

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

"Miroslaw Balka ctrl", Culture.PL, 2010

## CULTURE<sub>Q</sub>PL



photo: Miroslaw Balka, "Black Pope and Black Sheep", sculpture, 1987.

**Miroslaw Balka's bipartite installation was conceived after visits to both the famous monastery in Burgos and the museum Reina Sofia in Madrid**

In the Edificio Sabatini **Miroslaw Balka** has conceived a totally new installation comprised of several components. At Silos he has re-contextualised a formative early work which still remains in his possession some twenty-five years after it was first shown. Visitors access the gallery at the Abbey by descending a small flight of stairs into an antechamber where they see a handle, hanging from the ceiling, but attached to the doorway that leads into the exhibition space proper. That entrance is completely blocked by a dark structure, the backside of what turns out to be a wardrobe. Symbolically if not functionally, the handle becomes a device to access the exhibit beyond. Visitors who push open one of the closet's two identical doors find themselves on the threshold of a barrel-vaulted room, near the end of which a startling vision appears. A single object, bathed in light, occupies the sombre and otherwise empty chamber: a sculpture of a life-size, seated, black pope

accompanied by a black sheep.

On closer inspection, the potentate is seen to be weeping, his tears flowing so copiously as to form a solid stream. Each of these two motifs has a richly layered history. Commonplace in many cultures, the concept of the black sheep fulfils a clearly defined role however various its individual manifestations. Above all, it functions as a scapegoat, the locus through which a tightly-knit community expresses fears and anxieties that otherwise could cause internal dissension. By contrast, the notion of the black pope carries multiple references that derive in part from the context in which it appears.

For Balka, this hieratic image is linked to certain prophecies made by the Renaissance seer, Nostradamus, which were widely embraced in Poland in the Eighties as social and political upheaval spread throughout the country. In his singular conception, the potentate who, it is predicted, will appear at the Apocalypse has been transformed from a vengeful to a sorrowing revenant. The juxtaposition of this melancholy icon with the sprightly animal is deeply affecting if, ultimately, enigmatic: mysterious and full of pathos Balka's variant on these legendary concepts proves less baleful than deeply unsettling.

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At the Museo Reina Sofia, the galleries in the Edificio Sabatini assigned to Bałka for the second part of his project resonate with echoes of their former life. Designed in the later eighteenth century as a hospital, this massive stone building was only recently converted into an art museum. During the renovation few changes were made to the architecture of the brick-lined dungeon-like spaces in which psychotic patients had formerly been kept. They consequently resemble the harrowing places in which the insane were incarcerated, en masse, that Goya depicted in several small paintings made shortly after Sabatini's vaults were first put to use.

Memory of their dismal former function springs irresistibly to mind as visitors descend a winding staircase in search of Bałka's project. The first of the pair of galleries occupied by the installation is a large sombre space, empty except for three cage-like structures stuffed with foam which guard the trio of exits. From the doorway opposite the threshold a howling sound emerges. Those who venture into the almost pitch-black space beyond find themselves in a gyre of churning air-currents, and so subject to visceral as well as aural assault. (Tellingly, on one of his sketches limning this space Bałka wrote the word 'Purgatory'.) Formally akin to the repertoire of basic geometric volumes the artist has employed in much of his work over the past twenty years, these lugubrious structures could effectively seal off Bałka's installation in what is already a quite isolated part of the museum. Confined here most people would quickly succumb to despair, perhaps even madness.

The exhibition runs from November 26, 2010 through April 25, 2011.

Curator: Lynne Cooke

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