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Comments on Jaroslav Malina's 2016 exhibits in Jindřichův Hradec and Brno

Joe Brandesky

Výstava *Jaroslav Malina*. 22. 7. - 30. 9. 2016, Jindřichův Hradec a 25. 10. - 31. 12. 2016, Galerie Provázek, Brno.

The punning title of Jaroslav Malina's recent exhibit of paintings illuminates and summarizes its intent. Over the preceding five years, Malina spent numerous hours in his studio near Tabor. Freed from his grueling, but fruitful work as a scenographer in Czech and international theatres, he focused on personal responses to his life through his "free work" – painting. The results of these efforts culminated in this exhibit. Some of the displayed works reveal a mixture of new and fresh musings on topics that he has addressed in the past – landscapes, memories, women, self-depictions – but when compared to past works the line of progression in his work is unmistakably clear. This exhibit reflects Jaroslav Malina's continuous efforts to define and understand the world through his art. The following comments are meant to shine a light on a few of the works contained in this brilliant exhibit.

Jaroslav Malina understood semiotics and deliberately described his work in terms of "signs", rather than "symbols". Signs of his surroundings are embedded everywhere in his seemingly abstract paintings. This is a trait found in all his work, but is particularly clear in these works. Occasional "quotations" can also be found in

these works for as Malina frequently said, "we are all prisoners of our past". *Summer at Lhota* (2013) and *Landscape Face* (2014) are two examples from this exhibit which stand out as developments in his line of landscapes. *Summer at Lhota* depicts a colorful "birds eye view" of his home near Tabor. Visitors to his home might be able to visualize the unusual vantage point of the artist by the topography presented in the painting. It is a technique also found in an earlier work called *Baroque Landscape* (1997; Fig. 1), a painting noted for its lack of strong color. Malina's sign for himself, a small grouping of raspberries, is seen twice: once prominently displayed on an orange field just to the left of center, and again farther in the upper left corner of the painting. The hint of green surrounding the berries in the upper left helps identify the forest that Malina spent many happy hours traversing. The warm color palate connotes a strong feeling of place, of belonging. *Landscape Face* is an interesting combination of Malina's favorite themes – landscapes and heads. In this work there are three prominent signs: the fragmented but clearly discernible face which dominates the center, the flowering, some might say burning, fruit tree and



Fig. 1: *Baroque Landscape* (1997). Reprodukce poskytl Joe Brandesky. © Jaroslav Malina.

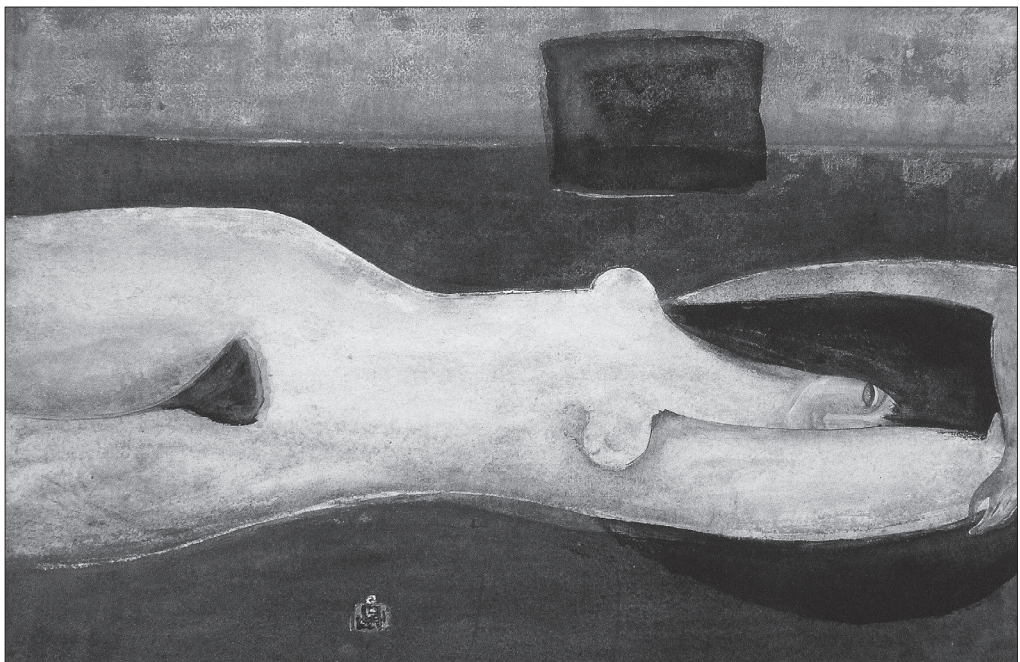


Fig. 2: *Red Pillow* (1997). Reprodukce poskytl Joe Brandesky. © Jaroslav Malina.

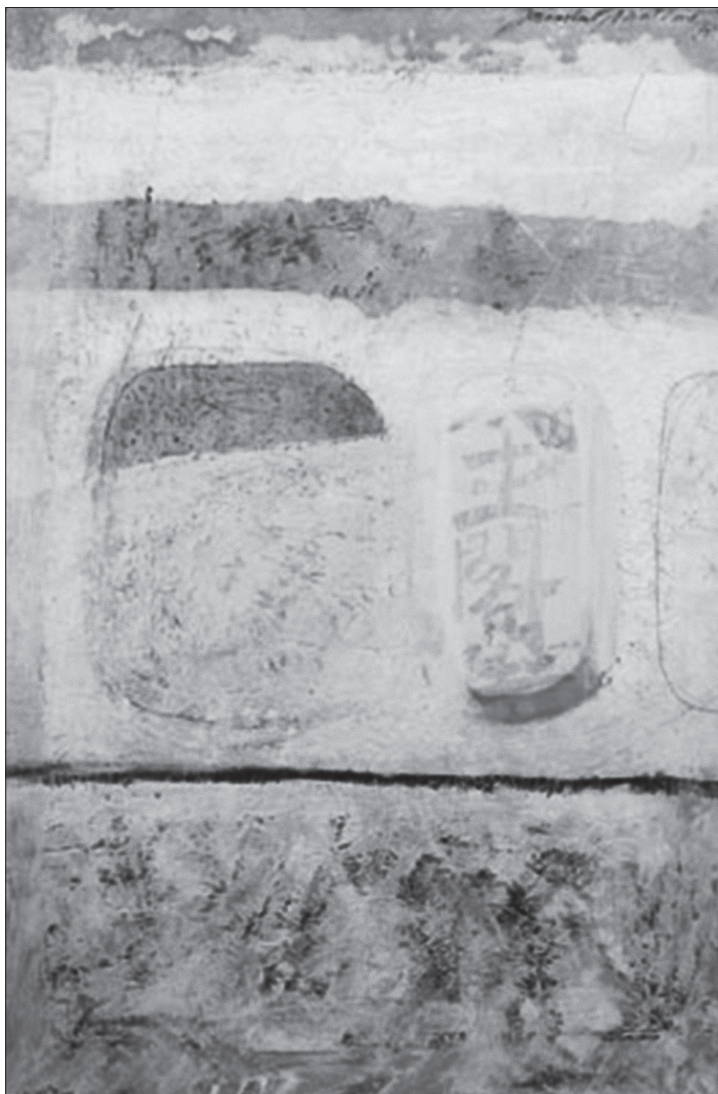


Fig. 3: *Not Too Much of Anything* (1997). Reprodukce poskytl Joe Brandesky. © Jaroslav Malina.

a small rear view of a head in the lower right corner. Malina frequently depicted himself in his paintings with a rear view of a head on an elongated neck. In this painting, the elongated neck is the same color as the fruit tree. His presence in the work places him directly in the landscape as an observer of all he surveys.

Memories of past travels and experiences has been an ongoing theme in previous works by Malina. His trip to Taiwan and the Far East is reflected well in his painting *Not Too Much of Anything* (1997; Fig. 3). This exhibit included two works of note: *Once Upon a Time in Japan* (2014) and *Memory of Paris* (2016). The latter has some connection to his “bird’s eye” landscapes in that it seems to depict a boulevard from one perspective, yet it also shows a fragmented Eiffel Tower bathing in the Seine. Vertical and horizontal are whimsically mixed as witty commentary deriving from a dream. This painting illustrates the imaginative humor present in many of Malina’s “free works” as well as his scenography.

Wit has also been a feature of Malina’s depiction of the female form over the years. In a painting from his early years entitled *Red Pillow* (1964; Fig. 2), the dominant feature is a horizontally placed nude while the title derives from a seem-

ingly nondescript pillow placed right of center at the top. On close examination, the pillow itself is extraordinarily detailed with many of Malina’s favorite embedded structures. Only those able to tear their eyes from the nude will be rewarded with the real emphasis of the painting. The same wit is employed in *Blue Glove* (2014); this is the cover image of the exhibit catalog. The torso of a standing nude is placed at the extreme right of the painting while the blue glove bisects it. In this case it may take a moment for viewers to distinguish the figurative elements in the midst of other shapes and layers of paint. The work embodies an echo of the past mixed with a markedly sophisticated blend of ideas.

There will undoubtedly be more exhibits of Jaroslav Malina’s works in the future. Unfortunately, they will not contain new works. His death in May 2016, just after finishing preparations for this exhibit, means viewers will have to be satisfied with those works completed in his lifetime. We are fortunate that there are still curators, friends, and critics (notably, Vlasta Koubská and Nad’ a Řeháková) who will help keep Malina’s memory alive while assessing his artistic legacy for future generations.

