

Ekaterina Ogorodnikova about KUUMBA UMBO

“A bridge between African and European art”

But in the background there is a car, to prove that the story is contemporary?

Saarepuu: What you think is a car, is actually a “*karakatitsa*”, also typical for that region. It is something which is constructed from a car, but when putting big tractor wheels underneath, this vehicle allows the local fishermen to drive over the ice on the frozen lake. It’s a detail that might be recognised by an Estonian audience as typical for the Lake Peipsi region.

The film was made by two directors, you and Piret Sigus.

Saarepuu: Piret wrote the first story; from there we worked together on the script and the design. While I focussed more on the characters, Piret designed the vegetables and the patterns in the soil. Together we made hundreds of drawings, Piret did the sewing, and Marili Sokk joined the team as animator, but the studio was so small that only one person could work there at a time. For the embroi-

deries we got help from friends, and we found a group of retired ladies who embroidered the grass and some flowers above the ground.

How do you fit in the Estonian animation tradition?

Saarepuu: Estonian animation is flourishing, with studios both big and small. We are kind of outsiders but we do well in festivals; there were many selections and even awards, like the ECFA Award we won in Riga.

A child, a buffalo and a beautiful mask are the ingredients of the animated short KUUMBA UMBO. At the Film’on Festival, Belgian-Russian director Ekaterina Ogorodnikova explained how these elements together form a story about an African boy growing up to be a man.

KUUMBA UMBO means ‘The birth of shape’ in Swahili and seems to be situated in a timeless world.

Ekaterina Ogorodnikova: The birth of shape is the birth of the world. From our childhood till the moment we take our last breath, we learn about the world around us and try to find our place in it.

Through the story of an African mask, KUUMBA UMBO tells about a child growing up.

Ogorodnikova: The child grows up together with his friend the buffalo. We follow him during his teenage initiation rite. He becomes a mask maker, the most important job in the village.

In the opening scene, we see him wandering through the forest looking for wood to make a mask that the villagers will use in their ceremonies, and for which the shape is inspired by the buffalo from his childhood.

Only in the last minute, the story changes tone, when this mask turns up in a Western gallery or exhibition.

Ogorodnikova: When I started the film, the ending was not quite decided yet. Until one day I saw an African family standing in front of the window of an art gallery in Brussels. It was raining and the father, mother and three children looked inside at the African masks and sculptures. They were subdued, as if in prayer. I understood: these people aren’t looking at the price or the beauty of these objects; they are interested in something beyond, something meaningful. It was then that the story took on its final form.



What is the story behind that mask?

Ogorodnikova: The Goli Glin mask comes from the Ivory Coast. Goli Glin, son of the god Nyama, is a mythical hero of the Baule people. He has elements of a buffalo and an antelope. The mask forms a bridge between African and European art. It inspired numerous Cubists and Fauvists, such as Pablo Picasso, who used it in his famous Guernica. By wearing this mask, the villagers make contact with another reality - in many cultures, people transform into other beings through the masks they wear.

**Actually the mask is your main character?**

Ogorodnikova: The film pays tribute to the creation process of such masks. African artists work from an image in their mind. It may be a form from their memory, something they saw as a child which now is materialised by the adult artist. That is why I show the artist in all his life phases. African sculptors are extremely skilled artisans. They know the features of each type of wood and carve their ideas directly into the material, without any preliminary sketches. As a sculptor, I know how difficult it is to create a shape directly from an image in your mind.

How did you give shape to the Afri-**can landscape?**

Ogorodnikova: I've never been to Africa; I have never seen this landscape with my own eyes. But I've been watching plenty of documentaries and reading books about African art. Maybe I might have dreamed that landscape...

At times, objects in your film are reduced to pure geometric shapes, e.g. spears flying through the air during the hunt.

Ogorodnikova: Ornaments and motifs are extremely important in African art. Geometric shapes can have many symbolic meanings. I rhythm those shapes to the music, which adds extra

dynamism to the image.

The colour pallet in your film is limited – brown, grey, beige – but so rich in hues and shades!

Ogorodnikova: I painted countless backgrounds on watercolour paper; thousands of sketches with only colour patterns; no computer colours but simply the result of endless experiments.

Your initial background is not in animation film.

Ogorodnikova: I studied in St. Petersburg at the Art Academy in Monumental and Fine Arts. There I created monumental works, such as frescoes and

mosaics. Later I graduated from St. Petersburg University in Film & Television, Animation Department. I made my debut film LOVE PRAY FIGHT for an exhibition of Indian art in Brussels. For an exhibition of African art in the Hermitage Palace in St. Petersburg, the curator contacted me with the request to make a short animation film. The Hermitage has a rich collection from which I was allowed to choose one object. I found this Goli Glin mask an interesting choice. Animation gave me a new language to talk about different worlds. This was my first big animation project.

More will follow?

Ogorodnikova: I would like to make a series of films about the birth of shape in other cultures. I have already prepared a story and an animation sketch about the Buddhist sculptures of Avalokiteshvara. Film is like a child clinging to me. When you have finished a sculpture, you are done with it. But KUUMBA UMBO has been on my mind for a long time; I still travel in the footsteps of that movie.

–
Gert Hermans.