

1926

Mikuláš Medek (1926 – 1974)

Blue Composition (My Romantic Uncle Karel), 1960

The two paintings by Medek held in the Karlovy Vary gallery (the other one is *Composition – An Adorable Young Man* of 1959) date to the artist's stage of Imaginative Abstraction, when he abandoned Surrealist figural painting with elements of masochism, black humor, and strange irrational unrest. The 2003 film about Mikuláš Medek, *I Don't Paint, I Throttle My Paintings*, directed by Ales Kisil, documents some of his painting methods. For example, Medek would place a canvas on the floor and layer newspapers into its color relief, gradually tearing them off until they formed strangely impressive wrinkled surfaces. This is also the case of the *Blue Composition*. Its color tissue is immensely dynamic, complemented by spiky protrusions, thorns and spines familiar from Medek's previous period, and enriched by larger or smaller targets, circles, and square openings. The range of blues, and also reds (in *An Adorable Young Man*), was one of the painter's favorites. The feature dominating the canvases is the transformation of the hitherto visually legible figure into its very abstract and lapidary sign (the body and head can be a rectangle or a square, the limbs can be sharp lines)... Our imagination can wander through the imaginative color space of the painter's ideas and visions. The 1960s mark the paramount period in Medek's artistic career.

Mikuláš Medek, a very literate artist, ranks to the few iconic figures of the 20th-century Czech art, such as Jan Zrzavý, František Tichý, and Toyen whose exhibitions always witnessed long processions of visitors from all over the country. His lifespan was short, mere 48 years, and yet his oeuvre is grand and monumental. It has represented an indisputably authentic pillar of the local so-called unofficial art since 1948, the era ruled by the tendency of Socialist Realism. During the 1960s' era of social and artistic loosening, his art could shine as part of Informal, or, Structural Abstraction.

Mikuláš Medek was born into the family of the First-Republic legionary general and also a poet and writer, Rudolf Medek. His grandfather was the painter Antonín Slavíček, one of the founders of modern Czech landscape painting. During the Second World War, Medek studied at the State School of Graphic Arts, and in 1945 attended the Prague Academy of Fine Arts. Between 1946 and 1949, he continued in his academic training at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague under professors František Muzika and František Tichý, but was expelled after the Communist surges. His life in the following years was far from easy – he had a hard time finding a job and fell seriously ill. Were it not for his wife, the photographer Emila Medková (1928–1985), who tended to him with utmost love and care, Medek's cardinal painting oeuvre would never come to existence.