a graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts and Design in Bratislava, where he studied in The Fourth Studio of Prof. Ivan Csudai and finished his studies in the Studio +-XXI lead by Prof. Daniel Fischer. His work filled with sexuality certainly caused some ruckus in the field of contemporary young Slovak painting. Andrej Dúbravský is gay and paints pictures with (but not only) homosexual content. The notorious iconographic subject matter of his paintings are young boys with bunny ears, which, naturally, connotes combination of sexuality and animality, adolescent gaucheness, coming of age and early experience. He paints boys and men figures, and these are often nude. If you make the effort, you manage to find author's (half)naked photos on social media. For Dúbravský, the boundaries between private life, public/real life and artistic work are seemingly non-existent. He's the author of my favorite quote: "*It is very easy to be controversial in the eyes of the petty bourgeoisie.*"<sup>1</sup> This is also the way his work is often described – as controversial. However, I don't think this definition is apt. Andrej admires Slovak rapper Rytmus – like him, the painter knows what he's doing, works actively, usually around certain themes and by large workloads. The painter openly states that painting as a medium has lost its significance and doesn't deserve to be celebrated. This may explain why he paints on untreated canvases, which he leaves scattered on the floor of his studio. He doesn't hesitate to cut up some of his quality abstract paintings and have tents sewn from them. He even lets his newly-found camp friends to paint the backgrounds of his future works. He has cooperated (more or less successfully) with a number of Slovak and foreign galleries. He is the laureate of the award VUB Painting of the Year 2012. His work is commercially successful and some of it can be found in the collection of the Slovak National Gallery. There is, obviously, a number of private galleries that would be happy to cooperate with the artist, however, they need to count with the fact that Dúbravský is not an easy persona to be tamed. Although he's had successful exhibitions in New York, Berlin or Prague, the shows that have resonated the most so far are exhibition experiments managed by himself – the scenery of flooded depot of the unfinished Bratislava underground (*The Very Exciting Mysterious Aquarium*, 2013), the former butcher shop (*No Ambitions*, 2011), or the island in the middle of the lake Zlaté piesky (*Golden Sands*, 2012) seem to be somewhat more natural fit for Dúbravský's works.

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After graduating in 2013, his work has distinctively eased both thematically and expressively, losing the kind of average crowd-pleasing aesthetics, and evolved from the post-teenage carefree life towards the ground reality. It is no secret that author's oeuvre composes his personal imaginary diary, depicting fantasies, recent adventures, interests, and experiences. The true magic of this diary, though, is the viewer's inability to distinguish between fiction and reality. If he kept a real diary, like Ladislav Mednyánszky<sup>2</sup>, the audience could probably decode the particular subject matters of author's work. Mednyánszky, naturally, protected his

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<sup>1</sup> Andrej Dúbravský in an interview with Michal Stolárik. In: Profil no. 2, vol. XXI, 2014, p. 94.

<sup>2</sup> In his diary, author Ladislav Mednyánszky used Greek letters to denote situations or persons, eg: Δ – physical, or sexual attraction, excitement, Ψ = spirituality. More: Ladislav Mednyánszky – Denníky 1877 – 1918, Kaligram/Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava, 2007.

inner world from the public eye for obvious reasons, and homosexuality never penetrated into his paintings. Although this seems unnecessary in the 21st century, if Dúbravský, like his artistic predecessor, used the letters of the Greek alphabet to mark his works, the paintings would turn into an ordinary modern-day tabloid. Who knows? To answer the question that his ever-evolving work naturally arises, that is how would his work look like in year XXX, the author would probably recall his experiences and stimuli he got in the given period, and these would also determine his paintings, making the potentially real/fictional nature of his diary excerpts utterly irrelevant.

From a broader perspective, it is evident that the work of the artist is not of a mainstream nature. It oscillates between two contrary poles, but with no apparent calculation. Many times, Andrej Dúbravský's work balances strikingly on the "edge", but not in the sense of being on the imaginary borderline of what's right or wrong. Rather, the edge as a place of contact of two surfaces, or the sharp point into which two sides culminate, is how I see author's work. But rather than a top or an intersection, I'm more interested in the particular sides/surfaces/extremes/stimuli that may or may not be contradictory. After all, what kind of author returns to Slovakia (indefinitely) after successfully establishing himself in New York? After some time, though, he felt that Bratislava failed to meet his needs, so he decided to purchase a house in a village, swapping a city of approximately 9 million citizens for the village Rastislavice with barely one thousand inhabitants. As Andrej explains, he can imagine living either in New York or in a village. There's nothing in between. His fondness of rural environment stems from natural nostalgia – growing up, he spent a lot of time in a village (weekends spent at grandma's house in the neighboring village were the norm). As a result, these childhood memories somewhat distorted author's expectations of working in a rural environment, and the reality is, naturally, a tad different.

As I have indicated, the exhibition project Rural Desires can be seen as a reflection of everything that Dúbravský is currently going through. Although it may not have been apparent in its early stages, as his work evolved, the author has gradually developed an interest in the unrestrainedness and authenticity of nature. The more recent his work are, the more often nature serves not only as an aesthetic background in his paintings but becomes dominant. Gradually, the depicted characters naturally blend with forests, meadows or lakes, until they disappear in the portfolio of the artist in favor of classic landscapes. These are fully devoid of any reference to the period of their origin. In Dúbravský's paintings, nature is immaculate of any footprints of humanity, remaining wild. I emphasize this as the work of the author has been perceived for a long time only through his figural paintings. Although this perspective can be easily justified, it is no longer accurate. (Could we please finally forget the notorious equation 'nude boys with bunny ears = Dúbravský' ? By now, bunny ears have almost completely disappeared. They still appear in some paintings, but in a stylized form, resembling horns of mythological creatures.) It is also necessary to realize that the degree of author's inspiration by nature has changed – the painter now lives in a village, what has successfully eliminated his former need to commute into nature. Even the internet hunt for the perfect model image has been swapped for window views.

The change of locational has, naturally, brought about new themes and subject matters in author's work. For the current project, he drew inspiration from his recently acquired hobby – gardening. Dúbravský now feels environmental responsibility and is aware of his own (inexhaustible) resources, but also wonders who Slovaks actually are, what are our priorities, thinking and behavior. Society's footprints cause nature to lose its naturalness, which means it is now barely able to grow fruits without the help of chemicals. In addition to using acrylic colors, the author used boat varnish in the past and now experiments with pesticides and herbicides containing iron, which adds that typical reddish-brown tones to his recent paintings. Author's late works also include still lifes featuring apple trees, iconic symbols of wheat ears, hay, or straw hats. In a way, these could be reminiscent of the art of socialist realism and the cult of work typically related to it. But although Dúbravský pays attention to harvesting, the typical motifs of socialist realism such as economic success or some confident farmers are utterly out of the question in terms of his paintings. The men and boys he depicts are primarily not interested in work, and rather indulge in carefree summer, and the only things that matter are fun, meeting somebody new, and sex. The characters are observed, admired and desired, and are apparently enjoying it. This shows in his painting compositions, which are now significantly minimalized, focused primarily on simple portraits or landscapes.

Just like nature, the characters of his current paintings are imperfect, often suffering from common contemporary woes including anorexia or morbid obesity. Skinny or plump figures are seemingly devoid of sexual characteristics and, as the author adds, are: „(...) *very androgynous, and some collectors even think that they're purchasing a painting of a woman. I'm interested in outsiders, whose physical deviations can be metaphorical, but also literal. I observe the people we often tend to perceive as some sort of "half-humans",*

*like those who are disabled, obese, adolescent, etc.*”<sup>3</sup> You may disagree, but even Dúbravský’s paintings are often not exactly polished. They are on the borderline between wild and free painting and drawing. His style is expressive and, well, *imperfect*. His ceramic vases, which resemble antique amphoras or Baroque and Rococo porcelain, reflect all kinds of author’s frenzy. They show traces of his pain, distress, and suffering. His figure sculptures are as expressive as the figures in his paintings. He sprays varnish as if it was acrylic color. For all these reasons, if Dúbravský’s paintings were perfect, they would be boring. An original source of inspiration for his paintings is the contrast of wild nature and the fake world of pornography, that still plays a significant role in Andrej’s work. Personally, I was unaware of such fact, but if you dare, google films by the Slovak porn production company Bel Ami. The connection to Dúbravský’s paintings is pretty apparent.

During his stay in New York, Andrej had to deal with a seemingly banal detail – the brick surface of the walls of his studio that constantly imprinted a grid on his canvases. Soon, he started to take advantage of this initially unwanted effect and featured it purposefully in the finished works. He used the square grid to create perfect compositions or to trace accurate copies of images by drawing. Nowadays, a similar grid can be found on the screens of digital cameras or in Instagram’s viewfinder. However, Dúbravský’s not interested in the function of the grid, but rather uses it as a reference to the era of today. In the paintings featured at the exhibition *Rural Desires*, the abstract motif of a square grid has changed and morphed into concrete images of wire fencing used for fencing chicken coops, or other areas for livestock. The connection to rural life is apparent, the fence, in this case, however, refers to a certain barrier between us and the object or the character behind it. Even though this barrier is physical, it remains see-through, suggesting a mental obstacle. In some places, though, Dúbravský leaves large holes in these fences, through which one can certainly pass to the other side. Thus, the author gives you a choice: you can either take the imaginary leap into the world of his rural desires or remain a passive voyeur.

Andrej Dúbravský has repeatedly confirmed that although he is primarily perceived as a painter, he avoids creating classic painting exhibitions. Instead merely looking at the pictures on the walls, the exhibition *Rural Desires* needs to be seen as a whole. In the Bratislava City Gallery, the show culminates in the attic of the gallery, which Andrej turned into an utterly new environment. I’m still quite unable to tell whether the specific character of this space is the proper fit for his work, or whether his work is suitable for such space. However, there’s one thing I’m completely sure about: the entire installation is on the edge of authenticity and fiction. In a sense, it reminds me of open-air museums, museums, or haunted houses in theme parks – it consists of ready-mades transplanted from rural environment into the gallery, including dried plants, corn cobs, old fences, doors, pepper dryers, or sausage hooks. The installation may convey the mood of the objects/sculptures/installations of Louise Bourgeois (1911 – 2010). Her Cells, however, represented certain types of pain (mental, physical, emotional) and fear, which are not the primary themes in Dúbravský’s work. In addition to mood and similar formal features, voyeurism is another connecting element of the two artists. Passing through a maze, the viewer experiences the excitement of observing, searching and discovering objects or casually scattered drawings and paintings. This specific environment defines author’s work, which is unbound, expansive and attracting all our senses.

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<sup>3</sup> Andrej Dúbravský in an interview with Michal Stolárik. In: Profil no. 2, vol. XXI, 2014, p. 94.