

Wilhelm Sasnal, Portrait © the artist

A PAINTING IS LIKE A DIARY TO ME

WILHELM SASNAL

by SYLWIA KRASOŃ
translated by Joanna Pietrak

Wilhelm Sasnal (b. 1972, Tarnów) has had solo shows throughout Europe and the USA including at Lismore Castle Arts, Ireland (2013); Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany (2012); Whitechapel Art Gallery, London (2011); K21, Düsseldorf, Germany, Centro De Arte Contemporáneo, Málaga, Spain (both 2009); Wilhelm Sasnal - Years of Struggle, Zachęta - National Gallery of Art, Warsaw (2008); Matrix, The Berkeley Art Museum, Berkeley, USA (2005); and Kunsthalle Zürich, Switzerland (2003).

He was included in the XXVI Bienal de Sao Paulo, 2004, and was short-listed, with four other finalists, for the 2004 Vincent Prize at the Stedelijk Museum, 2004. With Anka Sasnal, the artist has written and directed four feature-length films: 'Huba' (2013), 'It looks pretty from a distance' (2011), 'Fallout' (2010) and 'Swine-herd' (2009).

Wilhelm Sasnal has recently had a powerful solo show of new paintings at Sadie Coles Gallery in London. On this occasion, Contemporary Lynx spoke to Wilhelm about his preparation for the exhibition, his changing interests, communicating with people, ambiguous attitude to art history and his feelings of seeing his paintings in different contexts.

Sylwia Krason: Let's talk about your latest exhibition at London's Sadie Coles gallery. Tell me about your preparations for this exhibition, how you selected which works to present, and what your collaboration with the art dealer Sadie Coles is like. How has your collaboration with this institution been evolving throughout the years?

Wilhelm Sasnal: My first exhibition at Sadie Coles took place in 2003 and, since then, they have taken place every 2-3 years. The gallery moved their headquarters on a number of occasions; as a result my current exhibition is taking place in Sadie Coles' forth space. I have a large space at my disposal, so the process of specifying the number of works that should be presented without complicating the main topic is really demanding. In general, I do not paint pictures on a specified topic or

for a particular exhibition. Only rarely may this happen. Usually, I analyse my latest works a few months before the start of an exhibition and develop the whole concept of the show around them. Sometimes I might add some of my older pieces, just as I did this time.

SK: Does that mean that Sadie does not interfere in your choices at all?

WS: Exactly. Usually we meet at my studio, look at the paintings, and decide on what the main subject of the exhibition can be. This time, we ended up selecting far more works than were actually presented at the exhibition. Our initial idea was to see all these works in the gallery, and only then to decide which of them we shall display and which not. Sadie has a long tradition and appetite for orchestrating exhibitions and is able to make quick decisions. It was her who eventually 'set up' the exhibition, made it a coherent whole.

SK: The exhibited paintings refer to a long tradition of great painters. Such is the case with the 'Jews' (After Degas) or 'Untitled' (After Stubbs). Can this be considered a tribute to the great masters?

WS: This is actually not a tribute at all. This painting is the clearest depiction of what happened in art history. It is bound to present and describe history in itself. I was a rebellious young painter when I graduated from university. For a long time I felt discontent with art history, constantly looking over my shoulder, analysing what happened in historical art canon. I was interested in what was currently taking place and what the future would bring. This changed and now I look back more often. I visit museums with pleasure. This is why I refer to such historical contexts. However, this is no tribute. Degas, whom I admire, turned out to be a fierce anti-Semite when the whole Dreyfus affair polarised French society. Therefore, I cannot have the same opinion about him as I did

in the past. Concerning Stubbs, I became interested in the relation between a superior and a servant. Before the 20th century, history was documented through paintings and drawings.

SK: You mentioned that Sadie Coles came to your studio to select the paintings. Do collectors who have been gathering your works for many years often want to see your studio and watch you work?

WS: Fortunately, it rarely happens. I am reluctant to let people from the outside into my studio. In fact, nobody except for my family and my assistant Paweł Gardynik can enter my studio just like that.

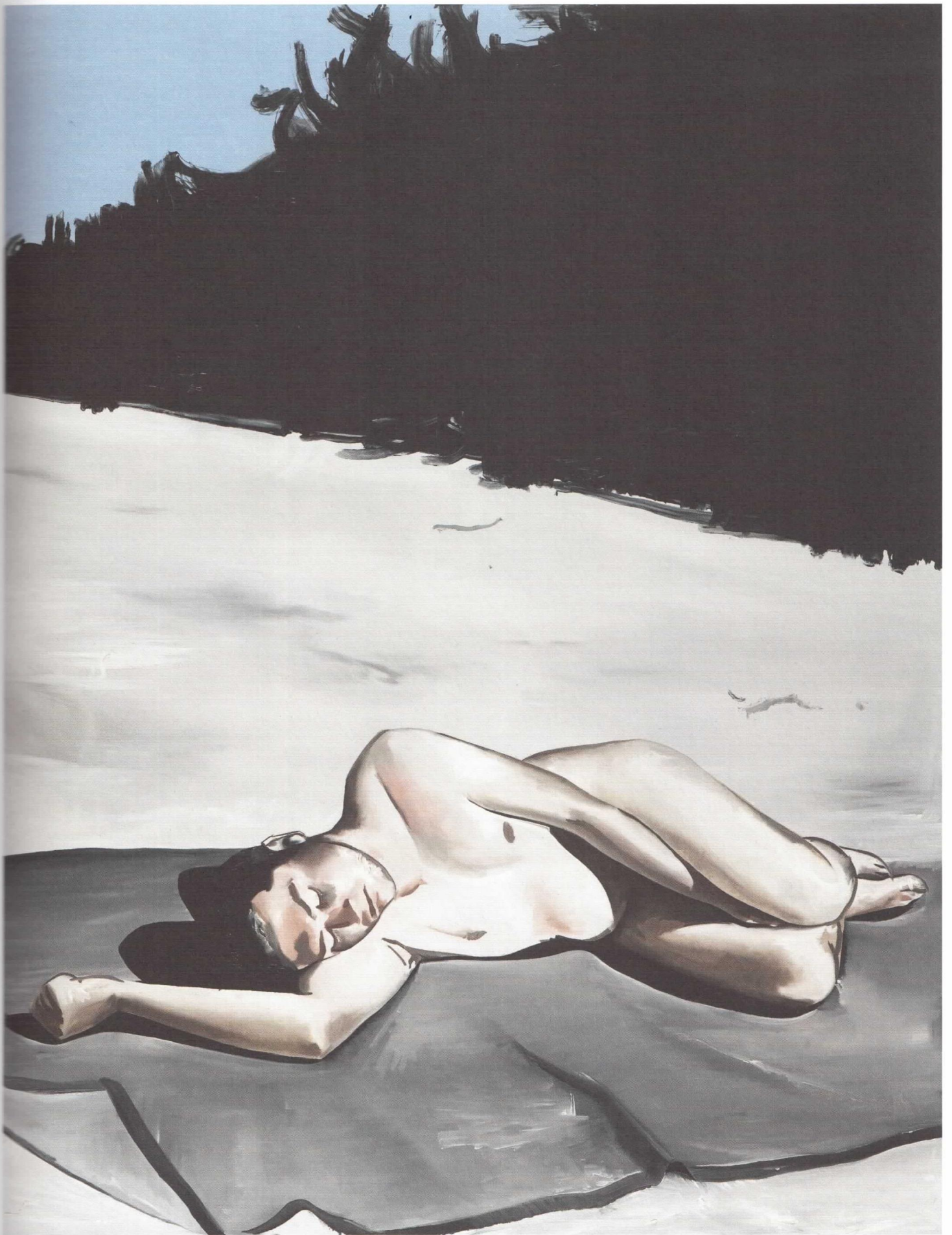
SK: You are emotionally attached to your workplace and you are not willing to open it to strangers. Do you have a similar attitude towards your works? If you like a painting, is it somehow difficult for you to hand it over? Do you wish to keep it for yourself?

WS: Yes, there are paintings which I keep for myself.

SK: What about the ones that have already been sold? Are you interested to know what happened to them? Do you follow them to see if they are presented at group exhibitions and do you try to remember them?

WS: The feeling of seeing a picture, which I painted some time ago, in a totally different context, e.g. in someone else's house, is both peculiar and extraordinary to me. A painting is like a diary to me. Usually I do not forget the emotions that I experienced while working on it.

SK: Do you pay more attention to the choice of subject than you used to as a younger artist? For instance, you previously worked in Poland. At present, you have more exhibitions abroad. Are you searching for threads and subjects that are more universal and would be understood outside of Poland?



Wilhelm Sasnal, *Witek*, 2009, oil on canvas, 220 x 180 cm © the artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London



Installation view, Wilhelm Sasnal, Sadie Coles HQ, London, 14 January - 21 February 2015 © the artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London



Wilhelm Sasnal, Foz Do Iguaçu Hotel, 2014 © the artist, courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London

WS: It is more about my constantly changing interests and consequently, my perspective on the world changing as well. Before, I used to focus more on local subjects. Currently, I am more interested in news across the world, through which I am able to 'communicate' with others. I try to be understood by others.

SK: When the film 'Alexander' was screened at the ICA in London, you and your wife Anka said that such films had been created for you. They are rather rough, heavy. In contrast, your painting is aesthetic and graphically clean. Do you use film in order to address more difficult subjects?

WS: I think that the aesthetics I choose in painting and the ones I choose in film with Anka are similar. We are both interested in exploring social themes within film, and to a certain extent, I am interested in these themes within painting. From an aesthetic point of view, I feel that these two mediums, painting and film, function at a similar level. At least, this is my belief.

SK: In your films, images are composed in the same manner as paintings. Do you look through the camera lens with a painter's eye?

WS: I am a painter so it would be hard to look through a different eye. It is true that when I am a filmmaker, my way of framing and selecting scenes is similar to the way in which I collect materials, which form the basis for my paintings. This is a natural process, and it is not done on purpose. In other words, I do not assume that in case of 'Alexander' the main character must stand in a certain position because this will create a nice composition. I rather follow him about and try to adjust to the reality in which we live in – my protagonist and me. This is an intuitive process and is not based on calculations.

SK: You currently live in Kraków but you used to live abroad. In your opinion, is the experience of moving to a different location constructive?

WS: I have never lived abroad for longer than half a year, so we should rather say that I 'boarded' there. I think that all of us need to experience change, so I would not feel comfortable being bound to a single place. In my view, the notion of home and identifying oneself with a given place has undergone a little transformation. People travel so much these days. The ease of travelling, staying in different places, by choice or out of

WS: The country's history, its new perspective on it, and becoming a part of Europe.

SK: Do you observe and follow the activity of young artists? Do you buy their work? Are you interested in what is going on in the art world?

WS: I am not an expert as I am not particularly active in these circles. I do not buy works of art. However there are a



Aleksander Piotrowski, Stefania Piotrowska, Anka Sasnal, Igor Kłaczyński © the artist

necessity, has completely changed the notion of belonging. Poland is an unusual case since it is still undergoing transformation – it is radiating energy but also consuming it because there are a lot of things that frustrate us, and there is a lot of food for thought.

SK: So, what annoys you the most?

WS: The Polish church.

SK: And what do you find inspiring about Poland?

few works from the 60s and 70s which I would like to have. Maybe I will buy them at some point in the future. Not long ago Anka bought me a gift – a linocut by Józef Gielniak. He is an extraordinary artist. However, I am not an art collector.

SK: What are your artistic plans for 2015?

WS: Johnen Galerie in Berlin is organising an exhibition of my works in October 2015. ■