

Jakub Matuška  
aka  
Masker

When the wings  
of swallows obliterate  
a granite block from  
the face of the earth

Jakub Matuška is now primarily focusing on painting. With forty he is reaching the peak in experimentation with transposing his masterful drawing style to large canvases, often using complex techniques involving Photoshop and months of manual work with acrylics. Years ago his street art background brought him to spray painting and airbrushing, the primary media through which current post-analogue painting grapples with questions of flatness and depth, the solid and the fluid, the sure and the uncertain. The bold, seemingly solid drawn lines of the paintings exhibited here for the first time, in which small sketches have been transferred to painting with meticulous attention to detail, preserve every last quiver in the trembling of his pen.

In terms of the theme, Matuška seems to have leapt over the wave of surrealist investigation into the unreliability of his own perception, into spiritual crises and esoteric diagrams, and landed in settled scenes from the everyday life of a contemporary urban dweller – reminiscent of his early work as a poetically witty commentator on worlds of which he never fully felt a part. At first everything seems to be just fine, achieving professional successes and fulfilling dreams of settling down with a family. But the well-situated figures in the primes of their lives look down from the family portraits with the unease and often with the wobbly knees typical for Matuška's work. They leave us guessing, but they apparently are not ready to believe that granted wishes lead straight to happiness, that this is the summit – for the individual and for humanity. It is not clear whether the pensioner is giving a thumbs up, whether her expression is strict or confused, whether she is blaming us for the situation she is in, or if it would not be more apt for us to blame her for where her generation has led us. One eye is peering at us, the other into the void. The young couple's portraits appear to stray here from the tour of the castle's previous owners, but as if the pair was also watching a child spread soup all over the carpet and wondering if this is where life leads and when it will all end. The parent in the burning park can only resort to obscenities; he is passing the world on to his offspring in worse shape than he received it.

This entire family bliss has been bought on credit, and the forecast continues to predict extremes. As we go further down the path of fantasy, into the labyrinth of the installation and along the trajectory of Matuška's work, the certainties of the middle-class universe whither along with the slackening folds of skin on his figures. Themes of disorientation, resignation, and melancholy return, but the gravitation strengthens and the circles under the eyes deepen – from worry and from feverish, rather futile, activity, but also from the strange situation in which we have never felt as connected to people on the other side of the world, but also never as ready to swear just how different we are. The erratic melting landscape between Hayao Miyazaki, Hokusai, and Josef Lada entices the certainties of a civil existence into the thickening twists and turns of the unknown. The times for which realism no longer suffices stop being a question of a psychological episode and instead become the standard collective experience of a world in which we are losing our belief in the shared foundations of rationality. We discover that even those figures of productive age are like children in shallow water – in an unceasingly unstable environment, where everything is undulating and moving, surrounded by the silent expressions of irrevocably strange creatures. Decay, whether personal or planetary, is always within reach; anxiety and depression looming larger than ever and civilisation crowned by disaster return as a fixed idea resonating through various media, tossing the person around like destiny in a Greek myth or a ball in a pinball machine. And with his guiding finger, the father-creator himself is not sure if he wouldn't rather stay a boy entitled to his doubts.

The fragile nature of our balance and the everyday experience of fluidness remain the central theme. Ambivalence – emotional, energetic, and philosophical – and the grotesqueness of naked humanity, which Matuška enjoys having in common with the Renaissance masters, transform further into a portrait of present contortedness. But besides the typical sarcastic expression, gloomy beauty and shrugging shoulders of people dominated by history or biology, increasing reconciliation and hope are also a part of Matuška's newfound stability. If so much is happening that insanity threatens our minds, then our consciousness must have the power to change our state. But we have to learn to deal with these thoughts, just as Matuška is mastering new painting skills, every new picture a preparation for the final synthesis. For now we are struggling, but we are on the right path. We will approach the ideal of enlightenment in about the time it takes for the wind generated by the wings of swallows to obliterate a kilometre-long granite block from the face of the earth.

Michal Nanoru



Oliva and the Ocean  
2019, acrylic on canvas, 200 x 120 cm



Vote  
2020, acrylic on canvas, 190 x 180 cm



Something Like a Man's Head (Mine)  
2019, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 130 cm



Female Head (Tereza)  
2019, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 130 cm



Date  
2019, acrylic on canvas, 170 x 140 cm



Mikeš hegešák (Cat Behind the Window)  
2019, acrylic on canvas, 190 x 160 cm



Four Apples  
2020, acrylic on canvas, 150 x 90 cm



Man of Special Shapes  
2022, acrylic on canvas, 190 x 140 cm



Potato  
2020, acrylic on canvas, 160 x 120 cm



Interaction  
2020, acrylic on canvas, 180 x 210 cm



The Park is Burning  
2020, acrylic on canvas, 190 x 160 cm



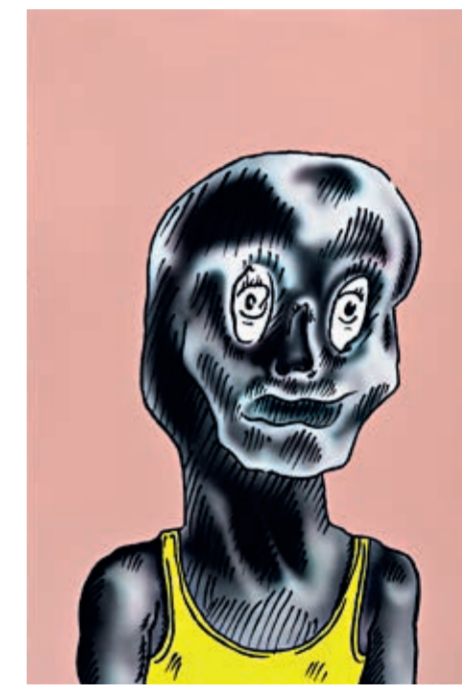
Evening in the Park  
2020, acrylic on canvas, 170 x 110 cm



Crash (Praying)  
2021, acrylic on canvas, 140 x 140 cm



I Called It a Bogyman Because I Didn't Want to Call It Death, But It's Death  
2021, acrylic on canvas, 140 x 160 cm



Death  
2021, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm



Head for the Conclusion  
2020, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm



Pepina  
2020, acrylic on canvas, 90 x 60 cm



Car  
2021, acrylic on canvas, 130 x 150 cm



Fish  
2021, acrylic on canvas, 120 x 100 cm



Yin-Yang  
2021, acrylic on canvas, 210 x 450 cm  
(three sections)



A Dam Half-Full or Half-Empty  
2021, acrylic on canvas, 180 x 230 cm

One of the leading Czech artists of his generation, the Prague-born Jakub Matuška aka Masker (b. 1981) started out with graffiti and street art and today focuses primarily on painting and drawing, occasionally crossing over into sculpture, video, installations and public interventions. Since 2013 he has been blending his boyish, ironic and poetic reflections on contemporary urban life with an examination of his own psychospiritual crisis. The persistent question 'how should one be?' serves as the foundation for his ever-inquiring exploration into the fraught relationship between image and language, as well as between painting and drawing, and into the different capabilities these media possess in making sense of our surroundings. More than a decade of combining traditional painting techniques, computer manipulation of hand-drawn sketches and the use of an airbrush on large canvases has allowed Matuška to explore questions of digital and analogue, transient and eternal, symbolic and everyday, and charming and confusing, creating his own rhetoric and dismantling conceptual and formal certainties in the process. 'Like Eulenspiegel, a joker and trickster educated by the street and equipped with an owl, a mirror, and the pea jingling in the spray can, Matuška mostly turns situations, sentences, and states against them,' wrote MF Dnes, the Czech national daily. In 2010 Matuška was a finalist for the most prestigious Czech prize for young artists, the Jindřich Chalupský Award. A year later he won the National Gallery in Prague's 333 Award. His work has been exhibited internationally. Matuška lives in Prague.

Jakub Matuška aka Masker  
When the wings of swallows obliterate a granite block from the face of the earth  
5/2-14/5/2023  
South Bohemian Gallery  
Castle Riding School  
Hluboká nad Vltavou 144  
373 41  
Exhibition curator and texts: Michal Nanoru  
Publisher: South Bohemian Gallery  
Graphic design: Zuzana Lednická, Aleš Najbrt (Studio Najbrt)  
Photographs: Martin Polák, Tomáš Souček  
Coordinator, Czech copy editor: Marek Svoboda  
Translation: Elizabeth Walsh Spacilova  
Architecture: Lenka Míková Architects – Lenka Míková, Anna Matoušková  
Construction: DilbaPro  
Promotions: PR and Marketing & Production Department, South Bohemian Gallery  
PR: Paulina Skavova  
Special programmes: Educational Department, South Bohemian Gallery  
Printed by Karmášek, ad agency & printing  
Print run: 200  
ISBN: 978-80-7641-055-8  
Special thanks to all staff, colleagues and partners of South Bohemian Gallery. All rights reserved. No part may be reproduced, copied, or digitally manipulated without the prior consent of South Bohemian Gallery.