

Tychy, 16 November 2021

Academy of Fine Arts in Katowice  
Prof. Adam Romaniuk

**Evaluation of the artistic achievements of Ms Sarah Epping drawn up in connection with a doctoral degree conferment procedure in the field of arts, in the artistic discipline of fine art and conservation of art, conducted at the Faculty of Graphics and Media Art of the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design**

Sarah Epping was born on 1 October 1990 in Holdrege, Nebraska, USA. In 2012 she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Nebraska, USA. In 2015 she came to Poland and started her MA studies at the Faculty of Graphics and Media Art at the Eugeniusz Geppert Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław, where in 2017 she obtained her Master degree in art with an excellent result. In 2016 she obtained the Cambridge CELTA - Certificate of English Language Teaching to Adults.

She is currently a PhD student at the Faculty of Graphics and Media Art at the Academy of Art and Design in Wrocław.

Course of employment:

International Relations, Academy of Art and Design Wrocław (2017 - present)

Thuso Ltd - Consultant/Data Support (2021 - present)

**Part one:**

**Evaluation of academic and artistic activities**

Activities in the field of didactics, popularization and organization include participation in conferences, international as well as regional workshops, but mainly focus on the organization of exhibitions at the university, as well as national or international ones, among others:

In 2019 she organised the "Invisible" exhibition at the Broadway Gallery in Detroit, Michigan, USA, featuring 24 international artists. In 2019 she organised the "Street Vision" exhibition at the Concrete Gallery, Wrocław, Poland. Ms. Sarah Epping organized and curated 10 different international exhibitions as part of the "State" project:

*CTRL art studio, Wrocław, PL*

*1-30 September 2019*

*Curator: Maciej Jaroszczuk*

*ShowCase Gallery, University of Knoxville, Tennessee*

*July 2019*

*Curator: Tatiana Potts*

*Walker Art Gallery, University of Nebraska in Kearney USA*

*1 - 21 August 2019*

*Curator: John Fronczak*

*Spike Studio, Bristol, UK*

*1-15 July 2019*

*Curator: Charlotte Biszewski*

*English House, Chlebnicka 16, Gdańsk, Poland*

*7-8 June 2019*

*Curator: Monika Walenciejczyk*

*Matthew's House; Allison, Ontario Canada*

*5 May - 27 July 2019*

*Curator: Sylwia Leśniewski*

*No. 14 Gallery, Faculty of Art Rzeszów*

*10 - 24 April 2019*

*Curator: Katarzyna Tereskiewicz and Dominika Surmacz*

*Birenbaum Gallery; Oberlin University USA*

*1 March - 1 May 2019*

*Curator: Kristina Paabus*

*Platform Arts Belfast, Ireland*

*7 March 2019*

*Curator: Raquel Amat*

*Toulouse School of Art: Toulouse, France*

*1-30 April 2019*

*Curator: Charlotte Clauzel*

In 2018-2019, she organized the following events at the "CTRL" Gallery in Wrocław:

1. "Mother" - Ola Majka

9 November 2018

2. "Microhistory" - Faculty

29 March 2019

3. "Some Do, Some Don't"

30 May 2019

4. "Los Peregrinos"

2 June 2019

Her active participation in conferences, as I have mentioned above, is also noticeable.

In September 2019, the PhD student participated in the "IMPACT 10" Conference in Spain.

Exhibition: Choropleth Maps: Encountering Diverse Shades of Printmaking; Curators: Catherine Bebout and Karen Oresmus; Gallery: Centros Civicos y Culturales Juan Carlos Calderon, Santander Spain.

In October 2018 she participated in the "New Administrative Workers" workshop in Portland, USA, in conjunction with NASAD's conference in Portugal. In April 2019, she participated in the "Hyper-visible and the Opaque" workshop, hosted by Banni Brusadin.

With regard to her artistic output, since the beginning of collaboration with the Academy she has participated in more than 40 exhibitions at home and abroad, e.g.:

-School of Visual Philosophy Residency - San Jose, California 2016

- Polish Printmaking Lviv, Ukraine 2017
- Mark Arts International Printmaking Competition Wichita, Kansas USA 2017
- India International Print Exchange Participant (46 participants, consecutive exhibitions) 2018
- BritaPrint Exhibition - Madrid, SPAIN October 2018
- Bentaray Budan - Indonesia Exhibition 2019

In addition, she is the initiator and organizer of 3 excellent workshops with a global reach for Polish students, whom she teaches, and foreign students. These workshops have resulted in a number of exhibitions in galleries in countries such as China, Ireland, USA, UK, Spain, Norway, Iran and Poland.

Her other achievements include:

1. Organizing and curating the MYPH School of Photography exhibition at CTRL Gallery Wrocław, PL 9.11.2019
2. Organizing and curating the "Invisible" exhibition at BWA Studio Gallery Wrocław, PL 14.02-21.03: all workshops, curatorial tours, and radio appearances
3. Assisting in the organization and translation of descriptions of works for the "Emerging Lines" exhibition at the Neon Gallery Wrocław, PL 20.09.2020
4. Curating and organizing the "Revive" exhibition for Kunstimaja Tartu 24.10 - 8.11.2019

In conclusion, being fluent in as many as five languages: Polish, Hindi, German, Spanish and English, the artist, according to her supervisor Prof. Przemysław Tyszkiewicz, is a very important member of the Wrocław School of Printmaking. And the examples mentioned above show her commitment to popularising art through publishing, exhibiting and teaching activities. The artistic output may not yet be extensive, but the way the doctoral student integrates the artistic communities, motivates students and engages in developing the world of contemporary art, deserves recognition.

### **Part two:**

In her doctoral thesis entitled "Narcosis" Ms Sarah Epping talks about the nitrogen cycle and its impact on life on our planet. Nitrogen, an essential element in plant life, remains inert in humans when inhaled, but in excess causes hallucinations. Applied in farming after the Neolithic Revolution, however, it became a great danger to the natural regeneration processes of the soil. The invisibility of this process makes humanity unaware of its consequences. The artist notes that nitrogen fertilisers today have become the main cause of dead zones in seas and oceans around the world. She focuses her attention mainly on the Baltic Sea, which has the largest dead zone of all waters.

The relationship between man and the environment became the starting point to develop the creative process of the doctoral dissertation entitled "Narcosis". The artist makes the invisible processes of the planet degradation visible. The viewer, manipulated by the richness of the image, while delving into it begins to perceive the narcosis, deception and the destruction that follows. Excessive algae blooms caused by fertilisers entering the waters, plastic waste, become a "hyperobject" impossible to eliminate. Therefore, the artist's primary goal is to raise awareness and to address those aspects of environmental destruction which are not noticed by the individual on a daily basis. Realizing the need to concretise her actions in order to save the planet, she sees that it is not enough just to raise human awareness, but that a structural change in the way we live, act and create is required. This can also be observed in the field of art, which produces objects that become landfills.

For the message to be coherent, the paper used in her drawings was made from the excess of Baltic algae, which is the result of "eutrophication"<sup>1</sup>. *"In collaboration with Charlotte Biszewski and the*

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1 The term is used to describe the high amount of nitrogen in the oceans causing the appearance of dead zones.

*TYP A Print and Paper Museum in Tartu, Estonia, we investigated how the fibres of this plant would behave in paper and, in particular, whether such paper would be suitable for printing,"* explains Ms Sarah Epping in her dissertation. She also mentions the idea of creating a new production line based on material extracted from algae in the Baltic Sea. She sees this as an opportunity to reinvent the industrial paper production process, thus saving trees. Chemicals are needed to decompose land-based fibres rather than sea-based ones, so using algae could revolutionise the paper industry. The consequence of thinking globally about the planet is a concern for the health of nature and humans. Ms Sarah Epping feels it is her duty to spread this knowledge in order to raise awareness, but also to create a new vision of the surrounding world, devoid of post-apocalyptic creations, but building a conscious society that cares for the planet. The individual can, by their behaviour and attitude, be the essence of the change taking place in the world.

She begins her reflections on her thesis with the story of Gilgamesh, concluding with humanity's obsession with its "ego", understood from the philosophical perspective as egocentrism - placing oneself at the centre of reality, and being driven by the desire for immortality, eternal youth and beauty. It has contributed to the expansion of consumerism to absurd proportions and thus to the mindless destruction of the natural environment. As a result, it has endangered human health and the whole of humanity in general.

The punishment for such behaviour always comes from nature. She mentions a scene from The Epic of Gilgamesh, where a flood is the Gods' response to the arrogance and egoism of humans. Interestingly, man, thanks to his ingenuity - in this case, thanks to a ship - avoids inevitable death. The human trait of discovering, changing and transforming the old into the new becomes a hope for liberating humanity from the yoke of ideology, consumerism and thoughtlessness in polluting the natural environment.

The artist attaches great importance to the role of the individual in society and their influence on changing behaviours. She quotes Jared Diamond's views presented in his book *"Collapse. How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed"*, who points out that the lack of change in a situation where resources began to run out resulted in degradation<sup>2</sup>. He sees a huge opportunity for change in the behaviour of the individual. Following this line of thinking, we observe growing awareness in almost every area of life. More and more people take grassroots initiatives to create zero waste products, packaged in biodegradable materials or intended for multiple use (e.g. wax wrap, which is an alternative to foil food wrap).

Taking part in this discourse, Ms Sarah Epping builds very sublime worlds full of connections, waste trapped in nets and plants still trying to find a space to function. She makes a confession in her thesis: *"During my doctoral studies I realized that ecological concepts in art are ubiquitous. Creating images that theoretically connect with the environment, but do not restore it, has become an empty practice, not playing an active role in policy change or systemic transformation. Hence, it has become a key part of my work to consider changing the way we create. Even though we are ecologically minded artists, the materials and systems we use become elements of Earth destruction. In a situation where we have developed a destructive way of functioning in the society, it is necessary to try and redefine ourselves. As exemplified by these artists and movements, raising awareness is no longer enough. There is a need for a proactive approach".*<sup>3</sup>

Each of her works addresses a very specific issue. "A Crimson Tide", inspired by the John Ruskin exhibition presented at Abbot Hall in the UK entitled "In the Footsteps of Ruskin and Turner", has significantly changed the way the doctoral student creates. Fascinated by the colour, detail and subtlety of his sketches, she began to incorporate colour into her work to suggest hallucinations, or changes of awareness caused by the effects of nitrogen in blood. Unnatural colour suggests poisoning; instead of

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2 Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (London: Penguin, 2013), [PAGE] [in:] Narcosis, Sarah Epping

3 Sarah Epping, Narcosis (no page numbering)

soothing cool colours, we get yellow or brown colours. This work thus alludes to the bloom of red algae, which cause illnesses and respiratory problems in many creatures. At first glance we see beautiful corals and delicate vegetation, but the geometric elements of an indefinite grid, which, as we learn, symbolises a deformed DNA code, are disturbing. *"The title has a double meaning, as the viewer may not be sure whether the water is tainted with blood or whether it is red algae threatening the lives of the underwater inhabitants. The painting should convey a sense of sublime beauty, as the viewer is drawn to the sensitivity of the colours, but at the same time is horrified by the sick abstractions taking place in what was once a healthy natural environment,"* - Ms Sarah Epping adds.

This deep immersion into the way nature works comes from a personal relationship with it. Ms Sarah Epping has explored the depths of the seas and oceans by diving in the remotest corners of the world, including in the far north of Russia in the ice-bound White Sea, watching the disintegration of shipwrecks. Travelling to places such as Monterrey, California USA, Baha Peninsula, Mexico, Belize, the Caribbean, she was not indifferent to the state of the local fauna and flora. Therefore she got involved in coral reef conservation and restoration work. She also explored the waters of Portugal, Iceland, India or Australia, which testifies not only to her courage, but above all to her being an explorer.

The consequence of these journeys is a diptych "The Prism" inspired by a journey to the White Sea and the works of Viktor Lagushkin: personal observations of life under the ice and the adaptation mechanisms of the local flora and fauna, which absorb the light penetrating the ice as through a prism. This state may turn out to be temporary, as everything is subject to change, so the ice may melt in the era of climate warming. Following this line of thought, the artist created a nature diary of the Anthropocene. Unfortunately, she did not include the work in the documentation, so I cannot comment on it. I can only quote the description of this publication in her doctoral thesis: *"The hand-bound book is covered with a cloth title with the words 'To be human, humane, humanity' surrounded by numbers one and zero. Flipping through pages showing jellyfish, dead fish, whirlpools and, above all, bits of rubbish, one acquires a deeper understanding of the found objects and observations that inspired the larger, abstract works in the gallery. The gargantuan, wall-mounted projects are meant to make the viewer feel as if they are surrounded by unusual stained glass patterns, while the book is meant to make one carefully observe the loss of biodiversity on a micro and macro scale"*.<sup>4</sup>

The geometry of the fishnet patterns in the drawing "Ghost Net" becomes a context for the organic shapes of plants. It refers to unethical fishing practices, as a result of which numerous nets are carried downstream, posing a deadly threat to animals and vegetation. The abstract forms bring anxiety, mental disharmony, but they blend into the composition of the whole work. The sharpness of the geometric grid is confronted and at times intertwined with the gentleness and softness of the shapes of organic structures of underwater flora. The size of the monumental works (70x500cm) allows for confrontation with the scale of the depicted phenomenon, and the imagery of the entanglement of structures gives the viewer an opportunity to visualise these connections. Human action affects life in the deep waters, destroying, suppressing and limiting it, which will eventually turn against man. A polluted environment alters human DNA, contaminates bodies with micro-plastic, causes illnesses, respiratory problems or affects mental state. Ms Sarah Epping thus expands the aesthetic experience of the viewer with ethical reflections. The drawing technique, as the basis of all fine arts, is an important aspect of the diploma work, which the diploma student leads from a sketch to a fully-fledged and autonomous object. The precision of drawing, attention to colour, correctness of composition and the size of the work reflect deep sensitivity and an excellent sense of artistic means.

The summary of accomplishments, which is part of the doctoral dissertation, is a commentary to the presented graphic works. Using her knowledge of science, philosophy and art, the author introduces the viewer to the world of her interests, fascinations and deep emotions. The examples of artists' works clearly illustrate the considerations concerning the presented problem, and determine its location in art. As it turns out, artists go to extreme measures, e.g. Viktor Lagushkin's exhibition under the ice "Until

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4 Ibidem.

the Ice Melts" as a commentary on the transience and weakness of man in the face of nature's enormity. Arctic Dive Base, which houses this artist's photographs, is an off-limits place. Accessible to very few people, it has become a truly exclusive gallery. Ms Sarah Epping's passion pushes her to explore the world of underwater phenomena and thus draw a broader reflection.

In the final part of the written work we learn that the doctoral work was a combination of drawings, prints and ulva prolifera paper made of the aforementioned algae, which were digitally printed to illustrate 'Crimson Tide'. Unfortunately the documentation does not give a full picture of the span of the work, so it is difficult to see what the creative process was like. Perhaps this is due to the translation, which in many places was unclear or at times stylistically incorrect. Without a doubt, however, the most important aspect of this dissertation is the research on new possibilities for creating printable paper.

The artist's work is characterised by a very emotional involvement and personal experience in exceeding the limits of human physical capabilities and in exploring inaccessible worlds. She enters places in which humans should not be present, thus exploring remote hidden worlds that still suffer from human interference with the entire ecosystem. Thanks to this knowledge, she is able to create an engaged work full of emotion and self-reflection on her own behaviour. Susan Sontag's words seem appropriate here: "*Even the simplest sensation is, in its totality, indescribable. Every work of art therefore, needs to be understood not only as something rendered, but also as a certain handling of the ineffable*"<sup>5</sup>. This is how the work of this committed artist should be read, as a dance of subtle meanings. For her, being an artist means taking responsibility for the message she creates. She wants to be a real change in the world and not just a pretty painting producer.

## **Conclusion**

Ms Sarah Epping's dissertation is a sensitive artistic proposal. The proposed solutions are part of the universal message, although her work stems from personal observations of reality and experiences. She reaches conclusions which force her to make the viewer aware of the scale of the presented problem of the seas and oceans pollution and the occurrence of dead zones. However, she does not dazzle viewers with literalness, but subtly introduces the very heart of the issue. The aesthetically pleasing compositions, attention to detail and subdued colours create tension in an unobtrusive way. The actual reading takes place in time, together with the observation of the presented structures. The initial admiration for the technique and craftsmanship of the works transforms into a deep understanding of the phenomenon, and the seeming softness and lightness of the compositions makes us aware of the complexity of this global problem.

I have to mention that the presentation of the doctoral series as well as the documentation deviates from the standards effective in art schools in Poland. Inadequately labelled misleading files (those in Polish labelled in English and vice versa), modest artistic output (no portfolio) and lack of adequate reproductions of the thesis and a description of the content and scope of the cycle, leave a certain unsatisfactory impression. However, this does not affect the final assessment of the artistic work. However, I would like to draw your attention to the fact that the introduction should clearly specify exactly the subject of the research and the elements that have been accomplished. This remained in the realm of conjecture until the end, and the lack of proper photographic documentation made it even worse.

The prepared summary of accomplishments proves the author's great knowledge in the field of art and philosophy of culture. The text is a comprehensive self-commentary on her artistic achievements and introduces readers to various areas of her interests. Ms Sarah Epping is a conscious and consistent artist who has pursued her vision of art with great determination for many years. Having become familiar with the artistic achievements and the submitted dissertation, I conclude that the author has significant artistic output, knowledge and skills to build a coherent artistic message, and

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5 Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation and Other Essays", publ. Karakter 2018

thus meets the requirements set out in Article 227, paragraph 2 of the Act of 20 July 2018 on academic degrees and title and on degrees and title in art (Law on Higher Education and Science). Her entire work and her commitment to the popularisation of art justify the granting of the degree of Doctor of Arts to Ms Sarah Epping in the field of fine art, in the artistic discipline of fine art and conservation of art. I fully support these efforts.

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Prof. Adam Romaniuk