

**EVA ŠVANKMAJEROVÁ:**  
**DETAILS OF A “LANDSCAPE SELF-PORTRAIT”**  
BY BERTRAND SCHMITT

**The painter**

Painter and draughtswoman, set designer and animator, poet and author, Eva Švankmajerová was one of the most impactful and original artists of her generation. First in former Czechoslovakia and then in the Czech Republic, a key member of Prague's Surrealist Group, Švankmajerová was relentlessly active until her untimely death in 2005. She left behind an astonishing and highly expressive body of work, one that not only plays on the pretences and pitfalls of figuration but engages with the dynamism of shape and colour. Developing the spontaneous automatism of so-called *naïve* and *primitive* art, her work draws on mediumistic expression and spiritist art to create visual enigmas or 'rebuses'.

At once fascinating, funny and disturbing, many of Švankmajerová's paintings paraphrase iconic images from the history of art, mining its archives before gleefully subverting them. While her works leave ample room for play and imagination as well as invention, they also contain a certain acerbic humour, reflecting an emphatic rejection of stupidity and violence wherever she found it. Her practice took equal aim at repression and propaganda under Communism on the one hand, and the imbecilic vacuity of consumerist and capitalist society on the other.

Švankmajerová saw her work as the expression of an internal, irrepressible impulse, part of her since early childhood, but also as a means of self-defence. *I have been painting since the moment I was given a brush. I have been drawing since I first found a pencil. I have suffered from cyclic depressions for as long as I remember*, she wrote in one of her texts.

Born in 1940 in Kostelec nad Černými Lesy, Švankmajerová was sent to live with her grandmother when she was just two years old - supposedly to 'compensate' for the death of her grandmother's son - and stayed there until the end of the war. Upon discovering that she had two brothers, one older and one younger, newfound sibling rivalry and a desire to assert herself drove her to draw constantly; her first models were reproductions of illustrations from girls' magazines. Yet, although she wanted nothing more than to study painting and drawing at art school, she was refused access on two grounds: not only was her family too *bourgeois*, but she was a girl. As such, she was forced to take a technical course studying woodcarving at the Art-industrial School of Interior design, where one of her teachers told her: *What a shame you're a girl, you could have been a great painter*.

Having joined the puppetry department at the Prague Academy of Performing Arts (DAMU), Švankmajerová first met Jan Švankmajer in 1958, shortly after he had completed his studies; two years later, the pair met again and married. Švankmajerová was soon participating in creations for the Semafor theatre company and Divadlo massek (Masks Theatre), created and run by Švankmajer and several friends (including future film director Juraj Herz). In 1964 she worked on his first short

film *The Last Trick*, and contributed to many others as a set designer, costume designer and poster artist until 2004 - work recognised by the Czech Film Academy, who presented her with several awards.

## The paintings

On one of their first dates in 1960, Švankmajer gave Švankmajerová two books: one on the life and work of Henri Rousseau, and the other on Salvador Dalí. Both painters would become major influences on the young Švankmajerová. From 1963, she began painting regularly, and continued for the rest of her life. Her first paintings were figurative, starkly opposed to the abstract and informal styles that were fashionable in Czechoslovakia at the time. While early canvases evoked aspects of synthetic cubism, Švankmajerová's use of supports, tools and materials was atypical, and her technical 'clumsiness' (deliberate or otherwise) made her practice unique. Having come to the attention of other painters and sculptors, in 1964 she and Švankmajer were invited to join the Máj (May) Group, one of the country's leading independent groups of visual artists at the time. Švankmajerová participated in several of the group's events and exhibitions until 1968.

As her work evolved, Švankmajerová moved towards a freer, more personal style of painting inspired by Rousseau. Drawing too on naïve painting, folk decoration, popular stories and games (rebuses, guessing games, charades, anthropomorphic painting), she also reinterpreted well-known images from art history. Painted in bright hues and colours, her paintings might seem naïve, but their tone is often sarcastic, pseudo-lyrical, aggressive or cruel. Her canvases are real traps for the rational, logical mind; here, the relationships between objects and their appearances, between words and the objects they designate, are mercilessly questioned and challenged. Along with artistic or other aesthetic hierarchies, preferences for 'beauty' are swept aside with both humour and violence. Meanwhile, bodies - particularly female ones - are shown in a relatively crude way, without pretence.

Rousseau's painting *Moi-même, Portait-Paysage (Myself, Portrait-Landscape)* (1890), which Švankmajerová saw in the Prague Gallery, fascinated her. The work's disregard for aesthetic norms, its powerful imaginativeness and the poetry of its colours, all made quite an impression - evidenced in Švankmajerová's *The Visit of Prague Naïve (refined) artists in Prague gallery; after Rousseau* (1970). Here, Švankmajerová places the oversized customs officer - complete with suit and beret - in a landscape inspired by the original canvas. But her interpretation is sarcastic as well as faithful: under Rousseau's feet, Czech painter Vincenc Beneš (1883-1979) kneels, paintbrush in hand, as though touching up the ground beneath him. Of this painting, Švankmajerová later wrote:

*Beneš - I was 21 years old when I first saw his smooth canvases of cities. Today I remember them as something beautiful, pale green, which I envied at the time. There was a certainty, calmness and understatement in his painting. The cowardice of an insurance salesman. [...] And a year earlier, 1970, Jan had brought me a little sketchbook of Rousseau. It was a shock to me and I stopped being ashamed of my inability to draw things as they look and started to accentuate that inability, to improve it, and today I don't give a damn. I paint freely, honestly, and because I have to.*

In 1972, Švankmajerová made her own landscape-portrait: *Eva Švankmajerová na Hradčanech v ěnová na mému milému*. As in Rousseau's original, she portrayed herself exaggeratedly large against a city backdrop – but this time, the setting was Prague rather than Paris. And just as Rousseau had peppered his self-portrait with identifying emblems (suit, beret, palette, etc.), Švankmajerová depicted herself naked.

Švankmajerová's work between 1970 and 1990 was full of female nudes; her representations of women's bodies were often crude, and sometimes even cruel. The figures are heavy, their flesh a violent, purplish red (*Emigrace* 1981; *Utajený*, 1987; *Všeho do času*, 1987; *Přes všechno*, 1988); there is no softening or staging, no sublimation here. Above all, her uncompromising gaze was trained on her own body, often portrayed in her paintings with a humour and irony reinforced by their accompanying texts.

### **The old masters**

That same playful insolence and irreverent humour is abundantly evident in Švankmajerová's *Emancipační cyklus* (*Emancipation Cycle*), four canvases painted between 1967 and 1969 that invert iconic tableaux by Botticelli, Giorgione, Rubens and Manet. Denouncing machismo and skewering misogynist clichés, Švankmajerová's naked male 'Venouš' is as voluptuous and ridiculously languid as Botticelli's come-hither original. A text from 1978 explains her thinking:

*The emancipation of women is not possible in this civilization, and at the age of twenty-six, I made this constation in the paintings *Sleeping Mr. Venus* (1967), *The Birth of Mr. Venus* (1968), *Breakfast in the Grass* (1968), and *The Kidnapping of the Sons of Leukipp* (1969), painted by honorable men. Nothing but vanity. It wasn't a joke, it was the realisation that I was supposed to spend my life doing a lot of dirty manual physical work, what they call women's work, and all higher intellectual and human strivings were supposed to be suspect in my gender, or brilliant for this sex. They made no secret of it [...] For twenty years I had not met anyone who believed that when I grew up I would be a painter. This distrust was not due to my lying or some other suspicious quality, but I made a name for myself by the sex put on my baptismal certificate. Without claim. Strange. I had hoped for some time that somehow the misunderstanding would be cleared up.*

But while Švankmajerová's rebellion against society's sexism is obvious, to label it a straightforward role-reversal would be an oversimplification: her message is subtler than simply contrasting male brutishness with the oppression of women. After all, in the same text she points out that *all my childhood I was terrified of fat female tractor drivers in scarves*, and that women at work do not seem to her to be any more respectable than their male colleagues. Similarly, commenting on the painting *The Kidnapping of the Sons of Leukippus*, she writes: *And the pictures are cheerful. Funny. Instead of a gentleman, there's a dumb bitch kidnapping a man.*

Rather than a moral good-bad binary, what revolts Švankmajerová is the imbalance of power between the sexes. But beyond their political dimension, these paintings also express a personal

frustration, stretching back to the artist's childhood. Any globalising discourse, any desire to enlist individuals under a single banner (be it that of a political party, consumerism or overly-ideological feminism) made Švankmajerová furious, even as she fought fiercely for her independence.

Finally, while the *Emancipation Cycle* paintings brim with irony and humour, they are also expressions of admiration for their source works. Švankmajerová is not indifferent to the audacity of Manet, nor to the the glamour of the Cinquecento and beyond. In fact, the late Renaissance and Mannerist period, with its allegorical paintings, games and rebuses, would later form an essential background for her work as well as her husband's – something highlighted in 2024's touring exhibition *Disegno Interno*.

As such, her 1969-1970 canvases inspired by Rembrandt, Goya and Manet should also be seen primarily as joyful and humorous homages. In them, she takes great pleasure in distorting the models to her own ends, just as Picasso did with Velasquez's *Las Meninas*: a tribute, a re-appropriation, but also a plunge into the world of another creator, drawing out the essential substance that nourishes her own practice. Here, Švankmajerová takes up the long tradition of copyists and marches off in her own direction, imposing her unmistakable and deliberately humorous style on a long-established formula.

In these 1969-1970 canvases, as in the *Emancipation Cycle*, Švankmajerová adds another playful flourish via handwritten inscriptions -'faciebat' and 'me fecit'- in place of signatures at the bottom of the paintings. The texts comprise simple descriptions (*Portrait of Rembrandt van Ryn and Saskia Rembrandt van Ryn. E.Š.*), affectionate tributes (*The Birth of Mr. Venus with respectful permission from Sandro Botticelli painted by E.Š.*), and pastiches alike: *The Kidnapping of the Sons of Leukipp, like P.P. Rubens, E.Š. painted after Helena Fourment (Emancipation Cycle)*. (In this last inscription, Švankmajerová indicates that the painting is seen from Helène Fourment's point of view, thereby reversing the roles of male/artist and female/model.)

Sometimes Švankmajerová's humour is more personal, inching into the realm of in-jokes as in 1970's *Dona Tadea (after Dona Tadea Arias de Enriquez)*, which bears the enigmatic inscription: *dle Francisca De Goy Já E.Š. net' Františka Nekolného, Boxera*. It encompasses both wordplay and assonance - 'Goya' and 'Goy-já, E.Š.'; Goy-I, Eva Švankmajerová - as well as autobiographical allusions: *Eva Švankmajerová net' Františka Nekolného, boxera* means *made by me, Eva Švankmajerová, and not by František Nekolný, the boxer* (František Nekolný was a famous Czech boxer of the inter-war period, medalling at the Olympic Games in 1928). Meanwhile, the fact that Nekolný - Nekolná in the feminine - was the last name of Švankmajerová's maternal grandparents transforms a painting whose subject was 'borrowed' (from Goya) into a quasi-autobiographical work.

Fundamentally, this layering of narratives is the key to understanding Švankmajerová's work. Together, her paintings, drawings and ceramics form a quasi-diary of biographical and autobiographical narratives: a landscape-portrait, in which each work functions as an almost obsessive reference to the artist's family and domestic life, her relationships, memories and early childhood, her traumas and fears, her obsessions, fantasies, desires, body - even (or especially)

# THE GALLERY OF EVERYTHING



when she delves into the work of others. It is thanks to this incredible strength and singularity that, in Eva Švankmajerová, the world is finally rediscovering one of the most original and authentic Czech painters of recent decades.