

Polina Barskaya – Paintings

October 25th - December 21st, 2019

The logo for GNYP gallery, consisting of the letters 'GNYP' in a bold, black, sans-serif font, centered within a light gray square background.

The subject of Polina Barskaya's paintings is both simple and incredibly complex: everyday domestic life. It is a subject that allows space for all the nuances of emotional life, for the highs and lows of interpersonal encounters and perhaps for the most authentic version of the self. Barskaya's paintings can be seen as a kind of personal documentation of her inner life, where a range of interiors become the backdrops to her self-portraits. She uses these to share intimate moments of melancholy, idleness or self-reflection, stripped bare – always emotionally and sometimes physically. This surrender to vulnerability in her self-portraits results in a remarkable expression of strength. The intimacy of the moments she portrays is also reflected in the way they are viewed: the relatively small formats invite outsiders to get up close to the canvas where Barskaya's portraits confront their viewers with an unblinking, confident gaze. It's almost as if you were looking in an open diary that has been purposefully left open on a table.

Figures, furniture and background blend decoratively together on the small canvases – an effect created by the apparent convergence of the qualities of her materials, and the slight distortions of space and perspective. The many and changing settings, the product of many travels, are given particular attention. New shapes and patterns emerge time and again, and location- and season-specific lighting gives the scenery varying atmospheric impact, which in turn affects the mood of the image. This creates a close relationship between indoors and outdoors, which gestures towards the complex emotional interdependence between humanity and its environment. Barskaya captures these impressions in a photo before she translates them into paintings. Overlaying the photo with her memory, she brings an authenticity and expressivity to the mood of her paintings. It is precisely the everyday moments associated with a certain silence or a personal ritual that she deems worthy of portrayal. These are, after all, the moments when we lose ourselves in thought and experience intimate moments of loneliness or togetherness, such as the physical warmth of being close to someone, the feeling of distance after an unresolved argument or looking at ourselves after a long bath. Barskaya even presents a selfie in the mirror as an everyday experience that can represent a moment of alienation from, and discovery of, the self.

Observation of change and physical transformation through Barskaya's pregnancy are also themes of her current work. The private, everyday, domestic background against which this imagery unfolds gives the pregnant artist's self-portraits a kind of intimacy that is otherwise rarely found in art. Perhaps the only other artist to undertake a similar self-examination when pregnant was German expressionist Paula Modersohn-Becker – an artist greatly admired by Barskaya – who painted her *Selbstbildnis am 6. Hochzeitstag* (Self-Portrait on the Sixth Wedding Day) in 1906. Barskaya consciously permits such influences by, for example, conceiving of museum visits as transformative experiences from which she derives new gestures or compositional shifts for her own work. Thus, alongside the relationship within an image between the inner and the outer, between setting and atmosphere, Barskaya's artistic work and practice is also influenced by her environment, and her paintings are in a state of continuous evolution, as is the artist herself.

Klara Niemann