

GLADSTONE GALLERY

Cumming, Laura. "The Poles have come in from the cold." *The Observer*, Dec. 20, 2009.



**LAURA
CUMMING**

**Mirosław Balka:
Topography/Pawel
Althamer: Common Task**
Modern Art Oxford, until 7 March

The scene: a clearing in the forest, black trees, deep snow. A last leaf quivers on a bough. In the centre of the shot is a pristine white circle implying the frozen depths of a pond below. Something dark is hunched on its surface.

You know where you are – or so you believe. This is the place where their victims were shot, where the mass grave was found or where the concentration camp once stood. You listen to the soundtrack of silence. The dark form: is it an object or an animal? Is someone still there? The camera pans imperceptibly closer, then pauses and retreats, as if it can no longer comprehend the view.

Pond is by the great Polish artist **Mirosław Balka**. It is as direct and simple as it sounds and works entirely by exploiting conventions. Some are verbal – thin ice, ominous silence. Others are visual – the nameless black shape, the space where something once was – or cinematic: the camera peering fearfully through the trees.

But Balka projects all these clichés back on to reality and they dwindle before the irreducible truth. Where you are in this black-and-white film, screening at almost the size of the landscape itself, is wherever you imagined as well as somewhere momentarily real: Birkenau, which is both a forest and a death camp.

Anyone visiting Modern Art Oxford this winter will probably know of Balka's tremendous installation in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern, that immense steel container that draws viewers into its dark maw, returning us to the light with an altered view of the world. It is the largest piece he's made and it is fair to say that it inevitably dwarfs the MAO show in its powerful effects. But if possible, it is good to try and see both.

For in Oxford, the work is wintry, tense, less grandly resolved, making a point of uncertainty. In these film installations, Balka returns over and



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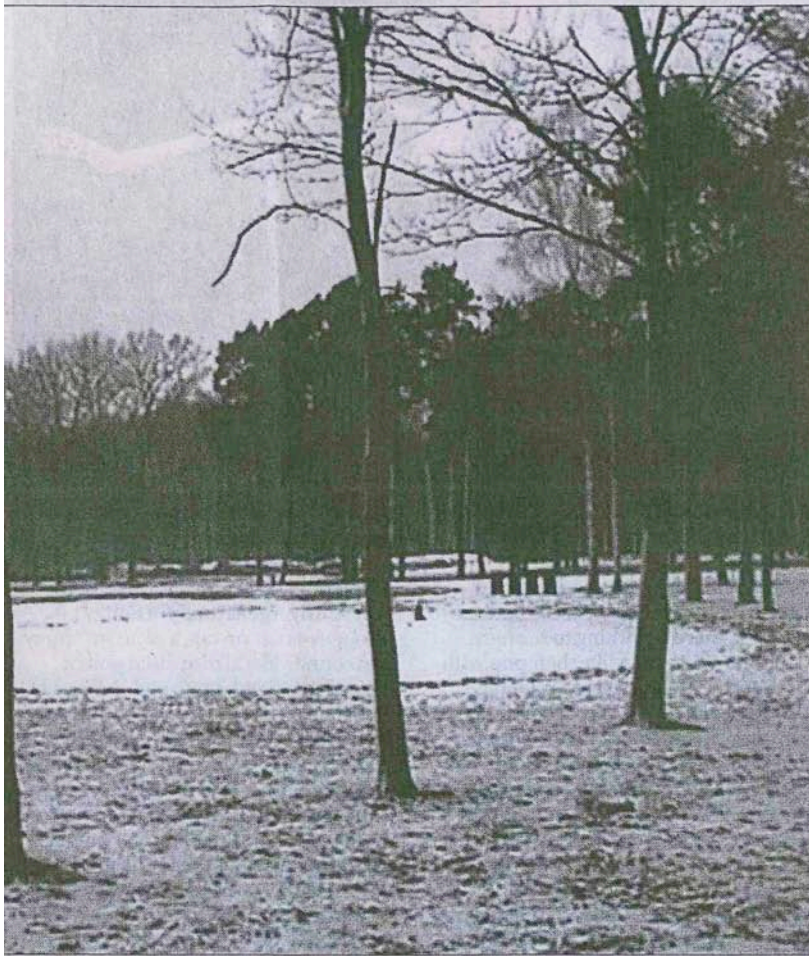


again to a history one assumes must be Polish, because the artist is Polish, yet which tug the mind in all sorts of directions. Confusion, anxiety, disorientation, palpable menace: this is the experience of the works, both separately and en masse.

Light bulbs crackle beneath a wooden crate at your feet, suddenly switching to black. An oubliette, a torture cell; it could be any time, any place. They exist

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'Momentously real' (above): Birkenau, both a forest and a death camp, in a still from *Pond* (2003) by Miroslaw Balka. Left: a detail from Pawel Althamer's video *Common Task*, 2009.

even now in the world's most popular destinations. You might be thinking of cattle trucks and camps or you might be thinking of Morocco. It is hard to gather the associations and this seems to me the point: to define is to contain, to give a false sense of limits, for man's inhumanity to man never ends.

Smoke churns upwards to the violent sound of engines; eyes and ears are assaulted, the mind recoils. Deer wander

through snow, foraging for food behind barbed wire; the real in equal tension with the devastatingly symbolic (*Bambi* is the bitter title). Dark huts flash round and round the room, spinning from screen to screen in a dizzying vision one can neither grasp nor stop. It happened, it continues, yet how can one accept it?

The works are inchoate, looping, yet visually graphic. I don't think this is because Balka agrees with Adorno – no

poetry after Auschwitz – so much as that this is how one might live as he lives, in a village near Treblinka, walking every day through the presence of history.

Several of the films are screened on the floor, visions at your feet that you cannot step into. Some are like ponds in which the world is reflected, others like holes or sheets of ice. A sound of cracking, something lashing across the ice, over and over: the effect is visceral, beyond speech. You want to escape the horror. But what exactly is it?

This is harsher and less elegiac work than one has come to expect and some of it, without knowledge of the historic references, may remain beyond reach. (The catalogue is excellent.) But the best of it stops just short of that edge, which is both a principle and an effect. The voice you can't quite catch, the offstage sound, the presentiment of something going on in the past, or in the next room, that you can neither see nor prevent – this art is haunted by history.

Polish artists currently have a vivid presence in Britain. Downstairs at Modern Art Oxford, Pawel Althamer has flown several neighbours over from his apartment block in Brodno – the camera repairer, the divorcé, the lad from number 34 – to celebrate the 20th anniversary of Poland's first free elections. They were there at the opening, dressed in golden astronaut suits, exporting their festive verve. You can see them on film, too, spiring themselves to Africa: performance art as picaresque adventure.

In Manchester, Artur Zmijewski's bristlingly contentious videos instigate and then record potentially violent events, from political demonstrations to prison experiments. In London, you can see Goschka Macuga's anti-war installation at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, enter the eerily null atmosphere of Robert Kusmirowski's exact reconstruction of a Second World War bunker, complete with fateful train, at the Barbican.

What these artists have in common is nothing less than spirit, profundity, force of imagination. Some of their work is unforgettably poetic and pungent. The director of the Warsaw Museum of Modern Art recently spoke of a "thawing of frozen potential" after decades of isolation and this certainly seems to be Poland's great moment. Someone should urgently mount an entire show of Polish work – what an event that would be, what an uprising in this flat phase of contemporary art.