

Meet the Artist

## Sculptor Mirosław Bałka on the Romance of Conceptual Art

By Dylan Kerr

Jan. 25, 2015



The artist Mirosław Bałka

“Romantic” may not be the first word that comes to mind when thinking about the art of [Mirosław Bałka](#). His sculptures are spare and often imposing, exploring the darker aspects of our existence in steel, stone, and salt while referencing both the painful recent history and cultural legacies of his native Poland. His move towards large-format installations in major institutions and galleries—including his much-lauded 2009 commission for [Tate Modern](#)’s Turbine Hall, *How It Is*, a massive shipping container/train car/abattoir—has been accompanied by an increase in subtlety and apparently a complete loss of the human figure.

However, this figure is not so much lost as it is transformed: the viewers themselves become the subjects of these works, made to physically embody Bałka’s historical references and

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

symbolic gestures without ever being touched by the artist's hands. The seemingly absent subject is in fact the unknowing viewer, trading the overwhelming landscapes of Romantic sublimity for darkened exhibition halls. **Artspace's Dylan Kerr** spoke with Mirosław to discuss his piece *203 x 97 x 7* (currently on view in **On Stellar Rays'** group show *Rotrixagatze*, through February 14), his definition of "the Romantic," and how his new works function like haiku.

**The catalogue entry for your piece *203 x 97 x 7*, an oval of cast bronze and salt that lies on the gallery floor, indicates that it was made back in 1997. How did this work come to be, and what were your primary concerns while making it?**

I made this work in the Fabric Workshop in Philadelphia, and the idea was to make a cast of a puddle of water on the floor. The amount of water was meant to reflect the fact that 75 percent of one's bodyweight is water, which is in turn related to Thomas Mann's description of the body in *Magic Mountain*. The idea was just to have this amount—at the time I think it was about 70 liters of water—in a cold space, so I was working with this frozen puddle on the floor. From there I made the form, and from there I made the bronze cast. I turned this bronze cast upside down, to show the inside of the cast, which was then filled with fine salt. This added another element, in that bodies also consist of and carry salt. I often say that salt can represent dried tears or dried sweat, which are of course related to the activity of the body. These are traces of the body's activity. It's very romantic, in some way. It's one of the most romantic organic sculptures I've ever made. Usually I make works that are more concerned with straight lines and clean corners, but this one was different.

**I'm glad you mentioned the romanticism of the piece, since I've heard that your instructions for displaying it specified that this salt surface should be "Romantic." What do you mean by "Romantic" in the context of this work?**

A Romantic touch. My first association with the word "Romantic" is Caspar David Friedrich, the 19th-century German painter. This is actually a very German work, because it has these two figures standing behind it, Friedrich and Thomas Mann. By Romantic I don't mean the state of being in love. Romantic here means that there is a soul in the touch—there is something that makes your gesture visible. The touch of the hand is visible in this work. It's the presence of the individual. You can see that this work is not made by machine, and you can feel that it was touched by a human. This is more or less my understanding of the "Romantic."

# GLADSTONE GALLERY



Caspar David Friedrich's *Stages of Life* (1835)

## **Do you find this element of Romanticism manifesting in the rest of your work?**

Of course it's present in different ways, usually within the bigger formal discipline but still as an attitude toward the space, as in the lonely figure. As I always say, the best condition to experience my work is to be alone with it. My work is always made in this way, for the lone visitor. The visitor measures the distance of the space, the distance between them and the work, the relation between all these parts. For example, this work  $203 \times 97 \times 7$  requires you to look down to see it on the floor. This means that your body, which is carrying your eyes, also has to move. For me, eyes are not the only important part of the viewer—it's the whole body. If you walk in the space and see something on the floor, the direction of your head changes. You look down, and these floor works are also about this action of looking down. It's not an objective view, like when you have something at eye level. When you come closer to this work, you have to move your head down in order to see it. These are simple gestures, but they are important to me.

Within the iconology of art and of the human body, the gesture of looking down often represents sorrow, introspection, pain of some kind. It's the opposite of looking up at the sky, both literally and metaphorically. This is the gesture of looking at the darker side of life. The working title for this piece was *The Puddle*, and the position of the puddle is very low within our social lives. This is important to me, giving attention to these poor things in life. In the work of Caspar David Friedrich there is a certain relation between the human figure and the landscape, with the figure's back turned as it looks somewhere in the landscape. Here this

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

figure is represented by the viewer, who is looking at this “natural” element, the puddle, which is itself lying at the feet of the viewer. This is the relation I see between my work and Caspar David Friedrich’s. In the Romantic paintings you can see that nature represents a state of mind, and I think that the puddle also accomplishes this in its own way.



*The Order of Things* at Barbara Gladstone (2013)

**This aspect of your work fascinates me, the use of the body of the perhaps unknowing viewer as a symbolic actor in the piece. What are some other examples of this method at work in your art?**

A good example of a different gesture might be the work I installed at Barbara Gladstone for my 2013 exhibition *The Order of Things*. That work was a single sculpture consisting of two very large steel containers, with dark, black water being moved from one container into the other. This dark water represents the natural element there, and it was a process of exchange, with the left container filling the right container with this black water just as the right container is filling the left. In that case the gesture was one of looking up, but when you look up you don’t see the beautiful sky but rather this black water falling almost on your head. This falling water makes a very strong sound, creating a situation where you look up and see what’s coming from above as a dangerous situation, as something unpleasant. You are seeing something that can generate problems.

The first element of the Gladstone exhibition was that we built an extra wall in front of the work, with small doors leading to the space that were left closed. In order to enter the space

## GLADSTONE GALLERY

with the sculpture you had to open these doors, and when you entered the doors automatically closed behind you. These doors were never open except when you were going through them. For most people these were just the doors to the gallery, but for me they were the beginning of the perception of the work. It was itself a gesture—you had to touch the door handle, push it, open the door, enter the room through these doors that were smaller than the rest of the doors in this area of New York, which has a more industrial character. This generated an almost private situation, because while you know the gallery and expect the space to be big and the doors to be open, here you have this passage that you have to go through.

This added a different dimension, one very related to the body. The passage described your body and reminded you of your own dimensions. Once you entered the space and the doors closed, you saw something that was much bigger than you. Again, this is like a Caspar David Friedrich, in that a landscape is in front of you and you are the small figure looking up and out. This was also the idea behind the small cube of wooden parquet collected from the floor, which I placed in front of the sculpture for the visitor to sit on and become even smaller. They could sit in front of and below these two streams exchanging this dark water, which cross on the ceiling above their heads. This is another form of the romantic in my work.

This is of course leaving aside the issue of Lance Armstrong [laughs]. I made this work around the time that one side of his brain was lying to the other, so for me this piece was also about describing this situation. Not literally of course, but this is one of the layers of interpretation—the idea that the left part of your brain can lie to the right part and vice versa. It was also about the situation of pollution, which you could experience in a visual and acoustic way here. I think it's important to remind the visitor that they are not only eyes but also the body that walked into the space.

Another example might be my 2010 exhibition *Wer Sehen Dich* at the Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe in Germany. I often use very strong industrial ventilators directed towards the body of the visitor, and in this kunsthalle they asked me to make an intervention in their collection of early Renaissance northwestern European paintings, with painters like Dürer, Grünewald, and Hans Baldung. All of the paintings in this collection are dedicated to the body and especially the pain of the body, like the Crucifixion, so I made a kind of caged corridor going through all the rooms with these strong ventilators installed on the low ceilings of this corridor. When you walked through and looked at these paintings about the body, your body was itself touched by this strong stream of wind from the ventilators above. This contact created a disruption, one that allowed you to feel yourself as a body as well. You

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

could look at these paintings of bodies and at the same time have your own understanding of your own body refreshed by these ventilators.

## **Getting back to the show at On Stellar Rays, how have the works you've made and the ideas you've struggled with evolved since 1997?**

That's a long way back, you know? 1997 was almost 20 years ago now. In general I work with lighter elements now, because my body is not able to carry as much as it could 20 years ago. I've been working more with video, but also projects and installations in bigger spaces that incorporate subtler, less visible gestures. One example might be my 2013 exhibition *Touch Me / Find Me* at Kiasma, the contemporary art museum in Helsinki. It was an empty exhibition space with three heating cables hidden around the room. The cables were heated to 37 degrees Celsius, the temperature of the human body. As the title suggests, the visitors were asked to touch the walls to find the cables, so you had people touching the empty white wall trying to find these warm spaces that were no bigger than one square meter. You could really feel the warmth, and the exhibition space was warmer as a result of these cables. In this way it also became a dialogue with the institution of the museum, an institution that usually discourages or prevents this kind of touching. Here we had the opposite gesture, where the institution asks you to touch.

This is typical of my recent work, occupying bigger spaces with gestures that are more conceptual. In some ways I got tired of working with the same materials that I've used before. I'm always looking for a new experience, so I don't want to return to the same materials that I've worked with in the past, and I'm trying to find new places for the bodies of the visitors to relate to beyond just looking. As I said, it is never only looking. I'm 56 now, and since I'm looking for lighter materials to work with I've been making more drawings, more videos, things that are easier to carry. My body is tired [laughs].

# GLADSTONE GALLERY



*How It Is* at Tate Modern (2009)

**When you do find yourself becoming tired with the materials you've been using, how do you go about finding a new mode to work in?**

I tend to do more improvisations—sketches, the haikus that I do by myself, mixtures of different materials. It becomes more like haiku poetry now, in that it's not so consequential in the use of materials. Before I had distinct periods in which I was working in terrazzo, or when I was working in soap, or with steel blades, so it was easier in the past to see the period of this or that because the material was more central. Nowadays I'd rather mix more materials, so they become less consequential than they were before. I glue things together now—I try to find new solutions, new relations, between already-existing parties or materials. Before I'd have to cast the terrazzo plate or cut down the steel blade, but now I'm trying to find this terrazzo plate, for example, and then find an already-existing metal piece, and then fix them together.

Maybe I'm a little bit tired with this process of production in which I'm involved personally. In the studio I make this gesture of affixing different things to one another by myself as a kind of visual poetry, but at the same time I am working on these larger conceptual projects. These include my projects with heat or darkness, like my 2009 commission for the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, *How It Is*. I find myself operating within two spheres of activity—the smaller things that I make by myself with my own hands, and the bigger projects where others realize the idea based on my concept because the dimensions are simply too large to do by myself.

# GLADSTONE GALLERY

**You draw an interesting parallel between your recent works and haiku. Could you tell me more about this connection?**

My art has always been related to haiku in its ideology, the dedication to simple gestures, but now they are even more personal haiku. If we look at the work of 17th-century haiku master Basho, despite the fact that the poems are always only three lines and 17 syllables, we can see the difference in what he wrote when he was younger versus when he was older. It's a little bit similar with me. You can see the difference in the touch, even though the hand is the same. You can see how the gesture is different. In its own way, the piece at On Stellar Rays operates like a haiku through the use of simple, careful actions to create a subtle effect. My works are very often related to this haiku philosophy.