

Alicja
Pakosz

Ptaki mówią po polsku

ALICJA PAKOSZ. BIRDS SPEAK POLISH

Arsenal Gallery in Białystok

26 September 2025 – 4 January 2026

Curator: Katarzyna Różniak-Szabelska

Production: Ewa Chacianowska

Beneath Mount Giewont, in the heart of the Tatras, an ancient story lingers, carried from one generation to the next. Long ago, a young shepherd, watching over his flock in the high pastures, strayed into the mountain's forbidding cliffs. There, in the fissure of the rock, he stumbled upon the entrance to a hidden cave. Its winding passageways drew him deep into the darkness until he arrived at a vast chamber. By the glow of a fire, knights in heavy armour lay asleep. Their horses, too, were resting, poised to ride at their masters' command. Startled and trembling, the boy roused one of the warriors. Rising on his sword, the knight thundered: "Has the hour come?" The shepherd answered that the time of trial had not yet arrived. At this, the knight bade him leave and let the sleepers dream on. For the guardians beneath Giewont will awaken only when the land itself stands on the brink of true peril.

Giewont, the symbolic mountain whose silhouette seen from Zakopane has long been likened to the figure of a sleeping knight, returns as a motif in the recent works of Alicja Pakosz. The artist explores the notion of banal nationalism, tracing the unnoticed and normalized national symbols woven into everyday life. She seeks them above all in culturally ingrained ways of depicting the landscape. For her exhibition at Arsenal Gallery in Białystok, Pakosz has created a large-scale diorama portraying a domestic interior. A life-sized Giewont lies beneath a duvet in an ordinary pine-framed bed. Through a ruptured wall, the landscape presses into the room, bringing with it a sense of structural collapse. The wind blows, curtains billow. At the heart of this scene stand pollarded willows, reminiscent both of Young Poland paintings by Jacek Malczewski and of Józef Chełmoński's visions of native landscapes. A woman in pyjamas tiptoes across the floor, trying not to wake her guardian. The sleeping Giewont, perhaps a husband or partner, clutches a knife in his hand. Once roused, he will give shape to the nationalist fantasy of violence enacted in the name of, and in defence of, the nation. Pakosz suggests that no matter how strained one's relationship with national identity may be, it remains impossible to imagine life outside of it. In this respect, it resembles a toxic relationship.

By working with the medium of the diorama, the artist references both the nineteenth-century tradition of natural history displays, showing taxidermied animals against painted backdrops of their habitats, and the twentieth-century history of national exhibitions. These exhibitions were designed to construct iconic images of modern nations, often through elaborate moving stage sets and, at times, even re-enactments with extras tending sheep. Because European landscapes tended to look rather similar, each nation had to distinguish itself through selective differentiation. In Poland, the iconic landscape became associated with the pastoral idyll, birch and linden trees, willows, and birds. Historical dioramas rooted in national narratives conveyed stories situated at the intersection of personal experience and sweeping geopolitical processes. Pakosz appropriates these strategies in a deliberately subversive way. Her narrative, staged within a haunted domestic interior, personal, tense, and infused with dark humour, both undermines and complicates traditional national narratives.

Deprived of its own agency and filtered through the lens of national sentiment, nature becomes merely a projection screen for collective notions of identity. Pakosz highlights this tension by ironically anthropomorphising the landscape, transforming it into a fearful witness to human interactions. The polarded willows, recurring in the painting at the centre of the exhibition, seem to scream in terror.

In Pakosz's paintings, elements of the landscape, together with amber and birds familiar from the history of Polish art., merge with everyday, and at times incidental, symbols of Polishness. Red-and-white roadside posts echo the colours of the many storks featured throughout the exhibition. In one of the largest canvases, these birds stroll among the wrecks of Polish-made cars: the Warszawa, the small and large Fiat, the prototype FSO 1100 Coupe from the communist era, as well as vehicles that have since acquired cult status, such as the presidential BMW or the Nissan popularised in the 1990s by the film *Kiler*. The car, a twentieth-century artefact and a symbol of national engineering, emerges here not only as an emblem of banal nationalism but also as an extension of the driver's identity. This thread is further developed in a small self-portrait inspired by Tamara Łempicka's iconic painting. Pakosz portrays herself in the window of a car, yet her image diverges from the erotically charged depictions of elegant women in interwar fashion magazines. Her unadorned face contrasts with the refined styling, just as the ordinary car in her painterly quotation lacks the prestige of Łempicka's green Bugatti a symbol of the liberated modern woman.

The cars painted by Pakosz seem almost immaterial, transparent, as if made of glass. These fragile "glass machines" symbolise the invisible, normalised forms of nationalism. Within the artist's personal iconography, the motif recalls her 2022 work *Machine*, which depicts four tyres on an asphalt road, "a road situation in which the vehicle moving forward has vanished, leaving behind only what touches the ground." For Pakosz, the machine is understood as "an idea embodied in a concrete institution." Such pairings might include God–Church, art–museum, love–marriage, or nationalism–state. In this metaphorical framework, the tyres stand for institutions that function on the basis of ideas which, in everyday life, remain largely imperceptible.

Returning to this motif in the current context, Pakosz emphasises that war, like a shift in lighting, reveals mechanisms previously concealed. It exposes the "machine of nationalism," which in times of peace may remain invisible. A painting depicting a graveyard of glass vehicles, among which storks stroll indifferently, extends this metaphor. It may evoke an image of a world in which state borders lose their significance.

Pakosz's practice reflects on the idea of national identity, a category that, owing to her Silesian background, has never felt self-evident or natural, yet remains an inescapable part of her own identity. Her

work is grounded in personal experience, which may serve as a source of inspiration but also as a limitation. One of the smaller dioramas in the exhibition depicts a man with his head submerged in a deep, muddy puddle. With a stick, the unfortunate figure scratches a rural landscape into the mud, attempting to picture what he sees beneath the water. At the same time, the hair on his head takes the shape of miniature hills and a pine-covered landscape, sending a different message. The artist does not trust her own convictions. She recognises that it is impossible to assess objectively the reality in which one is immersed.

Katarzyna Różniak-Szabelska

Translated by Anna Bergiel

Alicja Pakosz (b. 1996, Tychy) is a Kraków-based artist working in painting and its spatial extensions through installations and dioramas. A graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków, she is currently pursuing a doctorate at the Doctoral School of the Commission of National Education University in Kraków. Her works have been shown at venues including Gdańsk City Gallery, Arsenal Gallery in Białystok, CSW Kronika in Bytom, ADA in Rome, Raster in Warsaw, and Office Baroque in Antwerp. She has also participated in group exhibitions at Podium in Hong Kong, Her Clique in Lisbon, BWA in Katowice, and Galeria Piana in Kraków. In April 2025, she took part in an artist residency at the Polish Sculpture Center in Orońsko.

Katarzyna Różniak-Szabelska is an art historian and curator. She works as Assistant Curator in the Department of Modern Art at the Museum of Art in Łódź, where she is currently part of the curatorial team preparing the permanent collection exhibition *Ways of Seeing*. She studied art history at the University of Warsaw. Between 2020 and 2025 she was affiliated with Arsenal Gallery in Białystok, where she curated group exhibitions including *Cockaigne*, *After Valentine's* (with Tomek Pawłowski-Jarmołajew), *Duby smalone* [Fiddlesticks], *Deschool!*, and *In the Beginning Was the Deed!* (with Post Brothers), as well as solo exhibitions of artists such as Augustas Serapinas (with Post Brothers), Patryk Różycki, Gideon Horváth, Marta Romankiv, Zuzanna Hertzberg, Yarema Malashchuk & Roman Khimei, Alicja Rogalska, Lukáš Jasanský and Martin Polák, and Anna Hulačová. She has also organised public space projects and numerous community-based activities with audiences. Her research interests focus on modern and contemporary art in Central and Eastern Europe, with particular attention to socially engaged artistic practices.

WORKS ON DISPLAY:

Szklana maszyna [Glass Machine], 2025, acrylic on canvas, 140 × 200 cm

Garaż [Garage], 2025, acrylic on canvas, 140 × 200 cm

Pasażerka [Passenger], 2025, acrylic on canvas, 83 × 58 cm

Cichy narrator [Quiet Narrator], 2025, acrylic on canvas, 160 × 113 cm

Giewont, 2025, acrylic on canvas, 83 × 58 cm

Będzie tak, jak zawsze miało być [It Will Be as It Was Always Meant to Be], 2025, acrylic on canvas, 150 × 106 cm

Reporter, 2023, diorama: silicone, human hair, plaster, clay, epoxy resin, plywood, steel legs, 45 × 120 × 145 cm, work from the collection of Tomasz Pasięka

Ptaki mówią po polsku [Birds Speak Polish], 2025, diorama: acrylic on canvas, polyester resin objects, wooden bed, wooden table, resin casts, 210 × 450 × 250 cm

Alicja Pakosz's work, *Birds Speak Polish*, 2025, diorama, was created with the support of the Centre of Polish Sculpture in Orońsko as part of the Artistic and Research Residencies programme "Sculpture in Process".



EVENTS ACCOMPANYING THE EXHIBITION:

27.09.2025 (Saturday), 12:00 PM

Curator and author guided tour of the exhibitions:

Alicja Pakosz, "The Birds Speak Polish" and "Headlong. The beaver tumbled down the slope"

9.11.2025 (Sunday), 12:00 PM

Guided tour of the exhibitions in Ukrainian by Yulia Kostereva

22.11.2025 (Saturday), 12:00 PM

Guided tour of the exhibitions in Belarusian by Alina Wawrzyniuk

COLOPHON:

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municipal cultural institution



EXHIBITION OPEN: from Tuesday to Sunday, 10 am – 6 pm. Last admission at 5.30 pm

Entrance fee 8 PLN, reduced 4 PLN. Free admission on Thursdays

The Arsenal Gallery accepts Big Family Card, Białystok Big Family Card, and Active Senior 60+ Card

A detailed price list with a list of discounts is available at: <https://galeria-arsenal.pl/dla-zwiedzajacych>

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Arsenal Gallery in Białystok offers free entry to exhibitions and events to all refugee persons