

### At the Garden's Edge

*Family Triptych* is a one-of-a-kind work, its constituent parts revealing only now, when arranged next to each other, the laborious process of change that has been taking place in Igor Omulecki's life and work over the last five years. With the pregnancy of his wife, Daria, comes a discovery which at first the artist is unable to say much about; he tries rendering it visually instead. In the opening series, *Lucy* (2007-2009), the wife's changing body is in the foreground, but it is in the background that true revelations occur. The couple stand at the entry to a new space that is opened up by the child they are expecting. This does not mean that the *Triptych* becomes, with the very first image, a parenthood narrative or a paean to a new life. Rather, the images should be treated as an impulse for the change at hand, the beginning of new vision. Hinting at where the artist looks is the dominant green colour, the nature surrounding Daria, as did Venus before. In the whole *Triptych*, fauna and flora are given space in the images as a rule. Thus *Lucy* gives rise to a process of confronting and relating to a rediscovered world of nature. We are reminded of this by one of the photographs, with traces of chemical processes corroding the image, which imitates organic tissue. Not out of perversity, though - that is missing from the *Triptych* - but in an attempt to overcome the contemporary distinction between the manufactured and the natural.

The arrival at the garden's edge is underscored by the title of the first series. *Lucy* is a special name in the history (and 'herstory') of mankind: the name given to a 3.2-million-year-old hominid skeleton discovered in Ethiopia in 1974, known as the 'mother of man'. A reference to an ancestor so distant defines the time of this new space. It is not rationalistically divided into the past, present and future, but into remaining, lasting and passing down. As the folk wisdom goes: nothing gets lost in nature. *Lucy* remains present in our instincts, dreams and anxieties. Omulecki explores also such areas: our fears are hidden in thickets, flashes and masks. By evoking *Lucy*, we can return to our animal nature. And so Daria flexes her muscles for the camera, emanating a primeval power, embodying an active attitude.

Coming to the fore in the new territory, the subconscious causes the *Triptych* to assume a form much different from Sally Mann-style representations of family life. Rather, it is closer, through the gestures or disguises, to the work of Ralph Eugene Meatyard, which was also *familial*, for pursued within the context of a close-knit community and constituted by it. The American experimental photographer used masks and roles for his protagonists in order to free himself from the rationalising formulas of everyday life and their constraints. The transgression the Omulecki family performs has a lot in common with Meatyard's experiments. Here, too, boundaries are delineated according to artificial criteria. In the work both of the author of *The Family Album of Lucybell Crater* and the author of the *Triptych*, that which is usually outside of social norm finds a perfect complement in folkish colours. The primitivistic feel of some of these images is no longer surprising; they are slightly naive, vital like folk rituals which one needs to believe. Both authors also share an interest in Eastern spiritual teachings.

If *Lucy* is the beginning of the journey into the new, *It* (2009-2010) marks its further direction. Nature, which the artist strives forward with his family, appears in new guises. This is still a garden inhabited by various creatures and endowed with a memory much longer than the human one. We also get to see the artist's father with his grandson, the figures rendered naturalistically again, in symbiosis with the environment, though it needs to be said that the symbiosis is achieved by courtesy of materials very much human. Black plastic foil, draped like cloth, veils a plinth on which sits an elderly man. Somewhere else appears another costume, like a repetition of *Lucy*, indicating continuity of material. But we are most intrigued by a peculiar work, all in drawings made by a children's hand, sketching, stroke after stroke, the portrait of the artist's deceased friend. This is the climax of the middle part of the *Triptych*. In this odd, intergenerational collage, *It* - the unnamed - assumes the form of a dialogue. The experience of a new life can be bound up with notions of loss. Sons resemble their fathers and grandfathers; the ancestors are present in them. In this part of the triptych, the artist explores the fear of potential loss, visiting the darker recesses of the garden.

The odyssey through the garden is circular, starting from the centre of the first parental impulse. The initial phase will be connected with enthusiasm and vitality, remaining focused around the mother and child. The second one introduces shadows, dangers, as atavistic instincts emerge; following their trail, the artist broadens the category of the family. It now includes all those that the herd trusts, those who share its experiences, including the painful ones. Those who are similar to it. This is evidenced by the third part of the *Triptych*, called *Waveherd* (2010-2013). Here change is ultimately manifested. The sole 'family picture', representing the artist's family as an archetypal herd, follows a different paradigm than the tender, casual portraits of *Lucy*. There is more humbleness here, more sense of distance of someone who stops at the edge to preserve the harmony unfolding before him. The transformation is complete, the artist and his family regaining their place in the natural world. Integration occurs. Hence also a change of scale. Abstract images dominate, intentionally repeated, lending rhythm to the process. This applies, in particular, to the moon, which regulates the cycles of waves. But the artist only seemingly departs from the origins of his journey around the garden of nature; cosmos, shown here, contains the beginning too. Now it becomes complete, and the family becomes identical with the world.

Put together, Igor Omulecki's *Family Triptych* resembles the multilayered images viewed through a kaleidoscope. Here, too, the successive stages of returning to a balance with nature overlap on each other, blurring the lines where one part ends and the other begins. The triad's eclectic form enhances this sense. Although in most cases the artist uses the photographic medium, this is a photography that is hard to classify. He often avails himself of ephemeral installations, simple sculptural forms or kinetic actions, all of which he captures in still images as for-camera events. In the finale, the *Triptych's* formal breadth allows us to see how freely associations run, how the cross-references accumulate, arranging themselves in the shape of a genealogical tree. They are footnotes to the story of *Lucy*, an auctorial treatise on natural history. It needs to be said that Omulecki keeps a careful hold of the narrative, maintaining a legible stream of consciousness. The legibility is helped by the distance we gain with each circle completed around the garden. As a result, like the artist himself, the viewer is able to see more of the space they are discovering, explore the background.

The work of regaining the natural, that which stretches beyond the threshold of the contemporary home, would not be possible without including one's family. Also in this respect the *Triptych* is a unique project. Rather than being solely the artist's realisation, it involves his loved ones, who become part of the herd, adopting the rituals and searching together through the garden of nature. The work bears their imprint, and they themselves are reflected in its different fragments like in a mirror, be it in drawings, archival childhood photos, or a piece of wood pinched from the artist's mother, which assumes the proportions of an artefact here. Participation, an important element of the whole project, means that the space of discovery becomes real.

This flow of experience, indispensable for the *Family Triptych*, is something that draws a parallel between Omulecki and an artist from outside the field of photography, David Medella. Both weave their works by tuning into experiences and maintaining an open attitude, building on their web of relationships. Both work in constant movement. Listening to Medella speak about his foamy fountains, one can easily think of Omulecki's clouds. Both forms imitate nature in order to better express feelings and hard-to-verbalise ideas, to maintain their dynamics.

Imperceptibly, as the journey unfolds, Omulecki's garden smoothly turns into cosmos. Clouds appear, the moon, and finally a nebula of stars. We see the broadest panorama, the oldest of a family's relationships, its historical studies begun at the garden's edge.

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