

Zielona Góra, 15 September 2021

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## **Review**

### **of the doctoral dissertation by Mr John Moran in the discipline of fine art and art conservation**

John Moran, born on 28 September 1979 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA, received his Master of Arts degree in art from the Illinois State University in 2013. He is an independent artist and also the director of the Gent Glass Studio in Ghent, Belgium. He participates in numerous individual and group exhibitions. In the years 2019-21 he has participated in five individual exhibitions in Denmark and the United States and four group exhibitions in Belgium and the United States, seven academic conferences on artistic glass, and for three years in a row, in the High Temperature Festival organized by the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław, as well as several virtual conferences organized during the pandemic. In addition, he actively participates in artist residencies. Currently, several of them have been postponed due to the pandemic, but in 2019 he participated in two artist residencies: Kunst en Erfgoed Subsidy for On Solid Water. Flanders State of the Arts and STARWorks, Star, North Carolina, and in February 2020 he participated in an artist residency at the Glass Center in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. An important activity of John Moran is the promotion of art through the organization of workshops and residencies at the Studio

in Ghent, of which he is Director, as I have mentioned earlier. In this activity, he can also see the social impact of art through teaching the next generation not only the demanding glass art creation technique, but also the perception of art in general.

The doctoral dissertation submitted for review by Mr John Moran, entitled “The Importance of Socially Engaged Art in Public Space”, written under the supervision of Professor Kazimierz Pawlak, contains interesting personal reflections on art from the point of view of an American living in Europe. John Moran’s interests are located in socio-political considerations with a touch of a religious context. The author notes that art is a powerful instrument and a means of social change and political opposition, which is perhaps too often perceived as an esoteric, elitist or academic club of people who create art intended only for the audience privy to its intricacies. He believes, however, that art has the power to reach people from different social groups and make them reflect and empathize. It is worth mentioning this thread because, in my opinion, in highly developed countries art is not so hermetic, nevertheless its understanding depends on the way of educating/becoming acquainted with contemporary art, starting from the earliest years, through workshops, meetings with artists, etc. Another theme is the commercialization of art, which has developed dynamically in America.

The 85-page dissertation consists of five chapters, a photographic documentation of an exhibition which is the artistic part of the dissertation, a bibliography, sources of information and photographs of works complementing the content of individual chapters.

*In the beginning was the word and the word was John.* This sentence taken from the Gospel according to St John in the New Testament and transformed by the doctoral student in order to draw attention to the relations between art and religion, begins John Moran’s considerations on art and its socio-political impact. Religion and its embeddedness in social functioning, if only through respect to holidays and working days according to the religious calendar is further discussed by the doctoral student in chapter two, *Narrative imagery, religion and martyrdom*. In the first chapter, *Context and the construction of the lexicon*, the doctoral student deals with the concepts of empathy, limited perception and ignorance. In the third chapter, *The figure and society, between realism and recognition*, he refers to a number of artists he found important in the analysis of figurative art: Edward

Kienholz, Duane Hanson, Patricia Piccinini, Robert Gober, as well as those who use glass techniques in their works, such as Martin Janecky, Ross Richmond, Pino Signoretto, William Morris. In my opinion, Polish artists should also be included in this chapter.

I think that Polish critical and social art is very interesting and I assume that the doctoral student is familiar with the names of Elżbieta Jabłońska, Dorota Nieznalska, Artur Żmijewski, Katarzyna Kozyra or Aleksandra Kubiak. Since he deals with figurative and social art at the same time, I would also add Paweł Althamer, a sculptor who has been involved in social sculpture since 2009, engaging groups or individuals in his activities. One work created during the Draftsmen's Congress during the 2019 Drawing Triennial can still be seen in the windows of the former headquarters of BWA Awangarda Wrocław gallery, in the Hatzfeld Palace on Wita Stwosza Street in Wrocław. Paweł Althamer, along with curator Paweł Jarodzki, invited artists associated with the institution to express their opinions through drawings, among other things, on the complicated relations and conditions that resulted in the gallery losing its previous location in the city centre.

I believe that Althamer's sculpture *Rubber*, created in collaboration with children and carers from the North Prague Pedagogy and Social Animation Group, would be worth mentioning in the context of this doctoral dissertation and Mr Moran's interest in figurative art and the social impact of art. As one could read in press reports: the sculpture, mounted on a spring, sways when pushed by spectators and passers-by, resembling and "animating" the deceased *Mr Rubber* described by the young people as *...a colourful figure from Brzeska Street – for some a petty criminal and drunkard, for others an authority on the local code of honour*.

Chapter four, *Counterfeit consumerism and pop culture*, is extremely interesting because due to his background the author is perfectly familiar with the matter of consumerism, pop culture and corporate mechanisms. Additionally, working and living in Europe, he has been able to confront the interpenetration of these mechanisms between Europe and America. The author's reflections do not inspire optimism.

The artistic part of the dissertation, *Hope Less and (Dis)Obey*, is an exhibition organized in 2021 in the dissertation author's studio space during the pandemic.

The exhibition consists of the works listed below, creating a well-composed entirety:

*Mirror, Mirror* 2001; *Travellere*. Collaboration: Marta Byrdziak; *The Crossing*, 2021; *Searching for the Dark*. Collaboration: Susan Taylor, Glasgow, 2019; *Prey for the Sinners*. 2021 and a series of digital prints on glass from 2021: *Prey, Don't Be Afraid, Dreaming of...*, *Mary's Wrath, Let It Stay in the Family, Our Lady of FATTYma, Adam and Steve*.

John Moran writes about this exhibition:

*Hope Less and (Dis)Obey takes a trip into a world of confusion & (self) reflection created during the last year. Colourful and dim, dark and cheery, this work takes a trip into the world my mind has built over the past year as we have lived in isolation, enjoying our time to focus while longing for distraction.*

These words and the accompanying documentation of the exhibition confirm the artist's sensitivity to social issues and compassion, to which he devotes much space in his dissertation. He points out that the source of all empathy is suffering. If we have never experienced some form of deprivation, we will lack the fundamental basis for empathy. At the same time, he recognizes that social perception is superficial, and that for many people the basis of empathy is reduced to their own individual experience of hardship or limitation, and results in a lack of ability to go beyond their close social circle. I agree with the doctoral student's view that limited perception occurs when our social empathy prevents us from seeing the trauma of others because it does not coincide with our own. And I believe that this can be changed by trying to accept our own suffering without invalidating the trauma of others. In his works, the artist addresses both social and political issues. Each work carries a very personal emotional charge and deals only with those cases which moved the artist, who is sensitive to the surrounding reality. These are shocking individual events, but with a broader social resonance, touching on issues of race, immigration, emigration and violence, which John Moran has captured and artistically 'processed'. What is important in these works is the use of religious symbolism and the symbolism of consumer culture in conjunction with the figure to suggest a context for the statement. And here we come to

an important part of the dissertation, in which the author touches upon the hermetic nature of contemporary art, but also writes about the concept of accessible narrative.

Let me quote a longer fragment of the dissertation which, in my opinion, perfectly illustrates John Moran's work:

*"...I attempt to illustrate the importance of politically motivated art in our current socio-political climate becoming accessible through narrative, figurative imagery, exploring the possibilities of material and community engagement.*

*The concept of accessible narrative has become a starting point for me and the basis for the philosophy of my work. In my work, layers of seemingly unrelated instruments of capitalism and contemporary consumer society are interspersed with references to historical imagery, often rooted in Christianity or Catholicism... I have lived in Europe for many years and I am well aware that many of the norms and ideals of individual countries and their societies are governed by the same narratives, only they come from different contexts. The neglect of narratives, important in the context of contemporary art, has led to a gap between much of the work of today's artists and an uninitiated public, unfamiliar with the elitist, for many simply incomprehensible language of the visual arts... By using religious iconography, I therefore directly reference these narratives and explore their impact on contemporary European and American society.<sup>1</sup>*

To summarize:

Having studied the provided documentation and analysed the artistic output and the artist's insights contained in his dissertation related to the role of art, its perception and social impact, I can conclude that he is a very interesting artist who requires from the viewer a current, but also historical knowledge of the world around us. Each of his works is well thought over and deeply moving, once you identify

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<sup>1</sup>John Moran, The Importance of Socially Engaged Art in the Public Space, Chapter 2 Narrative imagery, religion and martyrdom, page 18, Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław, Faculty of Ceramics and Glass, doctoral dissertation in the field of art, in the discipline of fine art and art conservation.

the meaning of individual fragments of the work, because nothing here is coincidental, including the choice of materials.

Analysing the works of John Moran, I notice his great fascination with the works of Edward Kinholz, an American sculptor known for his complex assemblages, which seem to be the closest to his work. His first works were simple figures resembling Lego blocks, but now one can admire the craftsmanship and precision of the figures, which are not hyper-realistic, but very realistic. The complexity of symbolism and the juxtaposition of the figures with the frequently used ready-made objects, such as a supermarket trolley or a plush lamb, give these works additional meanings and evoke emotions.

The written dissertation is an important reflection on the functioning of contemporary art in a political and social context with aptly chosen quotations and references to the connections between art and religion.

On the basis of the theoretical written work and the attached documentation of artistic works, I conclude that Mr John Moran, an artist with recognized achievements in the field of fine arts, an author using a solid artistic glass technique, makes conscious decisions in the field of art, at the same time engaging in organizational and didactic activities, in the broad promotion of contemporary art, and therefore, in my opinion, he fully deserves to be awarded a doctoral degree.

I support the motion of the Council of the Faculty of Ceramics and Glass to allow Mr John Moran to defend his doctoral dissertation.