

The Order in the World

A conversation with painter Éva Köves

You are known for a having a determined and mature personality, as an artist with a sure hand and eye, who knows what she wants – with a purpose and who never strays down side paths. Have you always been this way? How did you come to decide that you would be an artist?

I drew a lot as a child for my own satisfaction. This talent did not achieve the kind of success at school that I felt I needed. There no attention was paid my ability in drawing, but my parents always encouraged me. They knew perfectly well how difficult it is to make a living in this field, yet they support me in the realisation of my ideas to this day. When I decided to apply to the High School for Arts and Crafts, I took the admissions exams very seriously. For four years I attended the drawing circle of the painter Ilona Ferk aciduously, but lacking all encouraging and motivating support at school, I was in fact left to myself to prepare for the difficult examinations. Perhaps at the age of fourteen years it is a little early to speak of a calling, but I can say for certain that the moment I saw my name among those accepted, I gained immensely in terms of self-respect. My will to become an artist gained force.

Did you switch environs with this decision?

I found myself in very good company, both professionally and in human terms. I was in Gábor Záborszky's class, who, freshly graduated, had just begun teaching at the school. He helped me a great deal, and we were fond of each other. His grading method was to have us all put our drawings out up front, and to evaluate our work together. These four years of high school were formative years of my life: I felt I could give vent to my talents at last. Due to the situation in the country at the time, very few of my classmates applied to the Academies of Fine and Applied Arts in the end, in spite of a new tendency at the Academies to admit students after two or three years of unsuccessful applications instead of the ten years' wait to be expected previously. For me, it was evident that I would apply to the Academy of Fine Arts. I was not accepted the first time.

Were you not disheartened by this failure?

It came as a surprise, and I was especially disenchanted by the fact that I was dropped in the first round. Since both my teachers and my peers had always considered me among the best at high school, I naturally differed with the admissions committee in my evaluation of myself. I had a free year on my hands, so I found a job. I was employed in the graphic design department of a company. I was so immensely enriched by the experience that I promised myself never to set foot in such a place again. I was admitted to the Academy of Fine Arts on the second attempt. János Blaski became my master, and we worked very well together. He held my stamina in especially high esteem. He did not give compulsory expert instruction, and I was quite clear about what I wanted even then. Sadly, he was sent into retirement during this time, and Gábor Dienes taught me from then onwards. I received the three-year Derkovits Stipend immediately upon graduation. I became a member of the Studio of Young Artists and the Visual Arts Foundation, and then in 1993 I received a scholarship to Frankfurt.

You emerged from the Academy in the year that the change of regimes took place. At the time, private galleries and a contemporary art market, for all intents and purposes, did not exist. Obviously, the grants extended a veil of security around you, but didn't the situation seem hopeless even so?

There were some critical moments, such as my settling down to build a family and the birth of my first child, which came around this time, but I desperately wanted to stay on track in the field. As I had just finished the academy, I felt I had not yet put anything on the table, and I felt I must make a lot more effort before I would get any opportunities. In fact, the first invitations for exhibitions abroad and at home arrived quite early, while the independent collection established at the Ludwig Museum in 1993 meant my first real breakthrough. I had made the acquaintance of Katalin Néray a few months previously, in connection with a series of group exhibitions in Germany organised by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. Katalin Néray told me that she wanted to introduce young artists in the museum from time to time, and offered me this opportunity, which I promptly accepted. This is a characteristic of mine: I make an effort to take up every opportunity offered to me, and use it to my best advantage.

Right from the start, you have often exhibited works together with well-known artists of an older generation belonging to the group apostrophised in the 80s by Lóránd Hegyi as the new painterly style, or new sensibility.

As a member of the Studio of Young Artists, I somehow always felt I did not fit in with the shows introducing the new, younger generation. Probably I did not want to take part in these first shows dearly enough. I have a good relationship with artists older than myself, meeting and conversing with them often at openings, for they always attend the openings of younger artists, as well. Certainly, exhibiting with them so often has been recognition of some importance, yet I still place the emphasis on the realisation of plans and ideas, on the work itself. I do not feel I am a 'young' artist.

How did you take up photography?

It goes back to high school, where I studied together with photography and textiles majors. Many of us took photos – it somehow belonged to the spirit of the times. We often went on outings on the weekends. From these trips I have some dear pictures saved of grape harvestings – and grape-stealing. I borrowed an enlarger from a classmate, and I developed my own photographs before I began making photographic art. With a circle of friends at the high school, we held regular photo-developing weekends. Photography then was a great opportunity offered by student life, and I felt even when I was at the academy, that I wanted to build it into my pictures. The first time I used photos was in pieces I produced in Frankfurt.

How did these works from your stay in Frankfurt come about?

I was given a huge studio for the month I spent in Frankfurt, with the enormous windows that I had always wished for. Since I knew about the difficulties with the authorities on crossing borders, I did not take anything along with me. But in Frankfurt I did not have enough money to create more imposing pieces, so I decided to make postcards. I selected and bought the postcards depicting the city. These were ready photographs, which I placed under glass, transforming them by painting on the glass. It was immensely paradoxical to be painting these little pictures in that monumental studio, while at the time, I was engaged in the creation of rather large size paintings

in my constricted, small studio at home. I decided at any rate, to collect postcards in every city I travelled to, and since they were so ugly, to manipulate these postcards to my taste. I later also painted postcards in Paris. I began building my own art photographs into my paintings in the mid-90s.

The inter-mixture of various artistic environs and mediums became increasingly dominant over the decade, to the point that many spoke of a crisis in the traditional art of painting. Did this tendency have anything to do with your beginning to paint on photos?

I used colour in the academy, and later the colours later became very muted, finally to be completely superseded by white. This frightened me, because white can mean the end of art. The fact that I had graduated before the great changes had taken place put me in an even more difficult position, because the impulses that could have oriented me in new directions never reached me. Moreover, I had gained recognition immediately with the Derkovits Grant, so that everything seemed to be going all right. I quickly realised, however, that I was on the wrong track. I did not paint bad pictures, but after a while I could not progress further; I had arrived at a dead end. I was searching for new tools, a context, a mode of expression, thematics, as I felt I had to move away from the classical notion of painting. I had discovered photography before it became the latest fashion, and I did not have much interest in trends anyway. I became acquainted with the art of Gerhard Richter in Frankfurt, where I succeeded in purchasing a copy of his weighty album entitled *Atlas*. It contained all his works to date, every photo, which had been taken along his travels around the world, in the most diverse of settings. This experience made a great impact on me, and probably played an important part in my finding new possibilities in photography.

You created a rather individual style that is both photography and painting at once, between these media.

Following my participation at the Venice Biennale in 1997, my participation in the exhibition at the Múcsarnok/Kunsthalle called *Oil on Canvas* was not self-evident to then-director László Beke, for instance. In his opinion, my pictures had overstepped the limits of painting, and many people stick my works created with the use of photographs under the heading of media art. I consider myself a painter first and foremost. The photograph is a point of entry, but the excitement is primarily in the painting for me.

Your pictures are dominated by spaces delineated with structures. The roots of this way of seeing go back in terms of art history, to the first half of the last century.

Constructivism had, and continues to have, a strong influence upon me – the photos and photograms of László Moholy-Nagy and other artists of the time, to be more specific. Yet I find it important to add, that while I photograph constructive elements, I see more than just pipes – I see things from an artistic and painterly angle, as well. As I look at you right now, I also see something quite different from who you are. Just as I see the order, or construction in nature or a landscape. I take a glance in my viewfinder, and it is not the depictions of the individual forms that interest me; instead I see the detail cut from the view by my mind right away, and the picture takes shape. In my vision are Moholy, Kassák, Kiefer, Gerhard Richter and myself, all merged into one.

Your experiences during travel inspired some landscapes, but the theme of your pictures is characteristically the city, the attitude of the city-dweller.

Strong bonds tie me to the city, to Budapest concretely. I look upon this place as an organic and natural context, part of my life, the place I live. It is a given, which seems unchangeable to me. Since I have been married, the idea of moving in with my mother-in-law in Villány has come up once or twice. The house is situated on the top of a hill in a beautiful place, surrounded by a vineyard. It is wonderful, a great place to rest in the summer. But I still cannot imagine not living in a city.

How do you come upon the places you photograph? Do your eyes switch to camera function immediately when you step out on the street?

Sometimes my attention is drawn to interesting details while I am on my way somewhere, and I take note, returning later with a camera. At other times, happy that the sun is beaming down, I hang the camera on my neck and take off on foot to explore the city, though these escapades are not always a success. Once in a while, I read about some construction in the newspaper and go to take a look at the site. This is how, for example, the photographs of the polythene-covered scaffolding that stood in Heroes' Square were made for one of my recent works. Sunshine is essential for me when I am taking my photographs. One of the TV stations once contacted me about making a documentary film about how I photograph the city. We needed to fix a time when the whole crew would come with me. It is, of course, impossible to say beforehand when the sun will shine, and so we somehow finally never came to an agreement. Among the disturbing factors of my line of work, I count the stares of the passers-by, baffled at my taking photographs of ugly scaffolding.

Your works changed after the Venice Biennale. The scaffolding and bare tubes are now veiled, covered by plastic sheets, so that the structures originally transparent have become secretive, suggestive and new layers of meaning have emerged.

It is true that I see the world a bit differently now, and my aim with the drapery is to allow myself to think about what really is, and what is not. I feel that the scaffolding and the drapery on it can express my thoughts quite well, pertinently and perceptibly. I call these works still lifes, because they have been created using the method of the classical still life, but they are actually much more complex in meaning.

While you have no human forms in your paintings, there is nothing impersonal about them either.

The structures visible in the photographs go through a metamorphosis, are transformed under my brush. My hand, eyes and brain shape what is to be seen. At the outset, I always observe the picture being made as an outsider, and then my relationship to the painting becomes more personal as the work proceeds. I composed one of my most recent installations from little photos I made from the window of my studio and its immediate surroundings. Gratings, shadows and pieces of wall appear in parts of this large work as well – the elements of my living space, the space I move around in, day by day. I am the subject of the structure I have built from the photographs of these details, the painting as a whole. The representation of intimacy, or the composition of a kind of intimate space, has occupied me for some time now. I had an exhibition in Székesfehérvár two years ago, where I used all the space available to build a church space using a photograph of a pillar of the Roman

Pantheon. Unfortunately, the opportunity is rare for engendering such a spatial painting, as most exhibition halls are unsuitable for such work.

Your installations have a spatial effect that seems to push and twist the view out of its corners, revealing a complexity of sight and visible reality.

For me, the installation is a means by which to build spatially. I connect various viewpoints and dimensions, allowing me to step out of the traditional framework of the painting. The installations I have created in the past few years have expanded in horizontal and vertical directions, opening airily and articulatedly. The paintings of various sizes and proportions are placed and the installation organised so as to follow the lines of the scaffoldings and gratings, which are light and transparent, yet also strong and sturdy, while twisting in all directions. My latest installations have a closed outline, and are reminiscent of giant TV screens or video projections. I have built up from a number of smaller paintings of the same size put together a large painting of regular form, which seems to deepen, to open inward. I am handling many more types of space with a dimension that is growing, while the outwardly shut form is more concentrated, and has a life of its own. My new works cannot even be called installations anymore, but rather panel paintings.

As a vestige of the past decades, the image of the contemporary artist is not consistently positive, so far as the wider public is concerned. Your personality, nevertheless, is an intrinsic part of the profile of the generation that entered the arena during the change of regimes, energetically, fully self-aware, taking the reigns. This is, I would think, reflected in the grants and awards, exhibition opportunities and the media interest you have received.

I became accustomed to regular, hard work in the academy, and, of course, everyone in my family is also a hard worker. If I am allowed to, I can work very hard, but I now see that this is just not enough in today's world. I have achieved a great deal, and I cannot complain, but to be honest, I expected a bit more after my participation in the Venice Biennale. The Biennale can be a great breakthrough for an artist, because it transitionally sets the generally young artist at the centre of international attention. In lieu of managers with the expertise, we Hungarians, however, never seem to be able to take sufficient advantage of this outstanding opportunity. It is very difficult to be present on the international scene without a gallery; yet my paintings often find their way into significant international exhibitions. I find that interest has been aroused in my work here in Hungary, as well: the museums collect my works, companies and businesses look me up and serious, representative works of mine are held in their large collections. My first large show in the Ludwig Museum eight years ago proved to be a milestone in my career, and I hope that the present large exhibition in 2001, representing a comprehensive cross-section of my work will lead to similar progress in the future.