

Riga, September 13, 2021

Review for Doctoral Dissertation.

PhD candidate's name: Katarzyna Skalska

Date of birth: 3 October, 1991

Title of doctoral dissertation: Imperceptible. The Language of Printmaking

Supervisor: Professor Christopher Nowicky

Name of university: The Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław

Field and discipline: Doctor of Fine Arts Degree

The doctoral dissertation by PhD Candidate Katarzyna Skalska *Imperceptible. The Language of Printmaking* consists of:

- 1) Doctoral thesis *Imperceptible. The Language of Printmaking*, 2019-2020;
- 2) *The Glass Kingdom mezzotint* series which consists of 16 mezzotints, 2018-2020;
- 3) *Chess movie*, 2019-2020;
- 4) Installation *The Glass Kingdom*, 2018-2020;
- 5) *The Glass Kingdom* online exhibition on Instagram account @theglasskingdomskz.

The textual and artistic parts of Katarzyna Skalska's doctoral dissertation should be assessed as a whole, conceptual work of art. Therefore, in order to talk about the artistic parts of her doctoral dissertation – a series of mezzotints, a film and an installation – it is necessary first of all to tell in detail about the general concept of the work, which follows from the theoretical parts of the doctoral dissertation.

Skalska in doctoral dissertation *Imperceptible. The Language of Printmaking* unifies deep and extensive knowledge of linguistics and philosophy with a system of visual images, which she has created through introspection.

The author traces intellectual searches of her important authors in a fascinating narrative. She does this with elegant ease, as if Lewis Carroll's tale of *Alice's Adventures* in Wonderland continues after Alice wakes up. Immersion or going downstairs ends with a strategic chess game of linguistic metamorphosis and emotional experiences.

Skalska is playing against herself. Skalska *versus* Skalska. This is an introverted game in a sealed environment, the game in which both attack and defence are equally important. There is no absolute winner in this single player game, at least at first glance. Intellectual sophistication is dangerous. Destructive for *prisoner of a personal fortress*. The brilliant mastery with which this game is played, is made apparent only after some time of reflection.

It was exciting for me to follow how the author takes the reader through a chains of language definitions in the first part of the dissertation. For example,

American linguist and anthropologist Edward Sapir has stated: “Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols” (Reference 1).

Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of the Geneva School of Linguistics and the inspirer of structuralism, defined language as follows: “a fund accumulated by the members of the community through the practice of speech, a grammatical system existing potentially in every brain, or more exactly in the brains of individual, but exist perfectly only in collectivity” (Reference 5).

Referring to American linguist Noam Chomsky, Skalska explains his revolutionary contribution. Chomsky repeals the communicative function of language, the symbolic nature of it and attraction to social groups using it. Following Chomsky, one should study only the structural properties of language, as if language were a mathematical equation (Page 23). A small note: a bar popular in Riga’s creative circles is named after Chomsky.

Skalska asks if the word has a connection with the object. She comes to the conclusion that the same words can denote different objects, and the same objects can form different words. Skalska has to look for another form of expression, her own method. And for Skalska it is the mezzotint process. This explains my presence as a reviewer, because we have a common form of artistic expression – the mezzotint technique. And I am very honoured that Skalska refers not only to Maurits Cornelis Escher's works, but also to my mezzotints in her doctoral dissertation.

Mezzotint is a printmaking technique whose starting position is black, not white. The preset direction of mezzotint is from the black to the white, from darkness to light. Therefore, the velvety, deep black, which is characteristic for mezzotint, has always been in a dialogical relationship with darkness. To navigate in the darkness, you have to memorize objects in the room, concentrate, and move forward very carefully until your eyes get used to it.

Due to the peculiarities of mezzotint, even a simple still life acquires a metaphysical radiation due to the incomprehensible source of the light. The author's choice of technique is definitely not a coincidence. The process of platework is meditative and slow. In this way a distance is maintained. Overcoming the resistance of material takes time, and no one sees it. The viewer also does not see the thought processes taking place in the artist's brain.

Art is a way to single out images from the invisible, from the darkness of consciousness, from fear of death, to see what is not in nature. A mental, inward-looking vision is required.

Chess is an abstract strategy game and each chess piece plays its own role. In the vision of Skalska the chess game is happening according to her rules; in her game the pieces are endowed with certain metaphorical denotation, hidden in the titles of the artworks:

Pawn – Fateful Pawn  
Knight – Rusty Knight  
Bishop – Father Knows Best  
Rook – Tower of Sand  
Queen – Sacrificial Queen  
King – The King Must Die

Skalska’s series of mezzotints consist of 16 prints, which are printed from 6 different-sized copper plates. The technical performance of Skalska’s mezzotints is absolutely

perfect. The tones between black and white is well-balanced. Skalska has achieved the dynamics of the compositions successfully chosen an angle of viewpoint to the chessboard. The prints are exhibited in the order of the chess pieces on the chessboard at the beginning of a game. The central and biggest size mezzotint named *The King Must Die* is placed in the position of the king piece. The mezzotint named *Sacrificial Queen* (queen piece) is smaller relatively than the mezzotint *The King Must Die*, but a little bigger than the prints, which are placed in the positions of the strategical chess pieces rook, knight and bishop. It should be noted that in chess the queen is the strongest piece with which you can both defend and attack. This is one of the paradoxes posed by the author.

Another of the mysteries or paradoxes posed by Katarzyna Skalska is replacement bishop piece depicted in her mezzotint named *Father Knows Best*. The bishop is a strategic piece in chess that can be used for radical moves, but can also be sacrificed for the sake of higher interests.

The dying king (father) is the key to the artwork. Skalska writes: “The King must die. In a death, there is a great sensation of a rebirth.”

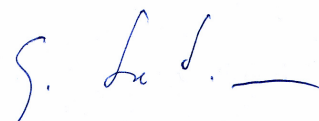
Personalized chess pieces are just the beginning. The artist metamorphoses the chess pieces into glass balls for the next stage. The glass balls as similar objects are arranged on the squares of the chessboard. Reflections of the environment, distorted images of other chess pieces are reflected in the glass spheres, like in a mirror. The artist makes moves with glass balls, like chess players make moves with chess pieces. The movie is about an abstract chess game with glass balls instead of chess pieces. The installation from the glass balls on the chessboard, transparent table, and chairs demonstrates that the game takes place in the brain of one person, the artist.

As a result, Skalska has created an excellent conceptual artwork *The Kingdom of Glass*, consisting of the series of mezzotints, the movie and the installation. Inevitably, an association arises with the main character of Hermann Hesse's intellectual novel “The Glass Bead Game” – the master of the game Joseph Knecht. However, let me emphasize that the Skalska's work is authentic, intellectually and personally justified, and masterfully created.

Evaluating Skalska's doctoral dissertation, one can but admit: if a chess game excludes victory in itself, then the artist's performance – both theoretical and visual – has produced the highest result.

I give Katarzyna Skalska my highest recommendation for a very well-deserved Doctor of Fine Arts Degree.

Sincerely.



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