

FIDEM 2010

A SPARKLING EXHIBITION IN A GLOOMY WORLD

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1. Tampere Art Museum, Tampere, Finland, 2010.

The medals from twenty-two countries that were selected for exhibition at FIDEM 2010 did not reflect a world beset by natural disasters, a global economic crisis, or continued war in the Middle East. Instead, they were generally light-hearted, reflected personal themes exploring psychological issues, and included some with an optimistic message. Interestingly, there were more free-standing medals than in the past.

Delegates gathered in Tampere, Finland, from 16 to 19 June 2010 for FIDEM's thirty-first congress. The first FIDEM congress was held in 1937, and for many years now a congress and international exhibition have been held every two or three years. This was the third time the congress had met in Finland. The Tampere Art Museum exhibited 945 medals by almost four hundred



2. FIDEM medals and contemporary Finnish sculpture in Tampere Art Museum, 2010.

artists alongside contemporary sculpture by eleven Finnish artists (figs 1, 2). Tapio Suominen, chief curator of the Tampere Art Museum, explained that, 'By placing the medals in connection with sculpture, we want to underline the role of medal art within the domain of sculpture.'¹ The result was a handsome and varied display that was able to keep visitors engaged as they made their way through the three floors of galleries.

Among the artists who exhibited free-standing medals were Theo Van de Vathorst from the Netherlands, José Aurélio and João Duarte from Portugal, and Mashiko from the United States, whilst all three of Bernd Göbel's medals in the German section could also stand vertically. Whether this is enough to identify a trend or not, it caused one Finnish participant to voice a complaint at the FIDEM general assembly held on 19 June. Arvo Aho, former president of the Guild of Medallion Art in Finland, commented that, while these objects were often beautiful pieces of art, he did not think they were medals: 'All medals are small sculpture, but not all small sculpture is a medal.' He then called upon FIDEM to establish guidelines for the future.

The subjects of the medals chosen for exhibition were also significant. While there were a few that contained a war theme or an artistic response to the financial crisis and other world issues, many were of a more personal nature. *The Place of Desire* by João Duarte of Portugal is a good example of a medal that is free-standing and also explores a personal psychological theme (fig. 3). The form Duarte selects is like a womb or an earth mother in which objects that are also round nestle. These round objects are like a child's ball or an egg or any symbol of goodness that can be related to our childhood or pre-childhood consciousness. Duarte explains, 'Good things in life relate to everything that's round ... The circular shape is an archetype of fullness, harmony and happiness in the world that surrounds us.'² Duarte, a former student of Helder Batista, is associate professor of sculpture and medallic art at the Faculty of Fine Arts of Lisbon University. He is also the chairman of the Volte Face research and study centre.

Anna Meszaros's *Alone* offers another intriguing illustration of the effective use of the art medal to explore a personal philosophical theme (fig. 4). The simplicity of the generalised single human figure that casts a long looming shadow over the bronze field creates a sense of isolation. 'I just wanted to convey that sense of sheer aloneness that we all feel from time to time, some more than others, that desolate feeling of being so alone and small that it is just you and your

shadow and absolutely nothing else’, said Meszaros.³ Her FIDEM 2010 medals show that Meszaros’s work is moving in a new direction, as she uses more abstract and inwardly revealing images to explore complex emotions and thoughts. Meszaros is from Australia and is a former student of her uncle, Michael Meszaros. She has executed various public commissions and exhibits regularly in Australia and abroad.

Much of the exhibition included medals that were hopeful and uplifting, such as the work *Hope* from British artist Natasha Ratcliffe (fig. 5). According to Ratcliffe, this is ‘an optimistic medal about the strength of dreams and hope’.⁴ One side shows a cityscape extending from rim to rim. On the other side, *Hope* is represented by an eagle using its talons to lift a city from the earth, as if it were a carpet. ‘It was designed to be playful, making the impossible possible and leaving the question of where the bird is heading, or where the city starts, a mystery. It gives the small a greatness over huge unmovable constructions. Nature, a quiet elegant power over the man-made.’ This medal and two others exhibited by the artist – *At your Fingertip*, issued by the British Art Medal Society in 2007,⁵ and *Where do we go from here?* – won her the prize for a young artist awarded by Aimo N. K. Viitala, past president of the



3. Duarte: *The Place of Desire*, 2009, bronze and glass, 70mm.



4. Meszaros: *Alone*, 2009, bronze, 125mm.



5. Ratcliffe: *Hope*, 2008, bronze, 124 mm.



6. Baltus: *Running Around*, 2008, bronze, 64 x 63mm.

Finnish Art Medal Guild. Ratcliffe began to make medals for the BAMS Student Medal Project in 2003 and won the Cuhaj prize for young artists at the FIDEM exhibition in Portugal in 2004. She now makes commissioned works as well as personal pieces of the sort exhibited in Finland.

The FIDEM grand prize for the best work in the show went to Elly Baltus, a sculptor from the Netherlands. Her exhibits included two medals from a philosophical three-part work entitled *Time Based* and a war-themed medal, *How Many Times? How Many More?* One of the *Time Based* pieces, *Running Around*, uses the circularity of the medal as a platform for small figures to walk around the edge (fig. 6). The surface of the medal contains the inscription, but it is the figures moving around the rim, some with briefcases, some with luggage, that make the statement. Baltus has for some years been an innovator in medallion form. She was the first sculptor to incorporate sound into a medal and the first to use visual multimedia. The medal acts as the canvas for her work but is not its visual centre, just as the visual centre of a painting is not the canvas but rather the image appearing in it. In *How many Times? How Many More?* Baltus uses the surface of the medal as the field of battle, with its circularity providing an opportunity to explore the fourth dimension – time – by inviting the viewer to rotate the medal slowly on its axis. ‘When you hold the medal you can easily turn it round as many times as you want. The soldiers keep on appearing and the last one keeps on being shot – the repetitive killing and war,’ Baltus comments.⁶

Among the few medals on the theme of the current global financial crisis, James MaloneBeach of the United States exhibited *The World Economy or Perfect Pyramid Scheme* (figs 7, 8). This piece features photographs of Charles Ponzi and Bernard Madoff across the folds of the financial section of a newspaper. The words ‘Guaranteed Return’ are repeated continuously. The medal takes the shape of a pyramid

and six can be fitted together to form one large hexagonal medal with each section separate but identical. MaloneBeach uses fabricated metal frames, found objects and personal artefacts to create his medals, which often comment on social and political matters. His medal, *A Round Peg in an Oval Office*, was issued by the British Art Medal Society in 2005.⁷



7. James MaloneBeach holding his medal *Ode to a Medal Maker – a Freudian Slip, Tampere, 2010*. An example of the medal was included in the exhibition.



8. *MaloneBeach: The World Economy or Perfect Pyramid Scheme, 2009, bronze, 150 x 150mm.*

Two people shared the Cuhaj prize for young artists: Bryan Beaverson of the United States and Ida Karkoszka of Poland. Beaverson is currently studying engineering at Kettering University. A student of James MaloneBeach, he uses mixed media and recycled materials to create medals with messages about our times. Ida Karkoszka is a recent graduate of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. George Cuhaj, president of the American Medallist Association and a member of the Cuhaj prize committee, noted that the number of sculptors under thirty-five exhibiting at FIDEM had increased, with fifty-five of the four hundred sculptors represented at FIDEM 2010 qualifying. 'This is a good sign for the future of medallist art,' he said.⁸

The congress associated with the exhibition included a total of thirty-one lectures, which were given at Tampere Hall. The topics ranged from talks on historical medals, such as 'Queen Josephine of Sweden-Norway and her medals' given by Lars Lagerqvist of Sweden, to those about contemporary medals, which included one by Rainer Grund of Germany on the medallist Peter Götz Guttler, who, as it happened, was in the audience. Each day began with a plenary lecture intended for the full assembly. The first featured Dr

Jyrki Siukonen from the University of Lapland, who spoke about 'The medal and its negative', a talk centring on Christian Wermuth's satirical medal commemorating the Peace of Utrecht of 1713. In the second plenary, Philip Attwood, keeper of coins and medals at the British Museum, spoke on 'The medallist tradition: what is it?', challenging medal historians to examine medals in the closer context of their times and to ask how the ways in which artists, scholars and the general public have viewed medals has changed over the centuries. The last plenary lecture, by Tuukka Talvio, curator of coins and medals at the National Museum of Finland, presented an overview of the history of the medal in Finland. Many of the lectures will be published in *Médailles*, the official publication of FIDEM, which acts as a permanent record of each congress.

The official medal commemorating this FIDEM congress was executed by the Finnish artist Assi Madekivi (fig. 9). Delegates from the various countries and participants from the United States also received an American delegation medal at a reception held at the Hiekka Art Museum on the evening before the congress officially opened. This was designed by the American artist Polly Purvis.

The city of Tampere hosted parallel medal



9. Madekivi: FIDEM XXXI Tampere 2010, 2009, bronze, 71mm.



10. Purvis: US delegation to FIDEM congress, Tampere, 2010, glass, copper and resin, 60mm.

exhibitions at various local galleries. On 16 June Galleria Saskia hosted a reception that marked the opening of a special exhibition of medals and small sculpture by Finnish artists organised by the Guild of Medallic Art in Finland. The following evening congress participants visited the Metso Library, where medals featuring Finnish writers were displayed in a show also organised by the Guild of Medallic Art in Finland. The nearby Lenin Museum, located in the room where Lenin first met Stalin in 1905, featured a special exhibition of Soviet medals and badges.

An excursion on 18 June took participants out of Tampere, to the Purnu Art Centre, the former studio and summer home of the sculptor Aimo Tukiainen, who is known particularly for his equestrian sculpture of Finland's former president Carl Mannerheim in front of Helsinki's Museum of Modern Art as well as for his corpus of medals. The lake-side setting and displays of works by Tukiainen, who died in 1996, and the artists who continue to gather at Purnu made for an

inspirational afternoon. An evening boat trip that evening and supper on the island of Viikinsari also gave us a glimpse of another aspect of Finland.

The closing banquet of the congress was held at the Vapriikki Museum Centre. Following the awards ceremony, the entertainment included an original musical composition performed by Illka Voionmaa and Ron Dutton, FIDEM's president and vice-president – a heart-warming conclusion to an instructive and enjoyable congress.

NOTES

1. *FIDEM XXXI 2010 Tampere Finland*, exh. cat. (Tampere: Tampere Art Museum, 2010), p. 16.
2. Email from Joao Duarte to the author, 24 June 2010.
3. Email from Anna Meszaros to the author, 27 June 2010.
4. Email from Natasha Ratcliffe to the author, 25 June 2010.
5. *The Medal*, 50 (2007), p. 96.
6. Email from Elly Baltus to the author, 23 June 2010.
7. *The Medal*, 47 (2005), p. 103.
8. Interview with George Cuhaj, 20 June 2010.