ALMINE RECH

Szabolcs Bozó 'Faces Instead Of Names' Palazzo Cavanis, Venice

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Szabolcs Bozó's happy creatures never really look straight at you. Too wrapped up in their own world, they turn their iris-less pupils towards each other, smiling and grinning openly. If they don't have mouths—as is the case for many of them—they stare with an expression of benign anticipation. And if there's the vaguest sense that something might not be right—the shadow of a frown, a glance tinged with a hint of anxiety—it is swept away in the generalized euphoria generated by a creature's many companions; often piled high one atop the other, or wobbling up against each other, or all squished into the confines of a cartoon car (or helicopter), ready to fly off to yet more happiness.

Bozó's characters exude positivity. In an interview, the artist mentions that the initial inspiration for his characters was the everyday experience of working in a restaurant, using a 'Henry' vacuum cleaner. These barrel-shaped pull-along appliances are known for their smiley faces: two hopeful upturned eyes printed above the hose outlet, which we involuntarily anthropomorphize into a nose; a vacuum cleaner that's always happy to help. What we are projecting, of course, is a fantasy of presence. Although, as Bozó notes in interviews, his characters recall characters from the old TV cartoon animations of his childhood in Hungary, everyone can relate; cartoon culture is common to all of us who have grown up in a visual culture of print and screen, between childhood storybooks and the grown-up (but increasingly childlike) styling of online graphics.

The figures in Bozó's paintings are sometimes humanoid, but never human; his morphing characters are inspired by Hungarian folklore, filtered through communist-era Hungarian animation, and storybooks such as Móricz Zsigmond's *A halhatatlanságra vágyó királyfi* (*The Prince who Wants to Live Forever*) (1984): Dragons and tigers, pelicans, dogs, roosters, foxes, elephants, all painted in toy-bright colors, crowd into Bozó's canvases to greet each other. And these are only some of the more identifiable creatures found in Bozó's world. Their companions include stranger things—multihorned, many-eyed beasts, centipedes in blue shoes, a boat party of curly-tailed, bright orange mammals. Even identifiable creatures sprout eyes on body parts where they wouldn't usually be.

In Bozó's latest paintings, his characters inhabit a strange kind of architectural scenery, which often borders on rivers, water, or other liquid spaces. *Éjszakai úszás (Night Swim)* (2023) sees a kind of gondolier wobble across a watery scene surrounded by swimming creatures and backed by distant buildings (perhaps a hint of Venice), while in *Vontatóhajók pilótái a Dunán (Tugboat Pilots on the Danube)*(2023), a group of button-nosed figures are squeezed into a pea-green boat, rocking unsteadily across a sweeping waterway of bright pink. In *Menekülés a szökókútbol (Fountain Escape)* (2023), a group of smiling animals tumble out over the edge of a kind of orange pedestal, like a classical fountain, which itself mutates, lower down, into an orange, blue-lipped bear-like creature.

If Bozó's creatures are in dialogue with liquid form, forever morphing and shapeshifting, they do this with one eye on the history of modernist painting and another on the artistic psychology of form and formlessness. Bodies that appear and disappear have a long history in surrealist painting for example. (Think of Asger Jorn or Jean Dubuffet or Max Ernst, to mention just a few mid-century artists.) And a more fluid, impasto technique has become evident in Bozó's recent paintings, with the artist mixing materials such as sand into the medium, shifting from the flatter style of earlier paintings to make the texture and materiality of the paint more emphatic.

The fluidity of creatures whose forms are constantly changing suggests a kind of fantastical in-between state. Psychologically, you might say it represents the blurring of the distinction between self and other, often registered by 'visionary' artists in their euphoric, sometimes psychedelic explosion of abstracted visual detail, often also marked by the appearance of disembodied eyes—a motif long associated with an 'outsider' and visionary aesthetic, from Adolf Wölfli to Yayoi Kusama.

But you might find the same dynamic in children's cartoon characters, where amorphousness isn't a subject of anxiety, but instead of openness and generosity. For those of us who were kids in the 1970s, this generosity was represented by the *Barbapapa*. And what were they, exactly? A family group of shapeshifting, multicolored blobs, far larger than humans, made up of nothing but outline and pure color, capable of taking any form they wished, with smiling faces drawn in line, black pupils set in white eyes.

Somewhere between these precedents—abstract painting, 'outsider' art, folklore, and the logic of the cartoon—we might locate Bozó's world. Somewhere in the midst of the carnivalesque conviviality of Bozó's characters, one might start to experience a sense of excess, or overload, a surfeit of positivity. TV adverts for children's toys sometimes make the ecstatic exclamation that "the fun never ends!" But what would it be like for the fun never to end? If Bozó's creatures never *quite* look at you, never quite break the 'fourth wall' of the painting, it may be something to do with that little 'Henry' vacuum cleaner: draw an eye looking sideways at any object, canvas, or surface, and it will always be looking away from you, no matter where you stand. Real world and imaginary world—the difference between the happiness of these unreal characters and the real positivity of actual color on canvas—are in Bozó's paintings always almost (but never quite) on the verge of contact.

— J.J. Charlesworth