

PRESS RELEASE
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Josef Bolf *Forlorn Martyrs Pull A Mirror From The Abyss*

8th December 2012 - 16th February 2013



Staircase (Armory), 2012

galerie dukan hourdequin is pleased to present *Forlorn Martyrs Pull A Mirror From The Abyss* (8th December 2012 - 16th February 2013), the first solo exhibition in France by Czech artist Josef Bolf (1971).

« The painter Josef Bolf entered general consciousness shortly after graduating from the Prague Academy, in the late 1990s. At that time, he was one of the founding members of the art group The Headless Horseman (1998-2002). In this section met a motley, but artistically extraordinarily strong group of artists, who profoundly influenced the face of the Czech visual art of the first decade of the new millennium. However well they knew a broader international context, they never copied successful foreign models, but created works based on their own unsubstitutable experience. It was also the first generation of artists who were in their work no longer directly confronted with political and censorship interferences of the previous decades. Rather than with domestic tradition, they felt a natural kinship with the foreign art scene. Despite this, their life experience was different and authentic, to a significant degree influenced and affected by the motionless greyness and deep embarrassment of the so-called normalisation of the 1970s and 1980s.

It is the specific situation of Bolf's growing up that is often used or even abused in order to interpret his paintings. The references to childhood and growing up in the settings of inhospitable panel housing estates or the interiors of estranged schools and hospitals have often led to that and made it easier for many reviewers to interpret Bolf's paintings and drawings. However, if Bolf was later coming to terms with the hostile reality of his childhood and growing up, he did it in a supremely artistic way of a careful and sensitive observer: "In my opinion, things work

if they come from a personal vision. Then they are understandable in the primary feelings and relationships. Our exact historical or local experience is not so important for the painting to speak. But still: in my paintings I speak of my childhood, not of anyone else's. Maybe just because of that the things can communicate." After all, childhood is a theme going far beyond the experience perceived only subjectively; it is a key and general symbol of inner cleanliness, emotional naturalness devoid of pretence, vulnerability as well as insecurity, searching, and discovery.

Bolf's new paintings seem to lose their earlier personal acuteness; by contrast, they become to possess a more general overreach reflecting a broader existential experience. What still remains in his work though, or is even amplified, is a feeling of ambiguity and the unknown. Besides the motifs of windows and doors, in the past years there have emerged a number of works with various entrances and passages. These are of some sort all-devouring black mirrors, the gates of hell, which have no real appearance, though, and are often and at the same time a direct reflection of existing places. Never before may have Bolf come so near the medieval painting. In the sizable painting from 2012 aptly titled *Entrance*, there is pictured an existing entrance to one of Prague Metro stations. The painting is divided simply, even geometrically; the centre of the upper part is dominated by a dark plane, under which lights up the entrance to the underground. As if everything was the other way round; a journey into the unknown, the centre of the earth brings with its light an unknown hope, whereas the real world on the surface wraps itself step by step up in the all-embracing darkness. The figure of a young man ascending the escalator brings the light into the dark; his head turning away in horror from the seen is lit by a stylised halo resembling Odilon Redon or Gustav Moreau. This vision is an altar painting of a post-apocalyptic world of sorts, a world where everything is turned inside out.

In the paintings from 2012 emerges Bolf's new attitude coming not only from a personal but also a more general mythological tradition. In several works he, as an artist, tackles directly the great theme of European Romanticism,

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with the dream fairy tale of *The Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare. Thus he returns not only to William Blake, but foremost to his equally mysterious contemporary, Heinrich Füssli, from whose paintings he cites some motifs. We even find here allusions to the marionette adaptation of Jiří Trnka. The paintings of this series differ from his previous paintings even in its use of colours; the palette is richer, greens, which Bolf almost abandoned in previous years, appear here again. Akin in colour, however different thematically, is also another painting from 2012, *Horses*. In the context of Bolf's whole body of work, it is a completely unusual work depicting a surprisingly idyllic, almost harmonic scene from some imaginary paradise. As if the painter was even tackling the late paintings of Paul Gauguin here. Whether this is an artistic step in a different and new direction or an exception is too early to speculate since the distance is too small. Yet, even this painting semantically belongs in the body of Bolf's new work, if we move forward and update the earlier motif of wolf. There is an apparent move towards both form and thematic syncretism, which heads towards a new denotation, too.

Into real scenes gradually and inconspicuously sneak surprising, almost dreamy details. In the painting *Staircase*, on the architecturally severe mezzanine of a school staircase appears some legendary knight armour splattered with blood. From the shadow over the staircase emerges a silhouette of a figure remotely resembling the famous sculpture of *The Thinker* by August Rodin. By multiplying allusions and meanings, Bolf brings up the question of time, or of many times for that matter, their interweaving and coming back in time in the same manner as ecstatic visions. Thus he comes nearer and nearer to the most fundamental themes of the history of art. The richer colourfulness of the new paintings attunes even a wider spectre of imaginary tones and harmonies; intimate sonatas evolve into grim symphonies or even dramatic operas. Therefore, a certain staging is felt in the pictures; a theatricality of vision, permeation of various spaces becomes typical of Bolf. The individual paintings do not connect directly to each other; they create unusual stories, which take place in an imaginary labyrinth of memories and dreams. The spectator is more and more drawn into a seemingly incomprehensible story, which he becomes part of. Like the pictured figures, he too becomes an unwanted partaker in random situations, whose meaning is to be unveiled and understood. The painter is rather a director or conductor here, who unifies most various forms in one compact whole, he creates his *gesamtkunstwerk*. Thus, the heroes of the new paintings are not only wandering adolescents of our presence, but also fabled mythological characters of knights or martyrs, who seem to have got lost in time and space from medieval epics or Richard Wagner's operas as well as from Matthew Barney's *Cremaster* series or portraits of Francis Bacon. The new paintings also show how important Bolf's experience with short animated films was, which consequently reflected in his paintings, too. The puppet film joins in a specific way the film and theatre vision and is an evident inspiration for Bolf in the construction of the space of his paintings. Moreover, in Bolf's thoughts and drawings ripens and crystallises an idea for a new film, hopefully feature with real actors this time.

However, the new colourfulness partly shines through some other works from the recent months, no matter how they exploit Bolf's typical themes of mournful faces, deserted and damaged hospital interiors, car crashes, or inhospitable panel housing estates. Bolf does not dwell in one place, he is not satisfied by what he creates, on the contrary, a kind of inner overpressure always draws him to exploring new possibilities of painting. Therefore, the direction he will further take in the form of his paintings is difficult to predict however evident it is that he will never quite leave his world of lonely and mournful young boys and girls.»

Otto M. Urban, July – August 2012

Otto M. Urban (1967) is an independent Czech curator. He completed a PhD in Art History and Aesthetics (2000). Since the beginning of the 1990's, Urban has intensely studied central European symbolism and, in particular, the issue of decadence. Organizer of several exhibitions in Czech Republic or abroad, he curated the show Decadence Now ! Visions of Excess (Rudolfinum Gallery, Prague, 2010).

This exhibition is supported by the Centre Tchèque in Paris:



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BIOGRAPHY

Josef Bolf was born in 1971 in Prague. He studied drawing and painting at the Prague Academy of Fine Arts in the studios of J. Naceradský, V. Kokolia and V. Skrepl from 1990-1998, as well as at the Kongsthögskolan in Stockholm (1995) and Akademie der bildende Kunst in Stuttgart (1996). During his studies, he was an active member of the artist group BJ (Bezhlavý jezdec/Headless Horseman), active between 1996-2004, with fellow Academy students Jan Šerých, Ján Mančuška and Tomáš Vaněk.

A prolific painter and draughtsman, Josef Bolf has exhibited extensively, has been nominated and is the recipient of numerous grants, stipends and awards over the years, and has work in the Czech National Gallery and Prague City Gallery collections, as well in regional museums and prominent public and private collections throughout the Czech Republic and abroad. He was voted 2010 Artist of the Year in the Czech Republic for his exhibitions *Personal Disposition* at hunt kastner and *I Won't See You Anymore* at a former funeral chapel in Volyne, and for the realization his designed mosaic for the facade of the historic Jurkovic Villa in Brno that was commissioned by the Moravian National Gallery. Other recent exhibitions include *Prague Biennale 4* (2009), Rudolfinum Gallery in the exhibitions *UnderCurrent* (2009) and *Decadence Now!* (2010), Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art in New York (2010), a solo presentation of new work in the exhibition *You Are Not You, You Are Me* presented for the first time at the Frieze art fair in London in 2009, and later at his solo exhibition at Prague City Gallery in 2010.

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Josef Bolf
Staircase (Armory), 2012
Oil, acrylic and ink on canvas
200 x 150 cm

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Josef Bolf
Entrance To The Hotel, 2012
Oil, acrylic and ink on canvas
140 x 190 cm

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Josef Bolf
Couple, 2012
Oil and ink on canvas
35 x 50 cm

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