

## **Evasive. Reflected. Variable.** **Video-treatises on condition of the image in works of Sophia Pompéry**

By Marta Smolińska

The marvel of Sophia Pompéry's works results from her interest in physical and optical phenomena. In many ways her video works come into a dialog with painting, its condition and tradition of imaging. They are characterised by a fascinating picturesque quality and a subtly arranged visual side, evoking a secret and oneiric atmosphere, guiding the viewer into a state of concentration close to meditation or even hypnotic enchantment. They are exquisite, self-contained, calm, focusing on a selected issue and perfectly arranged – they strike with simplicity of visual means resulting in the disclosure of multi-thread, complex meanings oscillating between physical and artistic reality.

The video **“Milk”** (2009) shows a jug from which white liquid flows in a continuous thin stream, flowing into a bowl set upon a table. The stream of milk is the only moving object in this specific still life scene that appears contrary to the laws of physics. By framing and arranging individual objects as a perfectly composed picture, nature comes alive – the timeless desire of painters. Additionally, the eye of a viewer who holds in the museum of his/her memory **“The Milk Maid”** by Johannes Vermeer (ca. 1658-61), subconsciously juxtaposes Pompéry's work with a part of that painting. Although in the Dutch master's work the jug is earthenware and seen from a different perspective than the glass and transparent one shown in the video, a dialog between them occurs in the viewer's mind, and in its consequence the video achieves a sublime picturesque quality.

Still life painting is also created in the project **“Plume”** (2010), in which red paint gradually introduced into water is dispersed like delicate wisps of smoke. The colour dynamically flows and **“unfurls”** from the bottom to the top, creating images similar to Japanese ink paintings or – close to the Far East traditions – patterns in paintings of the American painter Sam Francis. None of these images is allowed to stop; it passes very quickly, attracting the sight with its evasiveness and disappearing charm. The picture created in this way is therefore a continuous process, an activity, and, additionally, is based on application of controlled coincidence, as it can never be predicted what shape the ink will assume. Therefore Pompéry creates **“painting”** that breaks the stillness and unchangeability of a traditionally understood picture, in some way expanding the limits of that genre. Moreover, the English title **“Plume”** broadens a range of meanings, as apart from a wisp of smoke it can also mean a quill, which can be associated with the tool of a painter or an illustrator.

In **“Kawala Play”** (2008), Pompéry takes up the issue of the visualisation of sound. Playing on one of the oldest-known Arabic instruments she simultaneously blows a sustained note and a soap bubble, forming at the end of the flute. The bubble grows gradually and through that process, motifs reflected in it become increasingly clear. The ephemeral image reflected on the spherical surface is then directly dependent on the length of sound and breath of the performing artist. The bubble's surface is mobile, scintillating with many colours, yet still a distorted reflection of a room's interior can be discerned. The walls curve according to the shape of the bubble and thus recall anamorphoses known from painting, based, amongst other things, on showing reality reflected in a convex mirror, to demonstrate the skill of the artist.

A dialog with painting is also started due to recollections of still life painting or interior scenes by the Dutch Old Masters from seventeenth-century, who showed off their skills surprising a viewer with

exquisite reflections of rooms in transparent cups of goblets or spherical elements of metal chandeliers (as in “The Allegory of Painting” by Johannes Vermeer, ca. 1662-65). Due to such endeavours a picture inside the picture was created, allowing one to see much more than a section of the space showed in the frame. An analogous situation takes place in “**Kawala Play**”. An image of the flute together with hands holding it and the growing soap bubble is enriched with a view of the room where that event occurs, appearing in the reflection. Furthermore, at the edge of the scintillating surface the artist herself, tightening her palms on the flute, is visible – therefore her specific “signature” or self-portrait appears, which due to its specifics and marginal location can also be perceived as a dialog with similar self-portraits of painters already known in the Middle Ages and the early modern period, when artists excelled in showing themselves somewhere at a border of the main scene.

Also the motif of a soap bubble itself legitimises associating Pompéry’s video with the seventeenth-century Dutch painting, where it was present as a symbol of elusiveness and transience of earthly life. “**Kawala Play**” shows and makes clear that evasiveness through the short “life” of the bubble, appearing with first notes and bursting with a last sound of the flute. A viewer watches the bubble’s surface and the images pulsating on it as if hypnotised, trying to keep them in his/her sight as long as possible and to “fix” the image that bursts anyway.

A fascinating phenomenon of reflection and a motif of the artist’s own image is also the subject of the work “**Miralamentira**” (2009). The protagonist’s face is reflected in the surface of water filling an oval metal dish. The colours are subdued, calm, and the shape of the image field brings to mind eighteenth-century portrait miniatures. The artist contemplates her face for a while, and then bends towards it and slowly drinks water from the dish. As the result, the reflected face disappears, “withdraws”, is simply drunk, absorbed by she whose portrait was visible – therefore a peculiar act of “self-cannibalism” takes place, preventing freezing in admiration of one’s own face, which happened to mythical Narcissus dying of impossible to fulfil love and longing for himself.

In the context of this work it is impossible to avoid associations with one of the most famous canvases showing Narcissus, that is, with a masterpiece by Caravaggio created probably around 1597-99. While the painting of the Italian painter – due to inherent features and limitations of painting – shows one scene from the myth, that is, a youth staring at his own face, “**Miralamentira**” shows an image of a woman, and a sequence of events is develops: from the image appearance to its drinking and complete disappearance when the person stands *vis á vis* the oval dish but does not generate the reflection and cannot look into her own eyes anymore. Thus she is saved from fixing on herself and does not share a tragic fate of Narcissus – by drinking water she endeavours to do what the hero of Ovid’s “Metamorphoses” was not able to: he finally died of thirst. Pompéry’s work, by forming numerous and ambiguous intertextual relations subjects for consideration not only an image condition, and “edits” anew the myth of Narcissus. It appears that destruction of one’s own image means – paradoxically – redemption, while keeping it unharmed may lead to hypnotic enchantment and, ultimately, to death.

A relationship between video and painting is also, somehow automatically, initiated in the viewer’s mind also in case of “**Still Water**” (2010), in which Pompéry again focuses on reflection, where the surface of water acts as the carrier of an evasive image. The title, in turn, creates associations with still life and by this play-on-words emphasises the aspect of the quiet, peaceful existence of objects forming a fascinating configuration. Even the video frame showing a dark surface, part of a transparent vessel with water, a cream wall, a regular pattern of the tapestry on a sofa back and part of a blue bag, forms a very balanced composition of sublime colours. In the thus-arranged setting a hand appears, wetting a brush and painting water onto the flat surface. Due to a deforming perspective of the camera, the figure being created looks like a rectangle though in fact it would have to be a trapezium. On the water’s surface an image slowly appears – the reversed image of a window with a glass flask hanging in it. With each stroke of the brush the view becomes increasingly clear, sharp and complete; details appear such as the reflection of an inner court in the spherical vessel hanging in the window. This time then Pompéry creates a complex situation, in which not only the effect of an image within an

image is created, but also of a reflection within a reflection. Additionally, the image of the glass flask immediately creates a visual relationship with the jar filled with water in which the brush was dipped, therefore completing the finesse of this multi-layered picture configuration.

Associations with still lifes of the Dutch painters of seventeenth-century are justified in the context of “Still Water” not only due to motifs of interiors reflected in glass vessels but also due to the evocation of fragility, which becomes one of main issues in the work. A picture “painted” with water, after achieving its optimal sharpness and completeness, slowly begins to dry, disappear, shrink, losing sharpness, and so on, until it completely disappears from the surface. The work makes a full circle then, returning to the view of the room with which it has begun. In the Dutch paintings specific objects were saturated with symbols of transiency, while in Pompéry’s video those meanings are conveyed in progressiveness of a “maturing” and disappearing picture, showed due to specificity and possibilities offered by film, but still with a tradition of painting in the background.

Also other works of the artist, such as “Blind” (2010) or “Drawn Curtain” (2011) can be seen from that angle. Those two works show a window in two different ways: in “Blind” a view of clouds in the sky is projected onto a blind covering a real window, while in “Drawn Curtain” an image of a window that actually is not behind the curtain, is projected on its undulating surface. In both cases a viewer is confused as he/she cannot distinguish what is real and what is only an illusion. Those two Pompéry’s works make therefore associations with a definition of a picture as *fenestra aperta*, a term coined in the fifteenth-century and preserving a topos of perceiving a picture as an open window. In “Blind” the window is closed and the title of the work brings to mind blindness and the impossibility to see, whereas in “Drawn Curtain” suggestive presence of the window is only an illusion. Drawing back the curtain would in fact cause more confusion – it would show the strength of illusion in a way analogous to wonder of Zeuxis when he wanted to draw back a curtain perfectly and deceptively painted by his rival, Parrhasius.

The works of Sophia Pompéry – despite their visual minimalism and treatment of physical phenomena as a starting point (or maybe, due to those features?) – appear as particularly ambiguous and stimulating to the viewer’s imagination. They can be seen as treatises on the condition of painting, its progressiveness, illusion, potential of reflection, the everlasting desire of painting to show nature “as alive”, as well as about the sharpness and changeability of views (or lack thereof). Visual sublimation of each frame, visible both in carefully thought-out configurations of the objects and their harmonised colours, and in the selection of contrasting materials (glass, table top, plastic foil and fabric; skin of a hand, flute and soap bubble) creates a subtle picturesque quality, visible at the very first glance. Whereas when an erudite viewer stands in front of them, in further stages of perception those works interact with his/her private museum of imagination, activate knowledge and (sub)consciousness, directing associations towards the tradition of painting, recalling specific pictures or initiating reflections on topoi grown around the picture throughout the centuries. Pompéry additionally intensifies those chains of association by giving to her works titles that significantly expand the area of play on meanings and direct to new perspectives of making intertextual relations. The viewer coming face to face with those works must be aware, concentrated and open to the unexpected; despite their calm atmosphere these works also carry a lot of tension that is transferred to the viewer’s emotions when he/she wants to stop or at least stabilise for a while a disappearing or changing image, or stare as long as possible into a reflection on the soap bubble that can burst at any moment. Pompéry takes delight in exploring unconventional carriers for images, such as water, surface of a soap bubble or a glass vessel. Views created on such carriers are, however, evasive, perishable and not fully discernible. Similarly as indiscernible and gaze-evading is the image of the artist herself, caught in those fascinating and disturbing projections.