

REVIEW

by Assoc. Prof Katerina Gadzheva, PhD

Institute for Art Studies at the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

of the dissertation work for the for awarding the educational and scientific degree "**doctor**", titled

THE PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAIT – GENRE TRADITION AND MODERN MANIFESTATIONS

Doctoral candidate: Sonya Todorva Stankova

Academy of Music Dance and Fine Art “Prof Asen Diamandiev” – Plovdiv

Faculty of Fine Arts, Department of Fine Arts

Doctoral program: Applied, Fine Arts and Design

Academic supervisor Prof Galina Lardeva-Minkova

Professional field: 8.2. Fine Art

General presentation of the procedure and the materials presented for review

This review is prepared on the grounds of Order RD-27-043 of 12.03.2024, issued by Prof Toni Shekerdzhieva-Novak, Rector of the Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts "Prof Asen Diamandiev" – Plovdiv. I declare that I have received and thoroughly reviewed the documentation sent to me regarding the procedure. On the basis of the review of the documents, I confirm that work complies with the academic requirements laid down according to Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act (DASRBA) and the Regulations for its implementation, for admission to the defense of a dissertation work for the award of the academic title "doctor" in professional field 8.2. Fine Art.

Biographical data of the candidate

Sonya Stankova knows both the golden years of the Bulgarian photography, and its difficult ones, as well as modernity, which is still too early to evaluate. She is one of those authors who managed to overcome the pessimism, disappointments and false hopes that transitions entail. She graduated "Julius Fuchik" Technical School of Printing and Photography in Sofia and Pedagogy of Fine Arts at Plovdiv University "Paisiy Hilendarski". She has a Master's degree in Photography from the Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts "Prof Asen Diamandiev" - Plovdiv. She has worked with both classic photographic techniques and those offered by the modern times. Her works have been published in prestigious foreign editions, she is the author of dozens of solo exhibitions in the country and abroad, and winner of a number of photographic awards. I would like to highlight the teaching of Sonya Stankova at the Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts in Plovdiv. I believe it is especially important that women be supported in their pursuit of professional and academic growth in the field of

photography, as they are still a minority on the faculty of the higher education institutions offering Bachelor, Master, and PhD programs in photography.

Relevance of the topic

Of all the visual media in our country, photography is the most unexplored, undescribed and undocumented. In fact, it was only in the last two decades that it first became the focus of serious scientific interest. The “blank spots” in our photographic past are so many that it is difficult, if not almost impossible, to construct a complete, logical and factually based narrative. In such completely uncharted territory, any conscientious research is relevant and helpful, even more so when written with understanding and respect for the media. Sonya Stankova's dissertation offers a multifaceted analysis of one of the most popular genres in photography – the portrait, which is examined both in global and in the Bulgarian context. It is impossible to deeply understand neither the problems nor the aesthetic messages of modern photography if we are not familiar with the media's past - this is precisely the main idea that clearly stands out in the presented text.

Expediency of the research methods used to achieve the set goals

Sonya Stankova makes a historical review, highlighting authors and phenomena not only from the field of photographic portraiture, but also from the media in general. She also focuses attention on the Bulgarian photography, pointing out the most important representatives of the genre from the past and the present. Finally, she shares her own experience as artist. I find this research approach best suited for dissertation work, as it involves familiarizing and analyzing the existing literature, systematizing facts and drawing conclusions – in this case, presented in the form of personal creative projects.

Evaluation of the dissertation work

It is important to note that Sonya Stankova is not a trained researcher – she is first and foremost an artist and we should emphasize the efforts she has put into creating a well-structured, meaningful and contributing work. As she herself notes, the leading motive for her is the usefulness of her work “in the teaching work at the Academy of Music and Dance Art, as well as the theoretical support of the artistic doctoral studies, which will shape and complete her overall artistic and theoretical potential as an artist”. The dissertation work, the result of her long-term work as an artist, teacher and doctoral student, consists of a **theoretical part** – 101 pages, structured in an introduction, an exposition in three chapters, a conclusion and a bibliography, and an appendix of 98 pages with illustrations from the history of the world and Bulgarian photography, projects of contemporary Bulgarian photographers, as well as photographs from Stankova's personal projects in the field of photographic portraiture.

In the **first chapter**, the author examines the historical and sociocultural prerequisites for the emergence and development of photography, respectively the photographic portrait. Of course, what

was most aspiring for the creators of the first photographic techniques, and subsequently amazed everyone who stood in front of the camera, was the ability of the medium to capture extremely accurate, realistic and impactful images, presenting in the greatest detail not only the specifics of the human face, but also the peculiarities of the personal presence. The history of the photographic portrait could not be examined separately from the history of the medium itself, so Sonya Stankova rightly pays special attention to the first photographic discoveries and to the aesthetic, social and cultural transformations they lead to. She explicitly emphasizes that in her creative development, "the photographic portrait is based on the experience gained from painting to recreate a human image, but in parallel it follows its own, specific path". Special attention is given to the work of David Octavius Hill, Gaspard Félix Tournachon – Nadar and Julia Margaret Cameron. Although at first glance these authors are distant - temporally, geographically and aesthetically - from the contemporary Bulgarian photography, I find the selection of Stankova completely justified, since in recent years their works have had a serious impact on some representative of our artistic photography, appearing precisely in the field of the portrait genre. Particularly interesting is the part dedicated to the mutual influences between photography and literature – a problem that is poorly researched in our country. Here I would recommend a more clear and distinct argumentation of the connection with the main topic of the dissertation work, since it is lost in places. Then there is an overview of the work of some of the most significant portraitist authors of the second half of the 20th century, such as Yusuf Karsh, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Richard Avedon, Cindy Sherman, Erwin Olaf. In practice, this is also an overview of the different approaches in the photographic portrait - studio, reportage, staged.

The **second chapter** of the dissertation is dedicated to the development of the photographic portrait in Bulgaria - from its earliest manifestations in the work of Anastas Karastoyanov, Toma Hitrov, Georgi Danchov-Zografina, etc., through the work of the first female photographers in Bulgaria such as Elena Cherneva- Hitrova and her daughters Ivanka and Boyka, Nedyalka Kachuleva, Raina Karastoyanova, Elena Yotova until the founding of the Bulgarian Photo Club, which includes a number of prominent photographers as well as amateurs. Some of the most prominent masters of the photographic portrait are mentioned, such as Petar Papakochev, Pencho Balkanski, Emil Rashev, Boncho Karastoyanov. Then the author offers a look at the second half of the 20th century, when photography education was born in the country. Although necessary, the historical narrative is rather monotonous until it focuses on the last decades of the twentieth century. Here the doctoral candidate allows herself to formulate interpretations and conclusions concerning not only the photographic but also the artistic life in the country, and it is this courage of hers that I would single out as one of the greatest merits of the dissertation work. The text becomes significantly more dynamic and circumstantial, the works of Ivo Hadzhimishev, Lote Mihailova, Garo Keshishyan, Yordan Yordanov-Yuri, Deyana Stamatova, Yavor Popov, Stanka Tsonkova-Usha, Neli Gavrilova, Galina Usheva, Boris Misirkov and Georgi Bogdanov and others.

The culmination of the dissertation is found in the **third chapter**, in which Sonya Stankova shares her own creative experience. Her description of the studio work refracted through the lens of the political and economic transition after 1989 is intriguing. The repetition of actions and the automation of the shooting process, the hundreds of photographs for documents, the result of hundreds of dispassionately pressed photographic triggers, eventually become a solid foundation for the author's further development in the field of creative photography, and unexpected and winding paths took her to prestigious artistic forums and magazines, such as the landmark *Colours*, an edition of Fabrica- the design laboratory of the Italian fashion concern Benetton. Sonya Stankova presents some of her most emblematic projects, which make it clear how close her relationship is with Plovdiv and with the people who live in symbiosis with the city. Her story is genuine and sincere - just like her photographs.

Contributions and significance of the thesis and the publications on the subject of the dissertation

Sonya Stankova has two articles on the topic of the dissertation in academic journals and two representative albums – *Abstract Realities* and *The Faces of Plovdiv* – publications that meet the requirements for an artistic doctorate. I fully agree with the dissertation's contributions, as I would like to highlight the interesting selection of authors and images that logically lead to her personal creative projects, the good knowledge of the history of photography and interest in photographic theory, which I believe the candidate conveys to her students, as well as the pursuit of an engaging and meaningful narrative, supported by adequately selected quotations from serious literary sources.

The **abstract** corresponds to the content of the dissertation work.

My **recommendations** are mainly related to the bibliography, which could be expanded. It is noteworthy that no articles are listed in it, which I consider a serious minus.

I accept Sonya Stankova's dissertation *The Photographic Portrait - Genre Tradition and Modern Manifestations* as conscientiously executed and I will confidently vote "In favour" for awarding the educational and scientific degree "doctor".

17.05.2024

Sofia

Reviewer: Assoc. Prof. Katerina Gadzheva, PhD