

P.36 *Gergely LIGETFALVI*
COŚMOS IN THE KITCHEN
PÉTER PUKLUS

“So what was your first camera?” – was the first – not very original – question I put to Puklus. Not surprisingly, we both started laughing, but let’s face it, how else does a photographer’s career begin? “I must have been about 12 years old we were taking a trip to Austria, to the Schneeberg. Of course the trip was more like a gentle hike than actual mountain-climbing. Before we left I opened a cupboard at home and found a Practica 2B, and so I took my first photographs, which were images of my family, the sunset and naturally the cows.” Photography became a constant activity for Puklus, although he also meandered into the realms of painting and the graphic arts.

His first book, entitled *One and a half meters*, was based on his diploma work, which in turn was the conclusion of a period filled with photography that he spent at the Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design in Budapest. The book, while it reflects a documentary approach, also bears the marks of the extensive work he did in the area of painting. The images show the artist’s close friends as they appear in their own living spaces. The interior scenes provide a glimpse into the everyday environment of a generation that was entering their twenties around the millennium. The distinctive micro-still-lives were done in bathrooms or living rooms of upper-middle class apartments that gradually have become the sites of new habits and customs. These still-lives are constructed

out of elements that, due to their omnipresence, are barely noticeable, although they play important roles in our daily lives – notepads, books, cell phone chargers or containers for food. In addition to the hasty, seemingly random constellations, we also come across compositions that have a more enigmatic character and overwrite practical references. For example, a bouquet of flowers has been placed on top of a washing machine positioned in a corner with tiled walls. Alongside the micro-still-lives, photographs mostly taken in natural surroundings showing either plants or paths leading into a forest provide a counterpoint to the portraits, which tend to recall classical pictorial topoi. This latter group signifies the core of the material. The often scanty garments worn by the figures are by no means the source of the impression of intimacy. There is no question whatsoever of pornography or voyeurism;

instead one discerns the intimate bond of genuine friendship. The distance of a meter-and-a-half (which figures in the title of the series) signifies the sphere inside which an individual only lets in his or her personal acquaintances, delineating a border with the faceless, outside world. Yet the distance, which even Puklus’ lens is unable to cross, remains. This is the collectivity that includes distance and closeness, the dissolution of which – the loss of an artwork’s “aura” – was attributed by Walter Benjamin to photography itself. The personality, inseparable from the body, unfolds, but its secret nevertheless remains inexplicable.

Following a year in Paris, Puklus entered the DLA program at his alma mater in Budapest. Upon finishing this program, he started to become aware of his growing desire to grow in the international sphere. “I spent more than a year searching for European and American galleries on the net. Everyone said it was strictly

↓ **Péter PUKLUS** 290.4 (from the series *Handbook to the Stars*) / (részlet a *Kozmosz kézikönyv-sorozatból*), 2011, photo / fotó
 © courtesy of the artist / a művész engedélyével



forbidden for an Eastern European to peddle at the doors of Western galleries. Nevertheless I got a few positive responses. One of the galleries, Robert Morat, even suggested a meeting, which came to fruition in 2010 in Paris at the Paris Photo fair.” The Hamburg- and Berlin-based Robert Morat Gallery, which for years now has been present at the leading photography fairs, even proposed an exhibition for the artist. The stipulation, however, was a book. Morat introduced him to Klaus Kehrer, owner of a renowned publishing house in Heidelberg. Puklus was able to pay for the expenses of his book *One and a half meters* with the honoraria he received for commissions he did for Prezi. For anyone who hasn’t heard of this Hungarian success story, the company called Prezi, which began life in 2008 in Hungary and currently employs around 150 people in Hungary and the United States, has revolutionized computer presentations. Instead of a traditional

type of presentation, which has a succession of still images, or slides, Prezi developed a platform which creates a kind of interactive map of the entire material of the presentation, visually illustrating the connections between the various elements. The software enables one to zoom in on any given part, thereby displaying additional information about any given sub-topic.

Puklus was indebted to Prezi not merely for the financial support, which he in turn could use to fund his art. The platform, which focuses on isolated pictures according to their importance and the spatial arrangement of their relationships with one another, has left its mark on the artist’s book, which presents his series *Handbook to the Stars*, published only a few months after his first book. On the plane of photographs Puklus united the cityscape and the still life genres. His *Handbook to the Stars* series built on “studio landscapes” and “urban still-lives” is much indebted to his participation in the residency program in Banská Štiavnica, which was initiated by the Slovak artist Svätopluk Mikyta. The majority of the photographs in this series, which recall the formal experiments of the classical avant-garde movements, were created here. As it so happens, an elementary school in the town had just been shut down and all the instructional tools familiar from math classes ended up in Puklus’ studio. His pictures that document model-like constructions built in part out of these objects and their intertwining with the “urban still-lives” depict a kind of private visual universe, the independent elements of which relate to one another according to a varied principle based on synaesthesia. The real novelty is provided by the arrangements of the pictures. Leafing through the book, it becomes immediately apparent that the photographs are of various sizes, and are off-centre. Several of them are even cut off, with their missing parts re-emerging later in the book. The individual pages only become fully intelligible when we see the entire material as an installation constructed out of numerous copies of the book laid on the surface of a wall. With *Handbook to the Stars*, an old ambition – namely the desire to surpass the traditional presentation of photographs – has been fulfilled in a completely original manner.

↓ *Photographer Péter Puklus* was born in 1980 in Cluj, Romania. He lives and works in Budapest, Hungary.

↓ **Ádám ALBERT**
TO MAKE A MARK
DÓRA MAURER



↓ *Detail from the exhibition entitled* **Dóra Maurer** – Concise Œuvre organized at the Ludwig Museum in 2008–2009 (Detail from the series *Squares Slid Apart*, 1974–1981, object, etching, drypoint) / *Részlet a Maurer Dóra* – Szűkített életmű című, Ludwig Múzeumban rendezett, 2008–2009-es kiállításból (részlet a Széttolt négyzet-sorozatból),
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movements. It was followed by several more films, most of which were done in the Béla Balázs Studio. The oldest ones were small, “elementary” events for observation, the folding of a bed sheet, shifts in space and time, panning back and forth with the camera, or matching colour fields with sounds.

AA *Colour, picture, mathematics. How did these become part of the story? How did your relationship with colour change?*

DM I clearly had a sense for use of colour that mapped an image and then transformed it into abstraction. But I was more interested in the close connections between the pictorial elements, even in the earlier works made of organic and natural materials. On the plane of abstraction the culmination of this is the “magical square”. By shuffling around stalks of straw I first tried to create magical squares in an empirical manner. I did not know the mathematical formula; I wanted to discover it myself. In order to systematize the task I finally drew some squares, which I slipped step by step one on top of the other on a 10 × 10 raster field as if according to the rules of a game, drawing around them with a coloured marker. Mathematics became a visual experiment. I was interested in finding out what kind of visual structure resulted from the transformation of the sets. I sketched the lengthy series showing the steps of the system diagrams by pairing up eight colours. In 1977, while preparing for an exhibition, I enlarged certain details of these diagrams. Then by blocking out parts I painted them in acrylic. These became the first “quasi-pictures”. I call them ‘quasi-’ because they are not real pictures, they don’t depict anything, neither a spectacle nor an emotion. They were only the encapsulated stages of a system.

AA *Did you already think that the elements of the system would begin to function as a picture?*

DM No. But it was nevertheless a pleasant surprise to see how amusing the encounter of a certain green with ‘English-red’ was, or the effects of the combination of the meeting of stripes and the colour hierarchy created by the sequence of colours. I had recently browsed through a book on psychedelic art, arabesques that appeared on the walls of the rooms of drug addicts. I wondered what it would be like if I were to paint my own room with one of my

images, extending from the floor all the way to the ceiling. Then I was given a chance to do this, when I was able to select a tower room in a mansion in Buchberg in Lower Austria that belonged to an art historian couple named Bogner. Here, from the seventieth system step, I created the *Space as Quasi-Picture*.

AA *Your pictures have their own special “naming-doctrine”. In addition to the Quasi-Pictures, there is also the Quod Libet and the Overappings. How were these picture types conceived?*

DM The *Quasi-Pictures* were the first of these kinds of pictures: they are diagonally striped, rectangular, with surfaces that occasionally have a three-dimensional effect. In some cases I kept the quadratic form. Other times segments are cut out along the borders of the fields or just randomly, even obliquely. I started working on the perspective derivatives of the *Quasi-Pictures* in the beginning of the 1980s as I was lying in bed looking at a *Quasi-Picture* hanging above me on the wall from a heavily foreshortened angle. I created the picture of the *Quasi-Picture*, its deformed view. In the beginning of the 1990s I abandoned the diagonal stripes, thus the plane itself had a smaller role. The contours, which created complicated spatial effects, remained. Long, narrow bands remained from the wooden panels, which of course I wanted to make use of. Taking these, I divided them vertically into halves. Then I rotated my raster-diagrams, making them horizontal. This was in 1992–1993. New vistas of the *Quasi-Picture* perspective opened. This is how I started my *Quod Libet* series. The title refers to arbitrariness – its meaning is “as you like it”. Later I tilted, twisted, and cut up the horizontal longitudinal shapes. The series entitled *Overappings* or the “spherical scales” began around 1999 with the sliding of fields that were fastened to a sphere.

→ *Artist Dóra Mauer was born in 1937 in Budapest, where she currently lives and works.*

p.50. Áron FENYVESI IN DEEP WATER ÁKOS SZABÓ

Although Ákos Szabó does not tread the path of painters from Cluj with their “fleshy” gestures or follow the Eastern Bloc narratives of artists from Leipzig, and while there is little trace of the Flemish predilection for grey in his paintings, he is nevertheless one of the most exciting young contemporary painters in Hungary today. To be so bold as to remain outside the grand narratives in and of itself demands a great deal of courage. The cultivation of painting with traditional tools is a fundamentally solitary pursuit undertaken in the “depths” of the studio. Strictly speaking, Szabó paints classical subjects in a classical manner, primarily portraits and landscapes. True, sometimes it seems there is more than one Ákos Szabó: there’s at least one photorealist Szabó, one pop-artist who incorporates inscriptions, and one abstract expressionist artist who paints over his figures. The seemingly staid and quiet artist steadily pours out unforeseeably instinctive paintings.

Szabó was distinctly drawn to painting based on photographs even during his studies. He never looked seriously at new media. But he cannot be categorized exclusively as a photorealist. He himself claims that he doesn’t copy photographs, he only uses them as points of departure. He incorporates many odd details into his pictures – like Richter – that hang into the plane of the picture in a somewhat unintelligible manner. These details or layers open up a new, oddly hovering or rather, enigmatic dimension. “I interpreted photorealism as a task,” he recalls, “for it simplified a couple of manoeuvres that had been difficult for me. The concrete inspirational source and goal, the photograph, was given. I was able to complete the creative process like a task, as if it were a study.”

Despite their overwhelming force, Szabó’s paintings can often only be described in fairly banal ways. His picture entitled *Deep Water*, for example, is a landscape swimming in various shades of blue, with a tree on which the warning sign “Deep water” can be seen. The companion to this work is entitled *Plots for Sale*. It depicts a male figure with two fish, beside him a young boy and a ball, with a house in the background. The basis for the painting was a minute picture in an actual real estate advertisement. The owner was undoubtedly attempting to emphasize the value of the property with

→ *Ákos Szabó Analog / Analóg, 2010, oil on canvas / olaj, vászon, 90 × 55 cm*
© courtesy of the artist and Gallery Neon, Budapest / a művész és a Gallery Neon engedélyével



the inclusion of symbols that imply wealth. The end result nevertheless has a surrealist, eerie feel, like a well-executed scene in a David Lynch film. To my questions as to whether he had ever been particularly drawn to fishing (as he has several pictures with fish in them) his answer was decidedly no. Although he used to go fishing with his father a great deal, to use fishing analogy, he quickly “switched over to the side of the fish’s”. Fishing magazines were also of little interest to him, but his father regularly bought them. After his father’s death, Szabó began to be preoccupied with the many fishing magazines, as if they constituted a kind of bequest. As he weeded through this bequest, he came across pictures that for some reason were more exciting and mysterious than others.

But why do these particular pictures constitute a source for the painter? Ákos Szabó attributes it simply to time: “when I have spent hours, days, or weeks with a single photograph, that’s when I really start to work with it. It is simplest to decide on the basis of the factor of time whether or not the image is interesting

enough for me to work with it.” Szabó is temperamentally sensitive and unsparingly maximalist. Every picture is deep water for him, since in every case he investigates the unknown and he is not really interested in conventions. It is precisely this that makes his exhibitions unique: his maximalist agony is palpable. One can sense that Szabó is struggling with his own inclination to perfection. This is why his best pictures radiate a kind of inexplicable agitation. All this requires Szabó perpetually to seek motifs, pictures, techniques and style. And this is also the reason why – contrary to the spirit of our age – he does not think in series. His attention as a painter is too inclined to roam.

It is perhaps precisely this puzzling unpredictability that makes Ákos Szabó unique, but there are also cohesive forces that lurk in the depths of his painting: “there is something that can be severed from the formal source, some kind of timeless and universal thing that interests me, which emancipates, which can be described in a banal manner as a good joke. For a good joke only works if there is an enormous chasm between the story and the punchline. Meaning arises from nothing, from wherever, if you’re lucky, you were least expecting it.” Thus we are dealing with an artist who pays scrupulous attention to the question of what kind of existence he is bringing into the world through his canvases, a researcher-artist who is constantly sceptical of the results of his visual surveying. And who, while creating his paintings, takes the events that transpire on the canvases as the basis and builds from them, allowing them to overwrite any preconceptions.

→ *Painter Ákos Szabó was born in 1977 in Budapest, where he currently lives and works.*

Translated by
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