

Review of Ms. Katarzyna Skalska's doctoral thesis **Imperceptible. The Language of Printmaking**

I am honored to be invited as a reviewer of Ms. Katarzyna Skalska's PhD project entitled Imperceptible. The Language of Printmaking and of the exhibition project called The Glass Kingdom. Katarzyna Skalska is a PhD student within Akademia Sztuk Pięknych im. Eugeniusza Gepperta in Wrocław.

I say this, first of all, because this invitation comes as a continuation and consolidation of a long and constant collaboration, for over 15 years, between the graphic design departments of the art schools in Wrocław and Cluj, a collaboration that, I like to say, has gone beyond the already generous framework of the Erasmus program.

The organization of an engraving exhibition in Poznań and Wrocław, consisting of works signed by the professors and students of the Graphic Design Department within the University of Art and Design in Cluj-Napoca, was the first exhibition project I initiated as a young assistant back in 2007. I would like to mention that the subjects I teach to students in Cluj-Napoca reflect my research as an artist, my interest in visual communication through printing and multiplication techniques: Engraving Techniques, Alternative Investigations in Multiplication Techniques, and Practical Applications in Graphic Techniques.

Our respect for the Polish school of graphic design made our orientation towards Kraków, Wrocław, Poznań, Warsaw or Katowice extremely natural. As far as I'm concerned, as a proof stand my eleven trips to Poland, starting with 1994, as a second year student, for a first contact with the Kraków Triennial of Printmaking.

What made me feel the efficiency of communicating and collaborating with someone who has a historical, social, cultural background close to yours were my presence, on two occasions, in Wrocław, and the direct contact with the students, teachers of Akademia Sztuk Pięknych im. Eugeniusza Gepperta, and with their creation. This is the context in which I gladly accepted Professor Christopher Nowicki's proposal.

Therefore, I find myself in front of a doctoral thesis of a captivating sincerity, which, with an extreme elegance and far from any scholarly artifice, brings forward an ever-present issue in visual communication, a set of essential questions for anyone in this double position: artist and teacher. *Imperceptible. The Language of Printmaking* inspiringly interrogates the conventions, agreements, translations, understandings that make written, spoken or visual language an effective tool for knowledge, experimentation and especially communication. We observe a systematic research of different concepts about language, from Plato to Chomsky, which is permanently doubled by a self-referential discourse, natural and convincing, a true instrument of orientation and calibration.

The beauty of the construction proposed by PhD student Katarzyna Skalska is obviously based on her linguistic background. Thus, not at all accidental is the accuracy of the terms but also the careful choice of highly visual phrases that come to unite even more the two levels of communication: by word and image. I would exemplify by an expression that appears twice in the text: "engraved in memory", "engraved in the brain". Yes, memories, thoughts are "engraved" in the memory, not drawn, nor painted. Thus, the thought can also be seen as a visualization of mental images, the image imprinted after a matrix always ready for activation. It is just one example that builds a bridge between the world of words and the world of images.

Referring to the way the visual project is articulated, we notice that we have very different working environments that work perfectly together and build a complex semantic field. The mezzotint, the object, the installation, the video and the black and white photography, each with its specific voice, are the means through which the message is most effectively transmitted. Here, efficient would be equivalent to "stronger" and not necessarily "clearer". Katarzyna Skalska proposes an exhibition in which we move from the copper plate of the engraving to the wooden plate of the chessboard and then to the glass screen of the phone or computer. From mezzotint to Instagram is just a step when the language is a vivid one, able to translate ideas, thoughts but also moods and feelings.

I can't help noticing an aspect related to the choice of this classic engraving technique for the realization of a visual project whose object of representation and reflection is the game of chess. First of all I would say that both the world of traditional engraving and that of chess are under the sign of the black and white relationship.

As its name suggests, mezzotint was the etching technique that came to mediate this contrast, to refine the technique of the crossing, to propose another passage from white to black or, given the specific working process, from black to white. Following the thread of this relationship between medium and message, I would say that in mezzotint the objects are brought to light from the black of the granulated plate progressively, passing through intermediate tones, to the grey that best translates the real color of the object or to white. So we have a process that cultivates grey rather than black and white.

I wouldn't have stopped on these technical details if I hadn't felt that *The Glass Kingdom* is a project that is built around this interrogation of black and white even though the assumed theme is that of lived and felt reality, of things put on a chessboard and a copper engraving board. This relativity of black and white goes as far as the cancellation of the semantic content in the installation in which the chess pieces are replaced by glass spheres: color, shape, status, everything disappears, becomes transparent, identical and ready to be loaded with new content, new rules. I therefore consider that the chosen technical process is extremely inspired.

I particularly appreciate the quality of the execution, the composition, the artistry of the doctoral candidate in making the series of the six mezzotints around which *The Glass Kingdom* project is articulated. Choosing this laborious technique requires a lot of dedication, perseverance, persistence and, in equal measure: finesse, precision, control of shape, light and shadow. We know that mezzotint often appears as a technique subordinate to photography or depending on it. Katarzyna Skalska manages to create in her compositions a realistic and magical space in an equal measure, in which detail, far from bringing the light, is adding to the mystery. The objects, chess pieces and transparent spheres, in the series of black and white photographs are put in a completely different equation. Here a different interaction is created, a different battle than the one on the chessboard, a concrete, physical one in which the form and function of the object is questioned again, if only in relation to the mezzotint cradle.

The project *The Glass Kingdom* and the thesis *Imperceptible. The Language of Printmaking* are building together a strong visual and conceptual discourse and working methodology necessary for an artist and teacher in the visual arts. This construction is based both on a comprehensive and convincing research of written, spoken and visual languages but also on

the conviction that there is a texture that language cannot fully account for, a fine network built from intuition, emotion, instinct, personal experience.

The coherence of this visual project, which moves from mezzotint - an extremely laborious traditional technique, to photography, object, installation and video is the proof of a mature, complex approach by Ms. Katarzyna Skalska, based on the conviction stated in her thesis that speech, writing, printing or any other form of image construction are the work of a "translator". It must look beyond issues of syntax, grammar, rhetoric, lexicon, and semantics and construct a discourse that "keeps the words alive in every possible way".

To a certain extent announced by her previous artistic activity, as it is shown in Ms. Katarzyna Skalska's C.V., through a series of solo exhibitions and numerous participations in exhibitions in Poland and abroad, in which she proves flexibility, versatility and intelligence in the use of different working environments, *The Glass Kingdom* is a complex, sensitive, personal, refined, and convincing project. Knowing how important the construction of pedagogical discourse in a Graphic Design department is, where the connection to social dynamics is essential, I also appreciate the didactic activity of the doctoral candidate Katarzyna Skalska, her involvement in organizing exhibitions, symposia and conferences.

Considering this artistic achievement, correlated with the results of the theoretical research on written, spoken, and visual language, so necessary in the artistic and pedagogical act, I warmly recommend the award of the title of Doctor of Visual Arts of the Akademia Sztuk Pięknych im. Eugeniusza Gepperta in Wrocław, to Ms. Katarzyna Skalska.

PhD Prof. Cristian Opris

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. Opris', written in a cursive style.

Alfred