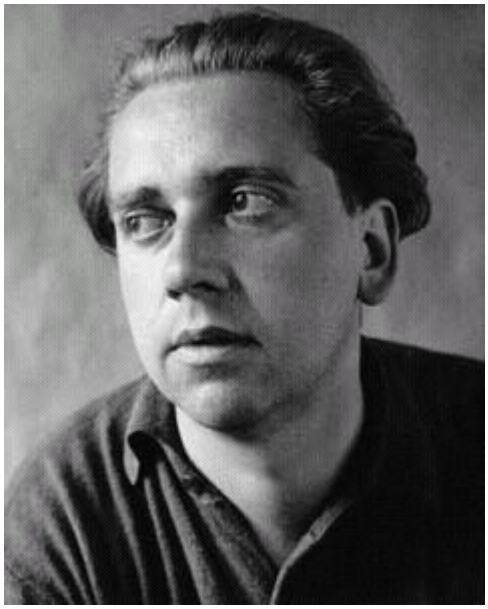
Jánuš Kubíček (5.12.1921-21.5.1993)

Igor Zhoř: On the Way from Viewing to Seeing

Beginnings



For Jánuš Kubíček, art school was his father's house. Not just his father's studio itself, where he saw many a work of sculpture emerge, but also the walls of the house, where works by contemporary Czech artists hung. The Kubíček family's Brno home was visited by artists and writers, and it was they who influenced the tastes and activities of the artistically talented young man. The writer Jiří Mahen, then the leading figure in Moravian literature, bought him his first set of paints. The Silesian graphic artist Ferdiš Duša gave the sixteen-year-old boy a gravure printing press. Jan Trampota, one of the greatest figures in Czech landscape painting between the two world wars, initiated him into work with wax pastels.

When Jánuš Kubíček graduated from secondary school in 1941, war was on, and the colleges and academies of art were closed. He therefore applied for entry to the Brno School of Arts and Crafts, and was also accepted into the Czech Visual Artists' Syndicate, thus gaining professional status. He was by no means the only young person of his generation to enter into the artistic life of his native city. But of course he differed from them in that he did not seek to complete his artistic education (his first exhibition catalogues mention no training at all). He already felt himself fully prepared for creative activity, particularly by his practical experience and the direct influence of his family environment.

Very early on he had learned more than many others would after years in the academic studios. He knew many historical facts (his older sister studied art history), and was in immediate contact with works of art as well as creative personalities, whom he heard formulate stimulating opinions on art both past and present. At the same time he acquired one of the most important assets of an artist - an ethical relationship to his work (meaning a highly authentic and extremely committed one). Precisely in this lies the essence of his "home learning", which he carried with him into his later life. He had come to understand artistic creation as a serious undertaking, one governed not by the demand for prosperity but rather, and above all, by the highest principles of personal morality.

First Appearances

It is not so very important that the young Kubíček loved Vincent van Gogh. In this he was no exception among the young artistic talents of the 1940s. More important is the fact that he felt Jan Trampota's influence close at hand. At home he had several of the painter's landscapes continually before his eyes, and Trampota's direct advice helped him to overcome some of his beginner's problems. It should be recalled that Trampota, though a landscape artist, was certainly no "mood-painter" governed by his impressions. His objectives were composition, structure and material relations; this was probably why he had trouble deciding between painting and sculpture at first. Arsen Pohribný once wrote that Trampota desired to "obtain a beautiful picture even at the cost of distorting his model". Trampota's inclination toward pictorial beauty was and always remained a point of origin for Jánuš Kubíček as well. Trampota guided the talented young man to Cézanne, and encouraged him to search for the classical qualities of balance and harmony. We will hear more about this.

Jánuš Kubíček appeared before the public quite early: at the age of fourteen his drawings and totems were exhibited at the children's reading room established by Mahen at the Brno City Library, at seventeen he took part in a student exhibition at the Brno Museum of Applied Arts, and he won first prize for his paintings at a young artists' competition when he was nineteen. He had barely come of age when he was featured as the youngest guest artist at an exhibition by the Prague artists' group Mánes, and that same year (1943) his work was first accepted for exhibition by the Brno artists' group Aleš, which prepared the way for his becoming a regular member of this

organization. The motifs of his paintings were, of course, quite traditional: still-lifes and urban landscapes.

In 1945 Kubíček began exhibiting with the Moravian-Silesian Artists' Bloc, the creative association into which the Aleš group had been integrated, and it opened up a wide field of activity for him. He did not enjoy any great success right at once, nor did he play the role of an innovator. Critics tended to describe his work as learned and cultivated, and from the first noted a pronounced desire for order in it, a sense of tranquillity and reflection. Already in his twenties Kubíček was a painter with an "unencumbered phraseology, neither modern nor old", and he tended more towards the center and harmony than towards exclusivity and conscious originality. In 1947 he left for a two-month stay in Italy. This, too, is revealing - while his fellow artists went to Paris, the center of modernism, to improve their knowledge, Jánuš Kubíček turned towards the European cultural tradition, visiting Venice, Florence, Sienna and Rome. He knew very precisely beforehand why he was going there and what he wanted to find. He was not a tourist, and did not even paint the new landscape. He was a researcher. He systematically made notes, sketched compositional analyses, and expanded his horizons. As if he sensed that the circumstances of his life would not allow such a trip later on, he acquired such quantities of information and experience during those sixty days that he was able to think and speak about them throughout his life, and use them to inspire both himself and others.

After his return, he moved for a time to the border town of Mikulov in South Moravia.The wine-growing country there has something Italian about it: the imposing Baroque churches, the Renaissance buildings, the white rustic architecture deflecting the burning sun. Jánuš Kubíček worked here in improvised conditions for practically the entire year of 1948 - and the harvest of this time made up fully half of his first solo exhibition. This took place at the Brno House of Art, and consisted of fifty oil and oil pastel paintings. In his preface to the small catalogue, Ivo Krsek noted the "great differences between individual works" apparent in a style that changed from one motif to the next. While at the time this may have been taken as a sign of immaturity, when viewed today it seems the result of a systematic search, the expression of an analytical approach to the depicted model.

The Way to Himself

Kubíček's first solo appearance in March 1949 also marked the end of one phase of his work. The years which followed were to see the artist moving away from urban landscapes and turning towards a subject matter he had scarcely occupied himself with before - the human figure. Only the still-life survived, now extended to include the studio interior (the Ateliers cycle was to become a life-long project for the artist). It also influenced his composition of figures, which was linked to the still-life in terms of both motif (a bouquet is a frequent attribute of Kubíček's figures) and overall conception: the human form is understood as a spatial configuration in relation to its surroundings, thus representing more a "figural still-life" than any sort of psychological penetration into the existential basis of a human being.

These paintings from the first half of the 1950s still partly retain numerous Cézannean features, but far more radical analytical principles have also begun to enter the artist's sensuously and materially oriented work. These were stimulated by Kubíček's thorough study of the work done by Matisse and Picasso during the Forties: forms, lines and colors themselves were to become the "reason for the painting". This carried with it an unmistakable sign of rebellion against the dogma of socialist realism prevailing in this country at that time.

Up until 1955 Jánuš Kubíček continued to display his older pictures at group exhibitions. In the privacy of his studio, however, he devoted himself almost exclusively to the figure, verifying his new conception of it by means of drawings and graphics as well. Shortly before this time he had become friends with his former fellow-student at the arts and crafts school, Bohumír Matal. For a time both made use of a common studio (in the Zemský dům building), where they worked intensively on portraits in particular, also deriving their compositions with a single figure from them. Contour began to be more strongly emphasized in the work of both artists, and linear rhythm (both outside and inside a form) became an exciting field of artistic exploration for them. Also significant was

their common interest in the doubling of a figure in a mirror, which in Kubíček's case dated back to 1953. Bohumír Matal presented an exhibition of his figure paintings on Česká Street in Brno at the end of 1955, and Kubíček exhibited there five months later. Both painters invited the same art theoreticians - Václav Zykmund and Zdeněk Kudělka - to their openings. The climate in Czech cultural politics at that time was not even slightly favorable to formal experimentation. While Matal's exhibition ran into trouble, Kubíček's passed quietly, no doubt because it was, after all, somewhat more restrained: most of the work evidenced at least some signs of an optically-oriented "realism". Two circumstances in particular aided Kubíček in this respect. For one, there was his innate tendency to join sensory perception harmoniously to its artistically autonomous transformation, while the second circumstance was an entirely external one: in most of the pictures the artist had portrayed his young wife, and so he could not (nor did he want to) suppress his lively interest in her charming appearance.

The text written by Zdeněk Kudělka to introduce the exhibition was formulated in a highly circumspect manner, seeking to forestall the objections of the dogmatic critics who dominated the daily press in particular. Though Kudělka refers to fauvism, which at that time was still rejected by them, he notes that Kubíček has adopted from it only his manner of working with color, adding that the artist is not indifferent to the objects he depicts, nor is the human "content" lost here in a preoccupation with form. Anyone who did not experience the cultural climate of that time, which, despite the death of Stalin in 1953, was still full of dark fears and pressures, cannot fully comprehend how little freedom there was in creative artistic work then. In the visual arts, it was color that first gradually emancipated itself from its ideological confines; thanks to its decorative value, it gained a certain freedom and autonomy, and was not forced to obey optical fidelity to so great a degree. Jánuš Kubíček made full use of this: he had a natural feeling for the expressive use of color, and by exercising it he could carry out his experiments with greater freedom than drawing, continually controlled and checked by its proportional and spatial ties to reality, could allow him. Nor could the freedom of artistic expression be restricted for long. In the second half of the 1960s came the collapse of the most oppressive dogmas, and the senseless directives and absurd taboos of state cultural policy gradually began to disappear.

Jánuš Kubíček and Bohumír Matal founded an artists' group sometime around 1957. A strong need to join forces had arisen then in the Czechoslovak art world, and a desire to revive the officially-suppressed activity of artistic associations grew up along with it. Material interests were not too greatly emphasized at that time, playing a decidedly secondary role. Rather, the concern was mainly to find space for individual expression, to renew ties to the legacy of modern art. State policy continued to regard the modern period sceptically, and modernism was designated a historically outdated phase without further prospects for development. This involved a curious conception of cultural discontinuity, an attempt to deny the natural interrelatedness of creative activity, in which the new always originates in reply to some impulse from the old.

Under the artificially smooth surface of conformist exhibitions, however, there existed even in Czech and Slovak art an awareness of something quite contrary to this: displaced traditions were reconstructed, and predecessors and examples were sought, not only at home but especially abroad. Of these, it was mostly those artists who either directly declared their allegiance to the political left or took a strong interest in social movements who were looked up to - this was partly for tactical reasons as well. Thus Picasso was the greatest authority in Czechoslovakia around 1955, along with Léger, Fougeron and Rivera, while expressionism and certain post-impressionist tendencies were only gradually accepted. References to cubist "disintegration" could likewise still be read. Surrealism remained longest on the "index", certainly because of its open subjectivity, but mainly because the manifestos of its leading figures called for a "deviant revision of Marxism", even though this very movement came out of the intellectual workshop of utopian devotees of Marxism.

Within the Brno group, Kubíček moved away from Matisse and closer to Picasso. But the Sixties were to take him significantly further along his way - to a radical generalization of the phenomenon, a systematic exploration of the expressive capabilities of artistic forms, a conception of the image as a new reality with its own legitimacy. Other painters from the group aimed towards the same goal - besides Matal, this included Vladislav Vaculka, Vladimír Vašíček and, later, Pavel Navrátil and the sculptor Karel Hyliš as well.

The group's passionate discussions about the nature of forms and their autonomous role in art suited the intellectually-oriented Kubíček. He found informed debating partners not only among the aforementioned painters but also in the small group of architects associated with them (I. Ruller, Z. Řihák and others) and, above all, among the art historians, all of them graduates of the university in Brno (Z. Kudělka, J. Zemina, P. Spielmann). As representatives of a non-dogmatic approach to the theory of the visual arts, they wrote introductory, often virtually programmatic texts in the catalogues for the group's exhibitions in Prague (1957, 1964), Brno (1958, 1963) and, finally, Cracow (1965). One of the most dramatic moments in the life of the artists' group founded by Matal and Kubíček was its participation in an extensive exhibition held in April 1963 at the Brno House of Art, entitled "Artists' Groups in Confrontation". This was the first manifestation in Moravia of the still-taboo abstract tendency in painting.

At the "Confrontation" exhibition Jánuš Kubíček presented a cycle of paintings, most of which were made using the encaustic technique. Based on the motif of the female figure (in this respect his work remained figural), he thoroughly examined the two polar categories of the physical movement of matter - Motion and Rest. The seven works he presented here represented his activity during the two preceding years, and bore witness to a definitive loosening of the artist's bonds to sensory reality, which was gradually to become merely the visible point of entry for ever more analytical artistic compositions. In these works the original concrete subject matter is successively changed into an abstract structure of entirely self-sufficient artistic forms. Three-dimensional reality is transposed into planimetrical structures in which the artist gradually and systematically explores the autonomous laws of the "pictorial field". The dynamic configurations of Motion give way at the end of the cycle to several paintings on the theme of Rest. The latter signal a return to the problem of the static image of a material still-life, something characteristic of the artist's subsequent stage of development.

Five years later, Kubíček reached the final point of the process described here. At a solo exhibition at the Jaroslav Král Gallery in Brno in 1969, there could be seen not only a new inclination towards the still-life but also a consistent maintaining of distance from phenomenal reality, leading to a specific "feeling of things". Here the material subject matter forms only a secondary point of origin for the painter's work, which quite clearly aims at achieving a "beautiful picture" and strives for perfection of both form and craftsmanship. This period - in which the inspiration of the compositional and formal refinement of Ben Nicholson's paintings is sometimes visible - represents one of the consummate phases of Kubíček's art.

Seen against the background of the huge waves of informel and structurally abstract work that flooded the studios of Czech artists at that time, Kubíček appears as a solitary figure driven by a desire to give expression to beauty, which he saw in the maximum refinement of every detail of the painted surface. To use the phrase "a cultivated style of painting" here would be to perceive only the outward appearance, the surface. Kubíček was not guided solely by the mere sensuous quality of the picture's formative components, but aimed to reveal their specific spiritual quality. For him, the creation of an image was also the process of constituting its philosophical essence. At this point he could have stopped his artistic development, resting content with the results he had achieved. Shortly before his fiftieth birthday (after more than three decades of concentrated labor), he had, after all, reached a goal for which many a painter yearned in vain: he was able to paint pictures which were not only beautiful but also deep and full of ideas - and for this he was acknowledged publicly as well. Yet he did exactly the opposite. Having borrowed a copy of Skira's publications about the Paleolithic "gallery" in Lascaux, he decided to explore painting all over again from the very start, namely, from the sources of its most remote origins.

Seeking Certainty

Jánuš Kubíček is indisputably an analytical artist, one whose creative work rests on reflection and analysis, and thus, to a great degree, on intellect. This is known to everyone who has ever discussed art or debated his own work with him (several interviews with Kubíček have been published); but it is likewise obvious to anyone who simply stands in front of his paintings. In this regard, it is necessary to pose a fundamental question: to what extent can painting be built on rational deliberation, how far is it possible for a complex, emotional, intuitive statement about the human condition - that is, the "inexpressible" which forms the basis of all art - to emerge under the supervision of reason?

Kubíček's interpreters posed such questions, asking whether a continued emphasis on intellectual control would not make his work too artificial and, finally, not

artistic enough. A certain danger lurks in every too-extreme approach to creative work: just as there can be sensory one-sidedness (leading to mere descriptiveness) and emotional one-sidedness (leading from lack of discipline to chaos), creativity is likewise threatened by absolute intellect. Only that here - as in many other respects - it is all a question of degree: it is not reason, the senses or feelings themselves which can pose a danger to art, rather only their uncontrolled predominance. Thankfully, Kubíček was never a fanatical proponent of any one idea. The very fact that he had started out with van Gogh, made a long and thorough study of Cézanne, Matisse and Braque, and finally arrived at an affinity with Kupka already showed him to be more a sensitive harmonizer than a militant advocate of strict conceptions. Convincing proof of Kubíček's tendency towards balance lies in his relationship to Picasso. For many a painter, the Franco-Spanish artist represented a key that opened the way leading beyond the limits of purely sensuous painting. The Brno artists' group mentioned above, with which Kubíček long remained vitally linked, was also minutely engaged with Picasso's work, as both the texts in the group's catalogues and the work of its members testify to. And it was precisely "through Picasso" that Jánuš Kubíček distinguished himself from the other members of the group, particularly from Matal, with whom he had once had the closest affinity. The massive, bold contour curve that gives rhythm to a format according to its own laws, the hallmark of Picasso's work in the Forties and Fifties, never fully established itself in Kubíček's work. Rather, it was soon superseded there by light, and an often almost illusive colored tonal value, linked to varied brushwork, disturbed the surface of the painting, so that it was never the drawn elements which fully prevailed, but rather always those which were painterly and pictorial. If the drawing is considered to be the outer expression of the pictorial structure, then Kubíček is a rationalist only "from beneath", that is, in spatially distributing the compositional framework of the format, while "from above" he tends toward intuition and impression, and does not preclude spontaneous stimulation of the senses and the use of colored light, through which he achieves a pleasing visual sensation.

Kubíček's enlightened interpreter Zdeněk Kudělka once wrote that the artist's efforts were based on a desire to "gain certainty". This is undoubtedly connected with the fact that Jánuš Kubíček really always worked as if outside the governing mainstream of the art of his time. Even though today he appears, at first glance, to be a classical exponent of abstract painting (primarily the musical, subjectively romantic branch thereof), on closer inspection we discover ways in which his work shifts outside the mainstream of such painting. As a painter of tranquillity and intimacy, he arrived at abstract painting through still-life, portraiture and figural composition and, in a period of accelerating haste of expression, turned his interest towards the slowest of painting techniques, such as oil tempera or encaustic. He did not let himself be disturbed by any of the trends in the art world in recent decades, and preferred to live in voluntary isolation, relying on his conviction that in true art there is no need for unrest.

Today, when Kubíček's work may be viewed over a relatively large space of time, it must be said that his work is classical in the traditional sense of the word: in its effort at balance and order, its attempt to apply the singular within the framework of the generally valid. In this respect Jánuš Kubíček sought, for more than half a century, that philosopher's stone which may be called perfection, freedom from doubt, certainty. He did not choose the most favorable of times for realizing such an aim. The reliable and the perfect could only be sought in those epochs that created a style, and even then only within certain limits. Certainty remained certain only as long as the stylistic obligation reigned supreme and was still in the ascendant. Jánuš Kubíček himself knew that certainty does not exist in art, and that this does not apply solely to the art of our own century. He also knew that precisely herein lies the eternal fascination of creativity, which cannot offer anything definitive, but rather always only some relatively stable phase of a never-to-be-completed transformation. Yet Kubíček sought certainty all the same. He was led by a desire that was stronger than the warnings of sceptics who had never experienced the bewitching power of the creative search themselves.

Yet the ways travelled in seeking certainty can vary considerably. It is enough to consider where Cézanne ended in his search for it and where Matisse did, where Mondrian and Malevich, where Klee or Kandinsky. Jánuš Kubíček was likewise consistent in his search, but did not go to extremes. Whenever he seems to be carried away by a preoccupation with pure form, he returns, at least through the title he gives the painting, to a natural model. Even where the painting is composed of independent forms in non-illusory space, some relation to the organic always reveals itself in the end. This organic quality is precisely that characteristic which is equally distant from order and arrangement (that is, organization) and from vitality and changeability (that is, the organism).

The Laws of Secret Necessity

The theme of Ateliers pervades Kubíček's entire work. His early still-lifes and cycles of figure paintings were included in it, and its culmination came in the 1960s with a series of canvases exploring the interior of the artist's workplace in its most varied aspects: once with regard to the specific situation of the place (Atelier with Easel), elsewhere from far more general perspectives (Light in the Atelier, Winter in the Atelier, Atelier (Twilight)). The paintings are often entirely detached from their concrete subject matter, and we perceive them, regardless of their title, as purely object-less works. Form and color alone are the bearers of the "expressive function" of the painting

here. If we consider the fact that most of these works originated at a time when a new figuralism was making its ascent in the world, we become aware again of Kubíček's deliberate persistence, and his reliance on form to carry both the initial and final meaning of the painting.

For Kubíček, line, color, light and space are realities of their own kind. He does not conceive of them as substitutes for what the sense of sight singles out in the objective world, rather he sees in them a means by which the painting returns to objectivity. Visual forms in his paintings usually have a dual function: they are signs of phenomena that exist in an environment grasped by the human senses, but are also concrete entities that have their entire form of being, with its own laws and relations, in the painting. Henri Matisse once wrote that "it is necessary to study objects for a long time so that we may discover their sign". Kubíček also attempted to discover these essential signs lying beyond nature. Moreover, he sought such signs as are not merely established "ad hoc", to serve a short-term use, but which may be derived permanently, based on the experience of generations of painters. Matisse was sceptical in this regard: for him, the sign was defined by the moment of its use, outside of which it had no significance. Contrary to this, Kubíček understood the visual sign as a script, a medium of communication, for which the viewer could be both prepared and educated.

Colors in Kubíček's paintings never have an effect in and of themselves (as timbres), but are first and foremost a function of light. Although the painter always strove after a precise "situating" of color in relation to forms and their surroundings, the end solution is not stereotypically fixed, rather it always derives from the complexity of numerous mutual relations, often only intuited and felt out empirically. Kubíček complicates these further in that he works not with homogenous surfaces of color but with a layered form of painting, with its vibrating "atmosphere". Its origin is sometimes only optical, but more often psychological as well: it is created by the material (e.g. wax painting) or brushwork used, or conditioned by the thematic requirements already mentioned (Atelier - Atmosphere, Atelier at Evening, Atelier (Twilight)). Constructively abstract - that is, rational - painting works primarily with tone (that is, with coloristic quality) and avoids tonal value, as the light quality of a color is hard to define and immeasurable. The surface of a precisely-defined form represents (according to Arnheim) a distinct value in the structure of the painting, conveying a color tone with whose help its "lift" or "mass" then emerges. The light value of a tone, however, introduces something which has "mood" as well, causing unrest and instability in the painting - and this is why it is so difficult to include it in structurally-ordered relations. A residuum of the romantic is hidden in light, something that at once obscures and reveals. Light has its opposite in shadow, which is mysterious and concealing and which, insofar as it is not merely a degree of color luminosity, dissolves forms and wraps them in something immaterial, fluid and intangible. And it is exactly this chiaroscuro we find in Kubíček's paintings, not only in the Ateliers cycle but also in his paintings with a less concrete subject. This bears further witness to something already mentioned above: in every painting the artist leaves himself room to move, an essential range of freedom that enables change, shift and modification.

Still another feature, one so very important for classical modernism, became stronger in Kubíček's work of the last twenty years - be it his paintings or his graphic works: all parts of the format have their "dynamic weight"; there is no neutral zone, no secondary plan which would merely coordinate and harmonize the other elements of the composition. All sections of the painted frame are given meaning; even that which we are accustomed to consider background becomes an object and takes on the same role as any other larger or smaller surface or form. This is not to say that the hierarchy of spatial fields has been lost, that everything is mutually interchangeable. Kubíček respects the superiority of one or more focal points - he defines centers, points of intersection and dominant areas, and there is a "convergence of the optical axes of the painting" here as well. However, he treats each part of the canvas, each remote corner of it, as an important element, always granting it a corresponding significance in engaging the viewer's eye.

In many paintings - up to the work in his final cycles - we can observe Kubíček's constant interest in the example set by the great figures of European painting. As he grew older, this no longer meant van Gogh or Picasso, but rather the masters of the "great balance" - from Poussin to Klee. He was linked to them by his great belief in the harmony of the painting, whose meaning lies not outside itself but rather exclusively within its own specific laws.

Jánuš Kubíček found important models in Czech painting as well. He devoted his attention to the work of František Kupka, and was a sensitive student of the great analyst among the Czech cubists, Bohumil Kubišta. Of painters from the Brno milieu, he felt an affinity with that original interpreter of orphism, František Foltýn, and in the last decades of his life his work also converged more closely with that of the melancholy, philosophical

Bohdan Lacina. Without our having noticed it at first, Lacina and Kubíček displayed a common desire to fathom the depths of painting, though each started off differently and took a different path. Both tried throughout their lives to disentangle themselves from the umbilical cord that tied them to natural beauty, in order finally to give meaning to abstract forms tending towards transcendence.

Kubíček's paintings from the Ateliers cycle, those with classical subjects (Laokoon), and even those inspired by the work of artists akin to him in spirit all originated during a period when Czech art existed under the pressures of the so-called "normalization" that followed the Soviet intervention in 1968. At that time the studio was the only place where many artists could find freedom, and by turning towards the "inside" of the painting they likewise expressed their protest against pressure exerted from the outside by the ideology of a brighter tomorrow.

As the artist entered the sixth decade of his life, his illness made itself felt ever more strongly. This meant that he voluntarily began preparing for the end of his artistic career at the age of sixty-five. He gradually cleared out the studio in which he had spent thirty-five fruitful years of creative activity. His final paintings are less concise; both forms and colors accumulate in them without the once so ascetically strict sense of order. Their subjects also make the more serious tone of a final reckoning heard: first of all in the painting Twilight, then in Old Junk and, lastly, in The Final Shore, which forms the epilogue to the painter's life's work. Like many artists of pure vision, Jánuš Kubíček confirms a remark Clive Bell made more than half a century ago: even forms which seem to be entirely abstract do not cease to convey exciting meanings, so long as their ordering proceeds from a position of creative sovereignty and bears the stamp of personal "laws of secret necessity".

Translated by Timothy Steyskal