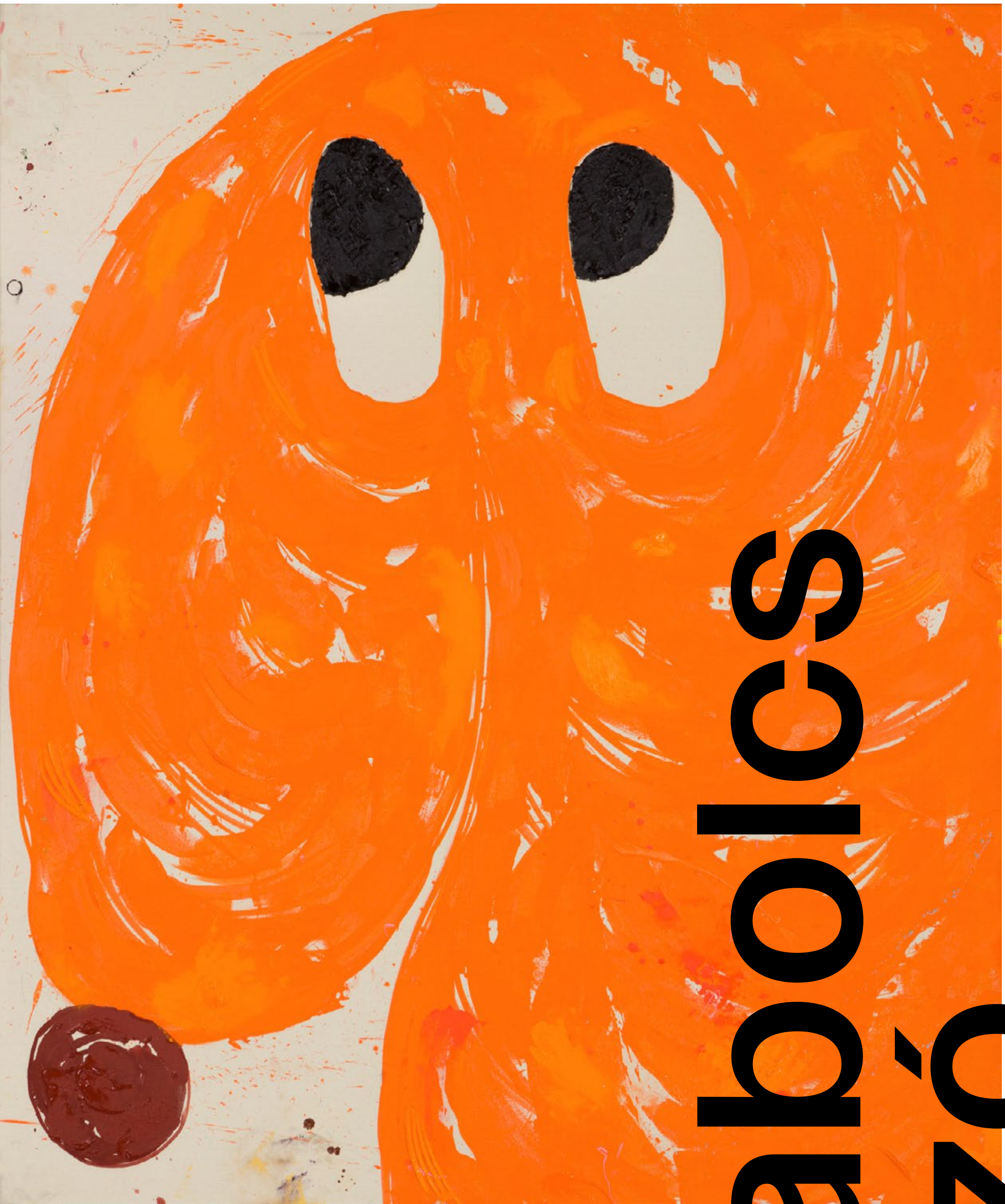


SOULMATE



Online Catalogue

Zsolt Petrányi

szabócs
BOZÓ

Introduction

The exhibition entitled Soulmate offers an overview of works by Szabolcs Bozó, both older and more recent. The successful London-based painter has become known in recent years for his distinctive, paintings of animals, which appear in groups or alone and are by turns comical and grotesque. While the immediate sources of his visions are Hungarian animated films for children and his grandmother's drawings of puppets, the story in fact goes back much further. Featuring large-sized paintings and sketches, this is the artist's first, long-awaited exhibition in Hungary.



And to complement the works you can now see live, here's the story of the development of a unique career.

The Start of a Career

Bozó did not prepare to be a painter. He went to London as a break dancer, and when that didn't pan out, he took jobs in bars and restaurants. He made drawings in his free time, which one day he showed to Marcell Nemes, an artist friend who lived in London at the time. Marcell gave him a table and tools in his studio – a big helping hand. The next step towards fame was the Instagram page Bozó created – and the rest is now history. Soon he was in a Mallorca residency programme, making paintings of his small sketches, enlarging them in the process to a size of 2 × 2 metres, as seen at this exhibition.

In painting, big size means a big change – both for the painter, who has to tackle the task, and for the viewer. The enlarged figures make for a different effect; they fill the space and their meaning changes. This way, the imaginary animal figures were turned into personalities who no longer resembled stuffed animals; they became beings that had come to life in the artist's imagination and were capable of firing the viewer's. Who are they; where do they come from; what's their life like; what do they want to do? – these questions keep our interest alive, and the answers change from one viewer to the next. This shift went a long way towards securing popularity for Bozó, who became one of the highest-selling young Hungarian artists.



Szabolcs Bozó: Curse of the Rabbit, 2021

Key to this success were the galleries that supported him and believed in his artistic development. This exhibition is presented in collaboration with Carl Kostyal Gallery, who represent the artist. Its owner, Carl, has done much to ensure his works are shown in major international institutions and are owned by collectors who will increase his reputation. Today, “art management’ is a system based on collaboration. If an artist and their work are interesting and respond in original ways to the visual and social phenomena of our time, curators, critics, exhibition spaces, collectors and the private galleries that sell their art will all play their part in ensuring their steady progress. The actors of the art scene can also help an artist to overcome the difficulties and creative doubts that are inevitable in a career.

Animal Motifs

The memories of children's cartoons, and in particular the world-class animated films that were made in Hungary, are an essential ingredient of Szabolcs Bozó's art. The figures of Mazsola and Tádé or Dr Bubó, familiar to many of us, gave us unforgettable experiences because their films were not only charming but also taught us about life. Their characters all represented human personalities, who solved problems and emergencies, and they all came to life through the handiwork of animators who in those pre-digital times moved thousands of hand-painted sheets. However, it is only to some extent that Bozó's work is a tribute to them because his own figures are very different from the original models – the former are,

in fact, only evocative of the mood of the latter. However, it is also true that when twentieth-century cartoons furnished animal figures with human characteristics, it was a chapter in a long story that goes back to antiquity.



Szabolcs Bozó: The Autumn Dream, 2022

From Animal Fables to the Grotesque

In the literature of ancient Greece, it was Aesop who first entertained audiences with animal fables in the sixth century BC, creating amusing situations in which the animals had to draw on their wisdom and their own character to overcome difficulties. Their lesson was that everyone should be reconciled with their own natural endowments and should recognize the abilities they have and can make use of in life. Everyone has values, and we should concentrate on what we can achieve, instead of what is out of our reach. Much later, in the seventeenth century, Jean de La Fontaine adapted and developed Aesop's works further, increasing the popularity of the symbolic use of animals; by the twentieth

century, animal stories had become commonplace and went on to be a main source for animated cartoons.

The representation of animals in art can be traced back to cave paintings. In painting, however, imagination played a more important role than in fairy tales. Artists envisaged half-human, half-animal mythical creatures, and the practice was taken to extremes by such painters as Hieronymus Bosch, who was active at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Grotesque and caricatural, his creatures were meant to be symbols of human frailties and sins. The symbolism of distorted creatures and human figures became part of the creative mindset, and disfigurement came to serve not only characterization but the expression as well of anxiety and other

The Evolution of Szabolcs Bozó's Art

As we attempt to understand Szabolcs Bozó's art, the history of animal representations in literature and art – a wide-ranging, intricate system, as we have seen – must be taken into account. That is because the cartoons that are referenced draw on this same history, and owe what we find to be their unambiguous meanings – like foxes are cunning, bears are slow and kind, snakes are sly, owls are wise – to the codes that are assigned to them. Szabolcs evidently chooses not to embrace these topoi, and represents his imaginary creatures in a way that makes it impossible to associate such meanings with them. This freedom is one of the valuable facets of his works: the viewer is given complete

liberty to make whatever sense they will of the painted creatures.

In recent years, Szabolcs Bozó's art has undergone marked changes. The initial acrylic works, which featured single figures or enlarged heads, were followed by experiments in juxtaposing multiple figures. He went on to paint with oil and create compositions in which the relationships between the figures are more complex. He could be said to have progressed from the enlargement of sketches to more painterly solutions, producing more mature works. The evocative character of his colourful figures is now complemented by playfulness in the representation, variety in the brushwork, and the bleeding or interplay of colours. However, Bozó plays freely with these picture "types," and sometimes

returns to earlier methods, preserving the versatility of his works. Let us take a look at a few examples of the different types of works.



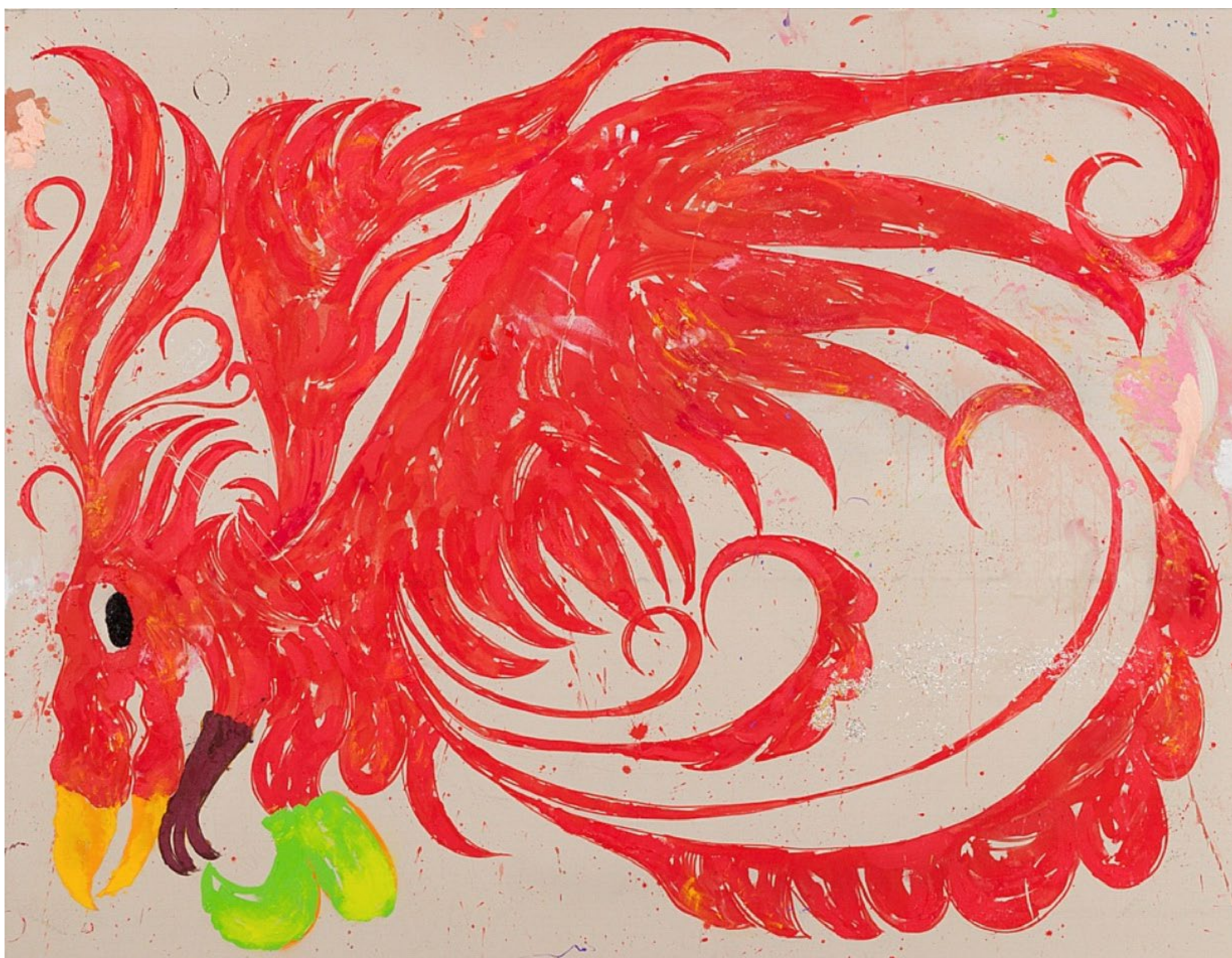
A Look at the Works



Szabolcs Bozó: Mr Gerald, 2021

Mr Gerald

In Mr Gerald, the red face, which either smiles or bares its teeth, almost completely fills the picture surface. We can see two ears in the upper part of the painting, with two large eyes underneath, followed by the nostrils and the mouth, whose line is uncertain and which seems to continue beyond the frame. The figure in this 2021 picture faces the viewer as if with a bad conscience, as if trying to avoid our eyes. This painting owes its effect to the impression that this large head seems to be looking through a narrow window – the frame of the work – to see what is going on in the reality we inhabit. The colour red can be either charming or ominous, but imagining the invisible body that belongs to the head can even induce anxiety.



Szabolcs Bozó: Red Phoenix, 2022

Red Phoenix

Red Phoenix shows a flying bird with ornate plumage and winding feathers, completely filling the canvas. Appearing in Egyptian and Chinese mythology, the phoenix is a bird rarely seen, a symbol of grace. It has red and golden plumage, and builds a nest only at the end of its life, which it then sets to fire and finds its death in the flames. From the ashes of the nest, a new bird rises. Bozó painted the bird in its full glory, putting a glove on one of its “hands,” and a boot on one of its feet. This way, the image evokes both the legend and its connection to the present. Bozó painted the work for a Chinese exhibition, where, much like in the space of NEO, it was hung much higher than usual, so that viewers found themselves in a position on the ground, looking up towards the sky.



Szabolcs Bozó: Trabant Copter, 2022

Trabant Copter

Trabant Copter is a painting-cum-installation, which is not something isolated in Bozó's oeuvre. The work comprises several parts, which can be installed site-specifically. In NEO, they surround a door, just as the work was first presented in an arrangement around an opening. This mode of presentation, the breaking up of the picture into parts, is about expanding the possibilities of painting, the search for new solutions. Trabant Copter references a childhood memory: Szabolcs was left by his father alone in the car; when the handbrake came loose and the Trabant started rolling, it was only stopped by an excavator, which ripped its roof off. Bozó was not hurt, but the experience was traumatic, and he tried to process it through this cheerful painting.



Szabolcs Bozó: Soulmate, 2020

Soulmate

Soulmate, the title piece of the exhibition, is a unique work in the oeuvre of Szabolcs Bozó, in that it was created through collaboration. He invited artist Richie Culvet to his studio and asked him to complete the painting with an inscription. Though it came up spontaneously, the word, Soulmate, sheds light on the meaning of Bozó's figures. They bring to mind our childhood, when we found companions among the imaginary creatures and cartoon characters, and they stimulated our need for social life, greatly influencing our subsequent lives. Painted with black paint against a white ground, Soulmate resembles a drawing, and as such, belongs in a distinct group in Szabolcs Bozó's oeuvre.



Szabolcs Bozó: Balaton, 2021

Balaton

Balaton is a multigure composition, with the picture space filled by faces, rather than a single, dominant character. As in medieval tableaux, the relative position in depth of individual figures is only indicated by one overlapping the other. A tree in the background suggests this is an idyllic lido scene. Thanks to the realistic situation, the figures could well be replaced by human characters. Group scenes led Bozó towards grotesque art, where the imaginary creatures serve the ironic representation of human behaviours.



Szabolcs Bozó: Bad Driver, 2024

Bad Driver

Bad Driver represents Szabolcs Bozó's latest creative period, with the figures no longer having the quality of cartoon characters, and are given bodies instead, the movement of which results in complex compositions. Irony and grotesque representation are increasingly important, as is well illustrated by this painting. As suggested by the title, this work depicts another realistic situation, the common experience of passengers in a vehicle driven by a bad driver: fright, anger, amusement and compassion completely change the ordinary mood of a journey. In contrast to former works, the background is segmented and is composed of colour surfaces, which lends a new, compelling perspective to this piece, along with other recent ones.

The Importance of Szabolcs Bozó

Szabolcs Bozó's art fits in with a trend in contemporary art where the references are less to reality and more to animal representations and pop culture, the intention still being to depict human behaviour and character. Like Bozó, André Butzer, Nara Yoshitomo and others avail themselves of this possibility to express their own meanings, their own individual experiences. For Szabolcs, the initial impetus to make art came from an interview he saw, in which Jonathan Meese talked about complete freedom in the choice of means and motifs. Later he would exhibit with Meese, whose approach made such a great impression on him; if their respective techniques are different, there is

a fair amount of affinity between their works. Each is marked by an individual approach, each follows his own rules in creation. Szabolcs Bozó's journey began with a simplicity of representation and a direct mode of expression, with his art becoming increasingly complex over time. This is well illustrated by the works on view in NEO at the young artist's first solo exhibition in Hungary, which offers an overview of his oeuvre to date.