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“In the Studio with Rafal Topolewski”

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MB: You have travelled very much over the years. Born in Poland, you then moved to the UK to study - between Manchester and London - and now you are based in Lisbon. How does this constant change of environment have influenced your creative work?

RT: Indeed, it has been quite a constant change of environment for me; however, I believe I am settling now for a little bit longer. Manchester and London were quite significant for me as I moved there mainly for educational reasons; therefore, their influence on my work was quite immediate, sort of clean-cut to my practice. I left something behind in Poland and tried to learn, or maybe absorb, the new environments around me. From my perspective, both cities were highly saturated and overwhelming in different ways. But at that time during my studies, my practice was a little bit, as you phrased in your question, in 'constant change' or explorative. I was fascinated by cities, culture, language, and people, and I think it is difficult to pinpoint a specific characteristic in my practice that would reflect my experience in the UK, but there is no doubt to me that the UK left a mark on my practice. In contrast, when I moved to Lisbon, even though it is a different culture, I felt I could slow down, allow myself to reflect on what I have experienced, and settle a structure for my practice.

MB: What led you to choose Lisbon as your current base, and how has living and working there influenced your artistic practice?

RT: In 2018, after spending 5 years in London, my wife Mariana and I felt the need to escape the intensity of the city. We also decided that it was time to leave the UK, and the choice was quite simple:

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Mariana is Portuguese, so we decided to try Lisbon. Moving to a new city is a strange process; for me, the beginning is a bit sinusoidal. There's constant change, adaptation, and mixed feelings. After the initial excitement, I felt somewhat contained and isolated in Lisbon. It took me a while to reassess what I had learned in the UK and structure it. I feel like Lisbon gave me the necessary time to do so.

MB: Can you describe your studio? What's a typical day like in it? Do you follow a precise routine/methodology or does each day bring a different approach to your work?

RT: My studio is located in the same building as where I live, two floors above my flat. It belongs to the condominium and before I moved in, it had been sitting empty for years, without purpose. It became an extension to my apartment, I find myself circulating between those two floors gradually blurring a division between them. The studio itself has barely any natural light, it feels hermetically enclosed, therefore I have to rely on the support of lighting. Once I started working there I had to adapt to its architectural quirks. The studio is an attic with low ceilings, there are no good walls to paint on, not much space for an easel either, plenty of unusual floor and ceiling angles, it is cluttered with too big stretchers and residue of past works, that I didn't learn to let go. Generally, it is not an ideal space to paint in. However, after some time spent in it, the space became particular to my practice and to some degree dictated the process of painting, it became strangely functional for my work. Usually, I follow a certain balanced routine, allowing some time for freedom and exploration. During these periods, I would sketch, plan, make changes, and read. Some days, I feel like I oscillate around painting but never actually touch the surface of a canvas; it feels like I am navigating around it. Naturally, during deadlines, the process becomes more rigorous and extensive, as I adapt to the specific needs of the work.



Rafal Topolewski, *Simmer*, 2023, Oil on linen in artist's frame.

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MB: You recently had a show at Alice Amati in London, how did it feel to come back to the UK for a solo exhibition?

RT: Working with Alice, after living and working away from London for a few years, it felt a little bit like coming back home for a celebration.

MB: Paintings displayed in this exhibition at Alice Amati, titled Interludes, showed an uncanny iconology. Elements often depicted in very mysterious ways, with an overall aesthetic reminding of dreamy imageries, that even though are completely surreal, yet can relate to our life and the reality that we experience. When did this fascination towards dreamlike scenarios started?

RT: For me, they represent more a suspension between two states. These pieces embody fragments of my memories, hopes, and feelings. I am interested in the space where one operates on the edge of tangibility, in the realm of subconsciousness where you oscillate around awareness but never quite grasp it. Similar tropes can be found in the works in my current solo show 'Slumber' at Grimm Gallery in Amsterdam. There, as with the works shown at Alice Amati, I try to navigate between presence and absence.



Installation view of 'Rafal Topolewski: Interludes' at Alice Amati, 2023. Courtesy of Alice Amati, London. Photos by Tom Carter

MB: The subjects included in your works often blend in contrasting associations akin to a collage technique. How do you choose your subjects? Do these combinations extend to a wider symbology or are they consequence of random choices?

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RT: The recent body of works focuses on introspection. Often, there is a relationship between the paintings, as they interconnect and determine new works. I suppose memories are a bit like collages —never quite right.

MB: Can you walk us through your creative process, from initial templates to the evolution of the painting act itself? Do you follow an initial idea or do you paint in a totally spontaneous manner?

RT: It varies. I work from memory and with photographs that I have taken, and sometimes I work with found images that resonate with me. Then I go through a simplistic pencil sketch, which is followed by a sketch in Photoshop, providing me with a foundation for my work. Next, the pieces slowly disintegrate, to a certain degree, from the original sketch and hopefully become autonomous, intuitively moving towards its direction.

MB: Images in your works are almost perceived as suspended. They are depicted in the exact moment that stands between two extremes - reality and dream; conscious and unconscious. Besides, many times the elements included in the paintings are placed in a non-context. There is no space or time reference. It is difficult to allocate them, and this usually flows onto a state of uneasiness for the viewer...

RT: I am happy to hear that you are reading them this way. The idea of being absent and present, losing perception of space and time is something that I am interested in. Some parts of the paintings may show a more obvious influence of a photograph, while other parts relate more to memory and feelings. Perhaps this combination creates a form of suspension.



Rafał Topolewski, 'Daze', 2024. Courtesy of GRIMM gallery

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MB: Your self-portrayed figure is a recurring element. I suppose this detail enable to access a very intimate space, a private and individual sphere. To what extent do you agree?

RT: I agree that the presence of self-portraits in my practice allows me to contain the subject within the parameters of intimacy. You could say, that those works, to a certain degree, can function as a compass for other works.

MB: Moving on to your artistic style, I immediately noticed the vivid texture of your paintings. The tones are earthy, with a murky finish/effect. Overall, a touchable surface is perceived, of an old and blurred grain. How does this choice of colours and textures contribute to the overall narrative of your work?

RT: I have been trying to narrow down my colour palette to one that will resonate with the subject. Also, to a certain extent, I am simply attracted to those colours. In recent works, initially, more saturated layers are covered with more murky, earthy tones, slowly disintegrating the vibrant colours. I work only with turpentine and have started applying paint without using much solvent. Additionally, in the last couple of years, my practice has been influenced by the space in which I work—an attic that feels contained. This has impacted the way I work with paintings, my visual proximity to the work, and the way I apply paint. All of my works are painted flat on the table, which I believe has a translatable effect on the surface. They feel a bit dry and washed off. I only hope this contributes, at least in part, to the overall narrative.



Rafał Topolewski, 'On, Off', 2024. Courtesy of GRIMM gallery.

MB: Most of your works are quite small in scale. Do you believe this choice influences specifically the way viewers perceive your art?

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RT: For me, there is a greater sense of fragility and intimacy that comes with a small scale. I observe small works differently, and my proximity to the work is intimate; it feels almost like an inspection. At that moment, with this specific group of paintings, it felt necessary to maintain this scale.

MB: Are you currently experimenting with other mediums, techniques, or subjects in your creative process? How much emphasis do you place on experimentation within your artistic practice?

RT: In recent years, I have focused on coherence in my practice while paying attention to changes as they occur during the painting process. After a period of inconsistency and inquiry during my studies and early career, I have reached a point where I would like to keep my exploration within more hermetical parameters.

MB: And what are your upcoming projects for this year? Any personal goals or challenges that you can reveal?

RT: Currently, I have a solo exhibition called 'Slumber' at Grimm Gallery in Amsterdam and in April I will be part of a group show, 'Self-portraits', at Grimm Gallery in New York. Personal goals? To understand myself a little bit better.



Installation view of 'Rafal Topolewski: Interludes' at Alice Amati, 2023. Courtesy of Alice Amati, London. Photos by Tom Carter