

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Presence, Radiance, Pulsation: Ilona Keserü's Restless Objects

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A faded film, shot in 1982 by Ilona Keserü's husband László Vidovszky, captures Hungarian actress Nóra Németh moving theatrically around an exhibition space filled with Keserü's colourful works. Her radiant *Hengerpalást / Cylinder Robe* (1978) is slowly lowered by way of a simple pulley mechanism to reveal a woman, stepping out as though from a rainbow bath, baptised in colour. Children are the accidental stars of the film: a mesmerised toddler orbits the diagonally striped structure – drawn delightedly into its vortex. Another child, all in white save for a traditional sequined waistcoat, clambers in and out of the fabric tube in a game of hide and seek. The installation produces a remarkably spontaneous social situation, revealing or concealing anyone interested in playing the game and participating in the embodied experience of being caught up 'in' colour. Keserü presumably embraced the performativity of all this, staging the limitations of optical experience in the gallery setting and compensating spectators with a sculptural opportunity to delight in the intense psychological and physical effects of colour.

The Hungarian artist has been entranced by the materiality of colour for at least half a century. She recalls receiving a parcel with a box of paints from Paris in 1965 and feeling moved to compose paintings “for the benefit of the various shades of red; it is these shades that called the [works] into existence so that I should realise, and my hands should experience, that [...] so many closely related colour categories exist (from blood-orange to lilac-purple) and I wanted to try them all.”¹ Her fascination may initially have been symptomatic of rebellion. She recalls, “[i]n the seventies I was repulsed by the browns of the Academy studies. In those days, we learnt nothing about colour, not theoretically, not in practice. This is why later, I had to puzzle out all this for myself.”² Keserü became interested in “how to connect a continuous row of colors with a spatial form [...] with a continuous interconnection, the separate color shades advance for ever in a mysterious space without bounds and without hurdles.”³

The artist's pictures are not easy. They often appear restless. They are made to make us work, but elusively so. Perhaps they also elude the artist. She wants to organise what cannot be organised and understands that some degree of arbitrariness is inevitable, anticipating the return of the repressed. And yet she somehow manages to hold in balance the revolutionary struggle between constructivism and surrealism, with unsettling results. Péter Nádas rightly notes that “what others conceive of as opposites, Keserü sees as complementary.”⁴ He refers to her as “one of the great ascetics of modern Hungarian art” but observes that her work is at once “organic and constructivist. Technical and folkartish... Ascetic and orgiastic.”⁵ Géza Pernecky concurs, stating that she is “the kind of painter who decides before she begins not to follow just one path, preferring to be side-tracked as she works. She is involved with several subjects and tasks that take turns grabbing her attention, or else are treated simultaneously. It's like a garden where something blooms in every flowerbed.”⁶

Keserü's painterly work has a theatrical quality; her pictures are mysterious spaces within which forms appear suspended like actors on stage, positioned according to the artist's directives. *The Pendant Object* series in

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particular toys with non-objectivity. While suprematism sought to “liberate form” and “escape from the circle of things”, its white ground representing infinite cosmic space, the ground on which this odd assortment of figures floats is either greyscale, or skin-tone scale. Keserü shifts the pictorial conversation out of avant-garde territory and beyond the realms of the conceptualist neo-avant-garde – by way of the dark humour of the liquid words of Ed Ruscha – to revel in the fact that these days “everything is possible, and everything is possible at the same time”.⁷ This springs from her programmatic rejection of the cultural Cold War’s ideologically motivated “absurd division between figurative and non-figurative, which [...] in Hungary made our lives so difficult.”⁸

The artist’s desire to overcome binary thinking echoes the pioneering colour experiments of Władysław Strzemiński. The Polish constructivist sought to level tonal values to overcome the structural opposition between figure and ground with a view to arriving at “Unism in Painting” – although he would finally admit defeat. Ultimately he turned to inner vision, exploring the phenomenon of after-images, which have come to preoccupy Keserü too, later in life.⁹ Her repetitive motifs stimulate our nervous system in uncomfortable ways: “everything returns, everything repeats itself [...] it takes the shape of sudden disappearances and appearances, arches, loops, knots that can’t be untied, and flowing currents within the constant and unbridled mass of change.”¹⁰ The anthropomorphic forms in her *Pendant Object* works pulsate, rotate and shift, challenging us to read them as both figurative and abstract, posing the troubling question of bones as non-bones, faces as non-faces. The series was elaborated in Poland at an artists’ colony at Kamień Pomorski on the Baltic coast, in the uncertain months before martial law was declared in the country in December 1981.

In 1967 Keserü saw the remarkable headstones at Balatonudvari cemetery, which became a crucial motif in her work thereafter. She recollects feeling compelled to paint the heart-shaped form over and over again, returning to it at various points in her career: “the repetition of the winged form, its presentation with minor changes in colour tone, as well as what happened to the space between them, began to intrigue me once again in 1974.” Its repetition in the *Accord* series, for instance, is rhythmic, pulsating, like music. For Keserü, music, “transmitted by vibrations, wave-like movements” is a great gift: we can give ourselves over to it “heart and soul”.¹¹

The motif metamorphosises to become disarmingly erotic, its concave and convex undulations seemingly approaching coitus, suspended like the conjoined genitals and spread-eagled legs dangling beneath the moon in Max Ernst’s 1923 *Men Shall Know Nothing of This*. “Artworks know about each other” the artist says, simply.¹² Keserü’s series is less explicit than Ernst’s work, though. In hers, the curves elude and frustrate: desire is deferred – unspeakably present, yet void. Despite their lurid colours, there is a hint of *rigor mortis* and something dispassionate about her formal repetition, similar to the repetitions of the protagonist’s eyes in the photographic illustrations to Andre Breton’s 1963 edition of *Nadja*. Keserü would perhaps not object to the comparison as she believes that “the process of painting must contain [...] the workings of the unconscious.”¹³

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Keserü likes to think that the undulations of her paintings relate in some way to the pulsations of the universe at large, and talks about connecting with the universal by way of the “material signs that surround us [...] which carry essences approved and transmitted by long gone ages and cultures.”¹⁴ She is fascinated by the “ceremonious yet weighty nature of the way cultural values were built one on top of the other, transgressing on each other’s existence in every way, enriching life in ways impossible to fully comprehend.”¹⁵ Perneckzy explains that “[f]or her, the past is a living entity that persistently barrages her with questions.”¹⁶ Keserü is not interested in being first or last – “I am not avant-garde” she comments. The work she makes is intended as part of a larger conversation; “what I care about is being part of the world context.”¹⁷ The energy that makes the *Pendant Object* works so present, that makes them radiate and pulsate, extends beyond the pictures’ borders, insisting, no less so than the rainbow tunnel dropping down from above, that we, too, become part of this conversation.

¹ Ilona Keserü, “Happening, Repetition, Message, Space in the Making”, in *Ilona Keserü Ilona*, edited by Vera Baksa Soós (Budapest: Ludwig Museum, 2004), p. 49.

² “A Conversation with Ilona Keserü”, in *Keserü* (Budapest: Ernst Museum, 1989).

³ Ilona Keserü, “Color-Moebius”, in Baksa Soós, *Ilona Keserü Ilona*, p. 34.

⁴ Péter Nádas, “Signs of Her Own: Neutral vision in the paintings of Ilona Keserü”, in Baksa Soós, *Ilona Keserü Ilona*, p. 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁶ Géza Perneckzy, “Battle and Rainbow”, in *Ilona Keserü Ilona: Művek 1982–2008 Works*, (Debrecen: Modem, 2009), p. 14.

⁷ Ilona Keserü, “Radiant Spaces”, in Baksa Soós, *Ilona Keserü Ilona*, p. 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ The English translation of Strzeminski’s remarkable treatise “A Theory of Seeing” is forthcoming from e-flux and Muzeum Sztuki Lodz.

¹⁰ Ilona Keserü, “Tangle, Stream”, in Baksa Soós, *Ilona Keserü Ilona*, p. 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² See Robert Balogh, “Like the Sea – A Conversation with Ilona Keserü”, 7 October 2020, available at <https://international.pte.hu/news/sea-conversation-ilona-keseru> (accessed 26 September 2022).

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁴ Ilona Keserü, “Tombstone, Chest, Fence”, in Baksa Soós, *Ilona Keserü Ilona*, p. 10.

¹⁵ Keserü, “Happening, Repetition, Message, Space in the Making”, p. 49.

¹⁶ Perneckzy, “Battle and Rainbow”, p. 9.

¹⁷ Balogh, “Like the Sea”, n.p.