

REVIEWS:  
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Had the tragic crash of an aeroplane carrying many of Poland's political elite, including its president, the head of its national bank and numerous other parliamentary and military leaders, occurred 48 hours before it did, the opening of Polish artist Wilhelm Sasnal's latest exhibition would have been suffused with a sense of loss. And when writing about the paintings in the aftermath of the accident, it is hard not to associate the pervasive palette of blues and greys with solemn contemplation, nor to deny a sorrowful air as prophetic for an artist who has explored both the history and politics of his homeland.

But coincidence must not be confused with circumstance, and moreover, for this show Sasnal has curated an apolitical selection of recent paintings (2004–10) that focus on the fashioning of memory and the challenges of painterly representation. For example, *Skeleton of Water* (2008) was created in response to Sasnal's son asking him to draw a skeleton of water. Despite the question's innocent confusion, Sasnal took the enquiry seriously. The resulting large canvas shows a flotilla of rickety bones spread out on an implacably flat, teal-coloured ocean that is at once mournful and full of mirth.

In *Untitled (Kacper)* (2009), the artist's son appears to be futilely crying out to his father from ashore while a white cloud looming above him appears so flat that it seems as if it were cut out of the composition. *Untitled (Anka)* (2010), which depicts the artist's wife lying on the beach in a bikini, is one among the few sexual episodes of the exhibition. Another is *Untitled (Scooter)* (2009), which renders a collapsed scooter curiously phallic. *Hardship 1–4* (2009) is a suite of four canvases (two of which are attempts at the same composition of Sasnal's wife and child lying in repose) that addresses the difficulty of imbuing painting with the right balance of compositional and emotional immediacy natural to a passing moment.

The dominant mood of the show is embodied by a large untitled painting of a man bathed in soporific calm; he lies on his back under the shade of a tree whose leaf-laden boughs drip paint

languorously down the surface of the canvas. There is a psychological disconnect between the subject of the painting and the object of the artist's vision, insofar as the man's view of the world is less apparent than the sense that his mind is at ease. We see this again in *A Gynecologist* (2007), a portrait of a doctor who wields a blurry sonogram machine. For an artist who paints from photographs and who is also a filmmaker in his own right, Sasnal's interest in the indirectness of vision and his emphasis on painting optical aberrations is fascinating. Is painting Sasnal's sonogram? By eroding details from memory, he muddles the emotional capacity of painting, making it roughly comparable (or variously incomparable) to human memory and its inherent degradation. *Steve Pulimood*

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**Wilhelm Sasnal**

Anton Kern Gallery, New York  
 8 April – 15 May

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*Untitled (Anka)*, 2010, oil on canvas, 70 x 90 cm. Courtesy Anton Kern Gallery, New York