

dr hab. Magdalena Hlawacz, prof. UO
Institute of Visual Art
Faculty of Art
University of Opole

Review of the Doctoral Thesis of Katarzyna Skalska in the field of art in the discipline of *fine arts and art conservation*, initiated by the Artistic Discipline Council of the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław.

Basic information

Katarzyna Skalska was born on 3 October 1991. She graduated from the University of Rzeszow with a Bachelor of Art degree in 2013 (with honours) and with a Master of Art degree specialising in Graphics in 2015 (with honours). In 2016, she finished postgraduate study programme *Interdisciplinary Printmaking* at the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław. In 2017, she got her postgraduate degree in English translation at the *Philological School of Higher Education in Wrocław*. In 2017-2020, as a PhD student pursuing studies in English, she was an intern at the Serigraphy Studio run by prof. Christopher Nowicki and dr Marta Kubiak at the Faculty of Graphics and Media Art at the Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław.

Assessment of creative achievements and artistic activity

Katarzyna Skalska has been actively involved in artistic life given the number of regional and international exhibitions and conferences, publications and catalogues of collective and post-competition exhibitions. Artistic achievements (after obtaining the Master of Art degree) can be considered satisfactory – one individual regional exhibition (2016 – „WILD”, Domek Miedziorytnika, Wrocław) and more than 10 collective exhibitions and art projects in the country and abroad. The collective exhibitions are mostly international and of competitive or curatorial character (among others, 2019 – „Contradiction – print exchange exhibition”, The Project Space, University at Buffalo, Buffalo, NY, USA; 2019 – „Wrocław School of Printmaking Exhibition in Belgrade”, Flu Gallery, Belgrad, Serbia; 2018/2019 – „PARA. CERAMIKA. GRAFIKA” / *Para. Ceramics. Prints. The Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław III*”, Liberec Regional Gallery, Liberec, Czechy; 2018 – „Contradiction – print exchange exhibition”, CTRL Art Studio, Wrocław; 2016 – „małe formy plastyczne”, r_z ORZ ZPAP gallery, Rzeszow; 2016 – International Art. Forum Graphics „Leopolis”, National Museum in Lviv, Lviv, Ukraine; 2016 – „51 06' 41"N 017 02' 33"E”, Ślimak Art Gallery, Wrocław; 2016 – exhibition “J. Panka award”/„Nagroda im. J. Panka”, X WSUR Gallery, Rzeszow; 2015 – exhibition of students participating in the flat printing workshop graphics symposium “Flat printing spaces”, Stara Drukarnia, Rzeszow).

It's worth mentioning her participation in symposia and conferences, eg., 2020, *Czy badania artystyczne?* Nationwide scientific online conference, Wrocław (participant); 2018 Wrocław Type Forum, the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław (chair of the conference in English, participant and member of the organisational committee); 2018 Conference ZLOT/ODLOT VI, Meeting of Young Culture Researchers,

Institute of the History of Art of the University of Wrocław (participant and presenter in the panel in English: *Lutalica of a non-artist. How to survive while not fitting in*); 2017 Post-digital Printmaking. Redefinition of print, the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław (volunteer, participant); 2015 Symposium of Flat printing workshop graphics Flat printing spaces/PLASKIE PRZESTRZENIE DRUKU, Rzeszów (participant).

A full list of Katarzyna Skalska's artistic achievements is attached to the thesis documentation.

Assessment of the Doctoral Thesis conception and implementation

Katarzyna Skalska's doctoral thesis consists of the written part entitled *Imperceptible. The Language of Printmaking / Nieuchwytny. Język grafiki warsztatowej* and the artistic part consisting of a series of 16 mezzotints *The Glass Kingdom* (2018–2020); the *Chess movie* (2019–2020) and installation *The Glass Kingdom* (2018–2020). The artistic part is available as an online exhibition entitled *The Glass Kingdom* on Instagram at @theglasskingdomskz account.

The Glass Kingdom installation constitutes a significant part of the doctoral thesis. It consists of the wooden chessboard and pieces. Yet, these are not ordinary figures for playing chess, they are replaced by glass balls. They all are identical, which fundamentally changes the rules of the game, while in fact chess pieces have different forms and functions. Meanwhile, all the 32 pieces on *The Glass Kingdom* chessboard are transparent balls of the same size. However, it doesn't seem that the author has deprived them of their powers. At least, this is the impression one can have watching the recorded game the author plays with herself. Moving the glass pieces she's pronouncing the statements such as *risking madness, striving for strength, losing self respect, etc.* It might reflect a social game, while the thesis refers to the game of chess only formally, and in fact it depicts the author's internal struggle which greatly influences the final shape of the doctoral work. The emotional state is compared to the game of chess. However, as mentioned by Katarzyna Skalska, "Nothing seemed to be as transparent as it was in a black and white game concept".

The modern version of chess developed in the South of Europe and became particularly popular in the period of Renaissance which is sometimes called the golden time of chess. However, India is considered to be the cradle of chess, and the oldest records of the game come from 7-century Persia. The word "checkmate" is derived from Persian *shāh māt* („King is dead”). Thus, chess is about eliminating the King or depriving him of his power and of the possibility to move. Katarzyna uses chess as a metaphor to tell about her personal experiences and struggles in the social game called life.

Inspired by chess, the doctoral candidate has also created a series of mezzotints. These are the figurative compositions in which the King, the Bishop, the Knight and other pieces as well as the glass balls are shown on the chessboard. One can see an interesting game of perspectives here – black and white square fields are reflected in the glass spheres of homogeneous pawns. The doctoral candidate has been clearly inspired by the works of two artists – Guntars Sietiņš and Maurits Cornelis Escher, she refers to in her written dissertation. Those are mainly formal similarities connected to the use of perspective and optical illusions.

In the mezzotint series, Katarzyna Skalska applies mostly the geometrical and curvilinear perspectives. Analysing the achievements in the development of perspectives, one can reach to much older art sources. Perspective was one of the main problems of mannerism and artists associated with that artistic style developed an exceptional virtuosity in using this procedure. Hence my association of the glass balls from Katarzyna Skalska's graphics with Parmigianin's paintings – especially with his 1503 self-portrait, where he painted his image reflected in the convex surface of a small mirror. In some sense, Skalska's graphics are also self-portraits but rather of her psychological state. Glass balls, soap bubbles, spherical objects reflecting reality are a common theme of the illusionist paintings of the Baroque era, where they symbolised the fragility and volatility of life. Katarzyna Skalska in her work does not give unambiguous answers leaving it to the interpretation of the observer.

In the written part, Katarzyna Skalska writes a lot about her internal struggles when preparing her thesis and performing various social and professional roles – being an academic teacher, translator, printmaker, as well as being and (not)being an artist and a linguist. However, what the dissertation lacks is more precise information on the creative process behind it. After all, mezzotint is a very characteristic graphic technique and it would be worth looking deeper into it. As I believe that the medium and process are significant in creating a piece of art, I'd be happy to find out why mezzotint was chosen among a vast number of other graphic techniques. Probably, because, as compared to other techniques, it is characterised by softness and subtlety which makes it closer to painting rather than linear graphics? Or maybe because of the very process of matrix creation – developing a copper plate with a wobble and a trackpad. I believe that a creator, observing the medium in their work, can come to interesting conclusions, especially such a sensitive and deeply analytical person as Katarzyna Skalska.

Reading the written part of the dissertation, I sometimes felt disappointed that the author hadn't made an attempt to reflect herself in the mirror of art and hadn't found broader contexts for her work. First, emotional states and the so-called psychological portrait are the well-known themes that have been functioning in art for a long time, especially loved by expressionists. Emotions and spiritual states have also been expressed by artists by means of the language of abstraction.

Undoubtedly, however, the artist who combines in his art everything that seems important in Katarzyna Skalska's work – psychology, conceptual approach, playing with art, language and culture – was Marcel Duchamp. He had a very critical attitude towards art, arguing that the art does not exist at all- He considered himself rather a chess player and should be noted that Duchamp was a prominent one. In 1925, the French Chess Federation even awarded him the title of champion. He participated in the tournaments, performed at the Olympics, and had numerous successes on his account.

I think that referring to Duchamp could help understand Katarzyna Skalska's artistic intentions, given that Marcel Duchamp based his art on the word, as what he was doing was not only the production but rather an artistic gesture based on pointing and nominating. *Ready mades* is nothing but choosing the ready objects and re-creating them using the words: *urinal – Fountain* (1917). Thus, I can see here the area where Skalska could have found many interesting and inspiring analogies.

Contestation and devaluation of art and culture were fundamental in the artistic strategies of Dadaists. Absurd puns, depriving the words of their meaning, the change of convention, all those are the dadaistic practices that consequently led to a very deep reflection on culture, art and language. That relationship between the word and meaning, imagination and physical presence/material being was explored by many artists working with the language. Given that in contemporary art, there is such a trend as concrete poetry, it would have been worth

considering the strategies of *Art & Language* artistic cooperative. Joseph Kosuth, whose images depict the definitions of various notions, as *Definition* for example, and explicitly show that language is the system of signs. His black and white images refer to the tradition of abstract painting and pose such questions as what a language is and which forms it takes. They also remind me of the black and white chessboard and Katarzyna Skalska's posts on Instagram, being part of the virtual exhibition. However, I'd rather the author had discovered those analogies by herself.

At the beginning of her dissertation, Katarzyna Skalska writes that she doesn't consider herself an artist and doesn't want to be called that way – yet she doesn't explain why. I understand that neither art nor artist are precise words and they will never be, as the essence of art is its redefinability. The notion of art is constantly updated, especially among artists who always face the issue of describing themselves within the ambiguous and vague definition of art. This is the fundamental problem and in fact the main part of the artistic statement – attitude towards art. The question is what is that ambiguous activity and who is an artist within it. It is a pity the author didn't express her opinion in this regard. It is the most important issue of the modern art, especially the conceptual one, and the artists themselves are attempting to make up their own definitions of art and being an artist, devaluating, invalidating and dismantling the existing expectation towards art.

The unquestionable value of Katarzyna Skalska's work is her personal attitude to the topic at hand and her sensitivity and empathy in treating the matter of art. I hope that it will let the author continue her artistic work, develop her artistic awareness and build up a satisfying relationship with art.

Assessment of didactic, organisational and promotional achievements in the field of art

In 2017-2020, Katarzyna Skalska as PhD student in English, was an intern at the Serigraphy Studio run by prof. Christopher Nowicki and as. dr. Marta Kubiak at the Faculty of Graphic Design and Media Art at the Academy of Fine arts in Wrocław. As a beginner, she conducted classes and consulted on student works within particular tasks, focused mainly on the technical aspects.

During her PhD studies, Katarzyna Skalska taught the following courses:

- Introduction to serigraphy for 1-year Erasmus+ students. During classes, the students obtained theoretical and practical knowledge and skills, got familiar with organisation, methods and the process of printing.
- Introduction to mezzotint for 1-year Master students (Master of Fine Arts in Printmaking in English)
- Mezzotints – introductory course for students of Science Circle of the Chair of Art Graphics at the Academy of Fine Art in Wrocław. The doctoral student organised and taught the 3-month introductory course (January–March 2018).

Stosowane metody dydaktyczne polegały na poznawaniu procesu twórczego, demonstracji technik, konceptualizacji zadanych tematów, opracowywaniu wstępnych koncepcji, otwartej dyskusji, eksperymentowaniu oraz swobodnej interpretacji w samodzielnej pracy.

The didactic methods applied were based on getting familiar with the artistic process, demonstrating the techniques, conceptualising the given topics, working on the preliminary conceptions, open discussions, experimenting and free interpretation in individual works.

Due to the worldwide pandemic Covid-19, the doctoral student also conducted workshops and courses online. Assumptions and methods Katarzyna Skalska used were similar to those she applied in offline classes. Meetings with students have led to numerous, formally diverse final projects – print series, comics, art books, artistic installations, etc.

Moreover, the doctoral student participated in all the classes conducted by prof. Christopher Nowicki and dr Marta Kubiak, gaining experience and learning the specifics of working in the Screen Printing Studio.

Conclusion

Katarzyna Skalska has presented for assessment the work which is a very personal analysis of her previous activities and artistic achievements. The doctoral dissertation *Imperceptible. The Language of Printmaking / Nieuchwytna. Język grafiki warsztatowej* and *The Glass Kingdom and Chess movie*, as well as the artistic and didactic achievements and organisation and promotional activities in the field of art make the basis of awarding the candidate the PhD degree in Art.

Having considered the overall creative activity of the doctoral student and her artistic involvement, I support the proposal of the Artistic Discipline Council of the Faculty of Graphic Design and Media Art of the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Fine Art in Wrocław to award Katarzyna Skalska the PhD degree in the discipline *fine arts and art conservation*.

Opole, 20 September 2021

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Magdalena Kowalska', written in a cursive style.