

When Eyes Question

Interview – Part One

Nelida Nemec, Rudi Skočir

Rudi Skočir entered the Slovenian art world as an artist wanting to follow his own path, convinced that true treasure lies but within himself, in his powerful zeal to paint and draw beauty, balance, and harmony seen all around by his subtle eye. It lies in his visions which gradually and clearly acquire the form of an original artistic language, marked by the artist's wish to depict human figure, although human figure has been depicted, created and seen so many times before, throughout the history of art. · Over more than two decades Skočir has created a rich opus of paintings, graphic prints, drawings and illustrations which prove him to be an original, searching and deeply reflective artist with a great sense of drawing and colour. Moreover, he continuously develops and enriches his style with a great deal of affection. Having exhibited his works in Ljubljana in the summer 1998 (Jožef Štefan Gallery, the Knight's Hall at Križanke), the painter presented his works also in the Town Gallery of Nova Gorica in October and November, while his thirtieth illustrated book with ten full page colour illustrations was published in December.

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You made your first step into the Slovenian art world already during your studies at Ljubljana Academy of Fine Arts, where you studied painting. So where does your enthusiasm for illustration come from?

Already in my second year at the Academy of Fine Arts in Ljubljana I received a commission to make black and white illustrations for Pavle Zidar's text „Glavne osebe na potepu” (Main Characters Go for a Ramble). The work was published by „Mladinska Knjiga“ Publishers in 1975. Without false modesty I can say that I was extremely happy to see my work accepted and published. I received this commission upon recommendation of the academically-trained painter and professor at the Academy of Fine Arts Marjan Tršar, who was very open-minded towards emerging young painters. He used to perform his lectures with unique optimism, flair, willingness, and he believed in sincere painting. · As many years have passed since then, I do not even remember whether or not this was enthusiasm for illustration. To be honest, from today's perspective it seems to me that there were a lot of different stimuli and incentives which made me accept the challenge back then. What I distinctly remember now is that being selected among numerous potential candidates made me feel like I was in seventh heaven. I am aware that I was quite vain, although without a reason. Today I see things in a different light. Looking through those first illustrations today, I realize that I was a complete beginner in the field of illustration and were it possible, I would definitely, without second thought, erase those first “experimental” illustrations from my biography. My drawing was rigid, tense, the details incredibly bad... Briefly speaking, if I look at that work of mine, I am ashamed that those “things” actually exist... However, those were only beginnings, and nobody is born perfect.

Since then things have been improving from book to book. This is what I think at this moment, today, but I wonder what I will say in twenty year's time? The answer will probably be the same, full of self-criticism, and lack of appreciation. I am constantly dissatisfied with something in my work, because I am aware that everything can be improved, done better. · The second reason why I made a very early decision to take up illustration were royalties that I was to earn in this way. As I come from a relatively poor but numerous family of workers, I used to struggle through my study years in all possible ways. It is this first royalty that provided me with the possibility of acquiring painting materials, colours, canvases, frames. A graphic press enabled me to make graphic prints. Without this source of livelihood it would have been much more difficult for me to live through those crazy years at the Academy.

Which one prevails in you today – the painter or the illustrator, if I may ask? You tend to paint as much as you do illustrate. Which do you prefer doing?

This question does not have a straightforward answer. Everything that I do in the world of art seems worthwhile to me. Dividing art into separate genres is of course necessary for an easier comprehension of its terminology. However, I am confused by this division, given the fact that everything is interconnected and intertwined, reflecting mutual influence of everything on everything. One field of art transits into another and contains elements of the other. And everything must give the effect of an independent and complete work of art. I am not bothered if my paintings sometimes include elements of illustration. This is simply my way of being special and myself. If this adds to my artistic expression, why would I renounce an opportunity due to puristic prejudices and dogmatic recipes? There are no recipes in art, but if by any chance there are any, they present an obstacle to fresh reflections, and vice versa! My illustrations often give the impression of a painting. This is simply my way of depicting and expressing art. · In the past, divisions between art genres used to be pretty stiff and rigid, whereas today the line between individual art fields is thin and rather blurred. Therefore drawing, painting, graphic art on canvas, and sculpture-like impasto layers tend to intertwine, so one is often puzzled, not knowing whether to consider a work of art as a graphic artwork, low relief or sculpture.

After graduating from the academy, you continued your post-graduate studies, specializing in painting under mentors Janez Bernik, Štefan Planinc and Kiar Meško. What influence did your teachers have on your art reflections? Your early opus reveals mainly the influences of Janez Bernik and perhaps Anderle. Why were you attracted mostly to Bernik's art philosophy and why did you opt for a similar iconography?

After their graduation most painters probably still feel the influence of some of their influential and charismatic teachers, painters or graphic artists for a long time. Therefore it goes without saying that their influences persist in me as well. Regardless of how natural this may seem to me, it is also natural that one strives to get rid of their influence in one or another way. These professors themselves must have dealt with similar problems at the beginning of their careers as artists. When they were students at the academy, they were also influenced by their teachers, as well as by artists from other cultural backgrounds and their work. In my opinion there are no self-taught painters who would start their careers out of nothing, as nothing is created from nothing! In the background there is always something or someone – some author or several authors, some masterpiece, a tradition, a

trend of the time, or anything that inspires those who follow them. Neither did Picasso, so independent in his later periods, start out of anything. At the beginning, he used to develop his paintings under the influence of some authors that he considered as role-models and were ideal to his mind. He based his work on tradition, and it was only later that he discovered his totally original artistic language and expression. All of us who are in quest of our own direction are aware of that. However, it is important that we try to get rid of those influences and substitute them with our own solutions and distinct elements in our original expression. · As far as I am concerned, I was strongly influenced by certain Slovenian and foreign authors. Most of all I was marked by Janez Bernik, a unique Slovenian painter and graphic artist, whose artistic expression is close to mine and relates to me. Even today! His use of lettrisms, graphisms, numbers, half-obliterated intimate recordings on the painting surface has always attracted me and responded to my personal anguish.

Why do you feel Bernik's artistic expression so close to you?

It is never about copying and imitating, given the fact that Bernik's expression, as well as his themes and philosophy are so different from mine. Only a superficial observer may feel it is about copying. But Bernik is so absolutely different from me in character, training, and philosophy. · In my works, there is always some kind of message underneath, a theme which I incorporate into the painting by means of various elements. Some of these elements are certainly similar to Bernik's. I use them, along with my own symbols, with my own figure, because I need them in my expression. I tend to use the means offered to me by the world of art, because I would like to tell my "narrative" in the most comprehensive, and artistically clear manner. Yet at the same time I want my story to be rich with multiple meanings. I assume that the painter Janez Bernik himself strives to articulate his artistic expression in the most satisfying way for him, which conveys the meaning he wants to convey. · Although I am younger by age, and in the time line I follow my great master's footsteps, this does not mean that I am not allowed to apply the same elements than he does, as they are not privately owned. On the contrary, they belong to art in general. Therefore the allusions of some critics and fellow artists that I am under Bernik's influence do not make me feel unhappy. On the contrary, I take it as a compliment to be associated to such a name. As figure has been depicted for as long as man has been in existence, this motif is so "worn out" that it is extremely difficult to create a figure which would not be associated to another, already seen solution. · There are many powerful painters who often try to make their way into my female figure, from Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele to Gabriel Stupica and De Kooning. Even a tiny detail can trigger an association to the works of these great painters. I basically search for my own expression by surfing among their figures trying to avoid them as much as possible, knowing that eventually I will "invent" a figure, which will be either completely mine, Skočir-like, or it will contain bits of those already created. When I was in Paris in 1996 I had a discussion with Jože Ciuha on this very issue. I can still recollect his idea that sometimes it takes years before one can achieve one's own expression which absolutely defines and marks him. And, as I love my work and I am also relatively obstinate, I am convinced that I will never get tired of it nor will I be satisfied with it. I am actually afraid of discovering my own expression too early, because that is the point where the adventure of infinite quests and journeys round the world of art ends, and repetition and gradual stagnation begins. A standstill!

During your first years after graduation you frequently devoted yourself to the graphic medium, while nowadays not so much any more.

As I am aware that my strong point of expression is line, rather than colour, I realize that I have always systematically devoted myself first to drawing, and to graphic art after that. To me, a drawing is a base to every good artwork, whether it be a painting, graphic print, low-relief, mosaic or something else. Drawing art has always attracted and satisfied me. Already as a student I learned how powerful and expressive a graphic work may be. Especially in black and white! I was extremely lucky to be taught by excellent and renowned Slovenian graphic artists. Each one of them was an outstanding expert in his own field, willing to share their vast knowledge and experience acquired throughout their long years of practice, if only you were willing to learn! These were Bogdan Borčič and Marjan Pogačnik in the graphic technique of intaglio printing, and Zvest Apollonio in the field of screen printing. · I was lucky enough to be able to provide myself with an old intaglio printing press owned previously by Riko Debenjak, a master of graphic art of Primorsko. I had the graphic press renovated so that I could start printing and practising at home. With time I developed a sort of affection for graphic art and its techniques which I still find rewarding today. · In the past five years I have somehow neglected this medium and nearly given it up, as I am currently more attracted to drawing and painting. However, I believe I will not be able to do without graphic art much longer, as the motif I am currently looking into lends itself to be realized in graphic art.

Do you feel attached to the so-called Ljubljana Graphic Art School?

I do not really know and I cannot give an answer to this question. I only know that in painting as well as in graphic art I strive to give a faultless, if not perfect performance. Actually, I have never produced large editions of prints. I prefer printing three to five artist's proofs followed by 15 numbered prints at the most. I always have a feeling that a small edition still preserves some rarity, which is characteristic of an original piece of art. But deep inside I also have to admit that printing, except for the first two or three prints, has always bored and tired me physically.

What does the art of drawing mean to you? Do you think it is the drawing that conveys the expression?

Yes, definitely. It is the alpha and omega of the whole world of art. A drawing, and a sketch even more so, is a stimulus, an idea, a materialized thought which takes form. It can serve as a base of a more complex art form such as graphic print, painting, or sculpture. As it is rational by nature, it is perfectly suitable to man. And as it is most often executed directly on the painting surface, it appears fresh, basic, primary, and absolutely subjective. And, as each individual has his own unique handwriting, so does he distinguish himself in his unique way of drawing. However, one must distinguish between a study drawing whose purpose is on the one hand to learn and observe, and on the other hand a drawing which is intended to define an object, figure, phenomenon. What I have in mind is the relaxed sketch or drawing that each author uses to record a thought, an idea, a draft drawing. To me, drawing and painting are equal in value, although at first sight the drawing may appear more modest, ascetic or even dull and plain. · My involvement in drawing is completely instinctive, but I tend to look into it systematically without neglecting any of its aspects. Therefore my "drawing sprees", several-month periods which I can spend drawing and not creating any new

paintings are typical of me. Then suddenly, at the spur of the moment everything changes and painted surfaces and colours begin pouring out of me. But nevertheless, beneath all these layers of colour one can sense the framework which supports everything. And this is a drawing. In fact, as there exist but few really good painters, there are also very few good drawing artists. One can quickly understand who is who. Drawing does not stand bluffing.

Where did you spend your childhood, youth, and your early creative years?

I spent my childhood and youth at the most beautiful place on this planet – on the banks of the Soča at the foot of Mount Krn. As later in life, I was lucky already at the very beginning, because I was born exactly where I would have always wanted to be. At the village of Kamno Pri Kobaridu! However, already the following year we moved to Staro Selo and then finally to Kobarid. Here I went to primary school, and, as luck always seems to be on my side, I received my first art education from the excellent teacher and painter Miloš Volarič. As my family on my father's side has roots in the same family as the poet Simon Gregorčič, I noticed already at an early age that art muses bestowed some artistic gifts upon me as well. In school I was more into the subjects which were closer to art than to science. Art, or "Drawing", as it used to be called, was my favourite subject. Therefore I used to make my notebooks and books "look nicer" by means of little drawings and scribbles. Home walls were no better. As all the walls were decorated with my works, we did not need any additional art decoration, except for a calendar. Of course my father used to change this decoration twice a year, as he had to repaint parts of the walls that were within easy reach of my hands.

How come you moved to Idrija?

After primary school I went to Idrija to attend Jurij Vega Gymnasium. Idrija seemed something special to me, because of the special status that this little Slovenian town holds, but also for its inhabitants. The very position of the town, squeezed between the surrounding hills, its outstanding economic, technical and cultural tradition, extraordinary, particularly strenuous and inquisitive people were the factors that formed an environment which is impossible to describe with words. It has to be experienced! · Who knows better than me that Idrija left a powerful impression on me. Also the gymnasium, whose staff was composed of extremely well educated teachers and original experts, helped form my inner world, whether you like it or not. And last but not least, the mine, miners, and lace! How unique this combination is! At the same place one can face a contrast between the miners' hard, back-bearing and harsh physical work deep beneath the surface of the earth on the one hand, and white, frail, gentle and unique lace on the other hand. A man's world, and a woman's world, complementing and supporting each other! · I have always been attracted to contrasts, and I tend to "exploit" them in my work. Therefore I am no longer surprised that I spent six years of my life creating an opus which became some kind of a monument and tribute to the Idrija miner and his wife. This opus contains a lot of drawings, graphic prints of smaller or larger formats, paintings, sgraffiti of outstanding sizes, book illustrations to present the legend of the pail maker who is said to have discovered mercury in Idrija, etc.

And then Ljubljana. How did you experience those years?

I spent as many as ten study years in Ljubljana: two at the Academy of Education, one at the Faculty of Construction Engineering, four at the Academy of Fine Arts, and after my degree two more years of post-graduate studies when I specialized in painting. Ljubljana did not make any particular impression on me. Except for my friends, fellow painters and sculptors, and a few teachers, I do not recall anything very special from this period. Studying, working! Studying again, a few parties, a few concerts. But most of all there was work, and hard work at the academy. From 7.30 to 20.30! My post-graduate years were packed with energy and the desire to master the craft to perfection. All the techniques, human figure, anatomy, descriptive geometry, history of art! It is but youth that is able to cope with all this! And I took full advantage of this opportunity.

With your first solo exhibition in Idrija in 1980 you presented your work created in the period after your graduation. Does this exhibition represent an important event for you?

To me an exhibition is a necessary evil. Necessary because from time to time you just have to show the people what you are doing and how, also in order to get some feedback from them. Although I do not consider their response too serious or binding, it happens that sometimes some opinion is like an eye-opener to me, as it draws my attention to some detail that I may have overlooked. Nevertheless, it all comes from me, this is my work, my expression, therefore corrections of my directions are rare and circumstantial with reference to the whole. On the inside I am strong enough not to let various trends and universal quests in art have an excessive impact on my work. They touch me only to the point where they are beneficial and add to my personal poetics. Some people may find this world of mine, and my way of painting old-fashioned, belonging to an art period which is definitely over. But to me art is timeless. Periods and trends are like little boxes, a result of man's flair to categorize everything into systems and to invent the terminology to help him categorise authors whose work has similar features in some aspect or another. The fact of the matter is that you can still find pleasure in new solutions that do not conform to the "time" which the history of art defines as a result of the past. But the fact remains that I am alive today. The world which is inside me is in me today and I tend to bring it out as it is, regardless of the current trends! This is essential for me! If I subjected myself to trends, I would have to change every few years! What would remain of me, then? · My attitude to work is by no means meant as a recipe that I want to share with others. This is my attitude to contemporary art and art in general and it holds for me personally. I am convinced that each painter knows exactly what he is doing with his painting. Therefore I am not against abstraction, installation, happening, new age, etc. Each author probably tends to realize what his inner self tells or urges him to do. Each author has his own artistic language. There are authors who can speak either fluently and brilliantly, or they can "stammer", or use all kinds of fillers and dull, inconsistent, long sentences. There are others who can speak with silence, they can be adept to a certain style, still others may express themselves in telegraphic style, for example. In fine art, like in literature, music, ballet... each artist is what he is, or what he wants to be! But when he begins pretending or imitating ways which are not his own, he quickly realizes that this is not him. As a result, he becomes unhappy and burnt out, not being able to cope with such efforts all his life. · Nevertheless, the first exhibition is something special and unforgettable and if the response from the other side is favourable, it represents a huge stimulus for the future. And this is what happened with my first exhibition in Idrija in 1980. In spite of some "well-intentioned" reviews I felt that I had chosen the right path.

What was the most important thing for you or how would you define your early period?

I do not know exactly how to define my early period. Today I would call it “black painting!” As I was financially on the brink of bankruptcy, all I could afford were black, white and grey colours with minor ochre and blue accents. The paintings look morbid, mysterious at times, reflecting my state of mind at the time. Dark, gloomy, contrasting! However, as I always tend to see some light at the end of darkness, there is always some timid light, some brightness and hope that glow from the black of my paintings.

A woman entered your art world at a very early stage. A mysterious woman, as Janez Kavčič wrote in the catalogue in 1985. Is she like a demon of good and evil?

A woman or a human figure is to me an element which I generally place centrally in the painting and is always the main carrier of the message. All other elements are its accessories. Within this very context, it is due to the symbols related to the figure that the latter is transformed into a “narrator” speaking a silent language to the viewer. I have been tempted several times to present the female figure with all the erotic energy that a woman is able to possess. This option is very tempting, if not too tempting, given that I am a man in the first place, and a painter only after that. Yet it seems to me that this way would be too likeable by itself, and as such too straightforward in meaning, and banal, which could eventually become a trap. I am somehow more interested in “deeper themes”. Why are we here, what is the purpose of our existence, who or what guides our lives, our events, our fortunes and misfortunes, why are we afraid of death, finality... I am interested in man’s ephemeral life and his attitude to it, in our fragility, vanity, smallness and grandeur at the same time! Therefore I make use of a female figure and symbols which depict the brevity of our lifetime, growth and decline, birth and death! I assume that a female figure makes it easier for me to tell all this, as I believe that women, more than men, are somehow afraid of ageing and of transformations of our outer image. All this reflects and marks the the transitory nature of our existence. Time forms new images on our faces and bodies which many people find shocking, painful, stressful and difficult to accept. By no means are our inner maturity and wisdom also changing, along with everything else that defines our personalities.

This is explicitly expressed by a polyptych of five large canvases from your early period. Your female figure does undergo transformations.

150 cm × 150 cm, which proved me right. The reaction of women at the exhibition showed to me that depicting their transitory nature and ageing openly came as a shock to the women’s world, or at least as an unpleasant confrontation. Namely, my paintings presented raw facts, without beautifying or cosmetic accessories typical of the contemporary civilization. The first canvas is a purely white surface with a blue light bulb, symbolizing birth, beginning, innocence. · The second canvas depicts a little girl, a child, a being without any worries, problems or stress. A phase in life, when everything tends to be an innocent and care-free game, letting loose and having fun. The painting is depicted in grey hues. It is filled with playful scribbles, and inscribed names. It is optimistic. On the third canvas the girl has already walked part of her life path and become a mature woman, a ripe apple, capable of bearing new life. This is the central painting, whose uppermost position also

represents the beginning of a way downwards and backwards, the beginning of a decline and denial, as we are actually destined to return to the point of origin. The fourth painting is therefore dark grey with an image of an old woman reflecting the transformation from a ripe fruit into a dried, aged and deformed image of a human being. The painting already creates a discomfiting, pessimistic and gloomy effect. The last and the fifth painting is completely dark and empty, but at the places formerly populated with figures, now floats a black light bulb, the symbol of transience, death. People tend to find various possible explanations for the darkness and the emerging passage from this earthly life into something that we can only sense. Yet, what lies “beyond” remains undisclosed, mysterious, fearful, unexplained, unproven and a huge enigma! It is extremely difficult to describe painting with words. Nevertheless, I have tried to indicate at least approximately the points that interest me when I speak about the themes that I paint. And these reflective excursions are where I want to bring the viewer who contemplates my paintings at exhibitions. To be honest, I do not think many people are willing to take up such reflections and by guiding them into my world I am not doing them any great favour! I also believe that it is in human nature to like things which are more pleasing to the eye, light if not kitsch. I do not know if people are afraid of those cruel confrontations, but the fact remains that our existence in this world is ephemeral and that sooner or later we will make our exits empty-handed, in the same way as we made our entrances into this life. There is no way we can change this fact. Therefore, regardless of how brave one may be, each one of us loses heart at the unpleasant thought that sits in our heads whispering: soon it will be your turn. · Yet, if you find what you believe brings joy, happiness, and purpose to your life, you can live your life fully. Then, gloomy thoughts stand no chance of depressing and breaking you. · I often find myself exhausted after all-day painting, looking forward to a new day, because then I will be able once again to indulge myself in my world of colours, symbols and thoughts, in the maze of still unknown and undiscovered corners of myself. I like doing that, I enjoy researching my own universe in which and with which I live. I love my work. · Each one of us has his own universe, his own infinite space, his own competences and talents. It is a huge waste if he is unable to discover and develop his gift in life. And I do not refer only to material waste, but to the one caused by empty, purposeless, unsatisfying and fruitless life.

Do you believe in fate?

Fate is a word which can really be fateful to some people, while to others it can represent mystery, coincidence, a turn of events, an act of nature, or God's will. There are many answers. Each one of us has his own explanation tailored to his own criteria. As for myself, I am not convinced that fate is the right word to explain my view of the turn of events in my life. However, I believe that everything that happens in the world and in the universe in general is interconnected and has an effect on everything. Although at first sight it may seem that things, especially our lives, are ruled by a complete disorder, I believe that everything is perfectly balanced and intertwined according to some law and order unknown to us. I am unable to define this. Everything is like a huge meadow full of life and pretty blossoms, but also weeds and thistles, tiny little worlds, growth and decay. Everything functions in harmony. As the prettiest blossoms are needed, so are the most painful thorns. The same goes for our lives where we often come across apparently impossible contrasts of beautiful and ugly, of happiness and unhappiness, white and black, green and red, good and evil, life and death. Everything affects and defines the other end. Everything is needed and nothing exists without a reason or purpose. Everything is balanced. Nothing is ever just bad, ugly, wicked, evil. There is always a counterbalancing element on the other end in the form of kindness, beauty, noble-mindedness. I believe in the order of balanced contrasts. However, this does not make me sit and wait that this or that may happen to me. Knowing what I know, I am not resigned to my "fate" and I am not waiting for fate to play into my hands. I live and struggle to fulfil myself, my purpose of being, my work, my inner world, my attitude to people and things. I am inclined to beauty, kindness, honesty, the perfection of what is good. This may sound utopian, boastful and impossible, but this is what I honestly think. I do not say I am perfect and faultless. On the contrary, there have been many mistakes, injustices, and stray directions in my life. I have fallen, been defeated, experienced misfortunes, failures, crises, dilemmas. After that, I always pull myself together and move on towards kindness!

Your paintings definitely reflect your states of mind. When you create, you lend yourself completely to your inner motivation. To the moment. How do you experience this?

I have the same attitude to my work as well. I strive from good to better, to perfection, and if everything happens to balance and coincide, I sometimes pass over that magic edge which I call ART. This is a special state of mind, a harmony of everything, of the whole and the details, which man achieves but rarely, whether he likes it or not. And I firmly believe that the same goes for great artists who rarely managed to cross over the line between perfection and art, which is ingenious. Although today they are venerated in all ways, each one of them used to create average, good, and also perfect works of art. However, they seldom succeeded in creating a real masterpiece. · To me, this statement is completely normal and acceptable, as there are but rare things that come to us in small numbers in rare frequency. Intense colours, distinct forms and precious metals are relatively rare and their quantity almost invisible. Likewise, art world knows only very few premium masterpieces, and a lot of waste. There are but a few pearls. I would not know how to define a real masterpiece, and I am not aware a definition exists. Given the fact that criteria and assessment systems which define art exist, it is in my opinion unnecessary to define it here. However, I know from my experience that you can feel the moment when you cross that invisible threshold into the world of art. In my life and work such moments have been very rare, unexpected, and each time they occurred, they came as a surprise. It is because of this state of mind in which you find yourself

in such moments that you want to continue working. And you keep on working every day in order to regain that same sensation, to feel again that you create ART. An unusual, outstanding and unique piece of artwork. At times you try to intertwine in it everything that you believe will help you achieve those unique states of mind, but it is ineffective. There is no recipe! This “divine moment” simply occurs at the spur of the moment, unexpectedly. You can feel it when it is there, you know instinctively that this is it! The rest is mediocre. High quality still, but routine, artistry, perhaps even perfection, but you cannot define it as Art.

Are you an artist?

I find it distasteful to hear the words art, artist, and similar, too often. We tend to abuse this expression. It represents rarity and as such it should be rarely used. It should be appreciated. Personally I am more satisfied when I am referred to as a painter, master, or something similar. If somebody addresses me as artist, I stress out, as I am not an artist at all times. Actually I am rarely able to achieve this supreme level of art. It happens in exceptional moments. But all these thoughts and limitations refer only to me and to my painting and artistic experience. Perhaps there is somebody somewhere who is extremely lucky and believes that everything that he produces is pure and absolute art. Of course it is his right and satisfaction to believe that this is his case and that his work is ideal. I have nothing against it.

The cycle of miners holds a very important position in your opus. Were you so overwhelmed by this underground world that you impressed it into the memories of your acquaintances in your own way as a result, or was this opus inspired by something else?

It may sound silly, but I have never wanted to do things of merely local importance, because everything that looks only local at first sight, actually helps forming the universe. Local matters are part of the general, objective world, part of the whole. This specific, “mining” part of the world is characteristic only of Idrija and of its inhabitants. It is something particular, exotic in a way, and yet it is so very special that it marks humanity as a whole. It is the man of Idrija, the miner, his wife and his family that represent a kind of a metaphor to the people living elsewhere. A metaphor for hard-working, resourceful, strong people who manage to survive in these remote, wild and isolated basins and valleys only thanks to the traits of their character. They are also a metaphor for perseverance and independence, for these people can only rely on their intelligence and their hard work. This may be difficult to understand to some people originating from big centres, from rich and fertile plains which abound in everything, from food to possibilities to go about freely, to be active, to build cities where all the knowledge and experiences are at hand, within people’s easy reach. Many “cosmopolitans” cannot understand what a miracle the reality of Idrija is! There are not many human beings living in such harsh conditions on a tiny area of land who would be capable of realizing such outstanding achievements as the people of Idrija have. What I have just told you may seem narrow-minded, but let me tell you that I do not come from Idrija and I have no relatives there, so I am not being subjective when I sing praises to these people and their achievements! Perhaps it is this fact that fascinated me enough to create quite a considerable cycle of paintings, graphic prints, book illustrations, and sgraffiti as a tribute to Idrija, its mine and above all to the people of Idrija. It took me six years to complete this cycle and I believe it contains quite a few good works.

In contemporary iconography the figure of a miner plays a particular role as a metaphor rather than merely an occupation marked by work underground. Working on this cycle you did not look for models in contemporary art trends.

I have never been attracted to or interested in a mine worker as a symbol of socio-realistic iconography. The whole opus is rather a painting monument to all the people who managed to create a unique technical, cultural, ethic and generally human wholeness on this small piece of Slovenian land. Although mine workers are basically physical labour, Idrija miners used to be more than that. Self-confident, they managed to achieve a special status of a class which was open to anybody. They behaved in a somehow more “aristocratic” way than other workers. Perhaps this was due to mercury itself, which is a rare and unusual metal, so the people who mined it may just have adopted its character. · All generations of miners were open to knowledge, inventions, culture, technical advances, to everything new and useful that was proposed by someone local, or by people coming to Idrija from all over Europe. Knowledge, experience, education have always been appreciated in Idrija. These qualities were not considered as something unnecessary. And Idrija always knew how to benefit from them. This goes also for activities that at first sight have nothing to do with mining: education, medicine, theatre, music. What other explanations could there be of the fact that it was in Idrija that the first Slovenian non-classical secondary school was established, the predecessor of the present Jurij Vega Gymnasium. It is in Idrija that also the first miners’ theatre was opened. Not to mention how many famous mathematicians, physicists, doctors of medicine, botanists and other scientists worked in Idrija. All these factors may have contributed to the fact that I let myself in for this adventure and drew the theme for my work from this environment. This motif seems rare in Slovenian art, and if we happen to come across an example of it, it is elaborated in a completely different manner. I was attracted to the contrast created between rough, dirty, manly, physical labour of a miner deep beneath the ground on the one hand, and the fine, fragile, skilful work of their wives on the surface, creating gentle, womanly, bright lace. This combination of two worlds, intertwining and complementing each other is unique, one of a kind, typical of Idrija. Man’s work – woman’s work; night, darkness – light, sunshine; rough, dirty, heavy – light, fragile, virtuoso. I am attracted to contrasts! Even today when this opus has been completed and I am busy doing apparently different things, exploiting different themes!

There are several works in your opus which were inspired by the venerable anniversary of the town of Idrija. Five hundred years is a long period!

Yes. However, the second motif that inspired me was the closing down of the mercury mine after five hundred years of its on-going operation. Associated to this event are the people’s destinies and those of their families and children, the loss of their jobs, livelihood, existence. It is this phenomenon and the shape of a cross that often appear in my work. However, rather than being considered as the symbol of Christianity and religion, they are a symbol of dying, leaving, passing. A long period which moulded a physical and spiritual image of the people in this area, which provided them with livelihood and possibilities of leading their everyday life, was being laid to rest. It gave the people the purpose and space of living in this hilly, remote world. And what was the situation like after a few years? It was again the same spirit of originality, enterprise, resourcefulness, determination and even obstinacy that came to light. Closing down the mine did not make people depressed. On the contrary! They immediately found lines of business that provided jobs, livelihood and a breakthrough to domestic and foreign markets. Yet again, the region

of Idrija rose above the average of Primorsko. Although I do not live in Idrija any more, this area is still something special, at least to me. I believe many areas in Slovenia could learn something from these people. Unfortunately, today some people still happen to look down on you with pity and give you patronizing and sometimes even despising looks when they realize that you come from the “God-forgotten Idrija”. Oh, yes, they say, Idrija, somewhere there...what an impossible road...”

How much did the artists that critics like to mention really influence you? Which part of you do you find resources for elsewhere, in nature or in art? How much is your art a result of your most intimate experiences and reflections?

Like all other painters, I was probably influenced by some contemporary artists of Slovenia, as well as by the painting and individuals from previous periods. Art critics who evaluate and categorize my work, find influences of both in my work. To be completely honest, I believe that most of these assessors categorize my work rather superficially, comparing and contrasting my work with the “influences” involved at the beginning. I know for myself that I am simply a painter, and I am completely sincere expressing my dilemmas, reflections and emotions. I try to transpose them onto the painting surface in an artistically comprehensive and readable language. But in order to convey my thoughts, fears, wishes and feelings in the most subtle way I use anything that helps me elaborate my expression most effectively. If anyone may think that I made use of somebody else’s elements on the way, I can only say with clear conscience: “Why not?” In art all elements are everybody’s property, so no particular element can be reserved only for some particular authors to use. As my particular line of art is figure painting, the situation gets even more complicated, as the number of artists who have depicted human figure from prehistory to this day and age is enormous. A true crowd! Therefore we tend to “borrow” each other’s solutions, but then we transform them into our own expression. In this respect I do not know any explicitly original authors living here and now! Each of us synthesizes the work of a few preceding authors. In this way variants are created which represent a conglomerate of already seen solutions, but transposed into an original language determining each author. Personally I believe that I have partly achieved some kind of expression typical of me, therefore I also believe that if my painting found itself side by side with one of the mentioned artists’ paintings, it would be obvious that my work is actually mine, with my expression, composition, language, colour range, and rhythm. The fact of the matter is that I paint only the way in which I know how to paint! The late Dr. Ivan Sedej, who often visited me in my studio used to say to me: “Do work the way in which you believe your idea is expressed at its best. Do not be bothered by other people’s opinion. This freedom is given to you and nobody can take it away from you!” This is the motto that actually guides me in my creative efforts.

You have been working as an artist for almost two decades and you have created a vast opus of works in painting, graphic art and illustration. How would you describe your creative urge?

Everything that I have created so far, and probably also everything that I will in the future is like a breath of my inner self. I do not know how to define this in terms of art history or style. And I am not even interested to know it, nor do I want it to burden me. In a way it is very difficult to explain my creative process. Simply speaking, my knowledge, observations, sensations, events, and reflections pile up until my inner self can no longer take anything in. Then, all these piled up

impulses have to be released, find a way out to materialize on the painting surface, filtered and transformed into artistic language. This is where I feel at home. And my home is the world of lines, colours, shapes, order, composition, harmony, rhythm. This is where I come alive, and where expressing myself is rewarding! Each person has his own field of activity where he can express himself releasing his inner emotions and thoughts in order to establish a link to the outside world, to his environment. Of course these fields of activity can be creative or destructive. I am happy to be on the creative side, able to express myself by creating. In this way results have optimistic effects, generating aesthetic and rational satisfaction, and stimulating positive aspects in us.

What guides your work in graphic art? Which technique do you prefer using?

The wish to express myself effectively in my own way guides all my work, from drawing, painting, sgraffito to graphic art. The technique itself is a skill which by itself is not worth much. But when it has been selected appropriately to suit your intellectual energies, it can be very effective in adding, ennobling and strengthening the power of your expression. I prefer using good old techniques of intaglio printing as they are able to enrich the image with countless hues going from black, through a range of infinite greys, up to the white of a graphic sheet. The techniques that suit me most are etching, aquatint and dry point. These are also the techniques in which I realized most of my prints, but there have been times when I made a few linocuts. · In the past years I have abandoned graphic art for the time being, as I am all into drawing and painting. I can hardly find any time for those demanding and time-consuming procedures, which etching and then printing are. But I still think time will come when I am again seduced into the realm of the good old graphic art, full of sudden, unexpected surprises. The theme I am dealing with at present gives me so much satisfaction while I am drawing or painting it that it seems to be extremely suitable for elaboration in graphic techniques. However, time will tell when I am ready to turn my current theme into a graphic version. One of my mottoes to work by is also to let things run on their own accord without being “forced” into any kind of work. It is work itself that guides me by the rhythm of cyclical alternations of work, rest, and accumulation. Not even a greater commercial demand in graphic artworks can change these principles of mine.

How many books have you illustrated until now? Do you accept commissions from publishers?

It is the thirty-eighth book that is being published at the moment, for which I elaborated ten full-page illustrations. As I already have quite some experience after so many years of illustrating, I always allow myself enough time to think carefully to find out if the literary text suits me. I do not accept all the publishers’ or self-publishers’ offers. I decide to do only those that I know will bring me satisfaction and help the writer to bring the book to life as a whole. In word and image.

What is your basic rule for illustration? Is the text completely binding for you or do you still manage to express your personal message?

I could add that I enjoy illustrating for young people of ten to sixteen years of age. Illustrating for younger children has never appealed to me, as I would probably have to change my artistic expression considerably, which I do not want to do. The way in which I am working now gives me

the pleasure I expect. Of course the text is binding for me, as I tend to illustrate texts with a narrative, a storyline, a plot. Therefore I do not work against the author of the text, but I want to help him. Working hand in hand we are able to create a convincing literary work acceptable for young people. Such a book provides literary pleasure and is upgraded by artistic accessories to the story. However, the fact that I subject myself to the storyline does not mean that I am deprived of freedom of expression. Of course I have this freedom! No text is so hermetically closed that it would not leave any place for imagination. On the contrary. Each text represents merely a stimulus for my fantasy journeys into the world of art images. Therefore I always feel relaxed, depicting freely the heroes and scenes from the story according to my standards and imagination. Sometimes I get so immersed in the world of my youth that the illustrations created are like a flashback of the years of my adolescence, of the situations in which I find “good” and “evil” characters for the illustrations. In fact it is not about a systematic search of the past. Everything is in me, still alive after so many years, whether or not I depict it.

Two years ago you spent two months in Paris where you created fifty paintings and gave them the title of The Queen of Hearts.

In 1996 I spent two months at the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris where I had accommodation and a studio at my disposal. The very location of these studios is favourable as they are situated at the heart of Paris, not far from the Louvre, the Town Hall, Georges Pompidou Centre, close to the Latin Quarter. Across the Seine you can enjoy the view of Notre Dame Cathedral. To me it felt like triggering a bomb. It is simply impossible to explain the amount of powerful energy that my body and soul received. Paintings were literally pouring out of me onto paper. I did not feel any strain, all the little and big problems you tend to face and solve on daily basis were left behind, somewhere on the way between Slovenia and Paris. Back then, the tempo was tremendous, as I can see it now. In such a short time I virtually drank from all the galleries, exhibitions, streets and squares. I loved discovering Paris on foot and very rarely used the metro. In this way I could wander round the city quarters rarely visited by tourists, discovering also those unpleasant, dark, run-down places occupied by the homeless, where you could see that Paris is not only a wonderful and affluent European metropolis, but also a place full of misery, sorrow, beggars, prostitution which the city manages to conceal so skilfully by forcing them out of the city centre. As the Cité Internationale des Arts is the place traditionally populated by by artists of different art genres from all over the world, I used to meet and made acquaintance with extraordinary people coming from Israel, South America, Africa, Australia. The artists from the former republics of Russia and from the former Eastern Germany made a good impression on me. They are extremely open to exchanging ideas, knowledgeable, their thinking fresher than traditional western concepts are. Although very young, the ones I met were well read and intelligent. What a refreshing and pleasurable experience they meant to me! We spent quite a few night hours together, discussing politics, economics, art, and the aims that the young generation has in life. I was also impressed by artists from Japan, China, North Africa. You can also meet people who will remain in your memory for something funny that happened, for their unusual behaviour, or any other little details. For example, I can clearly remember an Australian artist for an unusual conceptual experiment that he carried out in one of the galleries there. Likewise, I will never forget an elderly couple of American sculptors who lived above my studio. What I would like to say is that when you are open-minded and you travel the world with your eyes open, you live your life fully, intensively. You are rich. During these two

months I experienced as much as I would experience in normal circumstances in one whole year. All this makes you richer, nobler, more tolerant to your fellow man, as you gain the knowledge of the worlds that exist and live on this day and age, alongside you, with you, but possibly also past you.

You used to meet with the painter Jože Ciuha.

Yes. Meetings with Jože Ciuha, our painter who spends most of the year in his studio in Paris meant a lot to me. He is a great personality, marked by open-mindedness and extreme wisdom which one can only gain over the years of working and learning. Therefore I always looked forward to our meetings, as in our discussions he also honestly told me what he thought about my painting. I appreciated his honesty and good intentions of his remarks. Therefore I accepted from my senior colleague both his praise and his critical remarks about my work at the time. It is his critical remarks that I appreciated better, as most people lack the courage to speak out loud their opinion about a piece of art. This gets even more difficult if you work in the same field of art.

Did Paris come as a turning point in your career?

Actually Paris convinced me, enriched and gave me a lot, but also took a lot from me. Due to intense work and rich and full life I lost more than ten kilos. This is why I was delighted on my wife Vesna's arrival. She made me recover in one week of our extended stay together, so that I was able to return home. Of course I will go back to Paris as soon as I am ready to leave. I hope this will soon happen.

We could divide your painting of the past two years into the red, ochre and blue period. Does colour have any particular meaning in this period? What does colour actually mean to you?

After so many years of artistic creation I noticed about myself that I am primarily attached to line and drawing. With them I feel at home, as I believe I master them, cling to them and practice them. My attitude to colour is another thing. I use it to express emotions and states of mind that condition our actions from the inside. There are times when I do not even need any colour to express myself, it even disturbs me. This happens mostly when I work on a drawing or a graphic print. But there are also periods when I want to express myself by use of colours. Nevertheless, I deliberately tend to restrict my colour range, making it less rich so as not to use up all the resources that I have at my disposal. In this way I set myself some kind of framework within which I unwind my art play. My motto has always been to tell the most with the least possible means. Namely, although I want to restrict the range of colours, I still strive to achieve the greatest richness and tension with those that I use. At the beginning of my career I used only black, white and grey hues. Rarely this palette was brightened up by a tiny accent of blue or golden ochre. My painting of the past three or four years is similar. At the beginning I was extremely attracted to red colour in the hues going from carmine to cardinal red. Followed a period of golden ochre, and then of white paintings... Now I am more into blue. Into mysterious blue hues. Each blue hue can generate a different relation, a different mood. It can be sharp, cold, mysterious, icy, warm like a summer night... Each colour radiates its power and defines our experience of it. I study each colour as carefully and thoroughly as possible. I learn something from each colour and in the future I might start creating paintings using all these colours

together, but I strongly doubt it. Namely, painting with all colours is the job for geniuses. There have been only few artists in the whole history of art who were able to do it, but in general, using all colours can result in a total confusion of colours, distasteful and unconvincing, like a sickly cake.

In your paintings of the past four or five years you returned to female figure, defined by large, dark eyes wide open, and crossed or out-spread arms. These eyes reveal sorrow, pain, sometimes fear.

After the several-year-long cycle related to the 500th anniversary of Idrija I resumed the work on female figure, which I had researched already during my post-graduate studies. About two years preceding my departure for Paris, I had already gradually returned to my “old” theme, enriched with years of work in terms of skill, technology and intellectual growth. At the beginning I just fumbled around it to gather all the elements which would help me express all that I consciously or subconsciously reflected upon. The works I created then were like some kind of studies for what I am doing now. I tried to create a female figure which would be associative of Stupica, De Kooning, Bernik, Klimt... It is definitely extremely difficult to invent a figure which would not even remotely contain anything that other painters have not used before. However, I think that lately I have finally managed to achieve something that will eventually become Skočir’s figure. I am aware that a painter needs time, patience, perseverance, and self-criticism for such an achievement. There are times when one would like to quit this quest of one’s own self and begin doing things that could make them earn a lot of money, although this could result in a feeling of failure and dissatisfaction for giving it up. In spite of all this, I continue going my way, searching, completing, building myself. Although the theme that I am obsessed with and for which I actually create those drawings and paintings may seem boring to some people, already elaborated, worn out, it never stops attracting me! The reason for that may be my personal and family experience, a tragedy. Or, it may just have been an impulse that made me aware of the issues that I had reflected on and tried to articulate already before that. Who would know? The basic principle following my life experience and convictions is that the course of man’s life is predestined by birth and that one is only free to choose some shorter or longer sections of paths which all lead to important crossroads and important turning points. I cannot call this fate, coincidence, the course of nature, god’s will, superstition, supreme being’s will, or perhaps just stupidity. Each one of us has his own opinions, convictions, doubts, dilemmas, and unanswered questions. Myself, I keep turning round the questions on intangible, inexplicable, unprovable phenomena. Yet it seems to me that if I look at all the things as they happen, it cannot all be just a coincidence. I believe that universe is integrated in some kind of a system which works faultlessly rather than being ruled by the system of coincidences. Namely, coincidences bring upon chaos and collapse. Everything that happens, exists, passes, everything born and intertwined, is in some kind of balance, harmony. Good, beautiful, bright, happy, are not the only qualities that exist, as they also include their opposites. Therefore evil, meanness, dirt, wickedness, darkness, rage, anger, and everything that we understand as negative, bad, degenerate, ugly, unethical also exist! It seems to me that everything that happens somewhere in the universe triggers a reaction to re-establish the balance. And in this way the chain continues into infinity, the same as all our universe. · In my last paintings I place a child in the centre, a newly-born baby. Sometimes I add this child’s date of birth, a name, sometimes even a nickname. These are a little fuzzy, hidden inscriptions within paintings, which some viewers may actually discover, others may not. In some cases these inscriptions convey a meaning, but in other

cases they just reveal my inner confusion and dilemmas. Above the helpless child, or beside him, float, stand or just exist female figures which symbolize good and evil fate fairies. With their gestures and eye expressions they foretell, define and create the newly-born being's course of life.

Where do the symbols that we can observe in the paintings of this period come from? What do playing cards, crosses, numbers, and inscriptions mean to you! Do you think that our life course is predestined?

The presence of symbols, signs, numbers and playing cards is by no means accidental. Playing cards also help us become aware of countless unknown and unpredicted courses of life, options, turning points, because these are also typical of card games. You never know what is hidden in cards until they are shown. Likewise, each minute of our lives holds something for us, a pleasant or an unpleasant surprise. We learn what it is only after we have lived and experienced it, after we have turned the card over! The colour of the cards is also symbolic. Red symbolizes something good, like love, joy, happiness, while black means just the opposite. I use colour to conjure a certain feeling and atmosphere in the painting which would be projected onto the viewer. I know for myself that some paintings radiate with pleasure, happiness, contentment, while others emit darkness, anxiety, mysticism, mystery. In fact each element in the painting plays a role, it helps the "lady" articulate my statement, my thought, my feelings. Faced with my paintings many might think that I am a natural born pessimist, a man resigned to his fate, a constantly unsatisfied and bitter grouch. I will let the public be the judge of that, I am certainly not going to convince them of the opposite. However, I see myself in a completely different light. I always try to turn the course of events in my life to my advantage, according to my wishes, capabilities and common sense. It is very difficult for me to let other people decide on my personal matters, regardless of who this "third person" may be: fate, coincidence, or something else. I tend to see the bright side of things, without neglecting the fact that there are always two sides to a coin. I believe the negative counterpart is needed to balance the good. In my life I am always inclined to good, beautiful and positive things, as I am aware that the good outweighs the evil and negative. Of course my positive orientation in life calls for its "negative" image, its echo. And the chain is never-ending. This philosophy of mine may seem unacceptable to some people, stupid and impossible. Yet it is mine, I believe in it, and things of life have proven me right. I do not intend to force my conviction on anybody, as each person walks his own way through life. And this is right, as we all have different upbringing, inclinations, characters, professions...

If we just glance at the opus you have created to this day, it is obvious that you are extremely creative. Do you consider your work as a mission, a grand responsibility, or does it simply represent a challenge to you?

It may seem strange, but I do not count myself among very prolific artists whose production is really considerable. And I am always haunted by the feeling that I do not work enough, comparing to the production of some of my colleague painters whom I will not name. Of course my subjective opinion might be unjust to them. Anyway, I believe I create as much as I am able to. Neither more, nor less. I do not work unless there is this inner motivation in me that gives the painting inner energy. Therefore I have phases of creative outbursts and those of latent standstill which some people would call laziness. All the same! These are the times when I gather my forces, process the

“material” within me, sort out and complement the problems already solved. I do not consider my work as a mission, less so a challenge, or even a job to make a living. What I do is a primary urge! To me it is like breathing, eating, and drinking. Without expressing my inner self outwards, my inner balance would collapse, along with my health. I cannot even imagine what would happen to me, could I not, or should I not do what I do. Therefore it makes no sense to speak about my retirement or my age, as I cannot imagine my future without a brush in my hand. Perhaps I could only add a thought that I often live by. It goes without saying that working too much, you also produce a lot of waste. Not every created artwork can be good or excellent. Therefore I tend to realize my work the way that I can be satisfied with it without any major doubts about its quality. Too many artworks on a small area of land definitely brings about the state of some kind of “inflation”, where a work of art is no longer rare or special, but it becomes its opposite. No doubt this kind of work can become a pretty decoration, a good investment due to a renowned, omnipresent author, but it loses the charm that can be provided only by few precious originals. · However, no recipe exists telling you how and how much to work. Every artist has his own criteria, rhythm of working and living, possibilities, ethics and conscience.

How do you see yourself given the continuous growth of your, let us say, successful career?

The terms success or failure are relative, as people apply different criteria. Some measure success with money, others according to how well-known your name is in certain circles and how often your name appears in media, regardless of what you do, but thanks to your unconventional behaviour, a little scandal here and there, your charitable deeds or campaigns, or because you have donated your works to somebody. All this is generally covered by publicity in newspapers, on the radio or television. You can measure your success also according to how much your colleague painters, friends and critics consider your opinions, appreciate or ignore and envy you, which actually happens quite frequently in the narrow circle of professionals. You can become very successful and well-known if you happen to find the right curator or critic who can promote and present your work at home and abroad. So, there are many aspects of success, but personally I am myself the only judge of my success. What I base success on is my self-criticism and (dis)satisfaction with each individual work. Of course, I also listen to my friends’ and critics’ opinions and evaluations, but these may be unreliable as they may try and convince me about the quality of some piece that I have created, while myself, I know that there is something wrong with it. My utmost criterion, which I can always rely on, is myself. In the end I am always alone to find out if I succeeded or not. What guides me in my assessment is the sense of satisfaction, fulfilment, and a wish to continue working, rather than money, fame, or a name. This is how I know. As far as my continuous growth is concerned, I can only say that I have fallen many times, there have been crises and dilemmas. My way upwards is extremely slow, but still, if I look back at these two decades and more, I can actually see that I have been improving, that I have become better and I am certain it is not over yet. I know that everything can be done better. I try to be a perfectionist, therefore I am rather slow for today’s standards. With me everything runs much more slowly than with my colleagues. But this is my way and it suits me!

Are you one of those artists that keep their work on their mind at all times, although you may not be aware of this?

Yes, I feel the presence of my art world, order and aesthetics all the time. Sometimes this presence is extremely loud, sometimes I feel it like a whisper. Also when I am in the phase of “no-work”, I continuously observe, weigh, reflect and opt for this or that. Sometimes at table after lunch I can find myself arranging the left-overs and trash into a composition which would be beautiful and orderly by aesthetic principles. This is also one way of staying in my own world of creating a balanced whole, although I have been doing something completely different.

Are you just persistent or also stubborn?

Yes, I assume I am persistent, perhaps I could also say that I am hard-working when I am “immersed”. Sometimes I am also stubborn, but not at any cost. Only up to the point where I know that it is absolutely necessary.

When did you become aware of what you wanted in life?

With art, scribbling, drawing, painting, designing. I do all this out of my inner urge and I have been doing it since as far as I remember. My parents tell me that I began “creating” already before I can even remember. All the walls in the house, furniture, papers...everything within the reach of my hand was transformed. · However, what I wanted to do in life dawned on me relatively late. It happened as late as at the age of 22 when the painter Marko Šušteršič suggested that I should take entrance exams to the Academy of Fine Arts in Ljubljana. At the time I was studying art and history at what was then the Academy of Education in Ljubljana. I do not know how I would have ended up if my “good fate fairies” had not arranged everything for me to start studying painting. I know I would have painted and drawn anyway, but it would have been much more difficult for me to acquire all the knowledge and skills that I have now. It would have taken me much more time and hard work. Today I am happy and contented with my life course. All the years of aimless wandering were not in vain, but they gave me a lot of knowledge and experience. I absolutely enjoy working and dealing with problems, as I do enjoy the successes that my artistic creation has provided me with.

What are you when you are neither a painter, nor illustrator and graphic artist?

If I disregard my daily errands that I cannot avoid, I prefer being a traveller. I like travelling, not only to cities and capitals, but I also like the countryside. At home and abroad. If an occasion presents itself and I have at least a minimum amount of money at my disposal, I take to the road to see the rhythm of life outside my everyday environment. My aim on these journeys is not only to visit galleries and museums, but also to observe everyday life, the people, their habits and behaviour, I like having discussions with them. This has always lifted my spirits and filled me with energy. I also love the mountains, so I often go hiking in our mountains. On late spring or autumn days when our mountains are not besieged by enthusiastic crowds and you can regain peace in close contact with nature, I tend to hike to Krn, Razor, Triglav. My favourite sport is skiing. Winter suits me with its cold crisp air, wind and whiteness all around. Reading certain authors helps me find answers and fills up my inner world. I like reading literary works with a somehow “philosophic” content conveying deeper meanings. But I do not like literature with fluent and pleasant storyline, but shallow meaning, subject to fashion, and written according to proven best-selling recipes.

Do you like socializing? What do solitude and loneliness mean to you?

I believe I am a loner rather than a “party animal”. I do not feel very well with crowds of people around me. I avoid stadiums, gatherings, village parties, open-air concerts, whereas I feel comfortable when I am alone or with a small group of people. If the group is of such size that I can hear the person I am talking to. When communication is possible, I feel relaxed and fairly friendly. I dislike and avoid pushy, arrogant and self-centred people who do not respect the privacy and intimacy of my home, my studio, my family! However, art workshops where a handful of individuals with similar interests meet suit me well, and make my life more interesting, as working in the home studio throughout the year seems too detached and monastic. At these workshops you often meet people who relate to you both as people and as painters. We open up and tell the plain truth to each other. I am all for a tolerant and substantiated discussion or debate, and against gossip. It is with pleasure that I participate in two or three art meetings per year and until now I have always been lucky to make friends with good, pleasant, creative and hard-working people both in Slovenia and abroad. However, I do not consider solitude as something negative. In my line of work it is even necessary and I welcome it. But moments come when I wish for the presence of friends and other people. Then I simply seek their company, visit good people, relatives, friends. · I never feel lonely nor abandoned. Although sooner or later you become aware that in life there are not many real friends, they still exist. Rare ones! My family is also very important, very special to me and always comes first. I may be old-fashioned, or even conservative, but I love my wife and my two children. If I am away for too long, I miss them painfully. But all things considered, I am aware that in the end man is inevitably alone in his cosmos. Locked in his infinity.

You spend most of the time in Žibrše above Logatec, as if you were somehow related to the soft lines of nature, green pastures and forests which surround you. Is this connection and devotion to the earth, air, water and light an expression of your connection to the universe?

Yes. Now we are living in a modest home with a small studio in Žibrše. I like this place. I fell in love with this landscape, higher altitudes suit me well, as do the soft outlines of the hills, vast meadows and endless spruce tree forests, the view of the whole range of Julian Alps from Krn, Kanin, Triglav, Blegoš, up to the whole range of Kamniške Alps. An incredible place for living and working! Do I feel connected to the universe? By all means! Here stars really glitter in crystal clear winter and summer nights, while shooting stars flashing across the infinite sky show you how small we are. Fragile, ephemeral, but still full of energy, strength and will to do good, beautiful and noble deeds, or perhaps even to be destructive, inhumane and wicked! When I was still living in the valley, I was somehow not aware of all this richness that surrounds us. Perhaps this awareness came with the years that have piled up. But still, every moment that I do not spend in this paradise feels like a waste of time. Therefore I tend to get up early in the morning, at a time that I would have considered impossible not so long ago. At five o'clock I am already enjoying the sight of the sunrise from the top of one of the nearest hills! Nowadays I spend very little time in front of the television. I prefer listening to music, which always accompanies my work. · It was with a certain amount of disappointment that I realized that here at Žibrše we just could not do without a telephone and we had to accept it as an unpleasant, yet necessary disturbance of our incredibly magic idyll.

Do you prefer creating in the silence of your studio, or...?

I am able to work almost anywhere, in the silence of my studio or with a group of painters at art workshops. Basically, when I create, I somehow switch off the outside world, and live in the world I have created inside me. This world of mine follows my own inner rules, and lives my enjoyments, problems, dilemmas, traps. In these moments contacts with the outside world are reduced to minimum. Sometimes I want complete silence, but most of the time I need light background music, which must be quality music regardless of the genre. I have realized by now that while working, nothing can disturb me. I can only be disturbed by somebody extremely arrogant whose character is a complete opposite to my ethical taste. Likewise, I can be hindered at work by some eventual personal tragedy, an incident or accident that occurs to my family or to my dearest friends. Such things literally block me. When I was going through a terrible and unforgettably tragic family experience, I spent four years without making any single line!

Did you experience your surrounding in any different way when you were staying at the Paris studio?

Staying in a studio in Paris is by all means a particular life experience and adventure. The city itself is a cradle not only of European, but also global trends in art. It is a special environment, full of encounters, discussions, exchanges, experiences, freedom. All this happened to me, touched me and had a certain effect on me. However, the fact remains that I still preserve the whole world inside me, not outside me. I took it with me to Paris and after two months I brought it back home across all the borders and customs offices. It might have been enriched by a few details, but my universe travelled with me, inside me. The same happens when I set off to participate in an art workshop. Everything goes with me. Anywhere! To Počitelj in Herzegovina, to Ivanjica in South Serbia, to Ravne na Koroškem, to Vogrsko in Primorska! The environment has but a limited influence on me, perhaps only in the sense that the realization of my creative work is facilitated and made easier by the energy and hospitality of the people that I meet there.

In 1998 you had several solo exhibitions, namely two of them in Ljubljana, and one in Nova Gorica in October and November. Is the contact with the public and art lovers important?

Yes, too many exhibitions for one year. I felt really embarrassed when the journalist of a Slovenian television channel remarked in the evening programme called "Kultura" that "Skočir launched a real offensive attack against Ljubljana", because I opened two exhibitions in one week, namely, at Jožef Štefan Institute and at the Križanke Knight's Hall. An exhibition provides a contact between the viewer and the artists. It is a kind of test whether or not this contact exists and how it works. Myself, I take greatest joy in the work itself, in the creation of a painting, drawing or graphic print. On the other hand, the viewer is the one who probably accepts or rejects the results of that work. I accept that. But when an inauguration takes place, I suffer. After so many exhibitions I should have got used to the "ceremony", but I have not! Regardless of how much I have tried! I am aware that using words, metaphors, opinions, comparisons, analyses, art critics have to explain to the viewer those invisible signs that rare people can recognize, which are hidden to a superficial eye. At the same time critics educate the public in art and culture and most of them do this consciously and responsibly. With a fine, live and articulate thought they can convince and awaken also those latent artistic minds who happen to attend an opening, or those whose attendance has a different purpose,

such as showing off their cultural interests, keeping up with the time and fashion, killing the time, discussing business, politics... · I would prefer inaugurations without a standard protocol, without speeches, without publicly exposing the author before professionals, and even less so before general public. A work of art does or does not contain a powerful charge which generates questions and answers. The viewer can see and sense all this. He finds an answer for himself. His opinion may find a confirmation, or rejection. But if someone cannot find any of this without hearing an explanation, the painting is unreadable, uninteresting, inaccessible to him. Different elements may work for different people. To some, this is colour, to others composition. But if a painting does not get to him in any way, he still has a chance to discover in another author what works for him. I know that my painting is either aesthetically or intellectually inaccessible to many viewers, Although it may be close but to a handful of people, the fact that these find joy in my colour, brush stroke, line, thought, reflection, and the fact that their aesthetic and ethical principles are close to mine is enough for me. What more can I wish for? I am always happy when an exhibition turns out to be relaxed, when you feel some kind of affection in the air, packed with positive energy. Discussions start spontaneously, answers to questions are clear, without any restrictions, without too many words, but with a lot of feelings. Well, every venue has its own routines, presentation procedures, its own way of organizing exhibitions, its own critics... And I find this right! As an author I tend to be present at inaugurations of my exhibitions and contribute to the positive atmosphere, if this is only possible.

Do you think that an exhibition involves an over-exposure of the artist's most intimate feelings?

As my works are extremely personal if not even intimate, intended for a relatively small public who share similar feelings or thinking, each exhibition of my inner self before a more or less large public is for me definitely unpleasant and stressful. Therefore I arm myself before each inauguration with the greatest possible level of tolerance regarding other people's opinions in order not to get depressed or confused by any banal remark or reaction of the public. Each person, namely, looks at my painting from his individual perspective and has the right to do so. As my works have multiple meanings and because I tend to apply various symbols, these different aspects do not speak in my favour. I keep asking myself if it is my fault that I have not used the right "means" to make my viewer understand me. Or, is it the viewer's fault that he is unable to read my work due to his lack of artistic knowledge? What do I know! I simply console myself thinking that there still exist certain people who are able to follow my "narratives" and the course of ideas in my work without any effort. So I believe the viewer of my paintings and I must be some kind of soul mates, having similar conceptions in life or similar experiences, who would know!