

O Sole Mio

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Si On

Jakub Julian Ziótkowski

Martina von Meyenburg

Claudia Steinfels

Parasol unit

foundation for contemporary art

As We Face Up to the Unknown

This fifth issue of *O Sole Mio* is devoted to some intriguing pictorial works. Whether they were executed by established artists or by the hand of a child, someone now grown up, they are essentially recollections and thoughts processed through time in unique ways that bring the cerebral and visceral into dialogue.

Recently, when I again came face to face with *Conquista*, the fabulously intriguing painting by Jakub Julian Ziółkowski, I could not help but see it as analogous to the current state of the world in the grip of the Covid-19 pandemic. At first glance, one might see the evil conqueror depicted in *Conquista* as a magnified coronavirus. But alas, and on the contrary, it could actually represent the uncontrolled and somewhat irresponsible development of our global system prior to the pandemic, which may indeed have allowed free rein to our current foe, Covid-19.

Conquista is a very large painting, 230 x 240 cm (90½ x 94½ in). Art-historically speaking, it has three parts. The right side represents everything that could mean a positive and pleasant state of life and mind, such as light, peace, innocence, contentment, harmony, plenitude and goodwill; while the left side, which seems to come into forceful confrontation with the right side, embodies all the opposites: darkness,

rain, violence, oppression, evil, beleaguering, greed and excess. The centre is significant and reveals, in a stunning turn of events, the transition from good to bad. Dominating this space is a gigantic figure, seemingly a ruthless conqueror, who embodies many undesirable attributes. Close behind the



obese man comes a boat overloaded with a bunch of lamentable people and all sorts of baggage and boxes of merchandise. Overhead, we recognise the first sign of aggression within this otherwise eternal paradise, a monkey

with markedly long canines hanging off a bent coconut palm to grab hold of a skinned animal leg protruding from the jumble of objects stacked up on the boat.

The scene could have looked like a paradise were it not for this horrible carousel of disparate objects and people. The environment itself is bountiful, luscious with tropical vegetation,

turquoise water, a golden sandy beach and countless colourful butterflies. But the peace and happiness here has been interrupted by the unwelcome arrival of the conqueror and his retinue. The beauty and freshness of this painting collides

overwhelmingly with feelings of fright and shock. The peaceful indigenous family depicted on the righthand side of the canvas look utterly dismayed. A fearful young mother stands in the family's simple shelter holding their child's hand, while the father has stepped out to face up to the unknown. The image of David and Goliath comes to mind but with far greater intensity and multiplicity. In this realm of excess and possible orgy, this pristine environment seems destined for pollution and destruction.

Ziółkowski's paintings have never been short on expression but in *Conquista* the potential for horror and injustice is laid bare. The artist's brush and subject matter come together from a mind and gut that are rich with empathy. As we face the unknown, this challenging painting sets the tone for this issue, which builds on our thoughts in Issue 04 about seeing the bigger picture. In that issue, works by Sonja Braas and Navid Nuur, and a reflection by Philippe Davet all reminded us to stay alert to what is happening, not only literally but also and, above all, metaphorically, so as to recognise and act upon foreseeable dangers.

The vibrant and otherworldly paintings by Ziółkowski reflect a wild hallucinatory journey into a strange universe. Influenced by the folk tales and the dark history of his native Poland, and by contemporary culture, his references are wide-ranging, from the Ancient Greeks to André Masson to Frank Zappa.

His measured and often delicate command of his medium belies his sinister subject matter. Ziótkowski's paintings resonate with an unnerving atmosphere which speaks profoundly of the darker side of human nature.

Jakub Julian Ziótkowski, born 1980 in Poland, lives and works in Zamosc and Kraków. In 2011, Parasol unit, London, presented *In Utero*, Ziótkowski's first solo exhibition in a public institution in the United Kingdom.

For this digital *O Sole Mio* exhibition, artist Si On has contributed a stunning painting entitled *Pain of Growth*. In many ways this work follows Si On's usual working process and needs to be looked at within a similar frame of thought. The work is disturbing but is not macabre, it is violent yet fun-loving and, finally, it is both ironic and realistic. In the painting are the profiles of three creatures, each with a single disturbing eye and a mouth from which a long, flame-like tongue blazes. Three disconnected mouths, fiercely jagged with pointed canines, appear to have emerged through the surface of the painted canvas. The uncertainty surrounding whose faces these are, clearly indicates that the artist is thinking of collective issues rather than individual ones.

For Si On, the act of painting is usually cathartic. All kinds of difficult thoughts, frustrations and sufferings crowd her mind and need to be processed for her to free herself from them and emerge

feeling purified. This process of purification is very important to Si On, as it makes it worthwhile for her to accept the most disturbing thoughts and their ensuing and hopefully temporary impairment.

Si On painted the *Pain of Growth* with the Covid-19 pandemic in mind. Thoughts of collectivity mean that anyone and



everyone – human or animal – could become infected. It also means having to consider many unimaginable thoughts for the first time in our lives. We all invariably and intensely come to realise that life is not necessarily easy and can

require certain deprivations. We all understand that in many ways living at this specific time has become like a commodity for which we have to pay, perhaps considerably. For a painter, who sees painting as an affirmation of life, things have abruptly changed, and the creative act of painting may no longer have the same power. Yet, and at the same time, this could be the reason why

we need art, because, and after all, art has a fundamental power that confirms our need to survive. It requires the knowledge and understanding of reality, of grasping what it means to be alive and looking to the future by passing

on the skills that will help others to understand the frustrations they face in life and to come through them purified and enlightened.

Si On's intricate and expressive works are manifestations of explosive raw energy. She combines traditional Korean textiles, Japanese paper and paint, and often less conventional materials to create paintings and sculptural installations that explore themes such as sociocultural identity, grief, anger and sexual politics. Her assemblages are powerful fusions of vivid colour and emotion that appear to collide yet somehow live in unity within each work.

Si On, born 1979 in South Korea, now lives and works in Zamosc and Kraków, Poland. In 2019, Parasol unit, London, presented her first solo exhibition in Europe.

Si On, *Pain of Growth*, 2020. Styrofoam, satin, oil paints, mixed media on canvas, 220 x 340 cm (86½ x 133¾ in). Courtesy the artist.

Previous page: Jakub Julian Ziótkowski, *Conquista*, 2011. Acrylic and oil on canvas, 230 x 240 cm (90½ x 94½ in). Courtesy the artist.

Martina von Meyenburg



Martina von Meyenburg, *Leap*, 2020. Pencil, gouache pencil, watercolour, watercolour pencil on paper, 21 x 14.8 cm (8¼ x 5¾ in). Courtesy the artist.

But another sun

*If it's dark entirely – you couldn't tell the difference.
If it's light entirely – you also couldn't tell the difference.
If dark and light are opposite though – you could tell.
In sunny times darkness seems far. Shade and shadows are outshone.
There is but one – buzzing, blinding, overarching – sun.
The mind plays tricks: forever the one – sun.
Then darkness – sudden. Or did it creep? Muffling blankets of shade and shadows over
buzz and shrieks. Standstill. Where is the sun – the one?
Darkness sets, eyes adjust. Contrasts come to light: high – lights.
Many a sun surface.
Spells and sunny specks.
Ha! There is but another one – sun!*

Martina von Meyenburg (in isolation, April 2020)

Martina von Meyenburg's practice is diverse. It ranges from drawings and photography to sculptures and installations in which she freely borrows from anything – memories or physical objects – as long as it satisfies her curiosity and need to express her feelings and thoughts. Central to von Meyenburg's practice is the 'found object', which she keenly employs in ways that give it a new and totally different appearance, identity and meaning. Such transformations give her work an uncanny presence which makes her practice fall somewhere in the footsteps of the enchanting and disquieting attributes of Surrealism.

Martina von Meyenburg, born 1975 in Switzerland, lives and works in London and Zurich.



Martina von Meyenburg, *Roots*, 2020. Pencil, gouache pencil, watercolour, watercolour pencil on paper, 21 x 14.8 cm (8¼ x 5¾ in). Courtesy the artist.

Reflection by Claudia Steinfels



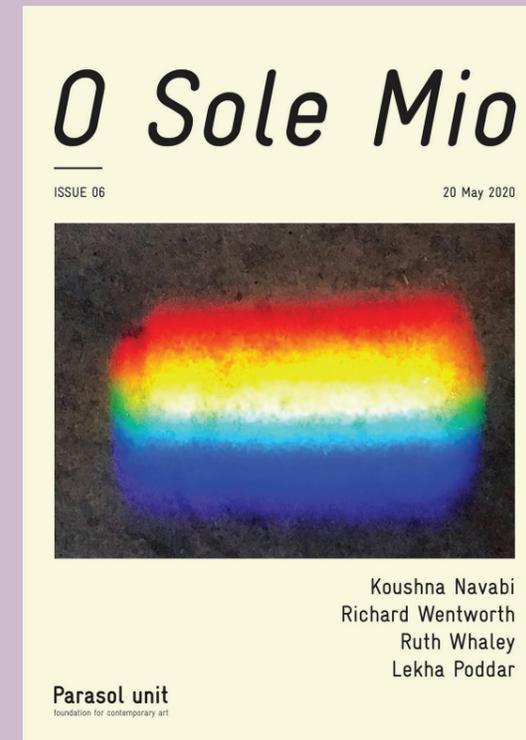
Even bleached by the sun, this ancestral portrait made by my infant hand shows that the early 1970s left nothing to be desired in terms of fashion. My mother's ankle-length checked skirt deserves special attention – who wouldn't think of Maria Vieira da Silva? The colour-assorted triangles on my younger sister's dress puts every early Frank Stella in the shade, the red heart on my father's chest exposes Jeff Koons as a 'copyist', and my older sister's monochrome red robe finds its equivalent in Yves Klein.

There's no question that I felt particularly comfortable in my green jumpsuit à la Josef Albers' square – always ready for a frog leap to exciting new territories. Our family rendezvous in the sunny sea of sunrays anticipates the good moving together and standing together in our challenging present.

An art historian, Claudia Steinfels reflects on her childhood with particularly loving memories. A family portrait drawn by her own hand as a young child is noteworthy. With the sun shining and pervading the entire picture plane, there is no doubting the optimism and happiness in the mind of the little girl whose tightly bonded family was the most important thing at the time and perhaps remains so to this day. This image made me think how children would feel today and whether as grown-ups, parents and grandparents, we ought to feel some responsibility for the situation in which we have put them.

Drawing by Claudia Steinfels, when aged seven.

Upcoming Issue



ISSUE 06 featuring works by

Koushna Navabi
Richard Wentworth
Ruth Whaley
Reflection by Lekha Poddar

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