

## **Symetry of Expression**

Mária Balážová brings with her work and especially with her original creative program a type of visual perception to the Slovak fine art scene, which on the one side provides a strong inner coherence and on the other side it can move the horizon limits toward new potential readings. As early as 1992 a supporting figure of her painting in the cycle *Passing* becomes a stylised head as well as body of a serpent. (1) This motive is present in her work as an emblem code during the following years and remains up to these days. In the cycle *Passing* comes to the forefront determination of the creative painting morphology, which in the following period goes through further development. This is defined by the deliberation from the coloured scale, abandonment of the pointilistic composition concerning the central motive and strident absence of the brushwork. (2) Colouring as well as form reduction of the picture field gradually lead to widening of the connotation grid and at the same time significantly contributed to a more stable anchor of semantic levels. E.g. 2 negative rectangles, which in the *Passing* simulate a reduced form of serpent eyes, become one central motive, which significantly shifts the issue of the snake figure to a symbolic position of the female principle. (3)

### **TRANSMITED CONTEXT, STABLE CONTEXT**

The question regarding the sign positions in the cycle *Serpent Geometry* is transposed in more layers, that match the author's disciplined reinterpretation of some post-modern tendencies. These diffusionally penetrate into the context of the whole cycle ingeniously bypassing voluntaristic application of sign systems and their primary planned projection into a picture surface. Stylized serpent head, which goes through a visual and semantic development remains both the bearer of a wide-spectral information and common denominator in this equation. Balážová does not identify the relevance of particular contexts, but she lets the snake symbolic operate as a plural set, as an electric circuit, which is charged with a voluminous cultural-memory data file. This file becomes a kind of thread, sign, which is constantly present and nomadically projected into each canvas. In this kind of intonation starts a next context – broken serpent trunk and body, which together with the head create always a brand new defined change as well as new configurations with original visual shifts.

The serpent figure becomes in this way a basic composition, variable construction as well as broken system thanks to which the picture composition is modelled and assembled.

In the next work phase, the author brings more radical position, which appears in purer

painting surfaces (reduction of coloured scale into black and grey), depersonalised manuscript and straighter bond in the geometry language. The composition system is subjected to the horizontal-vertical symmetry, on whose background appears new syntax, which is characterised with the signs. The embedment in canonised signs, symbols, their mutual dialogue, which is led by the author, becomes a basic construction matrix of the creative expression. At first sight – constructivistic solutions of the picture surface are confronted with an intuitive capture of the new-shape. (4)

Balážová works not only with the standardised geometrical icons like the cross and square, which in the central scheme undoubtedly become a dominant, but in the same manner she effectively uses the archetypes of cultural memory or she exposes into the picture field their coded mutations, which are enriched with individual, secondary readings. (5) This position of projection where the sign and symbol are forwardly created with a specified image mechanism becomes crucial. In this way the serpent body broken in contexts of cultural and historical metamorphosis is stylised. The image configuration and the visual record are derived from a symbolic sign scheme, but her description with own painting expression offers new visual solutions.

Since 2000, we have noticed a significant re-evaluation of author's next direction. Abandonment of the monochromatic ascetic positions leads to the precedence of more contrasting, signal colouring (red picture field and black serpent figure), which appears as a new emotionally and expressively saturated set. (6) In this way, Balážová creates a space for new sign constellations, whose visual shifts she determines already by several levels.

It is mainly about more assertive individualisation of own creative program. Whereas in the previous paintings, her base solutions offer more or less canonised composition of signs, the arrival of new colouring brings shift into a new visual angle toward pictogramic signs. Consequently, it appears as a key moment while creating new picture compositions. This exact shift is very important, concerning the formal part, it is being expressed as an abandonment of horizontal-vertical symmetry of ornament and definition of new sign system. The configuration of serpent bodies remains the basic pillar of visual information, but the final composition strictly tends to be under the author's individual approach.

Balážová's movement between the sign metamorphosis, between the diffusional expose of alphabetical code assumes combinatorics, where the broken serpent trunk creates more fundamental picture organisation, as well as more intuitive work with the definition of neo-sign.

## **2 + 2 = 4 and 3**

The whole cycle of the Serpent Geometry is in its visual as well as semantic component composed as a binary system with binary code, creating in this way a connection between particular paintings. As a basic information matrix, which contains attributes of programming language of post-modern paintings strategies, this system appears in several layers.

It is a work with reduced colouring, which in a wider context can be read as a relation of two painting cycles (in the first, it is a grey groundwork, in the second it is red), whose

cancellation value is being connotatively enlarged exactly with the colouring despite the application of the same language. This primary polarity is equally markedly present also on particular canvases by the use of dual, depersonalised and manuscriptless projected colouring.

Another important moment is author's consideration of the relation equation head-body. While in the grey paintings, that are subordinated to horizontal-vertical symmetry, appears their even number, harmonically grouped around the central axis, in the forthcoming period comes to their reduction (mostly two), what on the one hand leads to their tighter communication, and on the other hand, in this way, it accentuates the grouping and combinatorics of broken trunks.

Thus, in Balážová's work we can observe a new sign-making, exposed through own signature.<sup>7</sup> However, the second plan is important too, it is recorded as a relation between the negative and positive. Many times it is exactly the surface of the negative, regulating our vision and determining the conception on final picture state, as a visual dominant of the infiltrated lower layer. While the role of negative in the ornamental resonance of the first cycle phase lies in the emphasis of the composition structure or in creating its sign pedant, in latter solutions many times arises its promotion into the supporting pillar, creating the semantics of painting at the same level as the serpent configuration (Serpent Geometry 14 – Rocket, 1998, Serpent Geometry 15 – Temple, 1998). (8)

Balážová enriches the traditional painting position in a right dose with further creative media (drawing, serigraphy). Depending on applied medium, it results into an enlargement of the format interval. Afterwards, resulted variability comprises paintings, drawings as well as graphic treatments, which appear as multiple – layer re-reflection with a hard base in own morphology. In this way, we can define three basic levels, three approaches of surface transcription concerning the visual structures, which absorb a wide reference spectrum and mutual bypassings. The semantic level is determined by movement between the sign proportions, where horizon comes to coloured and formatted shifts. The symbolic converts into the pictogramic, archetypes and signs of cultural memory confront with individually constructed signs, mystical is being mixed with secular. (9)

The second level records a conceptual approach, gradual increasing of the chosen construction, a scheme of multiplication, as well as reflection of various artistic approaches encoded into author's emblematic cipher. (10)

Concerning the chaos line, a deconstructive breaking of serpent bodies (11) is significant, where the sign-thinking, which was present in the existing creation is eliminated. This line is defined especially by radical change of the configuration (till now, it was coloured shift and sign movement), where indeed we can still observe e.g. a cross, but only as an intersection moment losing its symbolic value. Mystique and application of symbols, that were up to now important for the author, are thus, on the one hand suppressed in favour of continuity of the artwork as a whole in this line, on the other hand fundamental images gain a stable position and from now on they bring stabilised contexts which were present in the previous work phases. The drawing medium here does not represent only a formal reflection of the previous creation of the 1990's, but it creates a reference arch back to the Lexicon, where we can notice similar

approaches. (12)

## **NEO AND POST, POST AND NEO**

The work of Mária Balážová within a wider fine art discursus of the geometrical reflection represents a contextual ramification, which counts on methods of several tendencies. Author's decision to join the Concretist Club in 1998, significantly influences one of the possibilities to read her work. On the one hand, we can perceive both the snake head and body as a concreteness,(13) with which the abstract aesthetical categories are formatted, that will be proven as an crucial especially in the ornamental reading of her work. However, on the other hand, this concreteness is semantically saturated and immersed into parallel operation with other contexts, whereby a deviation of the conception regarding the concrete art appears. (14)

Another position is created by a constructivist lecture of the picture construction. This is perceived by the author as a symmetrical separation, a filling of the Picture surface, that however in the definite version creates a secondary picture level, because its mother board rests in meaning. Therefore, concerning the equation which accepts constructivistic readings, Serpent Geometry should be probably observed through the suffix "post". (15)

The semantic dispersal of the Serpent Geometry and usage of the wide symbols repertoire, messages system as well as mentioned shifts, but foremost the auto-citation, significantly contributes to Balážová's incorporation into the context of postmodern geometry. However, a more important attribute than the exhaustion of signs coding of post-modernism (16) is the synthetic reflection in a picture code, harmonisation of both semantic and visual fields.

With an interesting manner, Balážová meets the metaphorical meaning of geometry, applied e.g. by the American graphic artist Peter Halley and the Neo-Geo movement. Halley starts his most famous essay The Crisis in Geometry with the words: "Where once geometry provided a sign of stability, order and proportion, today it offers an array of shifting signifiers and images of confinement and deterrence." (Halley, 1984). (17)

While Halley with the geometrical imagery of housing ground-plans, cells, jails and electrical fences filtrates a metaphor of society schematisation (18) including in his works oppressive Kafkaesque atmosphere of estrangement and impersonal coldness, Balážová transforms her statements into searching for absolute form, neologism and personal mythology. In this way, she introduces a female element into the primary idea of the post-industrial society, which expressively contributes to the general visual harmony of her paintings. Thus, the menace and fear motives are transformed into significant statements. However, unlike Halley's general schematics, Balážová applies a wider iconography set. Various types of swastikas, crosses, holocaust, millers, rockets, absurd post-architectures or protectors create a vertone of individual distress, which transcends into collective trauma of societal sadness comparable with Halley's cells. (19)

The work with the classical medium of oil painting and symmetrical definition of author's cosmograms distinguishes her from the radical post-modern scheme, which concerning the formal side appears as an error in system, (20) it distinguishes her also from the

geometry connection with the elements of the ready-made, or materials that are not related to the fine arts. (21)

Thus, within the Central European area we note a totally unique approach, which could be defined as post geo. (22)

Balážová's post-modernism creates a compact position of the fine art program and at the same time it represents a significant individual enrichment of the fine art geometry within the European context.

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### NOTES:

- 1 This cycle appears as a logical culmination of author's endeavour from the beginning of the 90's, when in the drawing cycle *Lexicon* we can find diffusional, biological and semifigurative signs in the communication as well as confrontation with the geometrical signs.
- 2 In this phase, Balážová interprets the point construction of the snake figure as a metaphore of human society, as a time and space grouping. Break away from this metaphor constitutes one of the shifts, which significantly contributes to a more direct connection to the geometric language.
- 3 Feminism is only a latent position of the author's reflection concerning fine arts. It is more or less about the dimension of both female approach and thinking, perception of the world and interpretation of own missions (*even though the Serpent Geometry 49 – Portrait represents more radical view to this dimension, where in the morphology of a cobra's head a radical change appears and from the cobra itself only a female symbol as a form of identification with this issue remains.*)
- 4 Jiří Valoch mentions here pictures that are constructed, but not constructivistic. BALGAVÁ, B. – ORAVCOVÁ, J. – VALOCH, J. 1997. *Mária Balážová*. Trnava: Ján Koniarek Gallery

- 5 In some paintings except of the square and circle symmetry operate also the contexts of non-artistic reality – Serpent Geometry 3 and Serpent Geometry 4 can except of the original signs contain readings referring to the post industrial society – millers, cog-wheels, machines components in a spiritual harmony of mandala.
- 6 Serpent Geometry 26 – Up, down is the very first paintings concerning this new phase, which could be specified as a red period.
- 7 Serpent Geometry 33 – Fatum represents the most complicated system of references, coding, which are supported with a big amount of personal mythology: zodiac in the lettristic icon of Virgo and Scorpio (m and m)
- 8 We may search for the origin of mentioned paintings somewhere in 1989, in the drawings Rocket Man I and Rocket Man II. These works in an interesting way reflect contemporary high-tech sign iconography, accumulation of ornamental and veristic contexts, their apparent inconsistency on the surface of one picture, as well as their mutual coexistent contrast.
- 9 In the author's program as very interesting appear to be the references concerning the memoir architecture and the sorela art, as the re-evaluated cultural and social contexts (Serpent Geometry 31 – Slavín 1, Serpent Geometry 32 – Slavín 2, Serpent Geometry 44 – Slavín 3, Serpent Geometry 64 – Dukla)
- 10 Conceptual triptych Serpent Geometry 66 – One, Serpent Geometry 67 – Two, Serpent Geometry 68 – Three, but also the pointillistic permutation and confrontations of the signs of roman alphabet, with own visual alphabet – Serpent Geometry 53 – H, Serpent Geometry 54 – J, Serpent Geometry 69 – Z 2, Serpent Geometry 73 – Z 2.
- 11 Serpent Geometry – Chaos 1 – 5 open new period of deconstructive and asymmetric composition.
- 12 We can see these approaches e.g. also in the drawings Pose VI and Pose VII, where a similar composition of broken lines appears, which is an indication of author's geometrical expression.

- 13 Concreteness, as a basic attribute of the concrete art, which through pure artistic categories intermediates abstract ideas as well as relations.
- 14 Even despite the fact, that these paintings can be perceived as objective, the figurative readings there are also constantly present.
- 15 While concerning the fine art solutions, that shift the construction issue of the picture into new positions, but selecting some other than picture concepts, e.g. the creation of Adam Szentpétery (1956), we would rather choose the prefix neo.
- 16 Eclectic interweaving of the sign levels is today already the classic sign of fine art post-modernism.
- 17 If sometimes geometry had ensured a symbol of stability, order and proportion, today it offers a field of semantic shifts and a shape of imprisonment and intimidation. HALLEY, P. 1984. The crisis in Geometry. In Art Magazine, Vol. 8, Nr. 10, 1984, New York, USA
- 18 Crucial moments concerning the influence and decoding of contemporary fine art geometrical production, Halley considers the text of Michel Foucault Discipline and Punish, as well as Baudrillard's Simulations, see the ref. Nr. 17
- 19 Another related feature is the work with the text annotation by both authors. Halley's essays, which often absorb the function of a metatext of his visual acts alternate in Balážová particular picture names.
- 20 Some geometrical works of the Austrian artist Gerwald Rockenschaub
- 21 As for the Chinese graphic artist Guang Yao Wu, it comes here to the controversy between the radical position of monotint and elements of non-artistic reality. RESING, G. – VALOCH, J. 1996. Guang Yao Wu. Brno : Dům umění města Brna.
- 22 What is expressed in the name of the whole cycle – Serpent Geometry as the usage of the adjective serpent would

be unacceptable for the “classicists” before.