

PARADOX OVER THE ABYSS

Guntis Dišlers

Today in the art of Latvia there are plenty of authors with works connected to sacred thematic. Plenty enough to come up with conclusions about the development orientations of this thematic. In twenty years since this thematic is freely available in both the Church and outside of it there is the experience accumulated that time after time is enriched by new works; with sacred themes work several ever new artists, there appear publications about such works¹. In general, the art in Latvia in this sphere develops in the same directions as in the other European states. "New energy and obvious interest: *coming back to the transcendent through Christianity* (emphasis mine – G. D.); the tendency to focus on the topics that are connected to Christian iconography in visual art can be observed already from 80-ties of 20th century."² This interest to great extent has been encouraged by the "sense of emptiness" of the postmodern age, but in our country – as well the rapid events of the so called Third Awakening and abolishment of censorship both in the affairs of art and faith. Speaking in terms of time, the graphic art of Latvian artist Nele Zirņīte (b. 1959 in Lithuania) fit in well within this period of changes.

Regarding artistic freedom and problematic of challenge there are distinguishable examples in visual art regarding the art that is associated with Christian worldview, and the art that is directly connected with liturgical practice (e.g., service as it is, for example, in Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches). About the fact that the Christian worldview of an artist not always is revealed in his works that has a direct liturgical meaning gives evidence already the noticed tendency by mentioned art histo-

1 For instance: *Sakrālā arhitektūra un māksla: Mantojums un interpretācijas* [Sacred architecture and art: The heritage and interpretations]. Rīga: Neputns, 2008, 223 lpp.; and, several studies dedicated to the research of the heritage of sacred art in Latvia.

2 Astahovska I. Laikmetīgā māksla un kristietība. Ķecerības, izaicinājumi un garīgie meklējumi [Contemporary art and Christianity. Heresies, challenges and seeking for spirituality]. – From: *Sakrālā arhitektūra un māksla: Mantojums un interpretācijas* [Sacred architecture and art: The heritage and interpretations]. Rīga: Neputns, 2008, 178. lpp.

rian I. Astahovska, namely, in many cases it is “coming back to the transcendent through Christianity”. Why it is so, we can suspect – Christianity, not considering the pluralism of religions and co-existence, after all embodies the traditional spiritual foundation of Europe; it is well known and the Christian iconography is instantly recognizable. Besides, the so called Judeo-Christian spiritual tradition, the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testament contain archetypical stories about the spiritual life of a human being, about God and a man – him against himself.

The task of this our common project was not gathering information about that sort of visual art precedents that have caused negative attitude from the Church. Our common willingness was to present topics from the output of particular artists that witness belonging to this common spiritual foundation of Europe. It should be mentioned – the artists involved in the project, also the graphic artist Nele Zirnīte, have not worked fulfilling ideologically engaged commissions, their creative output was looked upon in retrospect that excludes involvement to one project and who have honestly documented the creative process of an artist.

In this connection it is possible to mention the first problem of this “art created under the Christian worldview”, namely, interpretation of it. Trying to express the meaning of any nonverbal art – music, graphic art, painting – in words there always exist some certain risk “to miss one’s aim”. The risk has several reasons. Words may miss the mark of the miracle of artwork as colors, sounds, rhythmic, and other elements address other, deeper layers of consciousness than is grasped by rational and analytical mind. A critic in his turn should immerse himself, to become familiar with this creative spontaneity and not to impose his own opinion on the interpretation of the work because in case of failure this may totally deform the perception of the work. The artwork itself lives life on its own not depending on what different observers say about it. And have we not heard about the critics that have not grasped the meaning of artwork?... After all, the artist himself when creating a work not always is striving to formulate the idea of it in words but draws it from intuition, conviction, emotional excitement, and similar expressions that – thanks to his talent – is able to apply on paper or canvas. The theological criteria in interpretation should be used very carefully so that for being Christian is not proclaimed something that critic would like to see that way (or vice versa – denied something what doesn’t seem “Christian” to a critic). Such evaluation can be applied only with the permission of the author, his conscious turning to biblical or the Church thematic.

At the same time, when interpreting this kind of art one should take into consideration the deeply hidden cultural memory that apparently for European nations, also the Latvians, has been deeply written in their consciousness. Nor the age of secularization, neither the independency of artistic creative work from the Church has erased this memory. It reveals itself through the system of images, the meanings of symbols, after all also in direct references. In the graphic art of Nele Zirnīte one layer of her creative work undeniably is grounded in this cultural memory. On the basis of it she raises issues about the greatest questions of human existence: who am I? What is time – mine and that of eternity? What is a man and a woman, why do they don’t understand each other? What is a nature and what is a man on the background of nature?

Without doubts, for the interpretation of this art to great extent important is the understanding of the latest trends of sacred art being common to all Europe.

Looking at the graphic sheets of Nele Zirnīte the preciseness of fixed impressions of the critique in the press becomes an interesting topic. Because how it is to be interpreted that the author of this graphic art is a woman, but that is the beginning of mystery and secret in her creative imagination? First of all, the presence of mystery is already there in the very technique used. Graphic art – the art of plate. However, only in the second part of 90-ties “the artist started to experiment with graphic art techniques while in the first years of the new century she has went even farther and has tried bringing under her domain also format of plate or plane,” writes art historian Eva Rotčenkova³. And about the fact that overcoming the format of plate is not only the matter of technical nature, – trying to find always new and interesting methods, experimenting with aquatint, etching, copies or impressions on dry or wet paper, a. o., – the following statement



3 Rotčenkova E. Ieskatoties Neles Zirnītes radītajā visumā [Gaining an insight into Nele Zirnīte’s created universe]. – From: *Nele Zirnīte: Laika rezervuārs* [Reservoir of time]. Rīga: Epicentrs, 2009, 6. lpp.



of her bears witness to it: "Graphic art with its own rules and caprices is the way that usually starts with visualizing of idea and continues by overcoming the limits of plate. *The unseen thinks for a long time before revealing itself into light* (emphasis mine – G. D.) I live on this plate attempting to convince myself and others that it really isn't a plate"⁴.

In that way words fly around the event: promising, raising questions about that and explaining it, merging the practical meaning with the mysterious meaning, the known with unusual. But the moment the artwork receives a complete expression in form, these issues disappear, and everything reveals fully in incarnation where the divine encounters the humane. Then in front of us there stands incarnation or personification – the same way as incarnation in the bosom of Virgin Mary. In Christian art this motive is very relevant, in its origins it comes from the epiphany of evangelist John when writing about coming into this world of God's Word or *Logos*, where it reveals itself as the Light in the bosom of Mother of God: "And the Word became flesh and dwelled among us, and we saw His glory" (John 1: 14).

The Prologue of the Gospel of John that tells about the incarnation of the Word of God possesses the same intentional movement from sound to image and from word to flesh that can be seen in perception of artwork in the consciousness of observers. In the beginning we hear the Word, and originally there is nothing to turn eyes to. But then already in darkness the ray of Light begins to shine, little by little allowing seeing images: divine word that has become a human body, and we may see his glory.

One of these attempts to overcome plate – technically and conceptually – is triptych created in 1992 "Green Frame". In all three impressions one printing block is used that forms a frame from square-like middle part. Green frame is nature but leaves – the symbol of changing, vibrating and mysterious life. In the centre of the first composition there is dark square, in which the figures of humans and animals are levitating. This square is embraced by the framework of tree leaves that creates the contrasting effect between dark inner square and silvery radiant frame around. The middle square is as if the space for concrete game – human life; a space for rationally perceived existence, reasoning and nature being its framework. Looking more carefully, in the lower part there is a narrow path that leads a man into the forest beyond the square inhabited by humans, as if in the deep – in the mysterious element of nature. By walking farther this path, going against the stream of time, Nele Zirnite leads the observers of her works.

Before going on with the survey of creative output of Nele Zirnite, there is a need for short insight in the new direction of the Christian Church after the 2nd Vatican Council that took place in the middle of 1960-ties in Vatican City. The Council started reassessment of aspects of the Catholic (resp., Western) Church and its services with a goal to bring nearer them to the new conditions after the 2nd World War. By citing one of the greatest Christian thinkers St. Augustine there was the invitation proclaimed to receive the Christian message not only as a well-founded dogma centuries ago but rather as a "truth that should be studied". In the light of this common reflection the Pope Paul VI in 1973 when opening the exposition of modern religious art in Vatican focused that "not only the criteria being set by the past art have free access in the walls /of church/. Modern artist seeks the motives of his art more in himself but exactly because of these reasons he is genuinely human, helps to look deep into the secrets of a human soul that in seeking for spirituality should be valued. This art that has been born more in itself is a document, which is the mirror of the soul of a modern man the interpreter. Even in the modern secularized world there exists surprising force of expression of art that is truly humane, religious, divine and Christian"⁵. All the said can be fully applied as well to the graphic art of Nele Zirnite.

The image of nature in graphic art of Nele Zirnite quite often is a synonym to the element of dark passion, incomprehensible mystery. It is both the mighty power and the symbolic term. In the work "Red Immensity" (2002) that visually is developed in multiple variants, the element of nature is at the basis of the entire square; this is water that in some places has become red and has changed into scorching red magma. In the creative workshop of the artist "Nexus" that within the



4 Grantiņa I. *Dzīvoju plaknē, cenšoties pārvarēt to* [Living on plate, trying to overcome it] // *Literatūra un Māksla*, 2001, Nr. 10, 8. lpp.

5 Cit. after: Astahovska, *Laikmetīgā māksla un kristietība...* [Contemporary art and Christianity...], 184. lpp.

project took place in the Latvian Christian Academy in summer 2009, it was possible to observe how the artist works with these techniques. Aquatint in "Red Immensity" (as well in many other works) is used as if for the depiction of dimension of eternity or endless distance. But in subtle grass stems with the help of etching the refined human figures are corroded thus achieving the greater level of concreteness, and then serving as accurate limits of concrete time. In the work there is achieved very fine gradation of tonal nuances – the transition from black to mildly rosy. In that way, every human being allegorically has found his shelter at the end of his own grass stem but this shelter is fragile. Although the shelter but it is depicted over the abyss of anxiety, insecurity and dangerous (probably) disaster.

In 2007 Nele Zirnīte was awarded the 1st Prize of "Joseph de Ribera" International Biennale of Engraving, Xativa, Spain, Valencia for her work "Abyss" (2006). Technically also in this work there is used aquatint in combination with the etching. Composition creates "special, nerve-tickling atmosphere"⁶. The same as in "Red Immensity" also here we see the figures of human beings as if at the ends of grass stems but here they look like tiny dewdrops or coming out from the deep small running bubbles as if in sparkling liquid from the bottom up when the cork has been pulled out of the bottle. Nerve-tickling atmosphere is created by disengagement of figures from the power of gravitation, from the earth's gravity therefore becomes clear why the figures are rushing up. Nevertheless, holding at the ends of grass stems they stay connected with the dark depth beneath, which reminds the wave dredged up from the abyss but nonetheless fallen back. Little figures have their own bubble of light around their head ("dewdrop"), their own tiny microcosm, private space that allows them to breathe in cosmic space like the astronauts in open universe.

Similar visual development the artist has used in works "Departure" (2004), "Nexus" (2005), "Arising and Falling" (2006) a. o. The black and white, the light and darkness, maroon depth and mildly rosy glow of light – these are the primeval elements between which humans try to stay in the "air bubbles" of their private space. It would not be a mistake to say that it is the question raised in the artistic image about the place of a human in this created world. The background of human's tiny, fragile life is the universe. The graphic sheets sometimes even remind photos of asteroids coming from the distances of universe. Looking biblically to these sheets there comes to mind a story about the creation of world in the Book of Genesis, the very first lines of the Holy Scriptures where the abyss is described before God with his supreme command created the first – light: "The earth was formless and desolate. The raging ocean that covered everything was engulfed in total darkness, and the Spirit of God was moving over the water. And God said: 'Let there be light.' And there was light."

The waters of chaos – the abyss, the raging ocean – in Bible is dangerous, unordered, endlessly unlighted depth that has no form and shape, and only the glow of divine light starts to settle it beneath raising itself above the chaos as a sun above becalmed sea of dark passions. In the graphic sheets of Nele Zirnīte this moment is stopped when the very first day of creation is breaking, and a man – just created – is still beyond his own experience. Thus the depicted beings turn out being mediators between the heaven and earth, messengers that are in the air or hovering between "this side" and "beyond" in still unmarked, unspecific interim "place". At the same time it is also the theme of interaction between consciousness and subconsciousness.

Another image – above the black abyss winged creatures are hovering as if being human, as if – angels. Also this allegory is developed in several works ("Myriads, 2006; "Blind Hope", 1997; "Nostalgia", 2002; "Flight", 2007; "Perichoresis", 2005, 2007). As the artist herself comments, original composition was connected with flying as it has been the dream of little Nele – to learn to fly as a bird. However, it is not enough with the willpower and even not with an intensive waving of hands, – jumping off the closet and trying to fly in a room little Nele has fallen and broken her leg! Nevertheless, in graphic sheet one may sense the breath of universe and people (the winged creatures) have overcome the limitations of their bodies (and really, what is not possible in life, becomes possible in art!), and move around as if moth being astonished in the sudden splash of light. Nele Zirnīte as if suddenly turns on the light in the dark space of universe and makes to see that it is full of myriads of winged creatures. They all have their face and it turns out – also the very personal attitude although not fully expressed however seeable from their faces – the attitude towards both this dumb universe that can be that of time, subconsciousness, or the metaphor of dark chaos, and towards other creatures hovering in this chaotic flickering.

The light that in graphic art of Nele Zirnīte creates the atmosphere of non-reality, uncertainty, and mysteriousness is like sparkling grain, dynamic glow sometimes touchable but sometimes hitting the darkness or breaking out in stream of light. In general, it creates a "unique, even a little bit mystic, surrealistic (...) feeling of macro world."⁷

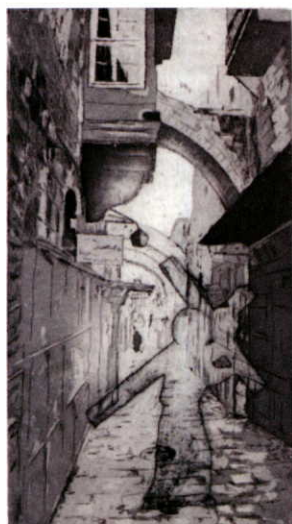
This is a man in flow of time, which has started just to get on. But as soon as created Nele forces this being to seek harmony with nature and with universe. The graphic artist itself speaks following about her main theme here: "The path from heart to heart, the link between the closest homes that we build here on earth and those we imagine, turning our gazes to the heavens. The eternal flow, which by invisible capillaries drives blood to the incomprehensible sea of the universe, maintaining the

6 Rotčenkova, *leskatoties Neles Zirnītes radītajā visumā* [Gaining an insight into Nele Zirnīte's created universe], 97. lpp.

7 Brazauskaite V. *Starp debesīm un zemi – laika rezervuāri* [Between the heavens and earth – reservoirs of time]. – From: Nele Zirnīte: *Laika rezervuārs* [Reservoir of time]. Rīga: Epicentrs, 2009, 8. lpp.



living pulse. How I desire to touch that – authentic one, not synthetic, and without the symptoms of arrhythmia.” And further – about already mentioned “air bubbles”, those “diving-suits”, which are necessary for every human that has grasped the grass stems: “Every one of us has a desire to build something stable and solid within ourselves. In every one of us there is a desire to fly. The skill to balance, to make even our lives so that the flight through art doesn’t withdraw us from the earth and doesn’t overshadow our relations with people – it is the greatest of arts”.⁸ A human space – this little “bubble”, dewdrop that already way back in time has served as a metaphor for fragility of human life (see also in Bible – throughout the Psalms and the Books of the so called great and small prophets) and looking more closely, it expresses confusion, piety, and yes – also loneliness.



The element of nature in the works of the graphic artist is both the mysterious, sometimes dark and inconceivable power, and the preservable basis as well – simply – the necessary to solve topic of ecology. Generally the world inhabited by humans, its derivation separately from nature is quite widely developed in the graphic art of Nele Zirnīte. The diversity of this theme in the creative output of the artist may be interpreted as both the relations of time and eternity, the forming and crystallizing of the personal experience of the artist (it is not for nothing that her last personal exhibition in the summer 2009 is called like that – “Reservoir of Time”, e.g., the accumulation of experience of a rundown life time), and as well the ecology of relations between nature and man. Nature interweaves a man, human being in his way expresses the nature in front of God but the image of nature may also be the time that leaves wrinkles in a man’s face and at the same time the nature strives for what it cannot achieve – it participates in a prayer uttered by a man (“Prayer”, 1988). Half-figure of a man dressed in coat on which the animals can be seen but the head and face formed from small twigs resembling the shape of a head, and the hands placed in the form of prayer. Traditionally sensitive feel of nature among Lithuanians and Latvians is made visible in the subtle, almost magical imaginary of the artist.



Else in the leaves one may see broken off trunks of trees, from which the twisted fiber forms the bodies of humans that have lived long ago, as well the known but distant faces (“A Tree”, 1997). There are the works in which in the gap of nature (especially in flickering leafages) there can be discerned the face of a woman; but behind it – from the edges of upright pyramids the face of a man is staring at us (“Find me”, 1989). Here the primeval element transforms into diversity – into a woman, but it is never a primitive, rectilinear reduction. Such a reduction of forms that the graphic artist willingly has depicted in the early period of her creative work in the 80-ties of the last century shows inevitable, depleting reality as the fact, but she herself marks with her personality a person who steps out from this depleting, schematic construction – into heaven (“Ruler”, 1988; “Gaze”, 1988). And everything starts again – search continues by the circle once already went, going out beyond time and space, striving to being born again from the ocean of infinite possibilities.



8 Nele Zirnīte. [Priekšvārds] [Foreword]. – From: Nele Zirnīte: *Laika rezervuārs* [Reservoir of time]. Rīga: Epicentrs, 2009, 4. lpp.