

In *Pompier, Muck, Socrococo*, Anna Orłowska accepted the daredevil task of retrieving for contemporary viewers vital and aesthetically appealing images from the fetid well of socialist realism.

Nowa Huta, Krakow's model socialist district oriented around the sprawl of the former Lenin Steelworks, is an area loaded with political, social, and cultural content and meaning. As such, it is compelling territory for artists as well as historians. By this point, the visual vocabulary of socialist realism has been so thoroughly trawled as to have been exhausted. In the 1980s, revisionist takes on figurative art of the Stalinist era animated Poland's painters. For historians of the art and architecture of socialist realism, this ephemeral artistic movement—it petered out within a couple of years—has rarely presented any interpretive difficulties. Somewhat perversely, Orłowska charged herself with the ambitious task of imbuing socialist realism with a measure of mystique, and the grace and aesthetic allure it was always deficient in.

The artist's core idea, brilliant in its simplicity, was to connect two sites located a kilometre apart: the manor house of painter Jan Matejko (1838–1893), where the Polish 'pompier par excellence' lived and worked, and the administrative centre of the former Lenin Steelworks. Their geographic proximity, although incidental, is nonetheless profoundly meaningful. Socialist realism, the official style of Stalinist art and architecture, drew extensively on nineteenth-century narrative techniques and decorative historicism. In communist Poland, Matejko's canvases were deemed the quintessence of engaged, national art in terms of both content and form. In the hulking industrial complex and the city rising around it, socialist themes were bracketed by traditional motifs, an appropriation which lent the ruling regime an aura of the legitimacy it so craved, and at the same time offered it a language it could employ to reach a mass audience.

With admirable finesse, Orłowska has melded two extinct visual languages, with an emphasis on the pomp and circumstance typical of both Matejko and Nowa Huta socialist realism. In her series of collages, she juxtaposes excised snippets of Matejko's paintings with fragments of the factory-city's architectural landscape sourced from vintage albums and postcards. In these collages, Nowa Huta, prematurely aged by the primitive printing technology of the time, is suffocated with cascades of drapery. Molten pig iron pouring out of the bottom of a smelting furnace burns holes through intricately patterned Sarmatian fabrics and carpets while heavy drapes are pulled aside to reveal expanses of emptiness—classical architectural figures, brutalist slabs of concrete, bulldozed heaps of earth steamrolled into flatness. Two faces of a crude lavishness entwined in mute embrace.

The artist hones in on interior details, both in the photographs taken in the executive suites of Nowa Huta's administrative centre and in Matejko's nineteenth-century manor house. Orłowska is not interested in ideology, be it nationalist or socialist, so much as its attendant accoutrements and prop-like paraphernalia. Here, the curving forms, the chiaroscuro, the colours, from pinks and golds to beiges, greys, and browns. In her collages and photographs, Orłowska focuses on material superfluity, framing the vestiges of an old style characterised by exaggerated rhetorical flourishes. The artist outlines

the schism with the worker-peasant doctrine in the fluting and filigrees, stitching and burnished sheen of columns and banisters, wall hangings and light fixtures.

Such palatial opulence laid bare the regime's proclivity for plushness, while at the same time highlighting interesting deviations from historical forms, visible in the accessories probably dropped in somewhere along the way: an imitation Bauhaus side table assembled out of four garish, golden rings, or a dangling light fixture in the form of three opaque, milk-white globes. This yearning for ritziness, whether in its post-Romantic or Stalinist manifestations, amounts to the same covetousness, and yields the same material result: a collection of photogenic exhibits destined to be entombed in a museum.

Orłowska has managed to radically deconstruct that language by selecting from its lexicon specific image-nouns: column, cabinet, telephone, door handle, chandelier, drapes. With calculated precision, she captures the glint and gleam of their surfaces. Here, socialist realism is described using terms drawn from the avant-garde lexicon, such as photomontage and New Objectivity. It could even be said that in this way, the historical dialectic of the avant-garde versus socialist realism—two ambitious undertakings which fed on their mutual antagonism—comes full circle.

Were we to delve deeper into Orłowska's aesthetic experiments, we would eventually discover within a universal story of representation and its many forms, the visual peregrinations of exaggerated verbiage, the belief in the allure of scenery, and the meanings embedded in backgrounds. By parsing the historical narrative into visual monosyllables, the artist disassembled and neutralised a political adversary. If her frames reveal Nowa Huta as nothing more than a purely aesthetic assemblage, it means that the experiment has succeeded in turning recent events into distant history, trauma into myth, and technical photographic documentation into seductively handsome images. The enemy will have been vanquished with its own weapons.