

The World and its People
Art Medals by Sebastian Mikołajczak



**TEYLERS
MUSEUM**



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Sebastian Mikołajczak

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Introduction

On 28 June 2022, Jaap van der Veen passed away. This remarkable man who cared deeply about art medals, initiated the *Jaap van der Veen / Teylers Museum Prize for the Contemporary Art Medal*. This prize is awarded once every five years. Thanks to his inheritance, the prize can continue to exist even after his death. The aim of the prize is to honour and encourage mid-career artists who make medals of excellent artistic quality. The international jury selecting the prize-winning artist also sees a lot of promising future potential in their work.

This prestigious prize was awarded for the first time on 11 February 2012, on Jaap van der Veen's 65th birthday. The first winner was the Czech artist Otakar Dušek. Five years later, the Japanese artist Tetsuji Seta won this prize. In 2022, the jury announced Sebastian Mikołajczak from Poland as the third winner. Delayed due to the Covid pandemic, the prize is officially presented in Teylers Museum in 2023 accompanied by an exhibition of his work.

The most fascinating medals are currently designed and created by artists who work in various art genres. They seem to move effortlessly from one medium to another. This is how contemporary art medals are closely related to the current trend in international visual art. However, what remains unique about medals is that the story needs to be told on a tiny surface of a few square centimeters only. Time and time again, medallic artists have demonstrated that this restriction of surface space is certainly not a restriction in terms of the greatness of their ideas and designs.

The medals created by Mikołajczak as free and autonomous works of art are an excellent example of this. He has won the prize because of his visual creativity, his brilliant use of a wide range of materials *and* his urgent signaling of major societal and political problems in the world – and in Eastern Europe in particular.

The jury looked at developments in medallic art all around the world for the third time, considering those artists who make these works of art as an integrated part of their work. For this edition of the prize, the jury consisted of Marjan Scharloo (chair), Philip Attwood, Tetsuji Seta and Jan Pelsdonk (secretary). I would very much like to thank the members of the jury for their work and their excellent choice. The selection meetings were held online because of the Covid pandemic, which can't have made the selection process any easier.

Teylers Museum has always collected medals, ever since it first opened. When Pieter Teyler passed away in 1778, his entire collection of coins and medals was incorporated in the museum, as specified in his last will and testament. He collected 'contemporary art medals' in his day and age. One of Teyler's aims was to support contemporary art continuously. This is clearly visible in the collection of visual art at Teylers Museum, and the *Jaap van der Veen / Teylers Museum Prize for the Contemporary Art Medal* is perfectly in line with this tradition.

This publication was made possible thanks to Hans den Hartog Jager, who interviewed the prize winner in Toruń in Poland, Marjan Scharloo who wrote an introduction about the medals, and curator of the numismatic collection Jan Pelsdonk who was not only responsible for this publication, but also for the exhibition of Mikołajczak's work in Teylers Museum. Above all, I would like to express my deepest gratitude and admiration for Jaap van der Veen's initiative to set up a prize for art medals in his name – he will continue to live on in our memories and he leaves a valuable legacy.

Marc de Beyer
Director of Teylers Museum



*Medal with the Portrait of
Jaap van der Veen (1947-2022)
by Carla Klein, 2003, bronze, 82 mm*

The Award

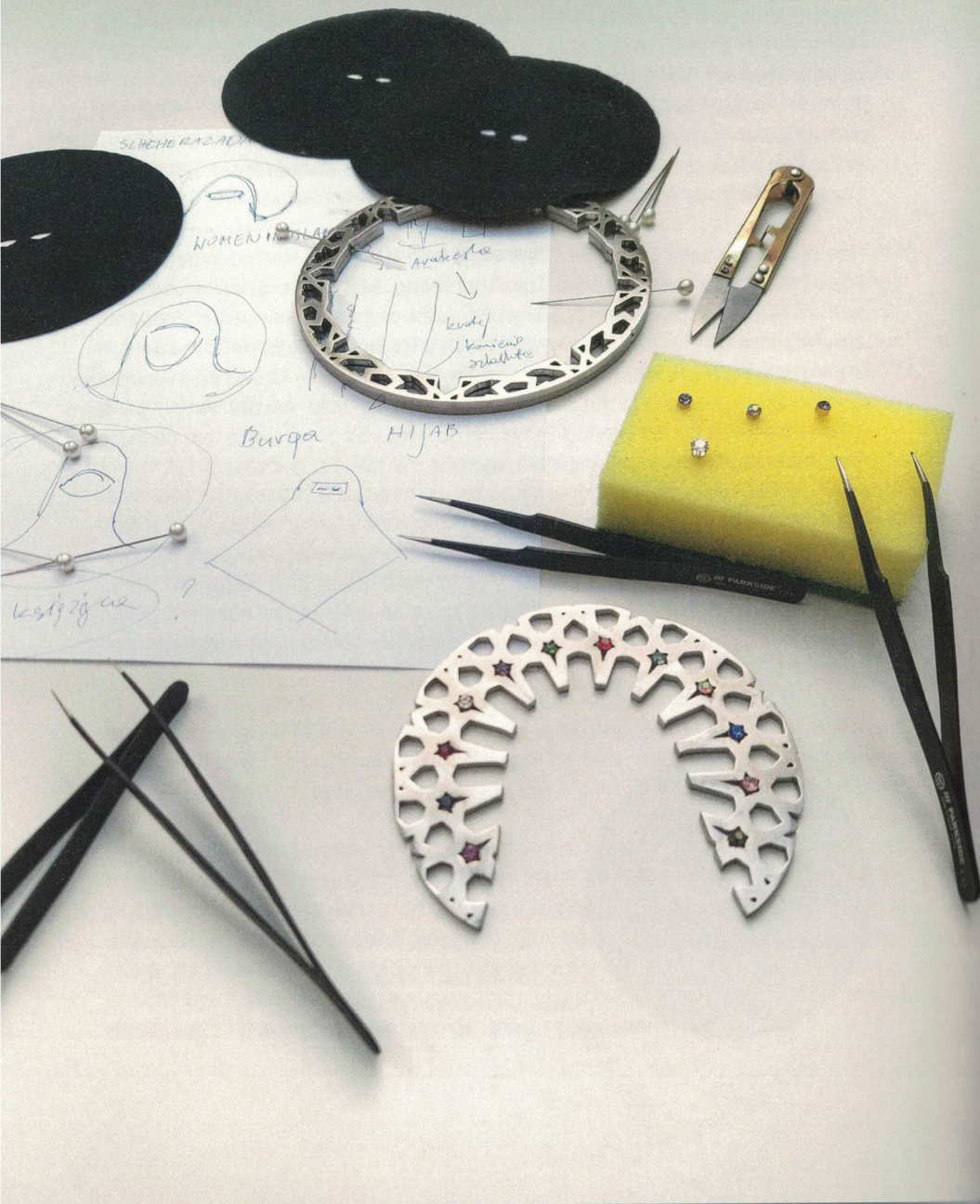
The *Jaap van der Veen / Teylers Museum Prize for the Contemporary Art Medal* was initiated by Jaap van der Veen and Teylers Museum in 2012 to encourage artists who have created a certain number of art medals and whose work holds a promise for the future.

In 2022 the jury consisted of Philip Atwood (former Keeper of the Department of Coins and Medals, British Museum), Tetsuji Seta (Japanese artist and second winner of the prize), Marjan Scharloo (former director of Teylers Museum) and Jan Pelsdonk (curator of the numismatic collection, Teylers Museum). Each member of the jury selected a number of artists who met the criteria. A shortlist was created after discussing each artist, based on documentation available. The artists who were nominated are (in alphabetical order):

Jennifer Hoes (The Netherlands)
Keiko Kubota – Miura (United States of America)
Sebastian Mikolajczak (Poland)
Natasha Ratcliffe (United Kingdom)
Virág Szabó (Hungary)

The artists on the shortlist were invited to send the latest information about their work. After studying the material of each of the five candidates and after detailed discussions during a follow-up meeting, the jury unanimously chose Sebastian Mikolajczak as the third winner of the *Jaap van der Veen / Teylers Museum Prize for the Contemporary Art Medal*.

The prize and this publication will be presented to the winner during the opening of a presentation of Sebastian Mikolajczak's work in Teylers Museum in June 2023.



Sebastian Mikołajczak

Sebastian Mikołajczak (born in 1975 in Górze, Poland) lives and works in Toruń. In 2005, he graduated with distinction at the Faculty of Fine Arts at Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Poland. In 2010 he received a doctorate in Fine Arts and in 2021 was conferred habilitation (*doctor habilitatus*) in this discipline. At this moment, Mikołajczak is an associate professor at his hometown university, engaged in both teaching and research. His main artistic interests focus on creating art medals and coin designs. He is the designer of one of the sides of the present-day Polish circulation coins (1 groszy up to 1 zloty). His work can be found in museum collections both in Poland and abroad. To date, it has been presented at 6 solo exhibitions, 36 national exhibitions and 148 exhibitions abroad.

Selected awards and distinctions

- 2022 First prize for the medal 'MEDALS OF DIS/HONOR' at the 36th International art medal and small sculpture symposium, awarded by Professor Algirdas Žebrauskas, ALKA Museum, Telšiai, Lithuania.
- 2021 Second and third prize in the international contest of the Central Bank of Estonia, for a silver 15-euro commemorative coin about the 150th anniversary of the birth of Johan Pitka. Tallinn, Estonia.
- 2020 Award in the medal art contest for the exhibition 'Czas ucieka wieczność czeka' (Time is running out, eternity awaits). The 5th Edition of Medal Art Conversations with John Paul II. The Kordegarda Gallery of the National Centre of Culture, Warsaw, Poland.
- 2020 First prize for the medal '500 Years of Medal Art in Poland and Lithuania' at the 36th International Medal Art Symposium, awarded by Professor Algirdas Žebrauskas, ALKA Museum, Telšiai, Lithuania.
- 2020 Second prize in the 'Coin Constellation 2020' contest in the category Unique Conception for the 5-dollar commemorative coin 'Creation of the World'. Moscow, Russia.
- 2019 Third prize in the 2019 International Coin Design Competition. Osaka, Japan.
- 2018 Decorated as Medallist Honoris Causa for special merits in the field of medal art, granted by Professor Bogomil Nikolov from the National Academy of Fine Arts in Sofia, Bulgaria. The award was presented at the 2018 FIDEM Art Medal Congress and Medal Exhibition in Ottawa, Canada.

- 2018 Honorary Medal 'Thorunium'. A special prize awarded by the President of Toruń, Poland in honor of service to the city.
- 2018 First prize in the category Classic Coin, in the international competition 'Coin Constellation 2018'. Moscow, Russia.
- 2018 First prize in the international contest organized by the Central Bank of Estonia for a silver 15-euro commemorative coin about the 150th anniversary of the birth of Jaan Tõnisson. Tallinn, Estonia.
- 2017 First prize in the international contest organized by the Central Bank of Ireland for the 2017 Irish silver commemorative 15-euro coin about the 350th anniversary of the birth of Jonathan Swift. Dublin, Ireland.
- 2016 COTY 2016 (Coin of the Year Award) for the World's Most Inspiring Coin, for the Polish 2014 silver commemorative coin of 10 zloty about Jan Karski. Krause Publications, New York, USA.
- 2016 Distinction at the International Art Medal Competition in memory of Boris Schatz, Israeli Art Medal Association, Yannay, Israel.
- 2013
- 2022 Awards in competitions of the National Bank of Poland for the designs of collector and circulation coins along with their implementation.
- 2012 Award for the medal Samogitian Baptism at the XXVIII International Medal Art Symposium at the ALKA Museum, Telšiai, Lithuania.
- 2011 Grand Prix Prize at the XXVII International Medal Art Symposium 'Memory' (Lietuvos medalio kūrėjų stovykla 'Atmintis') at the ALKA Museum, Telšiai, Lithuania.



A Visit to the Artist's Studio

Hans den Hartog Jager

Sebastian Mikołajczak likes to see himself as a monk – an artistic monk from the 13th and 14th century who illustrated the margins of handwritten manuscripts. These seemingly modest drawings are actually razor-sharp commentaries. He sees himself as the kind of monk who plays the main part in Umberto Eco's classic novel 'The name of the rose'. Modest, focused and very much content-oriented, according to Mikołajczak. This comparison becomes even clearer when you enter Mikołajczak's studio: a small 'cell' in their house located in the north of the Polish city of Toruń where he lives with his wife and young daughter. This is the studio where he works by himself – sometimes during the day, but more often at night when he returns from his job at the university – on his coins and medals. The themes of his coins and medals are mostly about world events, recent developments, Polish history and about the role and status of coins and medals themselves.

'This is where I can fully concentrate on my work,' says Mikołajczak. 'There is light here, and nothing to distract me, there are good lamps and a good magnifier – it's essential for the kind of work I do. Just like the medieval manuscript artists who had their candles.' He laughs. 'With their drawings, they commented on the world that was described in the text. That's how I also see myself: like someone who responds to the world around me. Presenting my own perspective on current affairs and everything that matters to me.'

His way of working has resulted in a steady flow of coins and medals from 2005 onwards, ranging from 1, 2, 5, 10, 20 and 50 groszy and the 1 zloty coin for the Polish National Bank, various memorial coins for the Polish team at the 2022 Olympic Games, his cube-shaped coin about Leonardo da Vinci (2015) and his recent ball-shaped coin 'Creation of the World' (2019), to a large number of bronze and glass medals. Slowly but surely, Mikołajczak has become one of the world's best and most innovative designers of coins and medals. He has now been awarded with the *Van der Veen / Teylers Museum Prize for the Contemporary Art Medal* and rightly so. This prize is a sign of how very much alive the world of medals is right now: an artistic world with plenty of space for new insights, new techniques and new opportunities.

Over the last two years, the reality of the world around Mikołajczak that he likes to comment on in his works of art has come very, very close to his own studio. Covid was already painful and difficult, but offered him – just like many other self-declared monks of this era – the time and peace to work. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, however, has deeply upset him – so much so that he was not able to work for at least a month after the war began. This is indeed a very long time for a highly productive designer such as Mikołajczak. In order to understand the impact of this war, it is important to realise – particularly for readers who are not from Eastern Europe – how much the Russian invasion of Ukraine affects the historic awareness of Eastern Europeans and certainly also Polish citizens.

Throughout the centuries, Poland has often been caught in the middle during conflicts between their 'large neighbours' Germany and Russia. Time and time again, it was striking how these powerful countries did not take into account the Polish identity, history and autonomy.

'The moment when Russians entered Ukraine,' says Mikołajczak, 'we immediately were extremely alert here in Poland – this is what history has taught us. The scenarios begin to unfold in your mind. What is the idea behind this attack? Is Ukraine merely the first step? What will happen if the Russians win there? People in the west may think that Poland is not at risk and not in danger, but we know better: it is precisely because Poland is located at the heart of Europe that we are always drawn into conflicts like these – the only difference is that Poland is a member of NATO, and Ukraine is not. If you see the Russian bombings on television, hear the sound of bombs being dropped... We have friends in Ukraine and they are permanently at risk of being killed now because of the war. This makes us realise how absurd everyday life is. Everything that we normally do seems completely trivial right now. It paralyses me in my creative work, makes me feel very powerless, but I still want to do something.'

That feeling of wanting to do something, not wanting to wait passively for what the large neighbour might get up to, that's something you see all around you here in Toruń, or in Warsaw, the Polish capital. Even a year after the war started,

the solidarity statements to support Ukraine are still everywhere in both cities – flags, banners, slogans. Keeping Polish people on their toes, to raise awareness for how vulnerable their freedom is, and keeping in mind the threat from outside.

This is also what Mikołajczak decided to do: after a month of inertia and feeling defeated (fortunately, he also works at the university), he began to design a series of medals in which he expresses his deep concern about the Russian invasion. The first, quite a large medal for him, shows a two-headed eagle with a weapon shield from the Russian flag, surrounded by five concentric circles (p. 55). On these circles all kinds of Russian weaponry used in this war are driving, passing, and flying by: tanks, Kalashnikovs and BUK-rockets. When you take a closer look, you will see that the eagle holds a Kalashnikov in one of his claws and a hand grenade in the other.

This is a typical Mikołajczak medal: politically engaged, powerful and clear, but when you look a moment longer the image is exceptionally layered. The artist is making clever use of the conventions of the classic medal. In this case it is the round shape: showing clearly that Russian aggression is eternal and inevitable in Mikołajczak's eyes. The aggression is so deeply engrained in Russian leaders, that their imperialist tendencies will always resurface. Even when these tendencies seem to have disappeared for a while and the rest of the world has stopped worrying about them.

Mikołajczak: 'Even if the Russians lose the war, and this is how it might look like right now, and many tens of thousands of their men are being killed, the powerful rulers will continue to fight. They are stuck in a self-made circle of desire for power and violence, that's why I gave the eagle itself weapons too.'

The second medal that Mikołajczak made about the war in Ukraine also touches upon this idea: a large aluminium circle, with a Z-shaped opening in it (p. 56). The Z is the Russian symbol for this war. Mikołajczak, however, has made the Z in such a way that it can be lifted out from the medal: and in the space underneath the Z tanks can be seen. The most important aspect is that the lifted-out Z can be turned; and if you turn it 90 degrees and combine it with the empty Z shape a Swastika shape is formed. The turning point is shaped – also in the typical Mikołajczak style – like a shell of a Kalashnikov bullet.

The medal *Matryoshka* – from the series *Report on the condition of the world* – shows an image of the layers of a matryoshka doll. According to Mikołajczak, this is his way of referring to the origin of the war when Crimea was annexed by Russia in 2014.

'That was the first time that our eyes here in Poland, but also in the rest of Eastern Europe, were opened again. That war started with a mission that had to be carried out because "the oppressed Russian minority in Crimea had to be rescued and supported". Russian undercover agents started that war. This time, with Ukraine, they are doing something very similar. This war is supposedly about "liberating Ukrainians from fascism". However, this war is obviously again about extending their own power and territory. This is the key reason for Russian actions, but they are hiding their true intentions. This is the reason for the matryoshka doll: it refers to their true reasons being hidden beneath the surface, and keeping them hidden for as long as possible.'

It is precisely this mix of political engagement, current affairs, symbolism as well as new, innovative ideas to express these themes in a coin or medal which are characteristic and typical for the work by Mikołajczak. And like the examples of the medals about Russia and Ukraine, his involvement with and commitment to the world. The works of art by Mikołajczak are particularly striking because they are richly varied. He can make all kinds of coins, from the plain, beautiful coins that unmistakably serve a practical purpose for national banks to exceptionally unique and personal medals with which he seems to want to stretch all boundaries of numismatic techniques. But above all, a deep love for coins and medals is expressed in his art.

When did you first become interested in coins and medals?

'My parents collected coins and medals, and my neighbour traveled abroad occasionally and gave me foreign coins. Collecting coins was popular in Poland in those days (his sister-in-law and interpreter Marta interrupts him and laughs: "I never knew anything about that!") – particularly the "collectors coins" as they were referred to. They had coins from the famous cycle

of Polish kings, for example, but also about Pope John Paul II, or foreign coins with images of nature. I thought they were all wonderful. The intimacy, and the concentration appealed to me. I liked their shape, the fact that you can hold coins and medals in your hand, the very fine details of the image that you can look at for a very long time and continue to discover new things in, the difference in how high the relief is, the concentration and focus, the relationship between both sides of the coin which used to be mostly two separate entities at that time... I did not have a large collection, because I mainly acquired new coins by exchanging them with others, but I was definitely interested in them. I had no idea that I would one day design and make my own coins and medals. It seemed impossible, like another world too far away from me.'

How did that start?

'At secondary school I took a course on making furniture, or actually: woodworking and carpentry. As a child I was very impressed by the interiors of churches, so I want to be able to make furniture like that myself with traditional wood decoration. But at school I merely learnt how to make modern furniture, so I taught myself how to make the sculptures in wood. I was the first pupil in the history of the school to receive a separate certificate for historic wood sculpturing.'

'Because I became more and more interested in sculptures, including contemporary art sculptures, I decided to enroll at the sculpture department of the Faculty of Fine Arts at the Nicolaus Copernicus University here in Toruń. I mainly made classical sculptures; but I also created a few installations. This is the place

where, at the end of my degree, I took classes making medals. And that's where and when everything immediately came together. My childhood passion for coins and medals, but mainly the realisation that medals are a good fit for my constitution: their size, the accuracy, and the fact that they are layered.'

'It turned out that this form of art really suited me: "sculpting art on a tiny surface". It is very satisfying to me to solve specific problems that arise when making coins and medals such as problems of the small scale, how high the relief is, how you can do justice to patterns in such a small sized object. And I love, as I mentioned before, the intimacy. When I made sculptures at university, they would always stand in a room, but in that room they would automatically be given a context that you, as an artist, has not asked for and that you can only partly control. This is very distracting. Coins and medals can be isolated, you can take them with you into your own world. They enter into a very personal relationship with their spectator, you can hold them in your hand, touch them, and they require concentration and accuracy. That suits me really well.'

When you start a new project, what is your starting point?

'First of all, it depends whether it is a coin or a medal. Or more precise: whether I have been commissioned to design it or whether it is my own free work. Coins have their own creative process. They are often designed because they are commissioned by a national bank or a large client. They have given me the technical parameters beforehand and often determined what the rules and options are: the size, the kind of metal, which mint will produce it, and usually also a theme

or historic event that the coin has to be about. Something else that is important: once you have handed in the design of a coin and it is approved, you can't change anything. It is completely fixed and nothing, nothing can be changed. I find it fascinating to somewhat challenge the client and to explore what my options are within such a tightly controlled and predetermined situation with clear boundaries.'

'My work is always about relationships with people too. If I take part in a competition, for example, and I know that there is a good committee with an open mind, I have the courage to take more risks. This makes them more open to new ideas too so you encourage each other to achieve the best possible result. Mints love that too – they are in fierce competition with each other, with every other mint in the entire world. So they know that they need designers to give them new ideas, to explore new techniques. They find me quite difficult and demanding, but because it has always worked out well in the end in the past, they know they can trust me.'

'With medals, the way I work depends on whether it is a commissioned project or if I am completely free. When the medal is commissioned – usually in the case of collectors' medals – the theme is often fixed, but I am given quite a lot of freedom. The client who commissions the medal often wants a medal that is attractive to the market, so they like a good balance between attractiveness of the medal and the costs to make such a medal. When I work on my "free medals", however, it is purely about my own concept, my own ideas. The source of inspiration for me is often, like with the Ukraine medals, about things that matter to me, things that affect me. I am completely

free – from the idea to the design process and I can continue to change and finetune for as long as I want until I am completely happy. I can even make a new version after a few years.'

Coins produced for the government are often an expression of the ideology of that government. However, in your work you are quite critical about society. How do you deal with these ideological frameworks?

'This is not really a problem, because for new coins there is usually a competition and much about the design is already pre-determined so I can see beforehand in each case whether it feels right to join in and create a design – or not. I am completely free. But you are right, coins are given a stronger ideological meaning right now, particularly with the current Polish government. Something I don't like, for example, when I design a coin, is to reinforce historical myths and stories about heroes when a commissioner only want to show one side of the situation. It is very often the case that the myth was, in reality, a bit more nuanced. I prefer not to take part in a competition for a coin like that, because it is clear to me beforehand that there will not be much room for nuance in this project. To me, that's what's most important: I do not want to work on myths without staying critical. I want to use coins to show the complexity of history. I want to show both sides of the story – and the coin with its two sides is ideal for doing just that.' He laughs. 'But it's tricky. The ideology is becoming a more important part of power, and even though my contribution as a designer is very modest and small, I don't want to be forced into a certain position.'

You often think about the meaning of coins and medals, and you make art about this. In 2010 you made the 'Art Medal in a Global World', shaped like a flat and empty balloon.

'That medal (p.31) was not so much intended as criticism, but merely as an observation. I made it for a conference in Finland with the same title. I was rather pessimistic about the developments in the world of coins and medals at that time. Clients were being very cautious, and makers who wanted to experiment with new shapes and ideas were not often taken seriously. That's why I made this medal: as a comment on the situation back then. And to my surprise, it was noticed and commented on at the conference. This really gave me a "there-is-light-at-the-end-of-the-tunnel" kind of feeling: from that moment onwards, I saw that more and more people in the numismatic world became more open to new developments and new ideas.'

Speaking of ideology, the 'Art Medal in a Global World' is part of your series 'The Medal in Art'. You explore the boundaries and merits of the medal and its tradition. In this series, you made a medal called 'Recipe for a Medal' in 2015. It is a balance scale, with 'obverse' and 'reverse' on the two parts and six weights each representing a parameter that is crucial when producing a coin or medal. You distinguish between: 'conception', 'originality', 'composition', 'techniques', 'aesthetics' and 'material'. Could you tell us more about this?

'That medal (p.36) is about two things: firstly, that artists have thought for a very long time that the obverse and reverse do not necessarily need to be related. I don't agree with that. To me, each coin or medal is a unified whole, the obverse and reverse jointly represent the concept and preferably strengthen it. Secondly, the weights show that these six elements play a key role in each coin or medal, but their importance differs for each individual piece. This idea of six parameters gives me as a maker a great deal of freedom: it is ultimately about how powerful the idea is, and the way in which the coin or medal expresses this in its entirety. It is not only about one of these six separate elements.'

**How important is the coin and medal tradition to you?
You are famous partly because your work is highly innovative,
but you don't seem to be opposed to traditions.**

'Tradition remains important, in my opinion, because tradition is the foundation that provides legitimacy for coins and medals as an artform. The ideas and messages that I want to express in my art are given a lot more power because of tradition. And I also see my work as part of the tradition of evolution. Coins and medals are part of a living artform that should not stand still, it should not continue to look at the past, but it should continuously look for new ideas and new forms of expression. There are people who want to break with tradition at all cost. However, I don't think it's possible, in the end, to present coins and medals as installations, for example.'

'This is also about the relationship with the outside world or course. Clients always have a certain expectation when they commission a coin or medal and practical considerations also play a role. With medals you partly depend on the collectors' expectations. Medallic artists have quite a lot of freedom there, but because we work within a certain framework, it is impossible in practice to ignore tradition completely.'

'At the same time, to be honest, it is not about tradition first and foremost as far as I am concerned, but about the concept that each coin or medal is based on. The concept is always the starting point for me, and the design and practical method used are always at the service of the idea. Take, for example, the two Ukraine medals, I deliberately created them rather traditionally: a round shape of cast aluminium. I wanted my

work to be in line with a long tradition of medals that is very popular in Russia. I hope to appeal to more Russians by doing so. What's more, there is a long tradition in Russia and Eastern European countries to reward people with medals. For example, soldiers for their good fighting of course, but you can also receive a medal in companies or from the government if you have done your best. In this sense, my Ukraine medals are actually anti-medals. I had good reasons to keep the medal relatively traditional. This makes it both more attractive for the target audience and the message becomes richer and more complex as well.'

**Still, you are mainly known for using new shapes and techniques.
When did you discover that you could make innovative and
groundbreaking coins and medals?**

'I realised this when I made my fourth collectors' coin in 2012. The topic was The Amber Room in the Catharine Palace, the summer residence, just outside Saint Petersburg belonging to Tsar Peter the Great and his wife Catharine I. The Amber Room had already become mythical because of its beauty, but it became an even more important legend because the Germans took it apart during the Second World War, they took it away and it has completely disappeared since then. This led to the wildest speculations about where it might be now, but nobody knows the answer. This was a wonderful project for me, because I was intrigued by the idea of a "lost room". I made a coin consisting of five parts, just like the Amber Room which consisted of various parts, with a meaningful element on each part: the tsar, the tsarina, the palace – the entire world around the room, but not the room itself.'

'The most important technological innovation of this coin was that I created hollows in the design, small nests, to place small parts of amber in. This was a very complex process, because it required a great deal of accuracy and precision, but also because amber is usually not cut into such tiny parts. We needed four of these tiny parts for each coin, so this meant 4,000 tiny pieces of amber for the 1,000 coins that were produced. In addition, the coin had a surface like a mirror, and in order to be able to mint that, the original surface needs to be completely sterile and free of dust. When I was working on that coin, I realised how helpful my technical background was. Because I know a lot about techniques, I can talk more easily to technical people about what is possible and what is not. Together we can come up with new solutions. Designers without a technical background, will find it more difficult to explore these boundaries.'

It is indeed the case that Mikołajczak, ever since he created the Amber Room coin in 2012, has increasingly given himself a certain freedom in his designs which is unrivalled in many ways – and this seems to have helped him to find the perfect balance between medals and free sculpture. There seem to be hardly any restrictions or limitations for Mikołajczak – neither in terms of the design or the materials he uses. For example, he taught himself the technique of how to shape glass a few years ago, because glass – in his eyes – is ideal to produce medals with. It starts with the symbolic value of glass: in its essence it always remains a liquid, it is never 'finished', but it is also fragile, vulnerable and transparent of course. Mikołajczak picks up his Darwin medal, which is completely made of glass (p. 29). We see the silhouette of Darwin's head. In various layers, through his head, we also see his brain. As if the medal, using the head of Darwin, expresses the various stages of evolution which resulted in his brilliant understanding of evolution. However, it also shows how fragile and vulnerable the human mind is.

This way of using various layers in his work can also be seen in other coins and medals made by Mikołajczak. The most striking example is undoubtedly the one about Nicolaus Copernicus, the mathematician and astronomer who was the first scientist to prove that the sun is at the heart of our planetary system. There seems to be a special bond between Mikołajczak and Copernicus, as the latter was born

in Toruń, and the university where Mikołajczak trained and where he now works is named after Copernicus. The work of Copernicus was devoted to researching the universe, the sun and planets. In 1526 he also wrote the treaty 'On the Minting of Coin', in which he did not only describe how coins should be minted, but also studied how money works in society.

When looking at it from this perspective, it was quite natural for Mikołajczak to make a coin about Copernicus, in which he – indeed in true Mikołajczakian style – immediately connects his fascination for the sun and planets (as circles) with his interest in money and coins. He very subtly used a few sentences from Copernicus' work in the coin, in which he writes about the fact that a coin can only keep its dignity if you produce it with noble materials without adding any non-noble materials. This is also a reference from Mikołajczak that freedom does have certain boundaries. However, Mikołajczak also emphasizes – with his design of almost concentric circles on the reverse, starting from a coin that Copernicus holds in his hand and presents in the air, ending on the edge of the coin – the unlimited nature of the coin in the world.

'This in turn refers to the strength of the two sides of the coin. It is precisely because a coin or medal has two sides, that the messages can contradict each other on both sides, or reinforce each other. It is important to me to play with this ambiguity.'

Copernicus also created his 'own' universe. Do you feel connected to him in that sense?

'I certainly would not want to compare myself to Copernicus. This coin was mainly created because I deeply admire him, just like I am often inspired by other people. This is why I often make coins and medals about people I admire. I always start by looking into their background, how they worked in the world, how they made their work, and their context.' One of the best examples of this is the well-known Leonardo da Vinci coin from 2015. Mikołajczak attempted to capture the entire work of the Renaissance genius in one coin. 'This was one of the hardest things I have ever done'. In order to be successful, I had to

start thinking like Leonardo.' He laughs. 'I decided to use his "Vitruvius man" as a starting point, because he does not only show in this Renaissance figure the perfect symbol of humanism, he also symbolises the point where a square and a circle meet: in a human being. I soon decided to design this coin as an open cube, each surface symbolising one aspect of his work: the painter, the architect, the inventor, and so on. I also wanted to show his work in the context of the era in which he lived. I wanted to show how much Leonardo has contributed to developing our world. It all comes together pretty well in this open cube.'

A similar coin that captures the entire world is Mikołajczak's recent, ground-breaking *Creation of the World* (2019). In this work (p. 46) he lets two round-shaped coins 'cut through' each other at an angle of 90 degrees, so they make a perfect ball-shape. Like a globe, a planet, in which Mikołajczak also includes the seven stages of the creation of the world. By doing so he touches on the promise that each coin or medal, particularly because of its round shape, always carries inside itself: the idea that every coin is a world or a planet in itself. A personal universe is created with the tiniest tools for creation.

You captured the entire world in a coin with 'Creation of the World'. Are there any limitations for you in that coin?

Mikołajczak thinks for a moment. 'I don't know if there are ever any limitations in a coin or medal. If there are any, they are often practical. When you want to make a coin at a certain scale, there needs to be a mint that can produce a coin of that scale.' A short pause. 'To be honest, I find the matter of size when it comes to coins and medals quite depressing... When there are competitions, there is an unwritten rule that medals should never be larger than 15 or 20 centimeters. However, this has never been officially agreed. There seems to be a standard assumption that you need to be able to hold a medal in your hand.'

'I have always seen the beauty in this: being able to hold the entire world in your hand. This is why artists often end up using the circle in their designs. No matter how you look at it, what you try or change, the circle is perfect. It is the symbol for the world, for each planet, for eternity – and it also fits into your hand. So yes, indeed, no matter how much I try to challenge the conventions, I always come back to the circle – as an elementary force, almost like a mantra.'

This actually makes every new coin or medal a whole new world of its own. And it makes you a kind of god.

Mikołajczak looks uncomfortable. 'Well, that seems to me an exaggeration.' He laughs. 'Although it is true that I try to create a completely new world of its own in each of my coins and medals. It is precisely because I always use the concept as the starting point, the idea, that all the elements in a coin or medal are related to each other. If you want to draw a parallel to creation: I don't see my coins as my children, but as separate, small worlds of their own. I give them the breath of life, and send them out into the world. They need to start living their own life out there. It is just like writing a novel: everyone who reads it will have his or her own interpretation of the work. That's why I don't like to see my work as a commentary on the world, but rather as an observation that I present to the observer. In turn, they can use it to build their own world with it. That is what's most beautiful: this chain of worlds.'

Form follows Message

Marjan Scharloo & Jan Pelsdonk

Sebastian Mikołajczak is a remarkably productive artist. The art medals in this publication are only a small part of the work he has produced over the last twenty years, focusing on his free and autonomous work. This selection shows the broad range of topics he is interested in, which varies from major events in world politics to more personal family matters and everything in between.

His interpretations are urgent and layered, often with a touch of humour which – depending on the topic – can be wry or kind-hearted. Depending on current affairs and his personal observations and experiences, he uses new designs and materials time and time again to express himself about issues that touch him. Art medals with 'No Title' that put the design and characteristics of the material centre stage can not be found in his work. Mikołajczak's medals are autonomous works of art with a clear message to everyone who can muster the concentration and patience to look closely.

A great deal of his work refers to the traditional role of the medal as a messenger for news and current events. This turns the medallic artist into a chronicler of his own time. He researches topics such as the vulnerability of nature, globalisation, digitalisation, consumerism and fast food trends. The design and the materials of each medal always serve the message – the higher purpose of the work. Examples of these are: *New Island* (p. 51) about polluting the oceans with tiny plastic bottles, and *Currency of the Future* (p. 52) with combination locks and seeds playing a key role.

Other works by Mikołajczak honour the legacy of famous artists and scientists, including *Samuel Becket*, *Charles Darwin* and *Marie Curie*. In each case the artist has managed to create new and unexpected interpretations of those well-known people who have been portrayed many times before. For example, a part of a typewriter is included in the Samuel Beckett medal (p. 32), and Marie Curie's portrait is submerged in a bottle previously used for polonium (p. 40). Universal stories from the ancient classics are given a new form with materials such as wood, glass, earbuds and a QR code. The contemporary meaning of these myths can, for example, be seen in the digital ones and zeroes on *Gift/Trojan* (p. 53), referring to the all too familiar computer viruses.

Examples of his more personal medals are *Treasury of Memory*, *My Home* and *Dialogue*. *My Home* (p. 50) shows a small timber house in its traditional form, with the artist's family's members and including the GPS coordinates of their house. *Dialogue* (p. 30) seems to be about the communication between various relatives. The surface has been smoothly polished and it is surrounded by a broken zip on the edge of the medal.

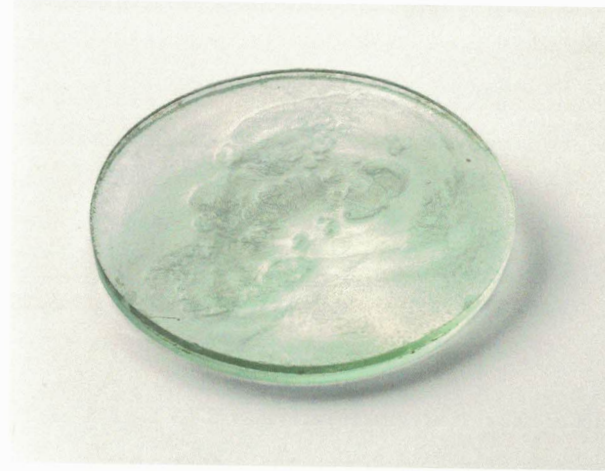
Recently he created impressive medals about the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The series *Medals of Dis/Honour* (p. 55-56) is intended for Russian soldiers, referring to the tradition of presenting medals to heroes for bravery. Earlier on his in career, the artist also paid attention to the consequences of war. In *The Child's World* (p. 45), he shows how war affects children in particular, with a child wearing a gas mask and dragging a Kalashnikov gun behind him instead of a toytrain with balloons as shown on the reverse.

The art medals by Mikołajczak invite us to go on a visual and intellectual adventure. Not all their details are immediately revealed to the observers. Each part of the design is carefully thought out and offers an unmistakable contribution to the whole. As the various components of the medal is unraveled, new and unexpected elements keep appearing. Three recent works show us that the artist will certainly continue his explorations of the world. The medals fit in the series called *Fairy tales*, featuring *Scheherazade* (p. 62), *The Emperor's New Clothes* (p. 61) and *The Princess and the Pea* (p. 63). This new work will be presented for the first time in Teylers Museum.

Selection of Works
by Sebastian Mikołajczak



Hurricane Katrina
2005, glass, cast, 140 x 140 mm



Charles Darwin
2009, glass, cast, 90 mm



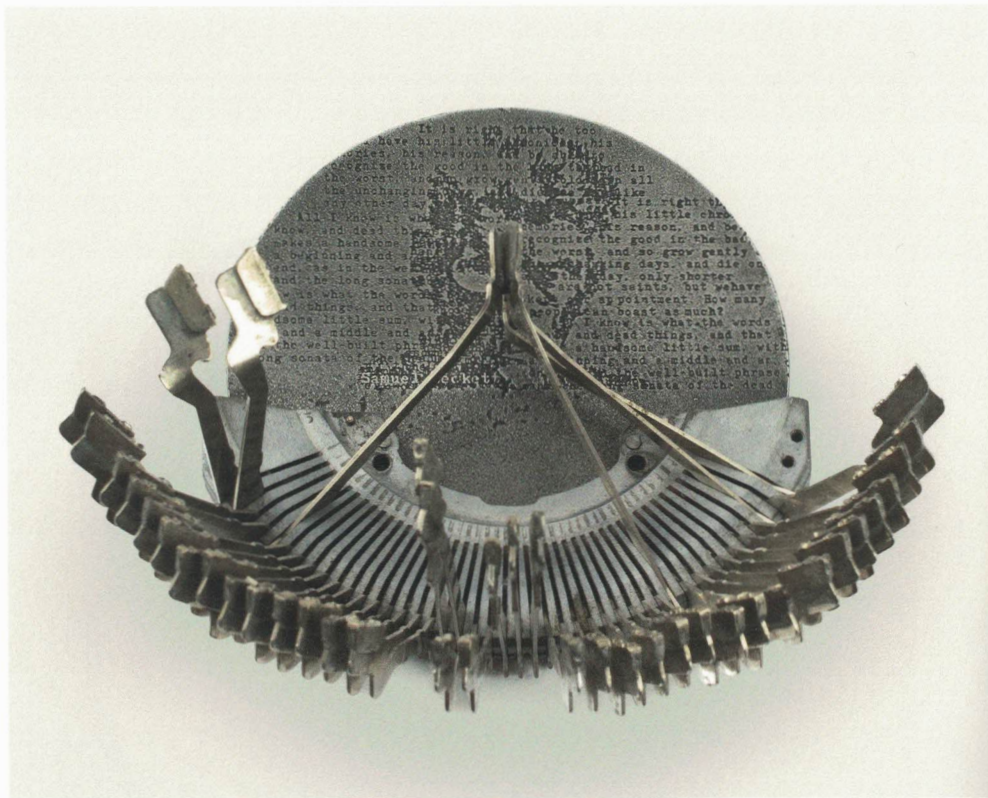
Dialogue

2009, bronze, cast, 100 mm



Art Medal in a Global World

2010, aluminium, cast, 120 mm



Samuel Beckett

2012, aluminium, steel, cast, 120 mm



Bonds

2014, bronze, cast, 110 mm



Not made in China
2014, bronze, cast, 90 mm



World Roulette
2014, aluminium, steel, cast, 140 mm



Recipe for a Medal

2015, bronze, brass, cast, 130 mm



Fairy Tales – Aladdin and the Magic Lamp

2016, bronze, cast, 75 mm



Hunt
2017, aluminium, cast, 90 mm



Identity I
2017, bronze, cast, 120 mm



Marie Skłodowska-Curie

2017, glass, bronze, cast, 90 x 110 mm



Voice for Women

2017, aluminium, lipstick, cast, engraved, 110 mm



Illumination

2018, bronze, cast, 100 mm



Pillar of the Epoch

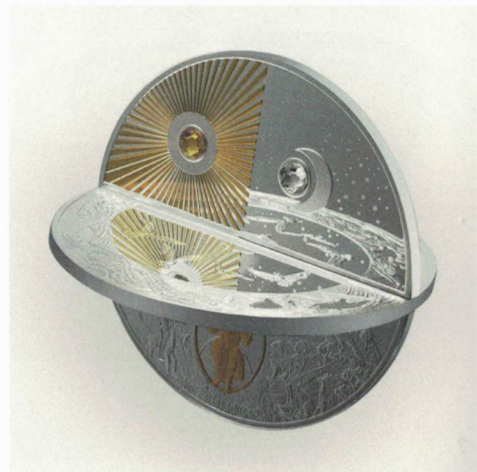
2018, bronze, cast, 110 mm



Temple
2018, bronze, cast, 90 x 170 mm



The Child's World
2019, bronze, cast, 100 mm



Creation of the World

Commemorative coin of five dollars, Niue (New Zealand), 2019, silver, gold plated, crystal, struck, 50 x 50 mm



100 Years of the Polish Scene in Toruń and 25 Years of the International Theatre Festival Kontakt

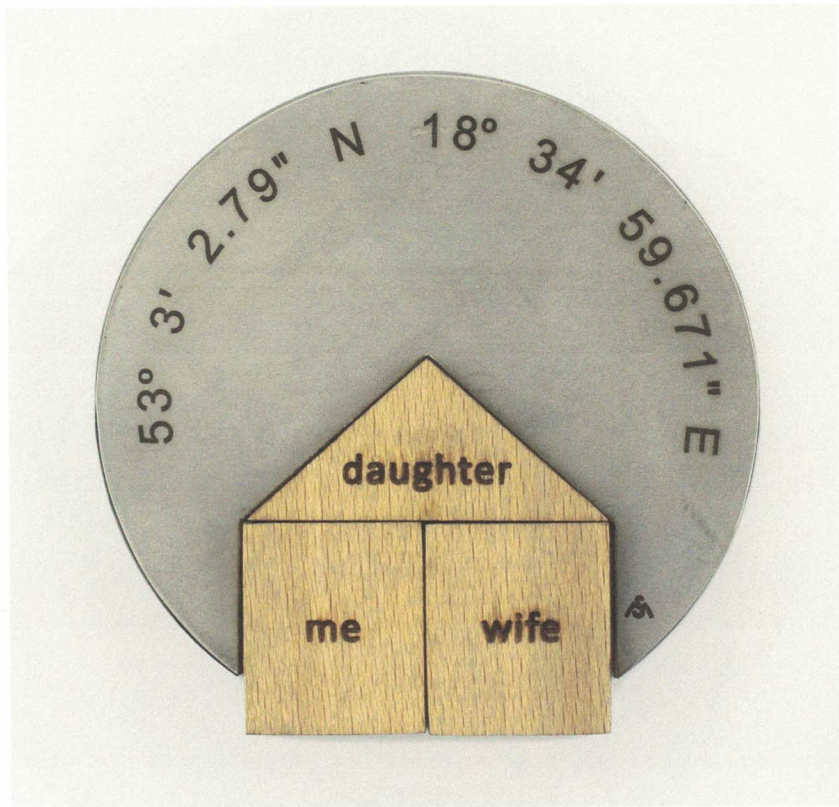
2020, bronze, silver plated, cast, 70 x 95 mm



Brexit
2020, bronze, cast, 90 mm



My Family
2020, bronze, cast, 120 mm



My Home

2020, steel, wood, fabricated, 100 mm



New Island

2020, glass, water, 3D printed, fabricated, engraved, 120 mm



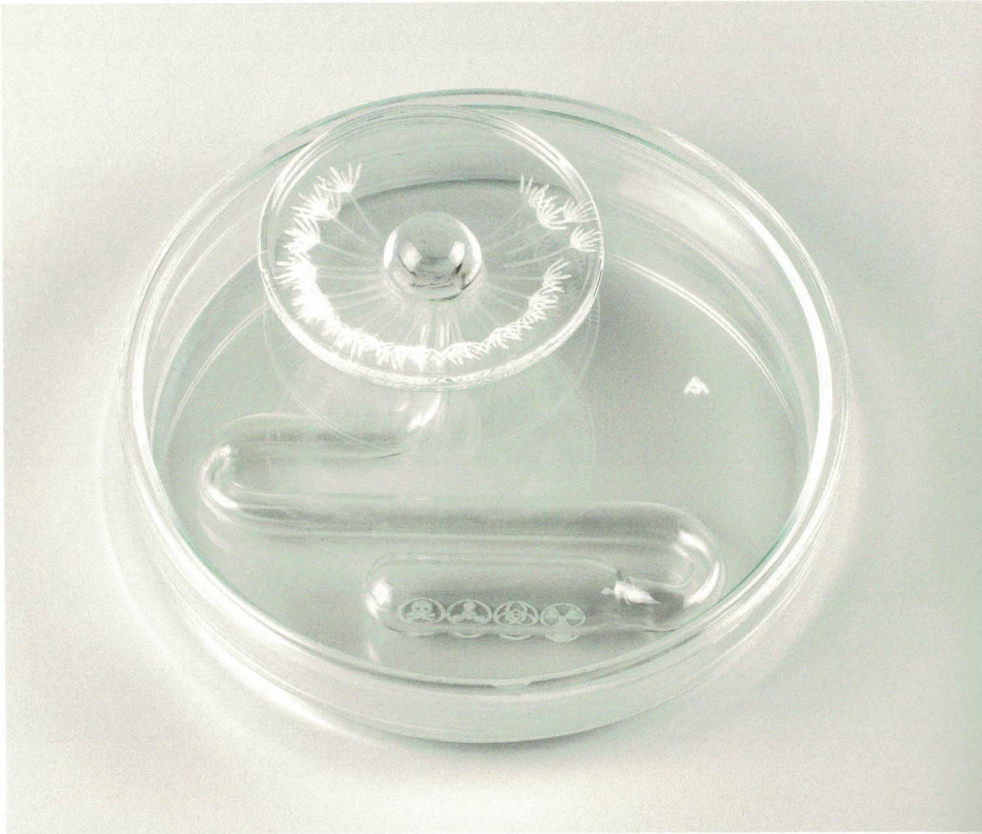
Currency of the Future

2021, glass, steel, plant seeds, fabricated, engraved, 180 mm



Gift/Trojan

2021, steel, wood, fabricated, 120 mm



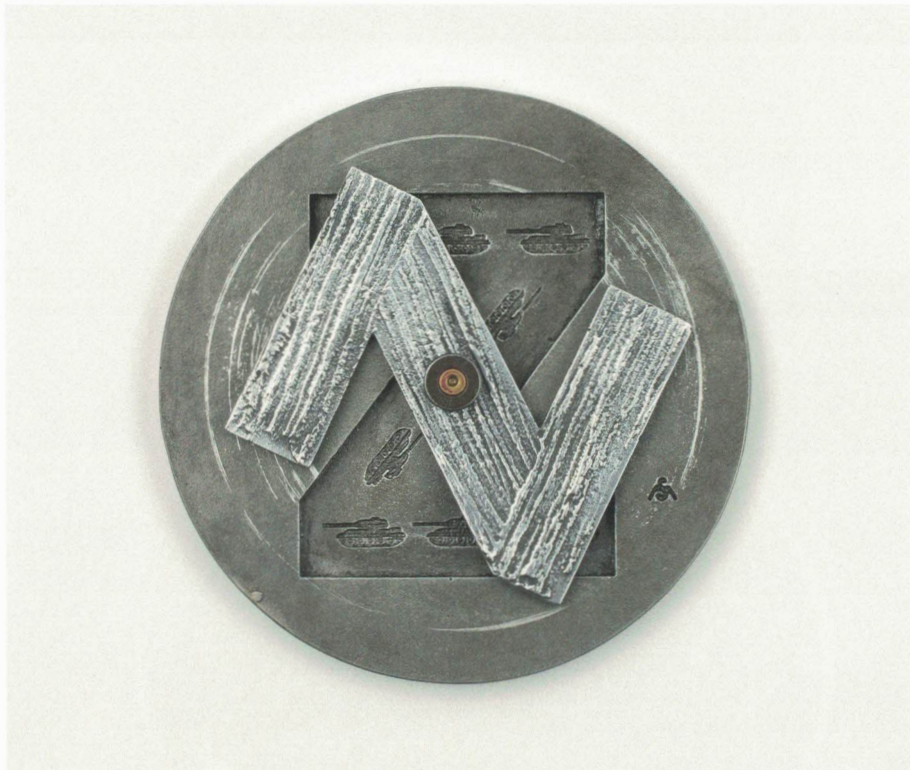
Bioterrorism I

2022, glass, fabricated, engraved, 145 x 60 mm



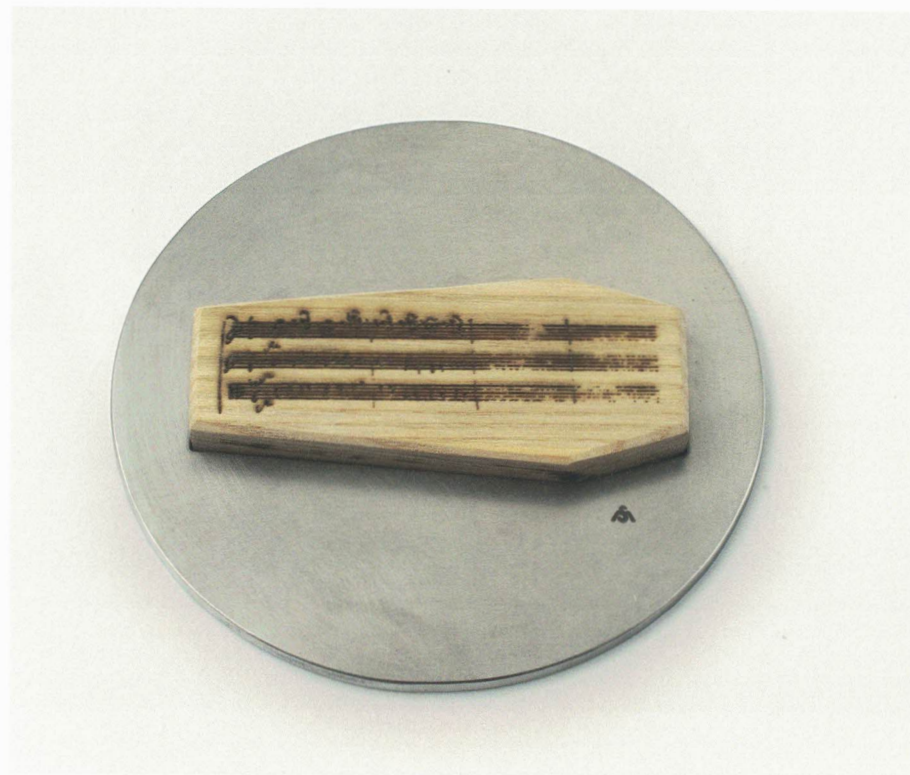
Medals of Dis/Honour – PRELUDIO – 2022 24 February Russian Invasion of Ukraine

2022, duralumin, cast, 125 mm



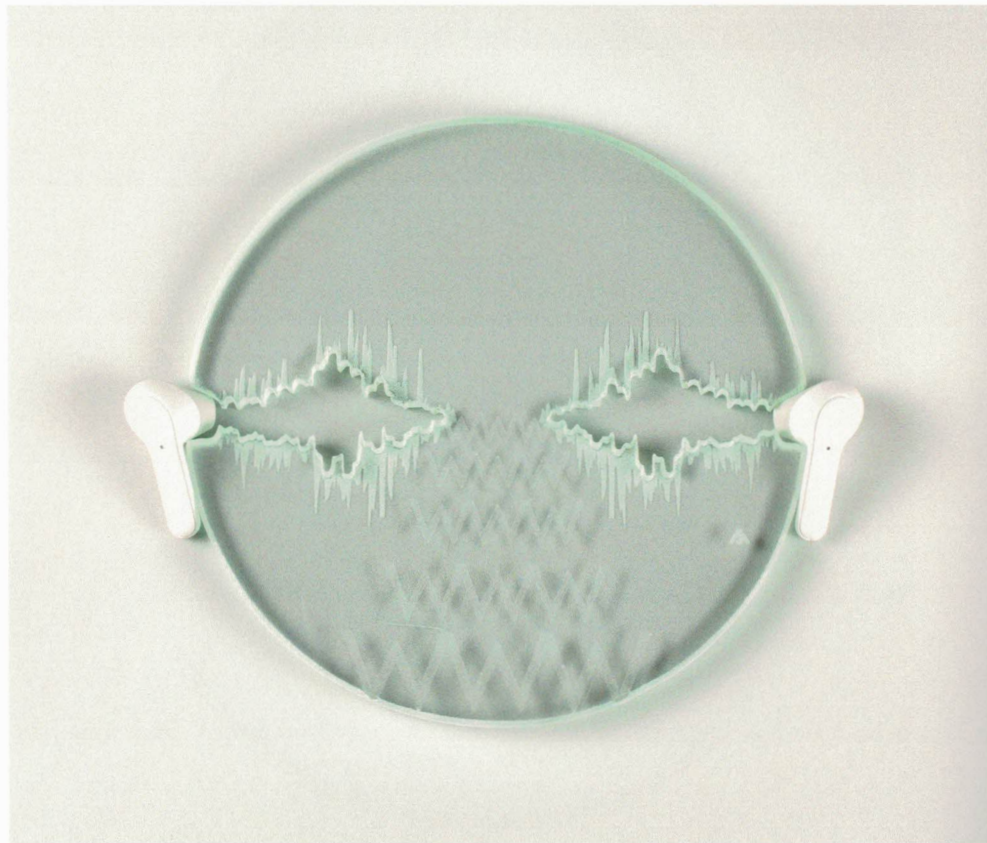
Medals of Dis/Honour – Russian Special Operation 2022

2022, duralumin, AK 47 bullet casin, cast, 120 mm



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Requiem – Lacrimosa

2022, steel, wood, fabricated, 120 mm



Odysseus' Travels – the Singing of Sirens
2022, glass, wi-fi headphones, mp3 recording,
fabricated, engraved, 165 mm



Pyramid
2022, glass, engraved, 130 x 165 mm



Irena Sendler – Mother of the Children of the Holocaust

2022, steel, glass, paper, fabricated, 170 x 100 mm



Fairy Tales – The Emperor's New Clothes

2023, bronze, cast, 60 x 100 mm



Fairy Tales – Scheherazade. Freedom for Women of Saudi Arabia
2023, steel, textile, crystals, pins, fabricated, 155 mm



Fairy Tales – The Princess and the Pea
2023, steel, textile, fabricated, 130 x 180 mm

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