



■ **BODONI Zsolt: Icon / Ikon** | 2011, acrylic and oil on canvas / akril, olaj, vászon, 100×135 cm | © courtesy the artist / a művész engedélyével

Historical Painting Re-Loaded

Interview with Zsolt Bodoni

JANE NEAL

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Zsolt, your paintings are recognizable for their high drama and bold themes: love and the pain and aftermath of twisted passion, the misery and spoils of war, and the realities of persecution of totalitarian regimes. All this must come from somewhere? Tell me about your childhood. It would be interesting to discuss your beginnings: where you grew up, and the realities of life as an ethnic Hungarian child and adolescent in rural Transylvania, Romania.

I had a great childhood. The very first realizations in this long process of growing up in the place where I happened to be born, was that everyone's expectations for the fall of the Eastern block in the end resulted in disappointment: it was a failure. As Baudrillard said, the East expected a new, great, perfect world to come, but what happened was that all the trash of the East went to the West, and meanwhile, the trash of the West also entered the East, which had not been expected. I spent a lot of time trying to escape from this reality, hoping and waiting for a change that didn't really happen, and gradually I realized this and faced up to the reality that we had to live with the new in all its annoying imperfection.

You are fascinated by the machinations of power – machines, war machines, foundries, and, as you just mentioned, statues and religious iconography. How did this interest arise?

The subject matter I am engaged with requires that these elements are charged with a potential power. Hence, war machines and icons. I know it sounds controversial to bring these two things together, but the mechanisms working behind them are very close. In my perception, both of them are tools of power. It is the one who has more, who is better, bigger, powerful, that wins. And the winner leads the crowd. These tools also carry power in themselves, through their presentation, because they have the, we might say, "capability" of manipulation.

Let's talk more about the iconography in your work, and your use of symbols. I'm thinking here of the Szent István (St Stephen) ship, and The Kolozsvár (Cluj), and the Merlin engine, that all feature as central subjects in three of your recent paintings.

The paintings in which I use these elements refer to the idea that history is a manipulation. Systems rewrite the past to serve their present. I was really young, about 12 or 13-years-old, when my father told me not to learn the history we were being taught in school. It was Romanian Communist propaganda. So I began my own research into the history of this region. Actually, the Szent István (St Stephen) battleship never existed in this way. There was a ship with this name during World War I, but it had a very short life. During its first battle, it was hit by two torpedoes from an Italian Mas 15 submarine, and it sank. So I created a second ship: bigger, a high-tech one. [...] All the subjects I choose to work with are derived from my research into very different themes, i.e., those of war. They might therefore feature battleships, or relics and their pilgrimages.

What did you find?

Well, take the monuments: I found out that there were foundries set up not only to make "new" statues, but to recycle the old ones! A kind of recycling plant for leaders and inspirational figures. As we know, everything was very well documented during the Communist regime, but in the case of these storage places and foundries, strangely, all the documentation has disappeared. I found only some written documentation about the people who had been working there. So I had to "rebuild" these places, where six leaders on horseback from the Imperialists and four angels could be "recycled" into one gargantuan Stalin. [...]

You often work on a large scale – reflecting the nature of your chosen subject matter. That is, within these often cavernous spaces, there is a great deal of negative space and dramatic chiaroscuro. It reminds me very much of Caravaggio and Rubens. Are these history painters of old your heroes? Do you feel an affinity with their work?

I love working in a large scale. Before I start painting, there is a long process of making the studies: I usually make many variations of one work, and then I see which is the best, and I start painting it. Painting is a process of flow with coffee and cigarettes, in which everything else loses its importance.

Certainly, in this you share a great deal of common ground with many contemporary painters – and not only the coffee and cigarettes! I'm thinking about an almost shamanic experience of the process of painting "taking over" the painter. Do you feel this?

Yes, there is a lot of energy in motion during this process, and I am satisfied when this becomes visible on the canvas. This isn't always easy to achieve. The goal is when this "energy" (let's call it that) spreads all over, when it breaks through the original dimensions of the work. [...]

I know you're interested in music and in reinterpreting "familiar" scores. I realize that this was partly responsible for influencing your decision to tackle this quite "taboo", or dangerous, area of "re-mastering", wasn't it?

Yes. For example, there is the Chaconne piece by Bach. I listened to many great violinists playing it. All of them were very different, but the most stunning interpretation is by Henryk Szeryng. He found things to accentuate more in this piece than others just did not. This is about taste, something very personal. And, as an aside, while we're on the subject of representation, did you know that all AC/DC songs are, in fact, inspired by Bach? It is simple and deep. Sorry, Mr. Bach, but there we are: look what you have inspired! I think this is a good

example of my working process. *You're the metallist of the contemporary painting world?*

Bach would be, too, if he was still alive. Yes, it is about dynamism and energy well equilibrated with necessarily calm fields. Caravaggio or Mozart are definitely rock'n'rollers – while Duchamp is a DJ.

(translation: Eszter Babarczy)

Jane Neal is a critic and curator. She lives and works in Oxford and London.

Painter **Zsolt Bodoni** was born in 1975 in Élesd, Transylvania (Aleșd, in Romania). He graduated in 2000 from the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest, where he lives and works.

Tamás Szvet's Science-Fiction Sculpture

NOÉMI SZABÓ

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The experimental works of Tamás Szvet merge cutting-edge scientific discoveries with the secrets of Medieval codices. His minimalist objects are both richly conceptual and stylish in their purity. Although he trained as a sculptor, Szvet's interest is not so much in classical plasticity as in the spatial extension of the various phenomena of physics. This well-versed young artist never ceases further educating himself: he does not believe in a rigorous compartmentalization of genres; rather, he finds inspiration in cooperation and the lessons learned through joint projects. "My works," he says, "have the common denominator of minimalism and conceptualism. I frequently use elements such as light, movement or electronics, so my sculptures are best viewed as installations, or as a synergy of object, environment and audience."

Tamás Szvet had started his first large-scale research project as a student in 2003, at the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest. At the time, he experimented with floating objects, and on his blog he continues to publish examples of international art operating on the concept of levitation. Until recently, the notion of levitation has usually been surrounded by the aura of the transcendent and the mystical, associated with the deepest human desire for an existence without gravity, but nowadays it can be reproduced by various technical means, modern electromagnetic forces among them. Szvet believes that magnetic levitation "provides new opportunities, hitherto unknown vistas in sculpture." A sculptural appropriation of electromagnetism, however, has its antecedents