

# JAKUB JULIAN



# ZIÓŁKOWSKI



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DESTE Foundation for Contemporary Art

**2000 WORDS**



# THE SOLAR ANUS

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The first time I visited Jakub Julian Ziółkowski in his studio in Krakow, Poland, he told me about a self-taught Polish painter named Nikifor, who was a very pious, religious man until the day he took a trip on an airplane and, up there among the clouds, realized there was no God. A similar tension between spirituality and blasphemy pervades the work of Jakub Julian Ziółkowski. The universes conjured by his paintings collapse onto each other heavenly visions and debased primordial needs; in his work the innocent and the perverse live side by side.

Born in 1980, Ziółkowski grew up in Zamość, a small town sixty kilometers from the Polish border with Ukraine that has been historically considered an extraordinary example of utopian urban planning. Designed in 1580 by the Italian architect Bernardo Morando, Zamość was planned as a settlement that would combine an innovative approach to urban design with the Renaissance model of the ideal city, aspiring to become a gathering place for people from different cultures, nations, and religions. Unlike many cities in Poland, which were destroyed during World War II and completely rebuilt in its aftermath, Zamość still stands today as a remarkable example of Polish Renaissance architecture with its celebration of the arts and its belief in the secret

correspondences between the micro and the macrocosms, between man and the universe.

Perhaps it would be a stretch to argue that Ziółkowski's paintings, with their intricate systems of bewildered sympathies between the realms of the microscopic and the celestial, have been inspired by some distant Renaissance belief in the magic symmetry of the universe or by Zamość itself. But it probably wouldn't be too far fetched to observe that in Ziółkowski's world one can detect the survival of a faith in the power of the mysterious affinities which link together different substances and creatures, disparate materials and forms—the human and the supernatural.

And if such a faith cannot be entirely traced back to the solar cosmologies of the Renaissance, it can certainly be linked to their darker counterparts. After all, the Renaissance's dream of order also feeds the ebullient chaos of Hieronymus Bosch and the Pantagruelic appetite of François Rabelais. Throughout the 15th and 16th centuries, under the apparent clarity of humanist thought, much murkier waters continued to bubble, cooking up a potion in which Medieval traditions and popular beliefs were combined to produce what art historians have called an "anti-renaissance" or a "dark renaissance."<sup>1</sup>

It is in this muddy underworld that Ziółkowski's work has put down roots. His iconography, with its abundance of mutant plants and fetid vegetation, could be grafted onto that incredibly intricate family tree which connects the darker side of 16th century art—for the sake of brevity, let's say Bosch and Mathias Grünewald—with the hallucinations of Le Douanier Henri Rousseau and the epiphanies of Max Ernst, all the way up to the mutilated figures of Philip Guston or the tumescent ones of Peter Saul. And it doesn't really matter that Ziółkowski might not even be fully aware of being part of such a noble and putrid lineage: like many of the prophets of this debased aesthetic, Ziółkowski seems to—or pretends to—operate in a perennial present in which different strands of art history co-exist in a raucous cacophony of forms.

History itself has been a subject that Ziółkowski has tackled in many of his paintings, often with the enthusiasm of a Don Quixote and the vehemence of a fool. Crucifixions and war scenes are among his favorite scenarios; he takes on subjects and themes tinted by delusions of grandeur. In his work, in fact, Ziółkowski seems to interpret the role of a self-taught, naïf artist agitated by paranoid thoughts and illusions. It's difficult to say

whether this self-stylization as an eccentric is to be interpreted as a conscious tactic or if he actually identifies and sympathizes with that kind of sensibility. Ziółkowski is a trained painter who has studied art history, but his work seems to reveal a predilection for minor traditions and obscure references, for an outsider-ish streak. Perhaps trying to distinguish sincerity from affectation is not even that relevant here, for it is precisely the coexistence of these opposing tensions that gives Ziółkowski's work its peculiar intensity. More importantly, Ziółkowski's work first of all urges us to look, to stare and focus: it is an adventure for the eyes—even an infection of the eyes—and as such it engages with minutiae and with the minor.

Take for instance *The Great Battle Under the Table* (2006), one of the paintings that brought Ziółkowski to international attention when it was included in the New Museum's 2009 Triennial *Younger Than Jesus*. This dense canvas depicts a battle scene that takes place underneath a modest table, which occupies the center of the composition. On the floor beneath it, hundreds of small creatures—tiny little men wearing red and blue uniforms, comparatively gigantic animals making their way through the landscape, and disproportioned

objects that seem to have been magically animated—crawl in a disorderly manner, covering the entire surface of the floor. Like little toy soldiers brought to life, the combatants move without clear strategy or order, perhaps following the guidance of what appears to be Napoleon, a towering figure standing at the top of an unrealistically large chair. All over the ground, diminutive landscapes open up like miniaturized Flemish paintings, bustling with activity like a swarming beehive: gentle hills are suddenly occupied by an army of cannons, a Tower-of-Babel-like structure is turned into an infernal battlefield, and several flower pots are made into bunkers by the mini-militia and by colossal skeletons. While this world unravels under the table, another scene animates its upper surface: succulent plants, hats, masks, and everyday objects fill the yellow tabletop. A number of little men take possession of this peaceful still life, turning it into another battlefield where plants are used as trampolines to launch parachutists to the battle below and a bottle of water is flipped to the side, its liquid transformed into an improvised weapon against the army underneath. One could only try in vain to describe such an intricate painting, for it combines a meticulous, even maniacal, attention to detail with the vast

breadth of a historical narrative, in which men and nature are entangled in a never-ending battle. Like many of his other works, this painting is almost a living, self-germinating organism, in which some of Ziółkowski's recurring obsessions with death, violence, sex, and religion are at the same time glorified and vilified, ridiculed and celebrated. Ziółkowski's carnivalesque universe refuses hierarchies, and offers instead an ever more slippery territory in which categories are constantly questioned.

Nowhere is this attitude more apparent than in Ziółkowski's portraiture. With his peculiar form of grotesque realism, Ziółkowski has composed a vast gallery of imaginary characters whose faces and bodies appear to be deformed by constant shifts in scale and by unexpected combinations of incongruous forms and organs. His delirious vivisections of the human body are based on a hallucinatory anatomy in which limbs can replace eyes, intestines colonize oral cavities, and genitals turn into bulbous digestive systems: any rigid categorization is refused, while condensation appears to be the reigning principle of Ziółkowski's biology.

The fact that Ziółkowski is the son of two doctors, and his father is an urologist, adds a surge of biographical evidence to his

phantasmagoria of disembodied body parts. Ziółkowski grew up looking at anatomical models and medical illustrations, and hearing his parents speak about operations and emergency room adventures. And yet his bodies remain rebellious to order, impermeable to any logic. They are against authority and austerity: gluttonous and excessive, open and penetrative, polymorphous and singular—less bodies without organs than organs without bodies.

It is in the series of 69 gouaches inspired by Georges Bataille's renowned novel *Story of the Eye* that Jakub Julian Ziółkowski gives free reign to his anatomical fantasies, resulting in one of his most ambitious and disturbing works to date. Originally published in 1928 under the pseudonym of Lord Auch to protect Bataille from the inevitable backlash against its incendiary content, the novel tells the story of two teenage lovers who explore their sexuality through a series of vignettes embedded with erotic perversions, exhibitionist lusts, and orgiastic adventures. But what lurks beneath these tales is a much more complicated narrative, almost a subversive cosmology, in which the eye—the real protagonist of the novel—emerges as a metaphor for human desire and for a new epistemology, a new system of knowledge, and a whole new territory of experience.



As Roland Barthes put it,<sup>2</sup> Bataille describes the adventures of the eye through various cycles of avatars: the round shape of the ocular bulb is evoked by, and transformed through, a chain of metamorphoses into a series of other images and forms. The story follows two distinct metaphorical journeys, which are intertwined and alternate throughout the novel: that of the form of the eye, which is mirrored in a series of other images, such as that of a dish of milk, an egg, and a testicle; and that of the content of the eye, which, as the novel proceeds, turns from tears into milk, egg yolk, sperm, and urine. Bataille removes the eye from its traditional, idealistic valuations, which define it as a symbol of beauty or as a privileged means of knowledge, and instead degrades it to a base, material object, which is dirtied, mutilated, defaced, pretty much as it would happen in the famous scene of the eye castration in Luis Buñuel's *Un Chien Andalou*, which was presented one year after Bataille's novel appeared in France.

As Barthes observes, *Story of the Eye* is a machine for destroying hierarchies. Bataille has written a novel that refuses to privilege any of the images that recur throughout its pages: as the eye turns into the egg, which turns into a testicle, the novel drifts sideways. It is not a

"deep work," writes Barthes; "everything in it is on the surface; there is no hierarchy." As a result, "the world becomes blurred," washed out, as Bataille writes, under the "urinary liquefaction of the sky." With this continuous ricocheting of forms, Bataille proceeds to demolish "the usual contiguities of objects," attaining a "general contagion of qualities and actions."

In his *Story of the Eye* (2010), Ziółkowski reaches a similar effect: every organ in the series appears to be contaminated, its confines violated, subjugated to some viral diffusion which spreads from body to body, annihilating differences and creating new, unexpected sympathies across substances and surfaces. Just as though they were infected by some kind of mysterious disease, the same images and forms seem to migrate from drawing to drawing, reproducing themselves as neoplasms: the spherical shape of the eye spreading into a variety of contexts and subjects, returning always identical and always different, first as a genital organ, then as some kind of tumor, as feces, as secretion. It is this blurring of the world, this transgression of values and definitions that Barthes saw as the avowed principle of eroticism: a counter-division which makes Ziółkowski's work so erotic, slippery,

and complex. A contagious, mucous wetness seems to dampen the gouaches in this series. Ziolkowski, like Bataille before him, searches the interiors of his bodies like a haruspex, looking for signs of a new order of things: a non-hierarchical image of the universe.

- 1 See Roberto Longhi and his concept of *rinascimento umbratile* in *Edizione delle opere complete di Roberto Longhi*, 14 vols. (Florence: Sansoni, 1956-1991), and Eugenio Battisti's notion of *anti-rinascimento* in *L'Antirinascimento* (Milan: Nino Aragno, 1962).
- 2 Roland Barthes, "Hommage à Georges Bataille," in *Critique*, nos. 195-6, August-September 1963.