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Poetically I Dwell on this Earth

What's a work of art these days? Nowadays, the internet, television, advertisements, and the market economy force us to watch many things without really seeing much at all. What's a painting in a world dominated by all kinds of images? In a world where museums and the art market are more concerned with value (and not in the artistic sense), what's a discourse—a literary discourse, in my case as a writer—concerning this or that painting worth?

In one way or another, we all ask ourselves such questions, because we all know that art is now a market. It's in relation to the market that we understand the value of an artwork, that we distribute (or not) that artwork, that we describe or document a work, so that it might eventually reach someone in the form of a snapshot or as pixels on a screen. We don't look anymore; we're made to watch. And seeing is becoming a very difficult undertaking in our age.

Personally, I don't trust this century that shapes the very way we see. That's why when I write about works of art in my poetry, I distance myself as far as possible from those works that are furiously mediatized and commercialized. Each time I enlist my eyes in an experience, I hope the experience I'm embarking upon will resemble the poetry of that great Greek poet, Homer, as he sought to describe the Achilles' shield. That famous shield, as you'll recall, wasn't intended for the art market, but its artistic value cried out to Homer's quill.

It's from that mythical and glorious past that I've drawn my definition of literary discourse as the word that bursts forth exactly there where we expected it the least. And of the work of art as an object capable of questioning or modifying our aesthetic vision of the world, as an object that doesn't necessarily participate in the art market.

So, I've invested in graffiti instead. Like Achilles' shield, the ultimate aim of graffiti is not to participate in the art market. Its artistic value is as free as a bird! It's a rainbow that arcs across our vision of the world.

When I wander through a city, when I accidently discover walls, streets, or public benches covered with words and drawings, I try to sense them, to feel them, and to make them take form in my poetry like dream homes. The German poet Fredrich Hölderlin said that "poetically man dwells on this earth." I think that this poetic dwelling is also apparent in those inscriptions that are a part of our urban architecture. Iowa City, for that matter, has confirmed my belief, thanks to the poetry scrawled across the benches of the pedestrian mall. They regale our eyes with every color on earth and a riot of different patterns. On one of those magnificently-decorated benches can be read: "Some of us are trying to get home." How can a bench that invites immobility enable you to reach your home? Artists love irony, obviously.

With those words, the artist reminds us that our first home is to be found nowhere else but in our heads; it's a mansion built upon our repurposed realities, our glories, our failures, our unsatiated desires and our suppressed frustrations; it's the soothing dream that makes the shade of a tree and the comfort of a seat possible. The artist etched a universal human aspiration upon that bench: each of us needs a place to dream. For it's dreaming that lets us breathe in perfumes and see countries, cities, streets, a home, and all that with our eyes closed!

My poetry is nourished by inscriptions like that one, from the graffiti that blooms across our walls, our streets, our squares. I like to see them in communication with my heart. I like to see them inviting my sentiments to dance before emerging into the world of words. That's why some of my poems read as a discourse on art. And we call this discourse Ekphrasis. What an odd word!

(Translated by Hodna Nuernberg)