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in the field of art, in the discipline of fine arts and art conservation

mgr Sarah Epping, the Faculty of Graphics and Media Art at the Eugeniusz
Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław.

NARCOSIS: Art in the modern world, or the Polynesian 'navigational exploration' of nature?

"...Among the marvels brought ashore from the ship Victoria when she reached Spain on 6 September 1522, after having completed the first journey around the world, were five bird skins. Their feathers, and in particular the gauzy plumes sprouting from their sides, were of a matchless splendour and magnificence and quite unlike anything that had been seen before. Two of them had been given to Magellan, the leader of the expedition, by the king of Batchian, an island in the Moluccas as a gift for the king of Spain. Pigafetti, the chronicler of the expedition, recorded the gift and wrote that: "These birds are as large as thrushes; they have small heads, long beaks, legs slender like a writing pen, and a span in length. They have no wings, but instead of them, long feathers of different colours, like plumes; their tail is like that of a thrush. They never fly except when the wind blows. They told us that these birds come from the terrestrial Paradise, and they call them bolon dinata, that is divine birds"....

"... I felt moved to the depths by the magnificence of their plumes. Many different birds of paradise had died to provide the feathers for these ornaments. Nearly every man had two King of Saxony plumes stuck through his nose and fastened in the centre of his forehead, so that the feathers formed a superb hoop around the upper part of his face. Some men had so many Saxony plumes that they had included them in their headdress. One warrior had sixteen of them in addition to the feathers of twenty or thirty other birds: the Lesser Bird of Paradise, the Raggiana Bird of Paradise, the Magnificent Bird of Paradise, Princess Stephanie's Bird, and the Blue Bird of Paradise. It was one of the most spectacular sights I have ever seen. I made a rough calculation. There were over five hundred beplumed dancers. Between them, they must have killed at least ten thousand birds of paradise to dress up for the ceremony ..."

Journeys to the Other Side of the World, 1960

David Attenborough

When I looked at the reproductions of Sarah Epping's Narcosis prints, memory took me back to a time over sixty years ago when my view of the world was being shaped. For me, the climate of late 1959 and the place

in which I had lived for fifty years shaped my inner world and was definitely reflected in my work, and created me.

Italian neorealism, French la Nouvelle Vague, surrealism, impressionism with the great filmmakers such as Louis Malle, Luchino Visconti, Luis Bunuel have become my life. The sea, beaches and coastal towns have sculpted my "stoic" form.

I gazed at Sarah Epping's works with great concentration and read her commentary – the young artist's world and mine are different images of the environment (mentally we come from different times), yet the final reflections on the state of the planet coincide at many points.

The more thoroughly I analysed the doctoral dissertation of the young artist, the more areas of contact there appeared between our worlds, the old and the new one, and yet ours.

In the documentation presented: Sarah Epping was born on October 1, 1990 in the heart of the USA, in Holdrege, Nebraska – 1448.9 miles from New York at the Atlantic Ocean, and 1371.7 miles from Los Angeles at the Pacific Ocean. It's a long way to the sea from there. When she came to Poland in 2015 and began her Master's degree programme at the Faculty of Graphics and Media Art at the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław, she was 483.4 kilometres away from the sea, from Gdańsk.

In 2017 she obtained her Master's degree in art with excellent result.

Her passion for travelling and observing nature led Sarah Epping to explore the idea of WATER, the most important transmission of the origin of life.

Almost like young Leonardo or Durer, she can translate her interest in the reality around her from a physical, sociological, economic language, by delving into the layer of printmaking technology.

Looking at Sarah's documentation, I pay attention to her didactic and organizational activities and her participation in exhibitions as well as her considerable commitment to exploration that she outlined in her doctoral dissertation.

"... The reasons for the 'navigational explorations' of the British (Dutch, Portuguese, Spaniards, Belgians etc. – quotation mine) and Polynesians were extremely different. While the Europeans were driven by a desire to conquer, as nature and people were for them property to exploit, it seems that the Polynesians often navigated and explored in moments of clear need rather than out of a desire for profit. Therein lies the fundamental difference in method and approach between British and Polynesian exploration...."(quotation by S.E.)

Another quote by Sarah Epping: "...Thomas Reid later wrote in his "Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind":

"When I observe a plant growing from its seed to maturity, I know that there must be a cause that has power to produce this effect. But I see neither the cause, nor the manner of its operation. But in certain motions of my body and directions of my thought, I know, not only that there must be a cause that has power to produce these effects, but that I am that cause...."

and

"... This statement refers to the power of one's consciousness, which of course brings us back to the Cartesian 'I think, therefore I am' ..."
(quotation by S.E.)

Combining the Polynesian approach with Descartes, one can quote:

"I am, therefore I think", rejecting the great philosopher, accepting the thought of another one and being then able to understand the actions of the island people.

I cannot understand why, getting to the heart of the problem, only one side of the issue is quoted – I think that without red there will be no contrast with green, there will be no plus without minus, and it will be easier for us to reject contemporary attitudes in the world glorifying the thesis that it is better "to have than to be".

It will also be easier to understand the attitude of the great artist Marcel Duchamp, who decided to "create" instead of "produce".

And such an attitude would probably solve many climate, ecological, health and other problems of the globe.

Reading the work "NARCOSIS: art in the modern world" with great interest, I understood why Sarah Epping provided information about the Australian photographer Frank Hurley, who as an eyewitness left a wonderful documentation of his weeks spent in the Arctic, most notably his photographs of the 1914 unsuccessful Endurance expedition in the Weddell Sea.

I suspect that such people as Frank Hurley very much influenced the activities of the doctoral student. Her travels and the outcomes of this activity became the foundation of Sarah Epping's art.

Teaching, organizational activities for the benefit of the Academy, participation in group (printmaking) exhibitions and symposia, and awards.

I would like to emphasize Sarah's artistic works, which are closely connected with her exhibition activities and her prints, particularly distinctive due to their technical and artistic level (individuality), which

I would place in two (positive) segments: Palimpsest and Potpourri, i.e. from Greek: 'again' and 'scrape' as a method and a mixture of different, not similar in character things, understood in the world of feelings, desires.

The Litho-Kielce 2018 exhibition, THE REPTILE'S LOT (35.5 x 45 cm), made in 2016 – a competition work distinguished by the delicate structure of mezzotint, ossa sepia and a visible move towards printmaking techniques with an emphasis on drawing.

In the big exhibition in 2019 in Liberec, Para Graphics and Ceramics, the third edition by artists from the Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław, Sarah Epping as a Breslav girl presented a series of etchings with digital print, RANNE MORZE [The Wounded Sea](100x70cm). In her own description the author posed the question:

"...Are we able to restore the forests of seaweed to their former state?..." And Sarah doesn't stop asking questions, whether in the titles of the prints, or taking part in projects such as the Wrocław CULTURE FOR CLIMATE in a work entitled WASTELAND based on T.S. Eliot's poem, The Waste Land (1922). At the Guanlan Printmaking Biennial, in her work entitled PANGAEA made in mixed media technique combining the latest technique and etching, she achieves an effect resembling the ancient method of using a partly scratched substrate to apply subsequent graphic layers, thus creating 'sea space'.
Impressive!

In 2019 her work STATE-OF-INDIFFERENCE, in which the author's artistic language definitively became crystallized, was presented at Galerie Crous de Paris, Art Space – the Kunstraum Potstdamer and the Neon Gallery in Wrocław along with the information that it was the fiftieth exhibition in which she participated.

In 2018 Sarah Epping's work MONTERREY, a digital print combined with etching, was presented at the exhibition OPUS DUARUM at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vilnius in the TITANIKUS Gallery. A better place for those interested in this theme in art cannot be found.

Sarah Epping is very active, exhibiting her prints in competitions and thematic exhibitions and she has marked her presence with her artistic prints in several places.

I think that participation in performance projects (a trendy word) and symposia is very significant in her artistic activity.

Already in 2018 she was invited by the International Exchange Programme (IPEP) in India to a Symposium entitled MiCROCOSMOS/ MaCROCOSMOS and as a representative from Poland she presented her work entitled THE STATE OF MATTER, an etching on Chinese tissue paper; The image, is...of our cosmos. One of a stone....

In 2020 Sarah participated in the OPEN OUT FESTIVAL, presenting her work entitled EXPOSURE, LEAVE NO TRACE.

She received a financial award for her activities at TOMSO in Norway and the EXPOSURE project. Earlier in 2019 she had received a distinction from the Tadeusz Kulisiewicz Foundation, and a year later she was awarded the Jerzy Grotowski scholarship.

From 2018 to 2019 she took part in the IMPACT 10 International Conference in Spain, a workshop in Portland, USA, presenting her work entitled NEW ADMINISTRATIVE WORKERS, and in the HYPER-VISIBLE AND THE OPAQUE workshop at the CSU Building, Studio 608.

2019 was particularly absorbing for Sarah with regard to organizational involvement; I will mention three of ten events: CTRL art. Studio Wrocław/Września, the ShowCase Gallery at the University of Knoxville, Tennessee and the Walker Art Gallery at the University of Nebraska, USA.

Information concerning her work can be found, for instance, in publications in India, Poland, Spain.

As part of her teaching activities with students, Sarah describes her technological achievements in workshop productions: etching, matrix preparation.

When I look through the dozens of activities in which Sarah Epping participates I am not surprised that our time passes so quickly. The young artist's passions allow her to organize expeditions, engage in projects, as well as describe and share them with the community. It is with great respect that I bow to such a great output of the printmaker-academic.

Artistic research – NARCOSIS – the final item

"...Perhaps the most important role of the artist in the modern world is to help repair the way we have shaped the world around us with art movements. Hopefully, we can then reconstruct our processes so that they are more sustainable and so that future generations can continue to live in a world of abundance..." (quotation from S.E.)

I had to stop writing and went into the woods for an hour of Nordic walking. During my activity, a cyclist passed me on his bike, at a dizzying speed; I was passing a family; mum, dad and child, who were walking around looking for mushrooms, not forgetting that they were on a leisure walk. Walking through the forest, referring to the quote above, I wondered who was right: the cyclist, the family or me. I think there is one truth – physical activity and being in the forest are necessary for human beings, but who was right about how to use our activity – everyone would find their own reasonable argument that they were the one doing the right thing.

And I thought that when I was Sarah's age I had a studio on a very busy street, where from the morning hours until sunset I couldn't hear my thoughts because of the traffic noise. When I closed the window, I noticed my own concentration on painting and had a reflection on the creative process: we artists are closed like in ivory towers, but we have to open a window and process the surrounding reality. But what we do is not this reality, nor an abstract detached from its surroundings.

Sarah Epping undertook a very difficult task and the objective she set for herself bordered on the almost impossible – combining fire and water, finding how artistic creation could develop something that would raise awareness about the state of dead zones and industrial agriculture in the world.

Sarah set herself a goal: the academic work was to be a structural change in the manner of creation.

The breakthrough experience in the work was the three-colour water panel A CRIMSON TIDE and then the diptych THE PRISM.

The painting structures created a new undersea reality; a world of fantastic creatures, delicate plants and velvet corals in the colours of a beautiful natural environment, "re-created", attracting the viewer with its wonderful sensitivity. From these experiences Sarah created her own nature journal of the Anthropocene. As the author writes: "... the book is intended to make us carefully observe the loss of biodiversity on a micro and macro scale."

The doctoral student's commitment to socially engaged art unleashed new creative processes leading to the creation of paper from dead zones; a new technological process from the excessive abundance of seaweed known as "Ulva Prolifera". The result: handmade paper in the TYPÄ Museum of Paper and Printing in Tartu, Estonia and then prints/etchings on seaweed paper.

Let me quote Sarah: "Due to the combination of drawings, prints and paper made from ulva prolifera, the images took on a new meaning in themselves. ... the doctoral dissertation on nitrogen recycling in the oceans was at the same time a work for the active removal of nitrogen pollution from the Baltic Sea, as well as transforming it into something artistic and useful..." (quotation by S.E.).

The process was completed. A series of unique and beautiful works entitled NARCOSIS 1-4, 210 cm x 70 cm, was created. Wonderful "plant" and "real" forms wrap us in their dense net, creating forms as in life, infinite and mysterious.

Unfortunately, as a reviewer of Sarah Epping's work, I have one regret: I can only imagine what the prints look like, but I cannot interact with them in the real world. Contact with the structure of the paper, the print, is an added value, without which I feel as if I was trying to smell the things I am watching on television.

I can only thank the author of NARCOSIS for reminding me of the wonderful exhibition of cartons and other stained glass works by Stanisław Wyspiański in the National Museum in Cracow. I hope I will have the same memories of my "adventure" with the works and theories of Sarah Epping.

I have had the great pleasure of becoming acquainted with her artistic, scholarly, organizational and didactic output for a moment, and I give her work the highest mark and look forward to her further explorations.

To sum up:

Having used for over forty years the techniques of printmaking and painting, I state with full responsibility that both the theoretical and the artistic parts of the doctoral dissertation are a serious artistic event deserving of the highest distinction. It is with great pleasure that I can see the in-depth artistic exploration of the doctoral student in a professional presentation with a very strong ideological message. The presented documentation testifies to the exceptionally substantial technical and intellectual preparation.

At the same time, I state that the doctoral dissertation prepared under the supervision of such an outstanding supervisor, Professor Przemysław Tyszkiewicz, is an original combination of artistic, as well as general theoretical and technical knowledge, which justifies awarding Sarah Epping with the doctoral degree in the field of art, in the discipline of fine arts and art conservation.

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