

Radek Szlaga  
*Greatest Hits*  
Curated by Alex Urso

Rediscovering oneself via painting, and vice versa. Radek Szlaga's work seems driven by this double-edged sense of tension, inextricably linking the artist to his work, making them one and the same. On one hand, experimentation with materials seems to be a defining aspect of the Polish artist's work, while, on the other hand, his own life story comes into play, making each canvas (or sheet of paper) a battlefield where the painter and painting are simultaneously grappled with. Matter and the man come together to take on a common need, exploring their own limits, delving into the past, and picking up on shifts in response to changes in the outside world.

#### PAINTING AS A WAY OF REPRESENTING EXPERIENCES

For an artist like Radek Szlaga, who constantly seeks out images and inspirations from others, the autobiographical element is seemingly secondary, but his work is deeply imbued with experiences and observations from his own life.

Born in Gliwice, Poland, in 1979, the artist and his family moved to the United States in the 1990s, remaining suspended between these two realities. During this time, the world as he'd known it – governed by Soviet ideology – collided with the bright yet decadent life he experienced on the other side of the curtain, shaping a vision filled with opposing forces. On one hand, there were the Socialist traditions and archetypes linked to his Polish childhood; on the other, the American consumerism as evoked in the painter's works with a certain tongue-in-cheek disillusionment.

#### FROM POLAND TO THE UNITED STATES, AND BACK

The theme of Polish diaspora is the first overriding theme in codifying Szlaga's work. The son of immigrants, he begins building his pieces by blending and reinterpreting icons, symbols, and visual elements from American culture, using a sarcastic lens to reveal the contradictions, failures, and, ultimately, the dissonance between the illusion of a great superpower and the current reality of such hegemony.

While the fall of the American myth is one of the major themes of the painter's works, he also takes aim at Poland with an equally critical eye. He is just as sarcastic and ruthless when it comes to taking on his homeland, mocking the liberal capitalist dream that followed the fall of the wall. The frequent use of Polish words like *solidarność* and *malarstwo* ("painting") in his pieces, the presence of vegetables, white eagles and references to the rural world of the former Soviet country are a nostalgic homage and a sharp critique of a culture in search of an identity. In other words, in his works Szlaga observes two "blocs" – Eastern Europe and the United States – translating into images the inspirations and failures of two models defeated by their own stereotypes.

#### PAINTING AS A BORDERLAND

The obsessive accumulation of images and visual references to the Western world and Eastern European folklore is manifested, in practice, via the creation of works that feature overlapping colours, materials, and techniques. Each of the artist's creations – be it a painting, drawing, or sculpture – is the result of a comprehensive approach that fills the surface with references that are object-based and photographic, going beyond painting. This layering of materials reflects Szlaga's many different experiences: information, places, encounters, views, and feelings all come together to form one singular sensation, full of technical and formal elements.

Somewhere between figuration and abstraction, the drawings, canvases, and sketchbooks displayed in the exhibition – created exclusively for the occasion – represent the idea of the "borderland" that defines the artist's work, bringing together the key elements that have made him one of the most important painters on the international scene over the past decade.