Stay After the Gallery Closes

Among the canvases, a glance is easier to hide than a feeling



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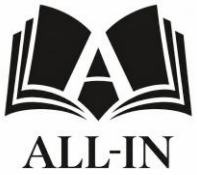

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INTRO

The last light of the day entered the gallery at such an angle that even the imperfections in the walls looked like intentional elements of the interior design. I loved this time of day. Gdynia was slowly shedding its daytime rush, silhouettes of people returning home passed beyond the windows, and inside there were only paintings, the smell of fresh paint, and a silence that required no explanation.

I stood in the middle of the main exhibition room, holding a sheet of paper in my hand. It contained the precise arrangement for my first solo exhibition. This wasn't a random collection of canvases that needed to be hung wherever there happened to be space. Every painting had its place, its distance from the next one, and its own room to speak. Some needed light, others half-shadow. A few were meant to catch the eye the moment someone entered, while the rest should only be discovered when a visitor decided to come closer.

For months, I had worked towards this moment. I painted, revised, destroyed my own ideas, and started again. I turned down proposals that seemed sensible but had nothing to do with who I was. Finally, someone had decided that my paintings deserved a space of their own, rather than just a section of wall between the works of other artists.

I had no intention of surrendering control over how they would be presented now.

I ran my finger along the sketch. The largest painting, the one depicting a woman's silhouette standing with her back to an open window, was supposed to hang at the end of the long corridor. It wasn't the prettiest. Nor did it have the most

striking colours. But it came closest to expressing what I wanted to say. It was too personal to discuss during a casual conversation and too important to allow anyone to decide that it would be better hidden away.

I heard a key turning in the lock.

I turned around, assuming one of the gallery employees had returned for a forgotten handbag. Instead, a man stood in the doorway, a black briefcase tucked beneath his arm. He wore a dark coat, open enough to reveal a simple charcoal-grey sweater. He didn't look like someone who had wandered in by mistake. He surveyed the room with the attention of a man accustomed to assessing a space before taking his first step into it.

"Excuse me," I said. "The gallery is closed."

He glanced at his watch, then looked at me.

"I know. That's why I came now."

It wasn't a particularly convincing argument.

"In that case, you should know that we don't admit visitors after hours."

"I'm not here to visit."

"That's a shame. It's quite a pleasant place when nobody is trying to arrange something in it."

The corner of his mouth twitched.

"Eryk Jeż. Exhibition designer. We were supposed to meet next week, but I wanted to see the space beforehand."

For a moment, I simply stared at him. I recognised the name from messages sent by the gallery management, a few attachments, and a brief note explaining that he would be responsible for the technical side of the exhibition. What I

hadn't expected was for him to turn up without warning, precisely when I was trying to put the final touches to my own arrangement.

"Florentyna Dąb," I introduced myself. "The artist whose exhibition you're planning to design."

"I know."

He said it calmly, without excessive politeness. His gaze moved across the walls, settling on the canvases leaning against the floor. He wasn't looking at them the way people did when they wanted to pick the prettiest painting as quickly as possible. He was studying the distances, the lighting, the height, and the angles from which each work would be viewed.

That interested me more than I cared to admit.

"Do you have a plan?" he asked.

His eyes lifted to the sheet of paper in my hand.

"I do."

"May I see it?"

"You may look at it, but that doesn't mean you can change it."

This time, he smiled more openly.

"Starting with clearly established boundaries. Good."

I walked over to the table and unfolded the sketch. I didn't hand him the paper. I simply allowed him to stand beside me and examine the arrangement of the individual works. I noticed that he didn't lean over it with exaggerated confidence. He left me room, as though he understood that I was the host of this project.

"Here," he said, pointing to one of the rectangles, "the light will fall too sharply. At this time of day, reflections could obscure part of the painting."

"We can adjust the lighting."

"We can. But then we'll lose the consistency throughout the room."

"I'm not interested in consistency. I'm interested in making sure the paintings can be seen."

"Those aren't always the same thing."

I looked up at him. His voice was calm, slightly deeper than his appearance might have suggested. He wasn't trying to persuade me at any cost. He had presented a problem and was waiting for me to decide what to make of it.

I didn't like it when someone turned out to be right about something I considered settled.

"Do you always begin a collaboration by explaining to the artist that she doesn't understand her own paintings?"

"No. Sometimes I start with coffee."

"You're a little late for that today."

"I could make up for it next time."

I didn't answer immediately. There was a lightness in his tone that hadn't been there before. I couldn't tell whether he was genuinely flirting or simply enjoyed testing how far he could take a conversation. Either way, I felt like making his task a little more difficult.

I closed my folder of notes and returned to the painting standing against the wall.

"This one stays here," I said.

Eryk moved closer. He stopped at a respectful distance, without touching the canvas.

For several seconds, he studied the painted figure. The woman in the picture wore a dark dress, her face hidden from view. Beyond the window stretched a fragment of grey sky. I had deliberately left much unsaid in the painting because there were things I couldn't name even to myself.

"Why here, specifically?" he asked.

"Because I don't want it to be the first painting visitors see."

"But you want them to find it."

"Yes."

"That's a difference."

I looked at him more carefully. That was precisely why the painting belonged at the end of the corridor. I didn't want someone walking past it in a hurry, phone in hand, their thoughts already occupied by the next meeting. I wanted them to stop. To decide for themselves whether they wanted to see more.

"Some things take time," I replied.

Eryk turned his head towards me.

"I agree."

For a brief moment, neither of us spoke. The distant sound of traffic drifted in from outside. Our reflections appeared in the window, standing side by side in front of a painting whose meaning he didn't know.

I had the strange impression that he wasn't looking only at the canvas. Not in an intrusive or judgmental way. It was

more as though he were trying to understand why that particular place mattered so much to me.

"I should get going," he finally said. "I'll prepare my first comments on the layout tomorrow."

"And I'll prepare my responses to comments I haven't even seen yet."

"Sounds like the beginning of an interesting collaboration."

"Or a very short one."

He laughed quietly. The sound suited the empty gallery surprisingly well.

When he left, I didn't immediately return to work. I stood beside the painting for a little longer, watching the reflections of the lights in the window. I had my plan, I knew the order in which the works should be displayed, and I knew what I wasn't prepared to sacrifice. And yet, in the space of a few minutes, someone had appeared who could see something more in my decisions than mere stubbornness.

I didn't know yet whether he would be a good designer. I didn't know whether his presence would make things easier or become another obstacle on the way to the exhibition. All I knew was that when he spoke about paintings, he didn't treat them as decorations.

I switched off the lights in the main room and slipped the sketch back into my folder. At the door, I looked over my shoulder one last time. The painting of the woman by the window remained in the half-light, exactly where I wanted it.

For years, I had learned to hide in my paintings the things I couldn't bring myself to say aloud. Now, for the first time, I

found myself wondering whether someone who looked at my paintings so attentively might one day want to look just as closely at me.

And whether, when that moment came, I would know how to let him stay.

Chapter 1 - Terms That Were Never in the Plan

The following morning, I arrived at the gallery twenty minutes before our scheduled meeting. Not because I was worried about being late. I wanted a little time to look around the exhibition room without anyone's comments and check whether, in daylight, my plan still seemed as obvious as it had the previous evening. Eryk Jeż had left me with several observations the night before, and I hadn't yet managed to dismiss them. What irritated me most was that some of them actually made sense.

I spread three versions of the exhibition layout across the table. The first was my original design, the second incorporated his suggestions about the lighting, and the third was a compromise I had no intention of showing anyone until I was certain I really needed it. I preferred having several options rather than allowing someone to put me in a position where I had to make a decision before I had time to think it through.

At nine, I heard footsteps in the corridor.

"I see you've prepared your material for the defence," Eryk said as he entered the room.

"More for a discussion. A defence would suggest someone has already attacked me."

He took off his coat and hung it over the back of a chair. Today he was wearing a light-coloured shirt with the sleeves rolled up and dark trousers. He looked less formal than he had the previous day, but his briefcase was noticeably

thicker. He placed it on the table without covering my documents.

"I didn't want to come empty-handed."

"Neither did I."

His gaze moved over the sketches spread across the table.

"Three versions?"

"One is the correct one, one takes your comments into account, and one you're not supposed to see."

"Now I want to see that one even more."

"Then I'm even less inclined to show it to you."

He laughed quietly and sat down opposite me. He didn't immediately try to take charge of the meeting. Instead, he opened his briefcase and took out several sheets containing printed technical plans. For a moment, I found myself looking at his hands. They were well cared for, but not excessively so. I noticed a thin scratch on his index finger, as though he had recently cut himself while working. It occurred to me that exhibition design probably involved more than sitting in front of a computer.

"Let's start with what's most important to you," he said.

"For the exhibition to tell the story I've planned. I don't want the paintings treated as separate products to be viewed and judged. They speak to one another. Even if someone doesn't notice all the connections, they should have the opportunity to discover them."

Eryk nodded.

"So the order matters."

"Enormously."

"And what if it turns out the space doesn't allow us to preserve it in its entirety?"

"Then we look for a solution in the space, not in the paintings."

He rested his forearms on the table.

"That sounds reasonable until we take into account the entrance, the circulation routes, the lighting points, and the number of people who might be in the room at the same time."

"I'm not going to put the paintings in storage simply because someone might stop in front of them."

"I'm not suggesting storage. I'm suggesting that we shouldn't create an exhibition that can only be viewed according to your ideal scenario."

"And you're suggesting that everyone should be able to walk in, look at the three prettiest canvases, and leave convinced they've seen everything?"

"No. I'm suggesting we give them a reason to stay longer."

I held his gaze. I hadn't expected that answer. It would have been easy to assume I was dealing with yet another person who wanted to organise my work according to his own standards. But he was trying to put into words something that mattered to me, even if I wasn't always able to explain it simply.

"Then tell me exactly what you think the problem is."

He unfolded the gallery floor plan.

"Here we have the main room. If we place the largest canvas opposite the entrance, it will naturally become the focal point. That's a good solution for an exhibition centred

around a single painting. But you don't have one most important work. You have three that form a kind of whole, and several others that change the way those three are interpreted."

"That's right."

"That's why I suggest starting with the painting of the empty chair, moving through the series of coastal landscapes, and only then introducing the more personal works."

I frowned.

"I don't want the empty chair at the beginning."

"Why not?"

"Because it isn't an invitation. It's an answer to a question the visitor doesn't know yet."

Eryk looked at the reproduction.

"That's interesting."

"Please don't say that just to soften your criticism."

"I don't make a habit of that."

"Yesterday, you said some paintings needed more space."

"I still believe that."

"And today you want to start with the one that should be discovered later."

"I want people to have somewhere to go. That's not the same as giving them the answer at the beginning."

I studied him for a moment. He had an irritating ability to formulate his arguments in such a way that it was difficult to find an obvious weakness in them.

"Fine. But I won't agree to the paintings being moved without me being present."

"I have no intention of doing that."

"I also won't agree to any changes in their order without discussing them first."

"We can put that in our agreement."

"And I don't want any additional captions or descriptions telling people what they're supposed to feel."

Eryk leaned back in his chair.

"Then we have our first problem."

"Already?"

"Yes. Short descriptions don't have to explain emotions. They can provide information about the work's background, technique, or series. Not every visitor knows anything about painting."

"I don't want people to need an education in art to feel something in front of a painting."

"And I don't want anyone to feel excluded simply because they don't know the context."

This time, I didn't answer immediately. There was no condescension in his voice. He spoke about the visitors with the same respect I felt for my work. He didn't want to make their encounter with the paintings easier by taking away their freedom to interpret them for themselves. At least, that was how I understood him.

"We could prepare short notes about the technique and the titles," I suggested. "Without implying how the works should be interpreted."

"That's a good starting point."

He slid a proposed layout towards me. I noticed a small annotation concerning the gallery's financial partner. It appeared near the bottom of the page, beside the information about promotional materials.

"What does this note mean?" I asked, pointing to it.

Eryk looked at the document.

"Guidelines for communicating the exhibition. The partner wants the message to be accessible to a wider audience."

"And the paintings are supposed to be understandable to everyone?"

"There's no way to guarantee that."

"Then what's the point of this note?"

He was silent for a moment.

"The sponsor is financing part of the project. They have certain expectations about how the event is presented. For now, those mainly concern the informational materials."

"Mainly?"

"Florentyna, I'm not going to pretend there are no restrictions. But that doesn't mean I'm planning to change your paintings."

I didn't like the way he said it, as though the matter had already been settled. Still, I didn't have enough information to accuse him of intentions he hadn't actually expressed.

"I want to see the full guidelines."

"Of course. I'll send them to you."

"Not just the ones concerning the descriptions."

"I understand."

I wasn't sure he really did, but at least he didn't try to end the conversation with a joke.

We moved into the main exhibition room. Eryk set up a small light meter and checked the intensity of the lighting in several places. He explained that some of the spotlights produced a shade that was too cool, which could make the grey tones in my canvases look different from the way they appeared in my studio. He didn't simply say they needed replacing. He showed me the difference using a test board and suggested two possible solutions.

"How do you know these particular colours will be a problem?" I asked.

"Because I checked the reproductions you sent to the gallery."

"You did that before our meeting the day before yesterday?"

"Yes."

"I thought you wouldn't look at them until you came here."

"I don't like arriving at meetings unprepared."

It was a simple sentence, but it stayed with me more firmly than several of his earlier arguments. I was used to people who claimed to appreciate art but couldn't even remember the title of a painting. Eryk had done his homework. He knew my work, its arrangement, and the technical differences between the pieces. I didn't have to keep starting from the beginning and explaining why something mattered.

"Then please show me what else you've checked."

For the next forty minutes, we worked our way along the walls. Sometimes we disagreed; sometimes one of us

changed our mind. Eryk had a habit of asking a question before presenting a solution. I didn't always like it, but it meant I never felt as though I were merely the person expected to approve a finished design.

He stopped for longer in front of the third painting.

"This one should hang lower."

"Why?"

"The figure is positioned close to the bottom edge. If we hang the canvas at the standard height, the viewer's gaze will pass above her."

I stepped closer.

"I hadn't noticed that myself."

"Because you know this painting from the side you created it."

"And you look at it from the side someone else will see it."

"Exactly."

I smiled, although I tried not to. Eryk noticed but didn't comment. Perhaps that was precisely why the gesture didn't irritate me.

By the time we returned to the table, I had fewer reasons to object than I had expected. That didn't mean I intended to give him free rein. Quite the opposite. The more I appreciated his competence, the more clearly I wanted to establish the rules of our collaboration.

"I need something concrete," I said. "I don't want to spend the next few weeks renegotiating everything from scratch every time we meet."

Eryk put away the light meter and sat opposite me.

"Go ahead."

"You are responsible for the space, lighting, technical arrangement, and installation. I am responsible for the paintings, their order, and the final shape of the story. Any change that affects the meaning of the exhibition requires my approval."

"I agree, with one reservation. If a solution turns out to be technically impossible or unsafe, I need to be able to propose an alternative."

"Propose, not impose."

"Agreed."

"And I want to receive all comments from the sponsors directly, not through your interpretation."

This time, he didn't answer immediately.

"That's reasonable."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning I'll pass on every guideline that concerns the exhibition. I can't promise the partner won't have further comments, but I can promise I won't hide them from you."

I accepted his answer. It wasn't perfect, but at least it left me free to make my own decisions.

"Good. We have the basis for working together."

"That almost sounds like praise."

"Don't get used to it."

He looked at me with amusement.

"I'll do my best to remain humble."

By the end of the meeting, we had agreed that he would prepare two lighting options and a new layout. I was to provide the final list of works, including their dimensions and

information about their mounting requirements. We also scheduled our next meeting for Thursday.

As Eryk gathered his documents, I noticed that he had left one sheet on the table. It was the plan showing the changes we had agreed on together. He picked it up, but instead of putting it back in his briefcase, he handed it to me.

"Keep this."

"It's your copy."

"I have a digital version."

"And what if you lose it?"

"Then I'll have to come and ask for yours."

"Very clever."

"Not everything has to be complicated."

He left a few minutes later. He didn't try to prolong the conversation or suggest another meeting somewhere outside the gallery. Even so, when the door closed behind him, I found myself looking at the empty space on the other side of the table.

The collaboration was beginning to take shape better than I had anticipated. I didn't trust him yet, but at least I knew he could listen. That was no small thing.

Only after putting away the documents did I notice a short note he had written in pencil on the back of the sheet:

"Check whether the painting of the empty chair needs its own light."

I read it twice.

It wasn't a technical observation. It was more like a question I should have been asking myself.

For the first time in a long while, someone hadn't tried to tell me what to paint or what I ought to feel. Instead, he had drawn my attention to something I hadn't yet been able to decide for myself.

I didn't know whether this was the beginning of a good working relationship or whether I had simply met a man who knew how to ask uncomfortable questions.

But I had a feeling that life with Eryk Jeż wouldn't be boring.

Chapter 2 - Beyond the Exhibition Plan

On Wednesday morning, I received a message from Eryk with two attachments and a brief comment. The first showed a lighting option for the main exhibition room, while the second contained a revised layout of the paintings. He had also included the full guidelines from the gallery's financial partner, as promised. He hadn't added any explanation or suggestion about what I should think of them.

I started with the plans. One option was almost identical to what we had agreed on, while the other included an additional light source at the end of the corridor. I liked that solution better, although it required moving two smaller canvases. The sponsor's document, meanwhile, was full of phrases about making the event accessible, reaching a broad audience, and maintaining approachable communication. I couldn't find any direct demand to change the paintings. However, I did notice a sentence about avoiding excessively confrontational content in promotional materials.

I closed the file and sat motionless for a moment.

I didn't want to draw conclusions based on a single sentence. I knew sponsors had the right to set conditions for financing events, and the gallery couldn't operate without their support. That didn't mean every suggestion they made had to become my responsibility.

I replied to Eryk that the second lighting option was closer to my concept, but I wanted to discuss it in person. I also added that I wasn't approving any changes to the descriptions of the works at this stage.

He replied a few minutes later.

"Agreed. I suggest tomorrow at ten. We can finalise the schedule while we're at it."

I accepted the proposed time. There was no reason to postpone decisions we would have to make sooner or later.

The following day, we met at the gallery, but this time it wasn't a lengthy meeting around the table. Eryk brought printed lighting samples and several photographs showing how different settings affected the perception of colour. For a moment, I had the impression I was talking to someone who had prepared a small exhibition solely to convince me about one particular light bulb.

"You didn't have to print all of this," I remarked.

"I could have sent you the files, but then you'd have to judge them on a screen. And a screen isn't a gallery wall."

"That's true."

"Besides, I wanted us to be able to compare them side by side."

He spread the photographs across the table. One showed the main room under cooler lighting, another under warmer lighting. The third demonstrated the effect of using an additional spotlight in the corridor.

"This one is the best," I said, pointing to the last photograph.

"I think so too."

"Why didn't you suggest it straight away?"

"Because I didn't know whether you'd agree to moving the painting near the entrance."

"I won't."

"Then we have a problem."

"Again?"

"That's fairly typical in my line of work."

I looked at him with feigned exasperation.

"Do you always talk about problems so calmly?"

"I prefer to solve them before they become more serious than they really are."

"That sounds like a professional deformation."

"Possibly."

We returned to the exhibition room. For the next half hour, we checked how the proposed settings would affect the individual canvases. Eryk didn't try to persuade me to change their order. Instead, he showed me where we could achieve a better result without disturbing the composition. When I rejected one solution, he didn't come back to it a few minutes later under a different name.

I was beginning to appreciate that about him.

He stopped for longer in front of the painting depicting a woman sitting on the floor, her back against a closed door. It wasn't one of the works people usually chose when looking at my paintings. It had neither striking colours nor a particularly decorative composition. Most people walked past it before they had a chance to notice the smaller details.

"This one is important to you," he said.

It didn't sound like a question.

"Yes."

"You want to put it in the second room?"

"I haven't decided yet."

"May I ask why?"