



Piotr Ukłański Ottomania

Piotr Uklański, *Untitled (Lukasz Trzcinski)*, 2019

Piotr Uklański: Ottomania

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Luxembourg & Dayan

64 East 77th Street, New York City

New York... Beginning September 19, 2019, Luxembourg & Dayan will present *Piotr Uklański: Ottomania*, an exhibition of works from the artist's new series of large-scale paintings inspired by the complex Orientalist heritage of Poland, his country of origin. Uklański's lushly rendered re-interpretations of a broad range of art-historical portraits find the Warsaw-born, New York-based artist expanding his longstanding engagement with questions of nationalist ideologies, representations of masculinity, and personal identity while redressing contemporary suppression of Eastern Europe's deep and felicitous connections to the Middle East.

Sifting through centuries of obscure art historical source imagery, Uklański has depicted white European subjects enrobed in the clothing and signifiers of the Orient—turbans, richly patterned fabrics, ornate Eastern jewelry, and other exotic accoutrements—to suggest the sitters' desire to merge the allure of otherness with their existing identities. Executed in ink, oil stick, and acrylic on deeply colored velvet, burlap, or canvas, the Ottomania paintings recuperate a complex, centuries-old cultural cross-pollination between East and West to contradict both the extreme Islamophobia of today's Western political culture, and the academic community's categorizations of Orientalism as unilaterally essentialist. Uklański's new canvases celebrate Europe's undeniable romance with the Islamic cultures of Turkey, Persia, and North Africa, while inviting viewers to question their coded content.

On view through November 16, *Ottomania* at Luxembourg & Dayan coincides with and complements Uklański's participation in the 16th Istanbul Biennale *The Seventh Continent*, curated by Nicolas Bourriaud. For the Biennale, Uklański will present a significant group of the Ottomania paintings inside the permanent collection rooms of the Pera Museum, an institution in Istanbul, focused upon Orientalism in the 19th-century art of Europe and Turkey.

The exhibitions in New York and Istanbul will be accompanied by extensive documentation. Luxembourg & Dayan will also publish an exhibition catalogue documenting Uklański's paintings in both the New York and Istanbul exhibitions, featuring a text by fellow artist and writer Sam McKinniss. Uklański will also publish an artist book entitled *Ottomania* in collaboration with the Istanbul Biennale, bringing together over 200 paintings selected from the Orientalist imaginary of European art spanning centuries.

About Ottomania

As Ukiński explains, “The history of the Poles—a Slavic tribe—belongs to the East.”

The roots of Poland’s close relationship with the Ottoman empire date to 1414, with the advent of diplomatic relations over its shared southern border. For Poles, the Orient was an object of fascination and source of prestige. From the 15th century into the 18th century, Polish nobility adopted Ottoman dress and Persian flourishes to signal their distinguished social status, ascribing their upper-class pedigree to the celebrated Persian Sarmatians of classical antiquity. Even in contemporary Poland these influences persist: the country’s national costume, the *Sarmacki*, derives from Turkish regalia.

From the 18th into the early 20th century, European artists turned signifiers of the East—turbans and theatrically embellished Orientalist dress, richly decorated fabrics, and the romantic settings of Ottoman or Persian court life—into images of exotic otherness for Western consumption. This complex history of representation was reevaluated at the end of the 20th century by, among others, the late influential writer and professor Edward Said, who positioned the term “Orientalism” as a pejorative to describe an inherently demeaning fetishizing of the Orient.

More recently, however, leading scholars have pushed back against Said’s totalizing view of Orientalism. As literary scholar Richmond Barbour argued in his 2003 book *Before Orientalism*, Said’s theory oversimplifies the “complex processes by which societies engaged, articulated and shaped each other, in multiple and shifting alliances.” Ukiński’s Ottomania paintings attempt to mine these exchanges between East and West, prompted by the legacy of the Polish and Ottoman cultural symbiosis he inherited as a Polish artist.



Piotr Ukiński, *Untitled (Tamara de Lempicka)*, 2019

About the Exhibition

In *Ottomania* at Luxembourg & Dayan, Ukiński’s paintings acknowledge the fraught history of colonialism within his Old Master iconography while simultaneously highlighting the reciprocal exchanges that fueled the centuries-long European craze for things Islamic. It is interesting to note that Poland did not develop a superiority complex with respect to those distant civilizations; its people never colonized nor conquered Muslim lands, but were instead colonized by other European powers as well as Russia and fled as refugees to Ottoman controlled territories in the 18th century. These paintings recall the Ottoman Empire not as a cultural underdog, but as a hegemonic political and cultural superpower, and bring to the surface repressed socio-political content as well as questions about the scopophilic pleasures of portraiture as a genre.

Appropriating centuries of cultural appropriation itself, Ukiński transforms his source imagery. Among other tactics, he enlarges and amplifies small-scale pictures to highlight the inherent theatricality of his subjects, magnifying the details wherein white Europeans deployed their Orientalist fetishes as a form of performative drag in a coded ploy to deviate from the everyday restrictions of class, gender, and sexual norms. Just as Ukiński’s work *The Nazis* (1998)—a group of tightly cropped portraits of famous movie actors playing Third Reich soldiers—excavated the seductive regalia of the Nazism, with its pomp of militarized masculinity

and its relationship to the nefarious ideologies of fascism, so does the work on view in *Ottomania* seek to interrogate the interplay of meaning and ideology under the pageantry of this longstanding romance between East and West.

The European tradition of Eastern masquerade as an amusement for the Western European aristocracy is the subject of one of the exhibition’s most emblematic paintings, *Untitled (Amalie of Württemberg, Duchess of Saxe-Altenburg)*, 2018. Painted on a deep red velvet ground, this portrait appropriates Ludwig Doell’s 19th-century academic painting depicting a German noble festooned with lavish jewelry and wearing a decadent green and cream-colored turban. Ukiński magnifies the scale of the original image, amplifying the palette and adding an eye mask that further literalizes the theatricality of the sitter’s cultural appropriation. The painting’s red ground seems to bleed through the dramatically pale skin of this patrician woman; the crimson hue of the velvet eerily streaks down her neck and décolleté, and is formally echoed in her mask. This dramatic revision of Doell’s portrait casts its sitter as a ghostly or possessed presence, the haunted personification of European cultural hegemony.

In a second portrait, Ukiński modifies Michael Sweerts' 17th-century painting *Garçon au turban tenant un bouquet de fleurs* (c. 1658–61). Known as a morality painter in the *Caravaggisti* tradition, Sweerts depicted an androgynous boy cross-dressing in the attire of a young woman. The extravagant sitter is surrounded with feminine symbolism and is adorned in a distinctive turban that seems to be made of a fringed shawl, breaking with Sweerts more "authentic" depictions of explicitly Oriental subjects. In Ukiński's rendition, *Untitled (Eastern Promises V)*, 2019, the boy's ambiguous gender play connects the historical source material to present day notions of malleable identities and the performative nature of gender.

A couple of paintings in *Ottomania* make direct reference to Ukiński's biography and allegorically engage with his identity as a Pole and an artist. *Untitled (Łukasz Trzcinski)*, 2019, depicts a Polish noble from the 17th century, dressed in exotic finery influenced by his Ottoman neighbors. While he might be one of the only subjects without a turban in the exhibition, his Mohawk hair style, mustache, and fur trim are marshalled into the distinctive Eastern pageantry of his Slavic affiliation.

The exhibition culminates with a room of paintings based on artists' portraits and self-portraits. Ukiński has chosen to focus on artists who are represented in Oriental garb, ranging from Michelangelo Buonarroti, Nikolai Afanasievich Rusakov, Duncan Grant, Leonor Fini, as well as the Polish artists Tamara de Lempicka and Balthasar Klossowski de Rola (better known as Balthus). The theme of performative representation is also present in the work *Untitled (Johannes van Swinderen)*, which shows the 17th-century painter in the clichéd trappings of the artist self-portrait, wielding a palette and standing next to a *memento mori* skull, while also showing-off his painterly virtuosity through deft rendering of the swirling fabrics of his Turkish inspired costume and turban. Such mannered self-depictions seem to acknowledge the continuity of sociological pressures upon artists—including Ukiński himself—to perform their otherness for public amusement while mastering other personae in order to enforce their position among their peers.

About the Artist

Born in Warsaw, Poland in 1968, Piotr Ukiński emerged on the New York art scene in the mid-1990s with the emblematic artwork, *Untitled (Dance Floor)*, 1996—a sculpture that integrates the legacy of Minimalism with the blurring of art and entertainment that characterizes the current era. Dividing his time between New York and Warsaw, Ukiński has constructed a diverse body of work that exploits many types of media (painting, sculpture, photography, collage, performance, and film) as it promiscuously absorbs cultural references.

His work has been exhibited in museums around the world including The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, The Museum of Modern Art in New York, Centre Pompidou in Paris, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, Tate Modern in London, and Museum Ludwig in Cologne. Ukiński represented Poland at the 26th São Paulo Biennial in 2004, and he has participated in the International Art Exhibition at the 50th Venice Biennale in 2003, the 63rd Venice International Film Festival in 2006, the 5th Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art in 2008, the 75th Whitney Biennial in 2010 at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York, and documenta 14 in 2017 in Kassel and Athens. Most recently in 2018, Ukiński was the subject of a solo exhibition dedicated to his photographic series, *Polska*, at the National Museum of Art in Krakow. In September 2019, his new series of *Ottomania* paintings will be featured in the 16th Istanbul Biennial entitled *The Seventh Continent*.

Ukiński's work often draws polemical reactions since the artist does not shy away from potentially controversial subjects. His photographic series, *The Nazis*, incited protests when exhibited in The Photographers' Gallery in London in 1998, and the works were destroyed in a publicity stunt staged by a celebrated Polish actor, Daniel Olbrychski, while on view at Zachęta National Gallery of Art in Warsaw in 2000.

In 2006, Ukiński debuted his first feature-length film entitled *Summer Love: The First Polish Western*. Written, produced, and directed by Ukiński, this allegorical Western features Polish film star Val Kilmer in the role of the Dead Man. *Summer Love* has received numerous accolades: the film premiered as part of the official selection of the Venice International Film Festival in 2006; and it was the subject of a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2007.

The artist's works are represented in private and public collections, including: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Museum of Modern Art, and the Solomon R. Guggenheim in New York; Tate Modern in London; the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis; the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw; the Migros Museum of Contemporary Art in Zurich; the Rubell Family Collection in Miami; the Francois Pinault Foundation in Paris; and Muzeum Susch, among others.

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