

Saša Bezjak and Arven Šakti Kralj Szomi

Glej, ne glej

Look, don't look

23. June–16. July 2016

KiBela, space for art

MMC KIBLA, Maribor, Slovenia

Sasha v. Shakti: Look, don't look

“Art should be the thing to shock us, in the sense that it would make us realize the truth about ourselves or about the world or about art itself.”

The title Look, don't look, which the artists chose for the exhibition, reminds us that the borders they've been setting up are extreme, and opposing. In this kind of dichotomy, the Kierkegaardian either/or turns into “a mere subjective fact”, that is, into a basic decision based on impression. It is not about the public being concerned with what they are looking at, i.e. the artwork and its potential message, but rather that they let themselves drift with the tide of general opinion. Shocking art still produces a double effect: since it is related to the social scale of values, modest as they may be, it shakes them up with its straightforwardness, its distinctiveness, and its shamelessness, demanding the viewer to make a decision. I will, or maybe I simply will not – look.

The artistic endeavors of Saša Bezjak and Arven Shakti Kralj Szomi combine a child-like playfulness and tenderness with sexual acts and raw erotic nudity of the images.

Shakti's photographs of children, with their angelic beauty, floating in midair or spacelessness, “as in heaven, so on earth”, are joined by Saša's drawings of genitals and sexual acts and other similar motifs painted with “the hand of a child”. They are simulated children's drawings, “basic” croquis that are created on an impulse, with a single stroke, testifying to the primal character of the artist. Saša also adds embroidery and sculptures to the installation, and these too are implying a basic “primitive, naturalistic, non-divergent” content of the artwork. Shakti plays with a combination of photographs presented on/in different formats: from a looped video and large scale ceiling piece, to her only slightly smaller wall image with mysterious little boxes housing more images, which the viewer may open or close; we may choose to (take a) look inside them or – turn away. The various media are combined in a spatial installation symbolically representing heaven and earth; a visualization of the cosmic contrast between faith and mind. You go to heaven if you believe! Well... maybe also through the help of an indulgence. Be that as it may – the message lies in grasping the symbolic of this “cosmology”: if you are loved, as they say, you can find heaven even on earth. In this context, “thy will be done” is given a whole new meaning.

The exhibit is a reflecting, self-confident and sensitive multimedia project, which the artists use to warn about a simple fact: that each life simply begins by a sexual act, which in turn produces “the gift of god”, i.e. a child. This is why sex should be beautiful, shouldn't it, and the orgasmic sensation should feel heavenly. Remember Bernini's Ecstasy of Saint Teresa? Why then must we have so much censorship even in the 21st century? So much hypocrisy, actually, since censorship in the objective sense refers merely to the distortion/modification of reality on behalf of an authority (the Ego, the other, or the state). In terms of anthropology, those are the only three authorities that exist. The artists cleverly alert about the amount of covert censorship in Slovenia, not only in “public spheres”, but in the commonplace, the mundane; entrenched in the society and in the spirit of that same society.

The exhibition Look, don't look focuses around the art happening in the context of the new society of the 21st century, and which in certain cases tackles the integration of art in everyday life. The highlight is on visual communication and the issue of identity, on artistic and social projects that deny political, reli-

gious, sexual and commercial systems. The rules of the artistic canon define the limit of one's own artistic expression. The artist just wants to treat a certain subject in a certain way. But will they, if the rules forbid a certain theme, simply give up that project? Or will they, much like Bernini, plant a bomb into the heart of that same society that is appalled during daytime but masturbates at night? Kant said that geniuses give the rule to art, not the other way around. This means that art should create rules from its proper self, abiding by the laws of the beautiful and the sublime, which this "genius" produces.

Art needs no advocate; should it lose its grip of being progressive, of bringing down the traditional barriers of every possible kind, then a transgressive and purely formal twist will provide it with a new quality, or better say, a new, transformed, rejuvenated and fresh contents. If art was only to rise from the dead over and over again, it would soon lose its progressive pulse: without the necessary rejuvenation, the re-questioning of established rules and principles, and without the ever advancing, constant drive of artistic instinct, there would be no progress either.

Art dies, only to be reborn again: it swallows its own ashes. And if that's not reason enough to trust it, then the one about heaven should do it.

Nina Jeza, Artists&Poor's

Sasha v. Shakti (Saša Bezjak, 1971 and Arven Šakti Kralj Szomi, 1974) could probably not be a more opposing artistic duo. Sasha works in painting and sculpture; Shakti's work follows a photographic aesthetic that spills into stand-alone photographic pieces, time-based and installational media. Sasha's process is very organic, her mark-making and assembly are impulsive, her work is raw and unabashed; Shakti's process is considered, concealed and intimate, and multilayered in meaning. Sasha's colourful depictions display the rawness of human nature and sexuality, Shakti's monochrome images, particularly of children, venture into a delicate domain and debate on how children are used and represented. Nevertheless, the work of the two artists, who have both completed Master Degrees at the Ljubljana Academy of Fine Arts and Design, has an inherent correspondence and intercommunication, perhaps precisely due to these outlined differences.

The project Look, don't look is the duo's first joint presentation, produced specifically for the KiBela gallery space. Drawing from their existing work, the artists have used the gallery space to produce an installation where monochrome black and white images of landscape and children (photographs) are confronted by vivid representations of explicitly depicted and intimate body parts cocooned within the heart of the gallery space (drawings). The installation acts as an immersive physical confrontation and communication between the images that invite to either look or not look.

Apart from establishing a confrontation, the work also seeks to address the construct of viewing (art – or any other visual medium in the proliferation of images today) – particularly the delicate subject matters that are contradictorily manipulated in the contemporary world and society of today. Both, the blatant displays of sexuality and the images of children fall into these doubtful categories. To further juxtapose the contradiction, the work of the two artists becomes "the viewer" and "the viewed" – leaving the actual viewer to the exhibition to decide which stand to take – hence the title: Look, don't look.

Sasha and Shakti have been collaborating artistically since meeting at a three-day international art symposium in the summer of 2015. Many productive conversations, ideas and corresponding feelings have prompted them to embark on a joint project, the fruit of which is this dialogue actualised in the KiBela exhibition space.

The exhibition will be showing until 17 July 2016.

Opening 23 June 2016, at 8 p. m.

KiBela / MMC KIBLA, Maribor

KiBela, space for art, is open on weekdays between 9am and 10pm and Saturdays between 4pm and 10pm (closed on Sundays)