

*"When I lived in Madrid, I lived just a few blocks from the Prado, making frequent visits to one of the finest collections in the world a pleasant task. There I came upon a particular image of the Virgin Mary, in which she reveals a breast that squirts milk in a long stream directly into the mouth of a monk at prayer. It was depiction of a vision of St. Bernard of Clairvaux by Alonso Cano. At that time I had no interest in breastfeeding and Cano was not my favourite at the Prado, but the scene was fascinating, slightly erotic and from the Central European perspective absolutely unprecedented. I saw the same scene in several other paintings at the museum. I saw it enough times to imprint the image in my mind. And after years when I myself began to use streams of milk to make marks on paper, I remembered it, of course. And so I even came to think of it as actually "normal" ... "*

We read the body instantly. Gender, age, power, as well as wear and tear. Just one glance suffices to decode another person. There is no doubt a pregnant woman projects a connotation for others that is more obvious than she probably is for herself at that moment. During her pregnancy Jana Kasalová began to trace the outlines and transformations of her body, probably in relation to the astonishment she felt at suddenly being read in this way. She was changing into a symbol that until then she has known only as an outside observer: *"I watched how my breasts increased and belly grew like a foreign object, and I felt a strong need to capture these changes; to record in drawings, and transfer to paper the changing state of this other body. "*

She focused on the silhouettes, thus actually progressing like a scribe who intently seams the transition of one character into another – both similar, but with a changed meaning. It was somewhat surprising that this procedure led her to a model that she already knew well from her previous work (*Terrestrial Maps / Tabulae terreae, 2002-2004*). Individual contours lined up together in a way strikingly reminiscent of the contour lines on maps, *"It was impossible to overlook the fact that through simple repetition, gradual reproduction and cross-hatching my drawings became a sort of landscape."*

Plotting the maps of landscapes, however, has long been associated with the need to demarcate the border: to mark exactly where one territory ends and another begins. It is precisely this question that loses its significance during the state of pregnancy, because it is impossible to determine exactly where "my" ends and "your" starts. This experience, when one body transforms slowly into the body of another, rather than via the expected borders, sometimes even brings the mother to a staggering sense that something like this actually dissolves any dividing lines between people. That the bodies of women and men are more than intermediaries, and that individuals pose as characters as though in obeisance to some text from time immemorial which sounds to us like eternal law.

Thus the studies of the body called *De Humani Corporis Fabrica* (2009) formed a natural counterpart to the series of 'written' drawings called *In the Beginning* (2010-2011). Combination of two or three words emerge from an immense graphic sea like embryonic clusters, developing only gradually into more complex messages. Even though Kasalová has co-opted sentence fragments from the first chapters of Genesis and the Ten Commandments, she has also rather inadvertently revived insights by Presocratic philosophers who perceived the world as a gradual consolidation of originally amorphous substances: "*From these as they are separated off earth is solidified; for from mists water is separated off, and from water earth. From the earth stones are solidified by the cold, and these rush outwards more than water.*" as taught by Anaxagoras (fraction B16).

The feeling that the written word emerges gradually, as if it were induced from a hazy indistinctiveness, refers, among other things, to child play: "*Before I could read or write, I made-believe that I wrote a long letter, imitating in my own way what I saw on the lines of books,*" the artist recalls. "*I think it could actually be compared to meditation. The lines in the cross-hatch patterns flow like a river, speech, book or embroidery. The repetitive process by hand was calming in an absolute way.*"

In any case the urgent need for calm speaks to the simple principles which Jana Kasalová implanted in her mind at the time when she was looking after her newborn child: "*I do not need to do two things at once. I have to concentrate.*" On the question of whether to make these marks using breast milk, she decided, despite several dilemmas, not to worry whether this was truly something new under the sun. A considerably more compelling motive directed her actions: "*I was writing myself.*" After all she was literally flooded with a substance, which surprisingly enough, could be used entirely regardless to the original purpose, and yet, whether it served as an artistic gesture or for verbal communication retained a direct trace of the body. "*I felt like Pollock, when I sent the extra milk on to the paper.*"

In her cycle of drawings with breast milk Jana Kasalová could convincingly experience her own presence via her work, as otherwise it was spiralling beyond control. "*Sleep deprivation, exhaustion and an inability to focus were so dominant that only via these small records could I confirm my own existence in the here and now.*"

Undoubtedly the awareness that this particular 'state' or 'condition' would not be forever did play a role. The sense of meaning that is alive right now - even to the extent that one can bear witness to one's own body - will perhaps over time lose its relevance, if any, and may even cease to be intelligible. It seems that Jana Kasalová returned to one of the oldest reasons to draw or write something. After all, all art probably originated from the need to report on a unique 'state' to those who are not 'there' themselves; who were, are, or will be someone else other than the one that currently writes and draws itself.

Jaromir Typlt

Translation: Harriet Landseer

