
LIDOVÁ ŠKOLA UMĚNÍ JAN MERTA AND WITH HIM JASANSKÝ-POLÁK

Ústí nad Labem House of Arts
Gallery 1

14. 9.—25. 11. 2023

Artists: Jan Merta,
Lukáš Jasanský and Martin Polák

Curator: Michal Koleček

Opening will take place on Wednesday
the 13th of September 2023 at 6 pm.

The opening will feature a performance by
students of the Eva Randová Primary Art School
in Ústí nad Labem.

A guided tour with the artist and curator
will take place on the 11th of October 2023
from 6 pm. as part of the second year of the
Academic Winery Festival.

Jan Merta's School of Folk Art

The city of Ústí nad Labem is often viewed as having no significant influence on the development of contemporary art, but, closer examination many interesting connections that, at the very least, challenge this notion.

Jan Merta, one of the key figures of contemporary Czech painting, was born in 1952, and his story illustrates how, both in the past and present, this city situated on the cultural periphery has provided important impulses for the artistic growth of undeniably creative personalities and has thus helped shape the greater art scene in general.

The exhibition *Jan Merta's School of Folk Art*, which is being hosted by the Ústí nad Labem House of Arts, is based on memories from the artist's adolescence, a period of time spanning from 1966 to 1972, during which he lived in the city, as well as from frequent visits with his parents, who lived here too until 1989, as Jan's father, Hynek Merta, was as a pastor in the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren.

Yet references to a past embedded deeply within the creases of the Ústí landscape constitute only the initiating concept of an exhibition interwoven with reflections of current events. It opens with several juvenile paintings done by Merta in Ústí nad Labem and a small set of

photographs by Lukáš Jasanský and Martin Polák documenting Merta's Ústí realities. We encounter works inspired by his family's background, environmental concerns, and, last but not least, the madness of Russia's ongoing brutalization of Ukraine. Although the more recent conflicts of the contemporary world, which Merta attempts to confront with focused contemplation fixed in the lines, planes, and depths of his paintings, might at first seem to be distant from his upbringing in Ústí nad Labem, it soon becomes evident that the opposite is true.

Perhaps the strongest continuity bridging these two periods of Merta's life emerges in a pair of works whose shared central motif takes the form of an unstable spherical object. In the small drawing on paper called *Dream* (1970), the object rests on a platform of delicate

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drapery, whereas in the monumental painting *Dream of Democracy* (2017–2023) it is perched upon a melting block of ice. Completed especially for the present exhibition, this programmatic painting of impending apocalyptic environmental and social destruction captures the artist's meditation on the repeated failures of human civilization, conjuring the motif of the sketch from his youth as if reliving his experiences with the environmental exploitation of the Sudetenland, shrouded as they often were in the suffocating toxic mists wafting across the Elbe Valley.

Likewise, the intimate painting *Mobilization* (*Postsuprematic Breakdown of Atonement Cross*) from 2022, which juxtaposes the legacy of Russian avant-garde art against the brutality of the war that Russia is waging against a kindred nation, may evoke a similar generational disillusionment, one that was present in the atmosphere of the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia, which Merta experienced during his years in Ústí. Committed in the truest sense and with Merta's characteristic dedication to expressing socially relevant themes, the canvases in the exhibition at the Ústí nad Labem House of Arts are complemented with introspective portraits of family members, again a deep connection to the artist's memories of his days in Ústí (*Self-Portrait with a Military Rank*, 1997–2006; *Tom*, 2007–2008).

As is typical of Jan Merta, the selection of paintings included in the exhibition can be seen as the creation of a story from individual elements – specific canvases, drawings, objects – so that his sensitive yet uncompromising commentary on what he is currently experiencing, both in the intimacy of his own life and in the rapid flow of the surrounding world, is revealed to the viewer.

Michal Koleček — Curator

Ústí nad Labem
House of Arts
Klíšská 1101/129a
400 96

Next to the college dormitory K1/K2
The trolley/bus stop Klíše lázně
trolleybus — 58
bus — 2, 7, 18

Opening hours:
Tue / Wed / Thu: 10 am—6 pm
Fri / Sat: 10 am—5 pm
Sun / Mon: Closed

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