M5. VALUE OF CRITICAL THINKING FOR A SOCIETY: CULTURE AND POWER - A Dialogue between the individual and the work of art

The appearance of the mural or street painting "Dedication to Džemma Skulme (Gemma Skulme)" on the renovated wall of Riga Secondary School No 40 has sparked fierce public debate.

This work was initiated by the "Art Needs Space" foundation. Lāsma Goba, a representative of the Foundation, informed that Latvian artist Kristians Brekte created the sketch of the murals, and the artists Miķelis Mūrnieks and the art company "Kiwie" transferred the sketch to the wall.

Kristians Brekte was influenced by the images of the Gemma Skulme's girls, which resemble children's drawings. This is why he has created the artwork "Dedication to Gemma Skulme". The mural features images of girls created by Gemma Skulme from the series of paintings "The Return" and "The Model".

Art historian Inga Šteimane emphasises that the "Art Needs Space" Foundation has previously developed projects that have focused *on visual artists from the second half of the 20th century*, but it has always been contemporary artists who have been invited to interpret their personalities and work. The mural "Dedication to Gemma Skulme" was a project that realised a "bridge" between two generations of artists, whose artistic practice includes models painted or drawn in a naïve style, underlining the talent of both for creating clearly powerful image systems. Moreover, contemporary art today tries everything - it tests our reactions and real emotions, it tries to draw attention to itself by all possible and impossible means.

The discussion, which already has received several hundred comments, has very different assessments. Soon after the unveiling of the mural, the management of Secondary School No 40 in Riga expressed their grievances against it, mainly stressing the lack of prior coordination with the school, and the pupils' parents, who saw in it a negative message, including elements of Satanism and pornography.

Parents were militant - such a mural has no place on a school wall. The participants of the discussion, who oppose the mural, mainly question its artistic value. They are concerned that the artwork has a sexual context, and that it depicts people as deformed, with multiple eyes and many breasts.

In their submission to the Riga City Council, parents write that there has been no visible active and good-governance-oriented action on the part of the Riga City Council, despite the priority given to children's rights under the law. The parents' argument that such an image may cause confusion, fear and negative emotions could be well-grounded, as this school has pupils from 1st to 5th grade (aged 7-12). At this age, children may have a limited capacity to perceive the image as a work of art with a deeper meaning than the artist intended.

Artist Kristians Brekte stresses that creativity should not be limited, and that artists should be free to express themselves. Therefore, when starting the work, there was complete freedom. "I realised that I had to make a mural painting. I did not pay attention to what the building was. It was not important to me." Commenting on the murals, Brekte admits he wanted to depict four goddesses: Aphrodite, who is the first largest, then Hecate at the top, Nike on the left, where the parents see some kind of sexual act, and Hathor at the bottom, known as the devil on social media, the goddess in ancient Egypt from whose tears man was born. It is very important that she represents music, dance and love, and she is smiling.

Department of Architecture and Urban Design of the Riga City Council (RD) Urban Development stresses that the Department is not entitled to take a unilateral decision to paint over the mural. The mural has been financially supported by a decision of the RD Cultural Projects Funding Competition Commission and has been approved by the RD Property Department from the point of view of property ownership. The

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representatives of the Riga City Council stress that professionals have evaluated the project and have not seen any threat to the well-being and moral education of the pupils.

However, some members of the public support the idea of the mural and the result, stressing that teachers and parents should be able to explain that it is art and that it is the artist's vision. They perceive the mural as a good stimulus for a conversation about contemporary art and see the work itself as valuable. Many people stress that Gemma Skulme was a great Latvian painter, and this mural gives them an opportunity to talk about the artist and art in general.

Art is nothing to be afraid of.

Art historian Inga Steimane points out "In contemporary art, everything is possible, provocation is commonplace. Given that art exists in life and culture, provocation is possible. One trend - if art is in contact with culture, with generally accepted values, the other trend - if art is in contact with the law".

Journalist Solvita Krese, on the other hand, believes that "when it comes to ethical categories, one has to be careful and more cautious."

Artist Kristians Brekte himself underlines "The biggest problem is that people do not delve into the context and the content."

What do you think?

- *https://lr1.lsm.lv/lv/raksts/kulturas-rondo/laikmetigas-makslas-darbi-ka-provokacijas-un-to-robezas.a102009/*
- *https://www.lsm.lv/raksts/kultura/maksla/makslinieks-brekte-par-stridus-raisoso-murali-riga-problema-ir-ta-ka-cilveki-neiedzilinas-konteksta-un-satura.a417588/*

Sketch for a mural by Kristians Brekte



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