

● **ON VIEW**

MEDICINE MAN

Polish artist Miroslaw Balka aims to bring a sense of seriousness and contemplation to Tate Modern's often carnivalesque Unilever Series. So as he talks about taking the artworld's largest themepark and turning it into a temple, what kind of experience can we look forward to later this month, when he unveils his vision for the world's largest museum space?

DR BALKA IS ISSUING his diagnosis: "The twenty-first century is quite polluted with too many things," he says. "Many, many things that we don't need," he continues, gathering pace. "And fast information which we are not able to swallow – so much information that all the time it's like being in a discotheque, being attracted to sounds, images, bodies." The patient is Western culture, and its sickness, he goes on to reveal, is confusing our appetites: "Nobody is really hungry anymore. Everybody is eating but no one is hungry." And what's the doctor's prescription? To remedy this he recommends periods of stillness and calm, as well as regular doses of Samuel Beckett and Japanese haiku. "I don't think that we have too many options in life to come to a place where we can get calm."

it is also the house in which he grew up. The contents of this house, and of Balka's childhood, appear as signature materials in his work in the form of ash, soap, steel, wine, rope and wood. When he has finished with them, these materials appear utterly condensed, as though they might contain the basic elements of human life – of birth, death, cleaning, washing, eating, sleeping, sheltering. The scale of Balka's sculpture is also related to human capacity – so much so, in fact, that he uses his own proportions to determine it: "I know if I cannot do something, or if something is too heavy I will not do it", he explains. "Because I understand my presence as an artist is very personal." Even more tellingly, it is these 'human' dimensions that often give his works their titles.

words LAURA MCLEAN-FERRIS

This month, Miroslaw Balka will become the tenth artist to take on the Unilever Commission for a work of art installed in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. As he laughs at the idea that he might be issuing prescriptions (for the record, he's not actually a qualified medical doctor), it's clear that he has a sense of a responsibility to the viewers of this huge commission and, moreover that he takes this incredibly seriously: "It will be seen by a million people – which doesn't happen in every exhibition you do. This is the challenge. The Turbine Hall gives you a bigger responsibility in some way."

It's fair to say that Balka doesn't shy away from responsibility, just as much as he doesn't avoid asking serious questions about the nature of humanity or tackling the grimmest events of recent history. He has repeatedly drawn on the events of the Holocaust, which has been explored through a combination of an extremely personal vocabulary and historical research. His studio is in his grandmother's house in Otwock, south of Warsaw;

In *None*, his 2008 exhibition at London's White Cube, Balka referenced the very inhuman treatment of the Jews of Otwock, who were rounded up in 1942 and taken to the Treblinka death camp. *190 x 90 x 4973* (2008) (the '190', incidentally, happens to be the artist's height) filled the entire room; in it, visitors were met by a wall that blocked their view, leaving just a narrow and eerie passageway that led who knows where, but turned out to provide a voyage around the perimeter of the gallery walls. To those who entered the work, the sense of unknowing could quickly lead to a sense of panic and claustrophobia, of having been trapped or tricked. The work referred explicitly to a narrow path at Treblinka that connected the area where the inmates were forced to undress and the gas chambers. The work demonstrated what the exhibition title, with its 'no there'/'not here' play suggests, that one of Balka's primary skills lies in his ability to fuse both common and private, general and specific emotional experiences.

GLADSTONE GALLERY

McLean-Ferris, Laura, "Medicine Man," Art Review, October 2009



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When we meet, Balka cannot explicitly discuss his new work for the Turbine Hall with the commission being, as usual, cloaked in secrecy, but the aspect that he appears to want to emphasise most heavily is the idea of creating a "pause" at the centre of a frenzied atmosphere. He describes having "an emotional attitude" to Tate Modern as a building, having been part of one of the institution's opening exhibitions: "I used to come to the Tate in 1999, when nobody knew about it. So I knew this building from the very beginning." It is this personal relationship that he hopes will allow him to create something more than "just a piece in the space" and instead a work that draws on the memories and sensations that echo around the cavernous hall. Generally, however, he seems disconcerted by the modern attitude to museums – playing, chattering, running around. It's hard not to think of the show-off students gazing at their reflections in the eerie solar sodium glow of Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project* (which was the 2003 Unilever Series commission) as he talks about this, or of Carsten Höller's manic helter-skelter slides in 2006. "I think people have a lot of fun", he remarks matter-of-factly, "but it's also good for people to experience things that are more mysterious, and not so fun".

It would appear that the idea of stopping, of pausing and of contemplating, is for Balka inextricably linked to the church. The church of his Catholic upbringing and its relationship to art figure often in his work as well as his conversation.

He recalls the atmosphere of his childhood trips to the museum were "like visits to the church. There was a respect for the space". Quiet contemplation with life's greater questions is something that contemporary life lacks, in his view. "In the past there was at least the frame of the church as a kind of place for the contact that is necessary with God, or with something. Or to experience something which you don't experience in everyday life... for me, the exhibition space is also a kind of modern church – without being part of a particular religion. It's a platform for contact with something that is very unfashionable – the soul."

It is a powerful, somewhat uneasy (perhaps because it seems so old-fashioned) image that makes a certain amount of sense. The Turbine Hall as cathedral – both a monument to art and a cavernous hole at the centre of contemporary life: a hole filled with desire for the moral and spiritual life that faith used to provide for many. Undoubtedly, in Balka's careful hands, the Turbine Hall will become a space for hard thinking and sombre, serious emotions. For it would seem that this is the medicine that Miroslaw Balka prescribes for us above all. •

The Unilever Series: Miroslaw Balka *is on view at Tate Modern, London, 13 October – 5 April 2010*

All images: *Nothere*, 2008 (installation view). Photos: Todd-White Art Photography. © the artist. Courtesy White Cube