



maja kucerovska 62

'Beauty is youth, love and life'

Maja Berezowska was a unique example of active female artists during 20th century Poland. Her work was well-known by the general public, as it was published in magazines, and illustrated in numerous books and catalogues. Although we don't know much about her personal life, which was always secretive, what we do know is that she was part of Warsaw's bohemia, who accepted all kinds of sexual extravagance, gender and orientations.

Her life is a story of inspiration, beauty and love tangled with the traumatic experience of World War II and the communist regime. Despite of that time, she was committed to her joyful art and was referred to as 'the colorful bird of Polish art'. Recently she carries the nicknames 'sex-realist' and 'trend-setter of Polish porn'.

Through her work, the border between erotic and pornography is stipulated; omnipresent naked bodies, always young and beautiful, in erotic poses, captured while experiencing the highest states of pleasure and being drawn in a subtle and poetic manner. The female perspective on erotic themes underlines the palpable manifestation of life. As a female artist, she was the only exception whose drawings and paintings with innuendo were highly appreciated in the society. The essential in her work is the woman's perspective on sex. When a woman's pleasure is as important as that of a man. When a woman's position is not exclusive to the reproductive role. In Maja's interpretation, man is always the object and woman, the subject.

One can say she was libertine, who along her life, continuously broke stereotypes and carried the Polish sexual education a step forward during difficult times, when all kind of erotic acts and its connotations were forbidden.

In 2018, forty years after Berezowska's death, artist Paulina Ołowska referenced her work in a series of original paintings and ceramic sculptures under the titled exhibition *Amoresques: An Intellectual Cocktail of Female Erotica* presented at Foksal Gallery Foundation in Warsaw. Ołowska's exhibited works are influenced by Maja's illustrations and are combined with love poems from the époque times which are made contemporary by the artist. In my brief interview with Ołowska, I asked about her strategy for reenacting the practice of another artist in her own works, she answered: 'There is no strategy, I am far from that. I am foremost driven by a need. (...) Thus, I form a dictionary of female art, which is not yet complete and is still missing and we have so many new female artists from the past generations. I find it as a basic feminist mission and a reinterpretation of the art history to add the female artists, and that's why I'm doing it.'

In an era overwhelmed with the naked female body in the public sphere, Berezowska's oeuvres appear to be naive trials to showcase femininity and shouldn't be shocking. But shock is always about context, so let's reflect for a while on the current socio-political atmosphere in Poland; In May 2019, works by three well-known Polish feminist artists - Natalia LL, Katarzyna Kozyra and duo Sędzia Główny - were censored and excluded from being displayed at the National Museum in Warsaw, due to claims of being too obscene and vulgar for kids and adolescents visiting the museum. In such settings, how important is it to bring Maja Berezowska's works to light within the institutional art history and the public realm?

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This text is part of my research for the *Tea Party with Maja Berezowska*, which took place on May 15, 2019 in Stockholm as a final project for the CuratorLab course, organized in partnership with Tensta Konsthall.

image: Maja Berezowska, illustration from the book *About love almost everything* by Mikołaj Kozakiewicz, 1962