



## I. Introduction

Marta Klonowska finds inspiration for the subjects of her works in famous European paintings from the 15th to 18th centuries, prior to the advent of photography, and in particular, the animals and shoes that appear in these masterpieces.

She produces numerous drawings as part of her close analysis of these paintings, and the sculptures she creates by making a metal skeleton and attaching to it countless shards of colored glass in a manner reminiscent of embroidery are displayed alongside ink-jet printed copies of the original paintings. The resultant works combine a variety of elements including past and present, ideal and reality, and beauty and danger, as well as revealing the emotions that lie deep within us.

The exhibition title, “Istota,” derives from a Polish word meaning existence, being, essence, nature or substance. Klonowska produces numerous drawings to help her interpret the overall mood and historical background of the paintings that provide her subjects. At a glance, the sculptures created based on the animals and shoes in the paintings look like full-scale, three-dimensional representations of the items as they appear in the original works. In fact, however, they are new entities that have been reconstructed based on Klonowska’s close analysis and interpretation of the mood of the paintings and the emotions of the figures depicted in them. The word *istota*, which has various meanings, overlaps with Klonowska’s artworks in that the latter reflect on the essence of the things that live and exist within the original paintings.

In addition to a selection of works made between 2003 and the present, this exhibition presents some of the drawings that form the starting point of Klonowska’s practice while also introducing recent works inspired by Japanese ukiyo-e, providing a comprehensive overview of Klonowska’s art practice.

## 2. Klonowska’s art practice from past to present

Marta Klonowska was born in 1964 in Warsaw, Poland. From a young age she enjoyed drawing pictures and making sculptures of people and animals out of clay, creating her own world surrounded by her own creations. According to Klonowska, her uncle’s work as a sculptor and her experiences of making things at his studio also influenced her subsequent art practice. (1)

From 1987-89, Klonowska studied lithography and printmaking at the Academy of Fine Arts in Wrocław, Poland. After that, from 1989-1993, she attended the Düsseldorf Academy of Fine Arts in Germany, where she studied drawing and painting. Between 1994 and 97 she studied under Professor A.R. Penck, a leading figure in the German contemporary art world. While attending these schools, Klonowska continually searched for her own style of expression. She felt that unless she made sculptures using methods that captivated her, there was no way



she could captivate other people with her work. At the same time, she was always asking herself where the origins of her own interests lay. In the course of this search, she noticed some fragments of a glass bottle in her studio and realized she “could make completely new forms out of things that had lost their form.” (2) From fragments of broken glass, a material that is at once artificial and endowed with natural beauty, she wanted to bring out the allure that lies hidden within. This was the moment Klonowska first encountered glass as a material.

(3)

At the time, Professor Penck opened up to his students a studio he was renting. It was here that in 1995 Klonowska exhibited *Augenbrocken*, a work made by attaching glass fragments to a wall with pins. Few students were working with glass at the time, but as a result of making this piece, Klonowska realized the potential of glass as a material and adopted it as her medium. In 1996, at an exhibition held every February at the Düsseldorf Academy, she unveiled *chair and shoes*, her first work to involve affixing glass shards to a frame. Later, as well as being given the opportunity to display *chair and shoes* at Büttgen City Hall, she also submitted the work to a juried exhibition held at the museum Kunstpalast. She finished the runner up, with much of the criticism of her piece focusing on its overly decorative nature. However, Klonowska regarded receiving criticism as a sign that her work had the energy to captivate people, and the experience led to her to enquire even more deeply into glass as a material. (4)

Sensing that she needed to incorporate into her work subject matter that was both everyday and human, Klonowska went through a long period of trial and error as she explored the possibilities of the properties of glass as a material from the perspective of motifs such as the Rhine River and boats. In due course, she came to regard “shoes” as the motif best suited to her approach as an artist. (5) And so up until around 2000, Klonowska concentrated on “shoes” as her subject in the knowledge that they reflected the historical background of the time as well as the social standing, personality, feelings and nature of the person wearing them.

In 1996, while studying in Germany, Klonowska received a scholarship from Cité Internationale des Arts de Paris and was given the opportunity to undertake a six-month residency in Paris, France. While in Paris, Klonowska continued to deal with the subject of “shoes,” but gradually began developing her works into installations, something she had been thinking about tackling for some time. Her first installation involved projecting the moon onto a dark water surface and displaying shoes made using glass in this space, and it was in the process of making this work that she gained the insights that would lead to her adopting her present style. Later, after returning to Poland, she studied graphic design and launched her career as a designer while retaining her spirit of enquiry with respect to motifs by continuing her own art practice.

In around 2000, Klonowska began examining old paintings with the aim of making “shoes.” It was in the course of this research that her interest turned to the “dogs” in these works. Although these paintings were not the works by the masters that she draws on for her subjects today, she noticed that the “dogs” stood quietly in impressive fashion while fulfilling their role as supporting players. According to Klonowska, the way the dogs



appeared struck her as both slightly peculiar and charming. (6) As a motif in Western European painting, “dogs” appear as man’s best friend and symbolize loyalty. (7) The dog in *Demoiselle en Polonoise* (1778) by the 18th-century Rococo painter Claude-Louis Desrais that became the subject of 2014’s *Demoiselle en Polonoise after Claude-Louis Desrais* is depicted with a slightly exaggerated expression and appearance. It has a bristled-up mane like that of a lion. In works such as this, dogs are placed beside people as a decorative element. At times, Klonowska also reads into this motif of the “dog” as man’s best friend and an object of affection a fearful response to the human desire for control or domination, and even the brutality that comes from disobedience.

As well, in preparation for 2004’s *The Declaration of Love after Jean François de Troy*, Klonowska produced numerous drawings of the “dog” that plays a supporting role in the original painting, Jean François de Troy’s *The Declaration of Love* (1724), in order to capture its vitality. She also closely analyzed the difference in social status and innermost feelings of the man and woman in the painting as well as their social circumstances, reviving the “dog” motif in the present as a sculpture incorporating these complexly intertwined elements and covered in a “skin” of glass shards. The first exhibition in which this series of dog-themed works was introduced in a coherent form was the solo show “Dogwalk” held at lorch+seidel contemporary in Berlin, Germany, in 2003.

### 3. Klonowska’s creative process

Klonowska says that for her the creative process is extremely important. (8) This includes working with her hands, turning over thoughts in her mind and enjoying the surprise of the changes that occur while creating a work.

Klonowska produces drawings and sketches while studying the paintings that become the subjects of her works. This is part of the process of determining whether the subject is important to her and whether she is truly interested in it. Above all, she says that for her, drawing and sketching, skills she acquired when she was a student, are both the starting point of her practice and the most enjoyable part of the creative process. (9) She starts by replacing the original, colored image with a black and white one. This involves transforming the entire original image that is her subject into the world of black and white in order to make it easier to perceive the lines as opposed to the colors. As well, the lines that she produces one by one also help her imagine the three-dimensional form. These lines, which capture the sense of volume, texture and coat of the subject, are related to the task of attaching the glass.

Next, Klonowska creates a metal frame based on her drawings. By attaching glass shards to this frame in a manner that resembles drawing lines or embroidering, she wraps the subject in a glass “skin.” Between 2000 and around 2003, the glass she used was produced by smashing glass bottles. Since then, she has been using sheet glass produced in the south of Poland according to a traditional manufacturing method. In order to recreate the lines



achieved in her drawings in a way that takes full advantage of the properties of glass, Klonowska treats the lines the same way as drawn lines in affixing the glass, paying careful attention to the finishing of the surface and details. As well, around the time she first began using glass as a material, she classified the colors she used, employing green when working from Spanish paintings, blue when working from Dutch or German paintings, and red when working from paintings full of emotion. At present, however, she decides on what colors to use based on her own interpretation of the overall atmosphere of each painting. She also displays in the same space as her sculpture a copy of the original painting produced with an ink jet printer in the same color tones as the glass she uses.

#### 4. Expanding motifs

Klonowska says she is interested mainly in the painterly expression in famous paintings from the 15th to 18th centuries, prior to the advent of photography, choosing as her subjects animals and other motifs from works by the likes of Durer, Rubens and Goya. She also says that the experience of being reacquainted with these old paintings through the medium of glass, which she first encountered as a material while studying in Düsseldorf, was like retracing her own footsteps, or traveling back and forth between the world she yearned for in the past and her art-making present. (10) In recent years her choice of subjects has shown signs of expanding to include not only dogs and shoes, but also devils, squirrels and monkeys. In any case, Klonowska's interest in living creatures is not a biological one; she is interested in the existence of these motifs and the emotions surrounding them. The animals and other subjects appear as if they have been extracted as is from the original paintings, but they also take on a different form reflecting the artist's own ideas. Sometimes, through the use of a variety of techniques, such as making small squirrels appear extremely large in order to express ferocity, Klonowska's unique interpretations give originality to her sculptures.

In recent years, Klonowska has been producing works that use Japanese ukiyo-e as their motifs. Based on her experience of studying etching and lithography when she was a student, she has long been interested in old printing techniques. She first encountered ukiyo-e six or seven years ago after she was asked by a collector to create a work featuring a Shiba Inu. Later, while visiting the Cologne Museum of Asian Art to do research for the Shiba Inu work, she discovered a new field of subject matter in the form of ukiyo-e. The first work by Klonowska to feature ukiyo-e motifs was *The Fish*, which she created in 2013. The ukiyo-e artist in this case was Yoshu Chikanobu, who was active in the Meiji period. The work from which Klonowska took the fish motif is *Oniwa Aruki* (Strolling in the Garden) from the series *Chiyoda no O-oku: (The Inner Castle of Chiyoda)*, depicting three carp and three women. (11) *The Fish* was created by combining the images of the figures and the three carp from the original work. Klonowska expresses in three-dimensional form the dynamism and vitality of the carp, which dramatically twist their bodies as they leap from the water. The countless shards of red glass visible around



the tail were inspired by the colors of the fish and the kimono worn by the women in the ukiyo-e. Meanwhile, *Carp after Utagawa Hiroshige*, created in 2018, takes as its subject the ukiyo-e *Carp (Koi)*, from the series *An Assortment of Fish (Uo tsukushi)* (1835–39) by Utagawa Hiroshige. (12) The green and blue scales depicted with overlapping glass shards are suggestive of a carp swimming freely through a limpid stream lush with green aquatic plants. At the same time, the manner in which the entire surface is covered with myriad glass shards like hatching evokes a feeling of tension. (13) By constructing her powerful carp forms out of a delicate material like glass, Klonowska imbues her works with both a robust appearance and a sense of the impermanence of living things.

## 5. Conclusion

Marta Klonowska takes motifs such as animals and shoes that play supporting roles in paintings and brings them back to life in the present as new entities through the applications of various processes including drawing and attaching glass shards to metal frames. Through the use of sharp-edged colored glass shards that completely cover the surface of each piece, what at first glance seem to be charming animals, attractive shoes or frightening devils appear before our eyes as “mysterious living things” that incorporate the images suggested by the original paintings and the feelings that lie hidden behind them. Adorned with glass, a fragile, delicate material, these objects attract us while at the same time giving rise to the kind of peculiar space that keeps us at a distance and makes it difficult to draw near.

Combining the powerful vitality of animals, the delicacy found in paintings, the evanescence of ever-changing time and the loneliness of all forms of life, Klonowska’s artworks are mysterious living things, new entities that stimulate our imagination.

## Footnotes

1. From an email-based interview conducted by the writer with the artist on March 7, 2019.
2. From an artist talk held in conjunction with the exhibition “I’ve Got Glass! I’ve Got Life! Passionate Contemporary Glass Art” at the Toyama Glass Art Museum on August 23, 2015.
3. Ibid.
4. From an interview with the artist conducted by the writer in Poland on January 10, 2019.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Kikuro Miyashita, *Mochiifu de yomu bijutsushi* (Art history read via motif) (Chikuma Shobo, 2013), pp. 8–9.



8. Poland interview.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.

11. National Diet Library, *National Diet Library Digital Collection*, *Oniwa Aruki* (Strolling in the Garden) from the series *Chiyoda no O-oku*: (The Inner Castle of Chiyoda), <http://dl.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/1302663> (retrieved March 5, 2019).

12. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston website, *Carp (Koi)*, from the series *An Assortment of Fish (Uo tsukushi)* <https://www.mfa.org/collections/object/carp-koi-from-the-series-an-assortment-of-fish-uo-tsukushi-254450> (retrieved March 5, 2019).

13. "Hatching is a technique used in pencil drawing and other mediums to depict surfaces by delineating light and shadow, ie, using lines to represent surfaces." See Atsushi Tanigawa, Motohiro Kozawa, Koichi Watanabe, *Kaiga no kyukasho* (Painting textbook) (Nihon Bunkyo Shuppan, 2001), pp. 202–203.