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**THE CABALLERO, THE MOON, THE MOUSE (on Denisa Rakoský)**

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**The sense of – not only personal – genealogy**

Women, authors, thinkers beginning their involvement in writing, pictures, paintings, but also science, do it in a new and different way. In contrast to tacitly posing models or silenced female artists or thinkers, they question and dispel the successfully implanted ‘meta-historical naivety’ about their absence. They fill white empty places, made almost invisible in a refined manner, in a novel and different way, pleading their predecessors, spiritual and artistic mothers, for a revival, for existence. Since according to the well-known philosopher’s quote – *esse est percipi* – to be means to be perceived. We acquire our – not only personal – genealogy retrieved from oblivion, from the confines of the historical narrative, or it newly emerges from space somewhere on the fringes of the canon.

It is a well-known ancient truth that history is written by the winners. For almost two decades the thinkers and artists from our geographical latitude have reflected with great intensity on the inevitability of examination, on ‘rewriting’ history in order to include *herstory*. Therefore it is possible that lexicons about women, their memoirs and stories are published, and we ‘discover’ marginalised women scientists, composers, writers, mystics... However, this genealogy is rather reminiscent of the mosaic composed of tiny, scarcely perceptible fragments or of what the philosopher Etela Farkašová called more precisely in connection with her texts – *‘the weaving of rugs’* from tiny pieces, slowly and sensitively, but with the ambition (hopefully not in vain) to create an integral and expressive image. Herstory is not only written about imposing acts recognised by society and the canon; it is equally important that herstory captures seeming banalities and trifles. It is often narrated and created from everydayness and from the unconcealed. Who would say that everydayness has a key importance? How to answer the sceptical voices asking:

“What do I need these female histories, stories or trivial everyday things for? After all, how should we interpret these small stories?”

## **History and everydayness**

**or**

**“to understand oneself through the stories of all the others...”**

In her earlier works Denisa Rakoský had already captured the moments so important for the artists advocating feminism. Although she has never been one of them – after all she is concerned with the principle of creative insight and spontaneity, which is often in contrast to the programmatic artistic treatment of feminist ideas – considering her *Woman on Horseback*, *Still-life*, *A Note*, *210 Days* or *Small Altar 2002*, several points of contact with the subject matter of feminist art and criticism emerge – the thematization of intimacy, privacy, corporeality, but also of pain, searching, integrity, identity or the contrast between what we are expected to do and what *we* expect.

However, in her latest works – *The Caballero*, *The Moon*, *The Mouse* – these questions are brought to the fore even more strikingly, set against the background of a strong biographical self-reflection and self-presentation. Although Denisa Rakoský does not strive to create in the vein of utterly conceptual feminist art, the result of her work is “*art as an idea*” that probably fulfils these attributes in a more interesting way.

The well-known Czech art historian Martina Pachmannová once expressed one of the elementary ideas of female critics of the so-called patriarchal depiction: “*To be an icon, a holy picture or femme fatale on a poster, means to be an object incapable of moving and thus seemingly not existing...*”

One of the first questions we can raise in connection with the *Caballero*, the *Moon* and the *Mouse* is whether depictions disturb the subject-object opposition (in which particularly women became objects, motionless and observed, and to some extent devalued), whether they enable that existence and motion. Denisa Rakoský creates a modern ‘trptych’ whose inner connection is an almost archetypical female story. It manifests a strong process, variability, emphasis on diversity and on a subversive potential. The artist dares to emerge from behind the lenses, thus ridding herself of a purely author’s perception, and becomes the object on a qualitatively new level, entering the game through allusions to her body, face, and her own

story which is only one of many female stories. We perceive her presence, pacifying and disturbing, referring to the presence and absence of women in art, to the presentation of her and our experienced, everyday. This work becomes a form of self-documentation, self-questioning, self-criticism, self-reflection, stimulating us to reflect on the 'female' reality, on the female story and everydayness.

### **New images of the Madonna – cheerfully and joyously?**

*“She cannot help it. The Mona Lisa has always struck her as an absent empty shell without content... The submissive posture of arms and unpretending gaze... Defined in the most diverse ways. And yet absent...”*

*“Oh, Mona... This, according to the Symbolists, “mythical embodiment of eternal womanhood” is older than all the stones among which she is seated...”*

The figure in the Caballero appears as a *'stubborn she'*. The iconoclasm characteristic of this picture again fulfils the requirements of feminist aestheticism. Apart from endowing 'small' female works – embroideries, ceramics and paintings depicting delightful still-lives with flowers – with meaning, the field of feminist political struggle largely includes icons and iconography. The 'mythical' Mona that is often transgressed is the most suitable object and space of subversion with the artist. Mona – here and now, in a novel way. Here you are, the new Mona. Or: 'Let's have the Mona Lisa in the background to create space for new icons. The Mona Lisa against whom every woman has to define herself, as she is also worth...'



**Denisa Rakoský: The Caballero** (from the cycle *The Caballero/The Moon/The Mouse*), 2007, oil on canvas, 95x135 cm

It would seem uselessly pathetic to maintain that thinking and art is the question and depiction (if at all) of a sense. However, who does it concern and where is SHE who *gives testimony about herself*? Whose experience has been described so far? Who is depicted? What is the genealogy we need so urgently to recognise ourselves? The Mona who so truthfully depicts the ‘eternal’ mystery of female existence has become endlessly analysed and consequently seems to be an absent identity. The great mystery of the history of art: the Mona Lisa and her smile. A great number of experts who studied her enigmatic smile defined it in different attributes – good, bad, frivolous, mystical, merciless and compassionate, charming and delusive, erotically provocative and inviting, reserved, simply mysterious.

Denisa Rakoský exploits a place suitable for redefinition, but also a place suitable for self-definition or the location of herself. What is the figure in her picture like? It attacks the system from a gap which Freud captured in his analyses of the smile: in this case the smile also disturbs and enchants, though it has a mysterious nature and therefore is a potential

source of problems. While the smile of the Mona Lisa has been the space of controlling her, the figure in this picture entirely masters the situation. Its identity does not fade through mystery; we can perceive its story, experience and integrity. In contrast to the Mona Lisa, it is protected and remains a coherent subject.

The Caballero shows what can be called cross-looking, or “*an intense exchange of gazes*” – the figure allows us a gaze, but returns it suggestively, protecting itself, remaining untouched and independent. It does not need our gaze to be the one it is and strives to be. In this way it changes the observer into an insignificant and defenceless voyeur.

Disquieting and with a touch of irony, the woman – vamp is layered on a more than mysterious and submissive Mona and is not even endangered by the penetration of the camera and lights to her closeness. She anticipates gazes from outside and knows our privacy changes by that from the ‘outside’, but she has or should have the power to identify herself, to become a speaking subject and thus produce her effect. After all, she is in the centre of attention: a viewed and perceived individuality. Denisa Rakoský succeeded in answering one of the most serious feminist-critical questions – how to depict the body without enforcing on it the conformity of a dreamed-up object, passive and motionless.

Her “La Gioconda” is not a too cheerful and frivolous woman (what is evoked by the translation of her name from Italian). The ambiguity and enigma of a new character, the appropriation of iconicity, irony, contrast and defiance with which she resists our gazes is the typical ‘poeticism’ of feminist art. This La Gioconda is present in an absolutely stirring and disquieting manner, but without the loss of identity.

**About the black princess who was sobbing and sobbing...**

**until a prince arrived and...**

**- they lived happily ever after!**

**Until...**

*“What has she been doing today? What has disturbed her recently?  
- That we have no other dreams or expectations besides the fact that one day we meet the  
right man who will put us out of ‘great misery’”.*

The continuation of the story began in the *Caballero* is the picture of the black princess (the *Moon*) and the video installation the *Mouse*. After a long search and thorny path, the conclusion of the story, unfolding expectations, self-questioning and self-definition in a private and public space, eventually leads to recovered vigour and integrity. These two parts of the artist's story offer the space in which the repetitive layering of ideological and conceptual signals or questions based on everyday experience and questioning are exploited. In this case painting as a biographical document, the presentation of the experience is also produced by layering experiences and burning existential questions concerning ‘Self’ and our lives in contrast to our own expectations.



**Denisa Rakoský: The Moon** (from the cycle *The Caballero/The Moon/The Mouse*), 2007, oil, acrylic and watercolour on canvas, 120x180 cm

What other than the production of myth and repression in the case of its unfulfilment is the classic story about the black princess, which Denisa Rakoský chooses as the object of her creative analysis in the second picture titled the *Moon*? The black princess lives in a golden chateau under the ground and sobs because no one frees her. As most fairy tales have a happy end, the weary Radovan eventually gets to his princess after an arduous journey and she changes into a white disenchanted princess, and the two halves that have ‘searched for’ each other live happily ever after. Until...

Nevertheless, this story also has many other ends. One of them is the possibility that it does not necessarily finish in a happy end; it can even happen that *...no prince will come, although the faint hope that she will sometime meet a man who will understand and appreciate her, has been the only thing that gave a sense to her monotonous existence.*

The story about a black princess is the embodiment of the myth deeply rooted in ourselves. It is the warning against a potential feeling of failure in the case of unfulfilment. In this context, the artist raises the question how to continue independently and meaningfully (this is the interpretation of the last section of her mosaic picture about the black princess – *Would you like to rewind it?*).

Like in the *Caballero*, self-definition, irony and deconstruction enter into the spirit of the 'game'. In this case it is the interference into a seemingly metaphysical destiny (to be the passive and expecting one, defined and directed, she sets her gaze towards a happy future). We can again identify one of the key, oppressive, and almost existential ideas of this story – the creation of subjectivity and a conflicting relationship between 'self' and 'the outside'. The artist realises that we are not only the ones we strive to be but also the ones 'those outside' enable and project for us. There is a permanent tension in the gap between the two points of contact. Likewise, as in the *Caballero* in which it is not obvious that she aims not to remove the gaze (we can admit that the gaze does us good), the artist comes to the conclusion that the prince's presence in the story is often not only inevitable, but also impossible, and therefore the awaiting of enchantment does not necessarily give a sense to our existence and future.

Nevertheless, the artist brings into play her story, her face, body, visions, thoughts, dreams or doubts. Undoubtedly, she is not uninvolved in her work of art. In contrast, she becomes the object and way of creating and coding the story in various lines, giving it an expressive potential of interpretation. This work can be interpreted from the aspect of corporeality, history, the quest for the sense of events and life, of the projection of the future and hope, and the conflict between the private world and the expectations of society. Moreover, we can say that the suggestively treated story is the artist's open search for the answers to private and intimate questions, which acquire a provocative 'political' character.

*The Caballero, The Moon, The Mouse* – are internally associated with the relationship to the question of self-definition, of independence and self-transcendence, an environment for subversion and self-development and the space for a dramatic search for vigour and integrity. First of all, this story deals with the path to one's own independence and the absolute. In spite of a seeming impasse, the virtual figure of this path, of this story aims at victory and permanently transcends itself. In the answer to the question: "Would you like to rewind, replay it?", it will reply "No, thank you". And thus she will come to the conclusion that her



identity and integrity does not merely depend on the others, but first of all on herself. After all, it is indicated in the sequences of the story in the last shot of the video the Mouse.



**Denisa Rakoský: The Mouse** (from the cycle *The Caballero/The Moon/The Mouse*), 2007, still from GSM video/sound, 3'18''

Thus this story supports genealogy which enables us to learn about ourselves, and it is another fragment in the mosaic creating an integral and fair image of ourselves. On the basis of conceptual messages coded in the *Caballero*, the *Moon* and the *Mouse* we can turn to the past but also create a new genealogy. This story is a metaphor of a big narrative about self-fulfilment and contentment.