

Andro Semeiko *Polka Dots and Curls*

by Andrew Hunt

For his exhibition *Polka Dots and Curls*, Andro Semeiko has produced a new series of paintings based on two distinct literary icons – namely, the heroic Georgian poet Vazha-Pshavela, known for his overarching themes of strong-willed nationalism, including dignity and a zeal for freedom alongside problems raised by the interaction of human love with love of country, and Dylan Thomas, one of the most important Welsh poets of the 20th century, noted for his original, rhythmic and ingenious use of words and imagery – to enact various historical loops in poetry and painting.

Semeiko has combined these two pivotal figures with the curved and elaborate, ever-so slightly camp flourishes of the Georgian language (essentially the calligraphic nature of this national script is utilised in Semeiko's work as an ironic-poetic / textual-conceptual prescription for the 'other' of 'locally-hewn' forms of interpretation) with a mannered international critical discourse in post-digital painting.

Much like the rarefied theory of contemporary painting, Semeiko's cultural cryptograms are translated into ever-more abstruse formal decorative designs, devises that start to imply the existential cosmic interstellar film-space redolent of Tarkovsky, ludic micro-realities redolent of Soviet-era sci-fi escapism. This spiritual and metaphysical theme of Russian cosmism is a metaphor for resistance to state authority through existential tropes and personal distraction that also links to historical critical painting, for example in Semeiko's reference to Cy Twombly's calligraphic doodles, Sigmar Polke's humorous challenge to prevailing doctrines (against mathematical certainty in Sol Lewitt, Benjamin Buchloh's critical doctrine, et al), and Tomma Abts' experimentation with rigid grid formats.

If Thomas spent time drinking during the 1940s in Fitzrovia near the gallery in which this exhibition will take place, fittingly, in a context-based move, Semeiko's new work includes loaded ornamentation and stylistic tropes taken from Thomas' dress (the area north of Oxford Street has an important history of tailoring and the fashion industry in the late nineteenth century), gridded bubbles floating in galaxies that refer to the polka dots that the poet regularly appeared on his bow-ties and shirts, alongside more curved scripture-patterns that imply both Georgian handwriting and the hair of Thomas and his subsequent counter-cultural trans-Atlantic protégé Bob Dylan.

Importantly, by including a reflection on his own childhood spent in Georgia during a period of extreme anxiety, interspersed with small phases of respite in the 1980s and early 1990s – memories of a culture infused with a psychological reprieve from totalitarianism demonstrated by countless hidden creative and personal acts by the population at large – Semeiko develops and furthers art historical narrative in a small but provocative manner, his itinerant minor language is transposed onto a very public Western tradition in a synthesis that has interesting implications for painting and personal identity.

In works such as *Polka Dot*, *One Shot Polka*, *Emotions Before Gala* and *Unfinished Polka* (all works 2018) for example, we can see Semeiko's interest in Thomas as a parallel symbol of dress to his own background, a model whose chosen fabric and dandyish habits correspond with the artist's personal life and the context of his mother's career as a fashion designer. These references culminate in *The Overcoat*, which presents a flat pattern for a garment, and *The Pin Board*, a collage containing corduroy spotted fabric and pearl head tailor pins.

Similarly, *Breastplate 1* and *Breastplate 2*, refer to dress and costume by looking at military uniform, namely Anthony van Dyck paintings of armour, which offers a theatrical response to persona and fiction, a trope consistent in Semeiko's work, where painterly lyrical flourishes evoke memories of the Flemish Baroque. Of course, van Dyck was the son of a wealthy silk merchant, a parallel with Semeiko's family that the artist has updated for a moment nearly thirty years after the first Cold War in the heart of the ongoing technological revolution, where multiple temporalities and histories collide in an uncertain moment for politics and art history. In Semeiko's universe, this includes Russian-Ukrainian writer Nikolai Gogol's *The Overcoat* (1842) (on which is aforementioned painting is based) a novella that contains a surrealist criticism of a bureaucracy that connects private memoir with world events, Marcel Duchamp's Malik Moulds in *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)* (1915–23), metal objects that resemble tailors' dummies as well as breastplates (in Semeiko's mind this is a critique of Duchamp rigid power and legacy within art history) and Joseph Beuys' felt suits.

Another recent minor cultural connection with pattern comes from an unlikely source. As I write, a documentary on the Scottish band Primal Scream, *The Lost Memphis Tapes* evokes personal memories of witnessing the band live in 1987 in a small pub in West London, during which Bobby Gillespie wore his trademark *Sonic Flower Groove* (1987) era black and white polka dot shirt, a moment in British independent music directly derived from Brigitte Riley-inspired Op-Art and Byrds twelve-string melodies. As one of the least documented youth cults, the 'Start-rite kids' of 'C86' held a deliberately child-like innocence in the face of late-Thatcherism, an escapism similar to Semeiko's memories of his Georgian youth. If this minor scene's subtle subversion is comparable to Semeiko's unworldly approach to pattern, the artist takes this to the extreme in the *Metapolka* series, where distorted polka-dots float in galaxy-like voids, a willingly credulous nod to 1980s sci-fi book covers, subsequently complicated within the entwined historical helix of film, design and painting. In a contemporary political sense, these works acknowledge an existentialism connected to the ongoing creation of a second Cold War.

If Semeiko identifies with the increasingly theory-driven art of predetermined concepts in the twentieth century, through his reference to Duchamp's legacy,

he also brings into play Tom Wolfe's *The Painted Word* (1975), a forensic satirical chronicling of an increasingly critically illustrative art within the same period. Forty-three years after the publication of Wolfe's book, the author's classic story of art made to critical order, combines in Semeiko's imagery with a classic Ballardian dystopic symbolism and a Georgian calligraphy to create an aesthetic gap that somehow renders the Western canon and its fixed symbolic index alien and unfamiliar.

Another ironic shift towards the literary in painting takes place in Semeiko's *A Rake's Progress*, a paper collage using William Hogarth's etching in which Hogarth's anti-hero, the drunkard Tom Rakewell is pictured surrounded by prostitutes in a Covent Garden brothel with black patches covering syphilis spots on their faces. Semeiko has translated this work into another polka dot pattern, one that furthers his reference to narrative didacticism, to suggest criticism as a diseased, pox-ridden, self-serving discourse produced, reproduced and perpetuated by a small cadre of authoritarians.

Two final works, *Vaping on Laugharne Beach* and *There will be better ones, his head was exploding*, employ curling calligraphic patterns within a tradition of strategic outsider positions in painting, most evident in Philip Guston's smoking heads. Guston's rejection of abstraction in the late 1970s in favour of a naïve cartoon figuration is now of course a major art-historical trope, as is Twombly's lingering between word and image, yet Semeiko complicates these critical stories in his first work by combining Guston's alcohol-fuelled visions with what could be seen as their exact opposite, Abts' cerebral abstract precision to produce a humorously uncertain formal fusion. Similarly, the second work contains a Twombly-esque writerly style of painting on a theatrically alien *trompe-l'œil* punctured ground. Ultimately these devices summarise Semeiko's ambiguity with regard to conceptual irony and experimental humour. In essence, he synthesises oppositions in order to create new problems that mirror his personal alienation from formal convention, and in this respect, Semeiko is a uniquely critical painter currently working from the inside of art back out, as well as from the outside-in.

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