

**Doctoral Thesis by John Moran, date of birth: September 26 1979.  
“The Importance of Socially Engaged Art in Public Space”  
The Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław  
in the area of fine arts, in the discipline of fine arts and art conservation.**

**Dissertation review  
By Koen Vanmechelen**

Art that does not come from pain is just entertainment. I tend to agree with this quote by political journalist Alice Thomson. It does not imply, however, that every creative act stemming from pain is art. Nevertheless, true art is fired by a sense of pain or driven by a lack of something defined or undefined and always fueled by burning, gnawing desire. In John Moran's work, I can clearly sense the pain, not only of the artist himself but also emanating from the yet-to-be-born community he wants to create. So, in his work, I detect pain, a desire to cure, and a hope for a long-term solution, which is something I like.

John is socially engaged, which is a force that is closely related to the way he perceives the world and functions in it. While wading through and surviving in various contexts, he develops different personae. Hence, his multicultural figures in his works, for me, can be seen as gestalts of Moran himself. They create a sense of estrangement. They make me think of frozen people, stuck in place and time, strangely like me and uncannily unlike me. They remind me of persons frantically looking for a new existence but getting mired in whatever they are doing. Whether they are running, up in the air (Searching for the Dark), or bound (Prey for the Sinners), they get stuck, and the motion stops. Everyone can relate to this in times of a pandemic. Moreover, we all can reflect on it. Will we survive this brutal reality, will we find ourselves in this uncaring world?

In most of Moran's works, impending doom looms in the background. These are times when snake slayers (clad in a tank top and bow tie) break their sword (Prey for the Sinners). Embraced by the snake, they only have their teddy bear for comfort and safety. The horse driver's horses (Crying with Silent Lips) try to escape but get sucked up by stone. Their eyes are wild with fear, the driver holding a teddy bear again. As psychologist Donna Varga calls it, we witness the thingification of comfort and security, the stuffed bear as commodified compassion. John Moran renders the sociohistorical colonization of childhood in glass. The human-animal defined as a child, stuck in time, blind to the world that created him. The suffering of the animals, their silent cries, is implied in the title. Non-human animals, having no capability to express themselves through language, do not exist unless they are commodities and tools.

Twists and contradictions are instrumental to art. John Moran convincingly proves this. Contradictions inhabit all his works, his tableaux. Hope Less and (Dis)Obey and certainly the stained-glass windows shine with contradictions. The contemporary is glued to historical, the mundane with the sacral, the mythological with the factual, entertainment with art. Time and again, the viewer is warned about the loss of a bygone world, replaced by a simulacrum we have made for our entertainment. We are left in a Disney story in which, in the end, everything crumbles, except for the toy that will last forever. This is a world without hope for and in the human-animal. A world crying for more empathy.

Seeing John's works, Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* comes to mind. Debord, a Marxist theorist, and filmmaker postulated that “all that once was directly lived, had become mere representation”. Reality has become a pseudo-world, a Truman show. Moran's works

nod to Debord's assertion that once society has lost the common narrative, the community myth, it must inevitably lose all the reference points of a widespread language. Until the divided character of an inactive community is superseded by the inauguration of an actual historical community.

And art? I quote Debord: "As soon as art – which constituted that former common language of social inaction – establishes itself as independent in the modern sense, emerging from its first, religious universe to become the individual production of separate works, it becomes subject, as one instance among others, to the movement governing the history of the whole of culture as a separated realm. Art's declaration of independence is thus the beginning of the end of art."

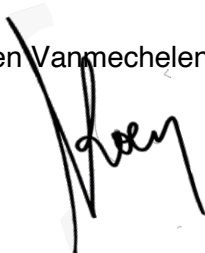
Moran's religious undertones hint at that lost narrative. We notice the burning Vatican; we watch an angelic figure looking not for darkness but the Dark; we stare at a Garden of Eden snake, are fascinated by four horses (of the Apocalypse?), mesmerize over the skull of a savior, and remember the saint feeding a deer not called Bambi. Yet, all these tableaus exist only in the context of the consumerist logo that defines them, whether it is Disney or McDo, the embodiment of consumerism, and heralds of the Anthropocene.

John Moran masters his craft. However, this is not enough. An artist must be able to play with the material given to him or her. I dare to say that there are two potential pitfalls in glass art. The first one is design, and in glass design, the art often gets lost for the decorative. The second one is in the niche in which glass is most dangerous: kitsch.

By transcending the kitsch and slapstick, John has made a daring yet powerful statement about our world and the state of the human-animal within it. He plays with the temptation to get lost into the kitsch zone, and by using glass, and two and three-dimensional images he maintains quality. This is how John Moran shows one way contemporary glass art can take and become more relevant to our times.

It seems self-evident that John's knowledge and explorations are passed on in the form of a doctorate. Few are those who master the craft and the art and yet dare to balance on edge. Hence, following my analysis of his dissertation and creative output as well as his professional practice in the field of art, I highly recommend that John Moran be awarded an academic Ph.D. title in the field of art, in the discipline of fine arts and art conservation.

Koen Vanmechelen

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Koen', written over a light grey rectangular background.