

Don't
hate the player

hate the game

12. Curated Exhibition of Bielska Jesień 2024

8 November 2024 — 5 January 2025

Galeria Bielska BWA, Bielsko-Biała

EN

It is useful to remember that avarice is always the enemy of virtue. Rarely can anyone given to acquisition of wealth acquire renown. I have seen many in the first flower of learning suddenly sink to money-making. As a result they acquire neither riches nor praise. However, if they had increased their talent with study, they would have easily soared into great renown. Then they would have acquired much riches and pleasure.



Leone Battista Alberti
De pictura (1435)

The Truth in Pictures

“Honesty” is one of the most overused buzzwords in art contexts, ranking right alongside “inclusiveness” and “non-hierarchy”. In reality, even purportedly confessional painting fails to address certain themes. Most artists have stories to share about boorish collectors who have never held a brush and yet offer heaps of unsolicited advice during studio visits, or those who drive a brand new porsche to a student exhibition and then haggle for a paltry 200 złoty. But how often do these stories find their way onto canvas?

The armor of capital provides a sturdy defense, which is why paintings that openly mock the collector figure are usually products of specific contexts. As the classic line goes, “When you ain’t got nothing, you got nothing to lose.” Marian Kopf had little to lose, working at a time when the art market barely existed in Poland; he completed his studies in the Bierut era. By the late 1940s, he had been painting works that bitterly critiqued the artist’s plight. His *Incident* (1960s) fits neatly into this body of work. Regardless of the political system, not many

artists ever find a place at the top, with the game of visibility allowing only the select few to win. While some players may seek to change the rules, many of the art world’s mechanics are firmly rooted in the mid-19th century. Beneath the surface, masked by elaborate discourse with references to names like Pierre Bourdieu, lies a base corroded by capitalist rules. In Kopf’s painting, beneath an elegant abstraction, we glimpse an image of two dudes, clubs raised, fighting for fire.

Kopf’s *Collectors* (1966) is one of his several takes on this theme. The title figures here are not enlightened patrons or connoisseurs; instead, they are locked in a primal struggle for a desired object, like starving dogs fighting over a bone. The prize here is not art, but the social status signified by the right artifacts. Michał Żytniak takes an equally direct approach to this subject in *Looking Down on People* (2024), offering the viewer a perspective through the eyes of a collector gazing out the windows of Żłota 44 skyscraper in Warsaw, one of the priciest addresses in Poland. The view is not realistic but rendered in bold strokes, simplified like a world reduced to the singular goal of accumulation. Żytniak’s honesty is credible; he functions as something of an outsider in the art world, for years being primarily a rapper (he recently released a new album with Noon, titled *GLITCHY PRAGA*). He entered the field of painting without compromise, working, exhibiting, and selling his art on his own terms, without trying to fit into the established art world norms. Of course, in both the art and rap worlds, radical honesty is a kind of pose, a convention. In this vein, we find stories of humble beginnings and of rough upbringings, of guys from poor neighborhoods who now ride bentleys to the studio. *Seven Poles on a Bunk Bed in London* (2024) fits within this convention. Contemporary painting has its own take on this kind of narrative, often built around tales of social ascension and bolstered by a repetitive bibliography, but usually lacking the ease, detachment, and self-irony that defines Żytniak as both rapper and painter.

The first chapter of the exhibition concludes with *Try Again* (2024) by Zuzanna Bartoszek and *Galleries Are Too Expensive for Artists* (2006) from Paweł Susid, part of the collection of Galeria Bielska BWA. While employing a different visual language from Kopf, these works share a directness in addressing the precarious position of artists, whether on the cusp of the new millennium or in the present day. The paintings by Mariola Przyjemska from the *Warsaw Under Construction* series (2015) serve as both a literal and symbolic bridge between the gallery’s interior and exterior. Playing with conventions from pop art and the hyperrealist urban landscapes of the 1970s, they function as a hall of mirrors where the boundaries between city, image, commodity, and spectacle blur.

The Double Life of Painter K.

“The objects and situations that Kręcicki delves into—though thoroughly familiar—in his interpretation look as if we’re seeing them for the first time,” wrote Jakub Banasiak about the artist’s paintings in the magazine *Szum* in 2017. But are we really seeing them for the first time? Nearly half a century earlier, in the same city of Cracow, another artist was painting strikingly similar themes, playing with scale and cinematic framing with similar awareness. The stories of Tomasz Kręcicki and Józef Kluza are like a tale straight out of *La Double Vie de Véronique* by Kieślowski – two lives, twin-like in a way, yet unfolding in vastly different socio-political and economic contexts. One artist succeeded during the communist era, between the administrations of Gomułka and Gierek; he was the head of a local branch of The Association of Polish Artists, ran the State High School of Fine Arts, belonged to the party, and mingled with creative elites from theater, film, and Piwnica pod Baranami circle. And yet, he never entered the canon, and today, his name is scarcely recognized. The other debuted on the eve of the market boom for painting and now pursues an international career, represented by galleries Stereo and Esther Schipper.

Their works meet for the first time at Galeria Bielska BWA, where their presentation style plays with the conventions of both wretched easel displays and polished white cube exhibitions. Keys, glasses, and fingers holding needles and thread reflect each other, facing off like duelists in a western movie. This juxtaposition reveals both the formal similarities and differing attitudes. “Out of non-representational art (...) emerged Józef Kluza’s figuration. This process was gradual, as if the color wheel with its center anchored to an object slowed down, allowing the silhouette, initially blurry with speed, to take shape as patches of color became clearer and found their rightful places,” wrote Jerzy Madeyski in the catalog of Kluza’s exhibition at Zachęta in 1971, shortly before the artist’s death. The ordinary objects seen through Kluza’s lens belong to a world filtered through a sensitivity steeped in nouveau réalisme and Pop Art, as well as existentialist philosophy. Kręcicki’s objects, by contrast, are artifacts from a world after several figurative renaissances, a reality in which even memes take on the form of curated product arrays that describe the individual. Kluza paints as if he’s trying to prevent the world from falling apart, while Kręcicki’s work suggests a world in which we can only skim the smooth surface.

The juxtaposition of their paintings also invites us to imagine alternative histories. What

would Kluza’s art look like if Poland had found itself on the other side of the Iron Curtain, more directly influenced by the Pop Art revolution? And what form would Kręcicki’s painting take if the market boom of recent years had never happened?

The Salon

Public and private displays of paintings have taken very different forms over the centuries. In 19th-century Paris Salons, the bourgeois public viewed paintings hung in dense clusters, vying for attention and medals. In private studios of wealthier artists, the utility of the space met its representational function. Chosen paintings displayed in these urban interiors were accompanied by ornate furniture, pianos, and props like historical armor and weapons. A well-arranged interior provided a thoughtful frame and added context to the works themselves. Today’s commercial galleries tend to be understated, with carefully hung works illuminated by bright fluorescent tubes, each brushstroke exposed as if on a dissecting table. However, other displays happen beyond the eyes of the broader public—seemingly casual dinners for select collectors serve as both a means of tightening quasi-friendship bonds with gallery owners and an opportunity to show works hung differently, alongside modern furniture from famous designers, in the warm light of Flos or Artemide lamps. This setup demonstrates how they will soon look in the buyer’s living room.

The latest series of paintings by Wiktoria Kieniksman—*LG TV*, *PS5 Console* and *iRobot Roomba* (2024)—creates a domestic interior where every element feels deceptive and disturbing, like the scenario from *The Sims* that has clearly spiraled out of control. In Veronika Ivashkevich’s works, rendered in pink-powdery tones, the depicted objects undergo a peculiar distortion, their economic value blurring. In *Fruits* (2024), mundane items and millennial interiors gain unexpected allure through the artist’s filtered aesthetic. *A story you definitely forgot* (2024), *The Real Horse* (2021), and an untitled painting by Jagoda Czarnowska bring us a step closer to a nightmare. The house seen through the window seems to come alive and scream, while innocent objects and images escape their frames, coming to life like surrealist works in *The Last Days of New Paris* by China Miéville, poised to tear us apart at any moment.

Patrycja Cichosz’s latest paintings, part of her ongoing series *Under the Iron Dome* (since 2022) and realized through the Gdańsk Cultural Grant, place the idea of a “safe home” in a broader geopolitical context. The title *Iron Dome* is an allegory for a neoliberal social structure serving a small group in the Global North. *Drained Pool* (2024) references Heather

McGhee's term describing the process of eliminating shared resources out of fear of losing privileged social status. One example of this is the destruction of a public pool in Montgomery, Alabama, after desegregation, preventing Black citizens from gaining access to it. *House of the Domestic Spider* (2024) portrays a somewhat visually unappealing yet completely harmless housemate, provided we allow it to coexist with us. As the artist notes, "The association of a spider-insect-parasite with a 'problematic' tenant seems quite common, while the methods employed by world-class evictors demonstrate all the subtlety of a cleanup crew." Both paintings and the interiors in which they hang are always political.

The "Gift" "Economy"

One of the legacies of 20th-century avant-gardes is a persistent vision of art as a tool for shaping socio-political reality. While art can indeed influence collective imagination, one thing is certain: capitalism cannot be overthrown with a paintbrush. Most artists, then, forced to operate in a market reality, feel morally hungover after every sale? As shown by Agata Stowak and Łukasz Radziszewski, this is not necessarily the case.

Radziszewski is a versatile creator, better known for his curatorial work than his painting. His relatively few paintings are found in carefully chosen private collections, created, for example, for a blueberry plantation owner in Podlasie or with the intent of gracing a label for local moonshine. As the artist explains, "The blueberry is a symbol in my area. Initially, it represented a surge of prosperity, like finding gold nuggets in your backyard stream, but eventually became the sole reason to engage in farming, rather than leasing the land for 29 years to put up solar panels". His early (*High Blueberry*, 2010) and recent works (*High Blueberry*, 2022), reflecting on memories of seasonal blueberry-picking work, the Podlasie landscape, and finding one's place within it, form a micro-story of local social dynamics and genuine patronage. They reveal a profound connection to the environment, shared by both the artist and collectors who see art not as an investment, but as a priceless symbolic asset. And *The Romantic Horse* (2022) is a work inspired by the artist's favorite pastime of driving through the countryside with friends. It was sold to a collector shortly after its first showing at the Arsenal Gallery in Białystok, but Radziszewski later reclaimed it to give as a birthday gift to one of the friends with whom he shared those drives.

All the works by Agata Stowak on display here were likewise gifted to their owners by the artist and are being exhibited publicly for the first time. Stowak

is one of the most commercially successful painters of a young generation. However, a surprisingly large number of her works have never entered the commercial market. Gifted to partners, friends, and acquaintances, they circulate in areas parallel to the market. Stowak's work contains numerous references to classical art; in works gifted to those close to her, these references are used in a unique way. Intimate portraits and self-portraits serve as tools to express subtle, often ambiguous emotions related to a given relationship. In portraits of curators from the Foksal Gallery Foundation, which represents her, she plays with the more formal conventions of Renaissance and Baroque patron portraits. Thanks to her generosity, Stowak's works are not only in premier private collections but also in the modest collections of individuals within the art world who, given the industry's notoriously low wages, could never afford to buy them in a gallery. This comes with a certain risk—sometimes a gifted work stays with someone permanently, while at other times it may quickly be liquidated at an auction house. From a market control perspective, this is certainly disadvantageous, but maintaining relationships can be more important than obsessively managing one's career.

De Pictura et Fetish

De Pictura by Battista Alberti was the first modern treatise on painting, written in 1435. Around the same time, the van Eyck brothers and Italian early Renaissance painters "invented" the technique known as *oil on canvas*. These were milestones in the development of Western painting. The combination of intellectual prestige with the practicality of a rectangular painting, convenient for trade, collection, and transport, proved effective in every way and remains largely unchanged to this day. Surprisingly, Alberti finds the exorbitant sums paid for individual works completely justified, even citing them as undeniable proof of the medium's power. He recounts the story of a king who spared a city because it housed his beloved painting. As he writes: "Rhodes was redeemed at the price of a single painting." An interesting anecdote also mentions the ancient celebrity painter Zeuxis, who supposedly gave his paintings away for free, claiming they were priceless. Today, the prestige of painting is mostly evidenced by spectacular reports of record-breaking auction prices.

Alberti's treatise is filled with opinions about painting and artists that still sound remarkably fresh. He writes about the value of friendly and expert criticism, the need to build up artistic personas, technological aids, and time optimization. He warns against the risk of falling into painterly mannerism, pretentious erudition, or overreaching, like choosing the wrong format. Yet the most important component

remains the single artwork itself—a painting as “an open window onto the world.” Alberti understood this metaphor literally, much like Zuzanna Bartoszek in her painting *U-Bahn* (2024). The composition is framed by geometric iron constructions with illusionistic rivets, technical plaques, and scratched inscriptions. Through this “window” we glimpse an expressive, sketchy view of a Berlin subway tunnel, stylistically far removed from Renaissance perspective techniques. Narrative elements here are reduced to a minimum. Using Alberti’s *finestra aperta* motif, Bartoszek captures the viewer’s gaze to confront them with a raw, stretched-out onomatopoeia expressing a sinister or ironic laugh.

A similar gesture aimed to draw the viewer’s attention appears in her work *Mercedes 170 V* (2024), featuring a frontal image of a classic German car produced in the Third Reich and popular among Nazi officials. Bartoszek monumentalizes the composition by filling almost the entire canvas with the car and contrasting the flashing white headlights with the shiny black body. Despite the ominous and oppressive atmosphere, the work possesses an almost fetishistic allure. We can’t tell if the car is approaching us or merely shining its lights in our eyes. We stand before it, submissive, in tense anticipation of what might happen next. Cyryl Polaczek’s work is known for its visually compelling and enticing formal solutions. The artist not only eagerly embraces traditional genres of painting, such as nocturnes, landscapes, and seascapes, but also plays with its powerful motifs. *Spinnerei baby* (2022) is a conceptual painting study, a 3-in-1 piece that combines literal representations of “linear perspective,” “illusionism,” and the “materiality of paint.” Everything is correct, though the scene itself gives off an absurd impression.

In *The Bow (Fuck Chin@zi)* (2020), Patrycja Cichosz explores the notion of fetish, associated with unique items or weapons in video games—often serving purely aesthetic functions. These “skins” are accessible to users through microtransactions paid for with real money. The image of a sleek, sporty silhouette of a taut bow may also evoke associations with semi-abstract modernist design. However, in this case, the inspiration came from sports archery equipment actually used during the social protests in Hong Kong in 2019. The protesters’ inventory included catapults, flaming arrows, and small bricked barricades, which, in press photos, were almost fetishized. Since Roger Fenton’s famous photographs of the Crimean War in 1848, visual arts and media representations have often aestheticized these types of images. The balance between socio-political stakes and aesthetics proves precarious.

Veronika Ivashkevich’s *The Gift* (2024) is based on an internet-sourced photograph of a jewel created by Peter Carl Fabergé, seen through a museum glass display. Ivashkevich is only minimally interested in its artistic and economic value. Instead, she focuses on

what’s known as the “possessive gaze”—the rapid, obsessive photographing of artworks and amassing them in phone memory, essentially as potential capital ready for future use. Contrary to Walter Benjamin’s interpretation, the piece is not stripped of its unique aura; rather, it is “taken on credit.” It re-enters circulation on social media in various contexts determined by its “owners.” Digital capturing, storing, and posting has now become the dominant mode of engaging with art, replacing extended viewing over time. In Ivashkevich’s work, this masterpiece of goldsmithing loses its readability and allure—it begins to resemble a mere trinket.

On the Shoulders of Giants

In recent years, the vast majority of paintings have been figurative. *The multi-figure composition in action*—for Alberti and Leonardo, a benchmark of painterly skill and talent—remains a format widely used by contemporary painters. But one might imagine that if those artists-theorists could see today’s paintings, they would be quite surprised. And it would be less due to the general stagnation of creativity that now characterizes culture across film, video games, fashion, music, and visual arts. They’d be astonished because modern paintings wouldn’t differ all that much from those of the 15th century—quite literally.

Painting appears to be abandoning the search for new forms of expression and visual languages. Literalism, stylization, and nostalgia for the past are triumphing. In short: the *arrière-garde*. From naïve, kitschy remakes of classic works, through pieces styled as medieval-courtly tales, to subtle references to specific aesthetics, like atmospheric, misty, melancholic 19th- and early 20th-century *Stimmung* landscapes, contemporary artists still look to the past, as if afraid to venture beyond simple historical references. And yet, within this general resistance to novelty and risk, intriguing works emerge that focus not so much on specific themes or iconography as on the relationships and conceptual gestures the artists make toward art history.

Veronika Ivashkevich’s *Self-Portrait as L.* (2023) is an intriguing nod to Isaak Brodsky’s *Lenin in Smolny*, a flagship example of the so-called “Soviet Salon” style. In her work, Ivashkevich reinterprets Brodsky’s iconic, propagandistic portrait of Lenin, transforming it into a subtle scene in which the figure—here, a self-portrait of the artist—sits in quiet contemplation in a domestic, intimate space. Brodsky depicted Lenin in a pose of diligent work, showing him as a leader focused on specific tasks. Ivashkevich creates something entirely opposite:

her figure appears immersed in a space detached from any particular place or time. The setting is blurred and bathed in pastel hues, creating a sense of suspension outside time, like a distant memory or a dreamlike moment. Ivashkevich's works frequently draw on the aesthetics of glamour, often referencing the visual culture of the early 2000s and classical motifs from Soviet culture. Like *Lenin in Smolny*, which is itself a grandly syncretic mise-en-scène (with furniture and décor from various eras, in a building that once served as a prestigious girls' school under the Tsars before becoming the Revolution's headquarters), Ivashkevich creates a kind of bourgeois eclecticism governed by a universal "ideology without ideology."

Similarly, Ant Łakomsk's *Girls (After "Morning by the Pond", Gustav Klimt)* from 2024 can be seen as a commentary on the traditional trope of the artist's "living presence" in their own work. Łakomsk unabashedly copies one of Klimt's early landscapes, nearly doubling its scale and adding two sketchily drawn female figures, reminiscent of a watermark-like signature. Like Ivashkevich, who replaces Lenin with her own self-portrait, Łakomsk turns another artist's work into her own personal background. Klimt's specific painting from 1889 becomes "Klimt"—a decorative tableau, ready for the layering of new elements. In this way, nature, which undoubtedly fascinated the young Viennese artist, is metaphorically drained of life by Łakomsk. It ceases to be the painting's primary goal and is viewed as though through a window etched with drawings. This treatment lends a sense of artificiality and distance to the composition—like a memory that has lost its original potency. Paradoxically, the "revitalization" of the landscape occurs through the unreal presence of the artist, who, on the one hand, pays Klimt a form of artistic homage, while on the other, poetically appropriates and perhaps even provocatively undermines him. If this is a classic remake, it is an exceptionally bold and ambiguous one.

Digital Resources

Nor will I hear what some may say, that the painter should not use these things, because even though they are great aids in painting well, [they] may perhaps be so made that he will soon be able to do nothing without them. I do not believe that infinite pains should be demanded of the painter, but paintings which appear in good relief and a good likeness of the subject should be expected. With these words, Alberti encouraged artists to use any technological tools available to assist them in their work.

In the 15th century, this primarily referred to the *velum*—a simple grid placed between the artist and the observed scene, making it easier and faster

to transfer spatial shapes onto a flat canvas. Over the centuries, the tools became increasingly complex: mirrors, camera obscura, photography, digital projectors, and now—artificial intelligence. In debates, this latest tool is often portrayed as either the harbinger of painting's ultimate demise or, conversely, as an inconsequential novelty for nerdy artists outside the professional art world. Norman Leto's painting series *A Different Kind of Home*, which he began in 2024, explores both the technological and poetic potential of AI-based image generators. He inputs memories of dreamlike visions into a well-crafted prompt, which the algorithms process into an image, ultimately translating it into a traditional painted work. Though the form of his paintings may evoke post-impressionist pointillism, Leto's main focus is to replicate, within painting, the AI process of forming images—gradually clarifying random noise into recognizable shapes through successive image iterations that progressively align with the initial prompt.

While Norman Leto consciously subjects his creative process to algorithmic influence, thus challenging full control and authorial presence within his work, Tymek Borowski's latest pieces move in the opposite direction. The three paintings exhibited from 2024—*BWUOWRBU*, *GDFJKGHUIERHTRHI RHGK*, and *GDFJKGHUIERHTRHI RHGK (low sampling)*—blend abstract, minimalist backgrounds with incomprehensible strings of text generated by random typing on a keyboard. Borowski's typographic choices, combined with the skewed geometries of the backgrounds, reference common formats seen in memes, explanatory instagraphics, and other online visual pseudocontent. Borowski's presence as the artist is deliberately pronounced in these pieces—he carefully crafts painterly gestures, accentuates the texture of the paint, and employs "distinctly painterly" color schemes. Yet, when he has the opportunity to make a statement (a role we are continuously encouraged to take on in modern culture), he opts for a tactical retreat. The audience is left alone with chaotic strings of letters—generic, empty placeholders, ready to be filled with final text and meaning.



↑ read also
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text

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artists:

Zuzanna Bartoszek, Tymek Borowski, Patrycja Cichosz,
Jagoda Czarnowska, Veronika Ivashkevich, Wiktoria
Kieniksmán, Józef Kluza, Marian Kopf, Tomasz Kręcicki,
Norman Leto, Ant Łakomski, Cyryl Polaczek, Mariola
Przyjemska, Łukasz Radziszewski, Agata Słowak,
Paweł Susid, Michał Żytniak

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