

(INTERVIEW PUBLISHED BY „ART AND BUSINESS”)

„ANOTHER KIND OF SOLITUDE”

The last interview with Zdzisław Beksiński was held on 14th February (2005) by a participant of our contest The Painting of the Year – Tomasz Mistak, a painter from Sanok. A week before his death Beksiński was sparkling with energy and humour. We illustrate the conversation with the artist’s works, so much different from the commonly known ones.

Tomasz Mistak: You started painting quite early, in the 1950s. What were the inspirations for these works?

Zdzisław Beksiński: I guess I started drawing at the age of 5 or even earlier. Recently an elderly woman with whom I reportedly played in childhood sent me a drawing with a jumper on the jump, torn out of a diary. In the background there was an inscription: “As a memento for Danusia – Zdziś Beksiński February 1938”. So I must have been drawing before the war. I know that in my young years I was incredibly impressed by Artur Grottger. Being a child, at the age of 12 or something like that, I tried to paint by copying Grottger, but making the themes more modern: some guerrillas with hands on slings and such rubbish ... Grottger has stayed with me all my life, but of course, greatly processed.

Is the drawing important to you?

Actually, now I'm not drawing, I'm making things on the computer. First I prepare a preliminary drawing with a pencil, on a scrap of paper, then I scan and transform it on the computer, I sum, multiply – you can do different tricks. On the print I draw something and put it in the computer again. And after a few such operations the print is finally ready – a printed engraving in e.g. 50 copies. I mean I never print all copies, just a few. Then I keep

very precise accounting books, so when these drawings are gone, I print next ones. It lasts very long and the printers wheeze so hard that I simply don't feel like printing all the copies.

The first works that hit exhibitions were strongly erotic.

I was interested in deviations in psychiatry and sexology, so my acquaintances sent me different kinds of materials. I got a German lexicon from the 1920s or 30s, illustrated with images of perverts, which inspired me immensely. These things were done “with one hand in a pocket”, as it is inelegantly described. You could feel strong emotions behind these artistic works: they were naïve, sometimes poorly drawn, but there was a reflex of authenticity in it. I thought I could also do something like that, because I also had my unsatisfied needs. They were quite weird and let's say – I could never make them come true in real life, because they required my demise, and I wasn't going to move to the other, better world, so everything had to be done in the sphere of imagination. Then I had an idea to make such drawings. But I was terribly ashamed, so I distorted them in six various layers so it's pretty hard to decipher the real intentions. Of course, I made a certain number of drawings only for myself, which didn't

have any artistic value, merely a “wishful” dimension. If I looked for them, I’d find them somewhere, in a pile of papers.

But the stuff shown at the exhibition was highly transformed and distorted as I was ashamed of exposing myself to the audience. Today I would probably be less ashamed, but these were completely different times. If I’d shown them then, nobody would have known what it was. Since sexual and erotic elements were mixed with funeral ones or with tortures, they would’ve been classified as the crimes of German fascism. Although this didn’t fit together, either, because why would there be some ladies in stockings with garters? So it didn’t fit the crimes of fascism, but finally the Museum of Revolutionary Movement History bought a few pieces from that exhibition. In Rzeszów I had an exhibition visited by a censor, an elderly man who had never come before.

Probably he’d received a tip-off about my case from Warsaw. He was with a young co-worker your age. The boss walked with a grim face from one painting to another; finally, when he was looking at one of the paintings, he had a flashback of some partisan’s memories:

everything about an ass. The memories were of this kind: they attached a girl to a tree and ran to her from a distance of 20 metres. The boss was making up stories and the assistant looked like a frightened bird. In the end, it was unbecoming for him to ban anything, so he just said: “either put everything down or let it go, okay, let it go”. And the exhibition took place. Polish eroticism, if any, because I’m not sure it existed at that time, was limited to the term “a fat blonde and half a litre of vodka”. Any sado-masochist deviations were out of the question. If somebody had some kind of such tendencies, he didn’t own up to them, even before himself. All that was terribly hypocritical. And today porno models have their fan clubs, it’s a completely different world than in the 60s.

And how about photography, were there any inspirations?

Everybody has some inspirations, but in my case they were not visible. I liked photographs by Weston or other photographers who made very precise photos of some elements of stones or destroyed tree trunks in big formats. But I wasn’t particularly inspired by anybody.

The idea and realization were your own then?

I think so, but everybody's somehow inspired, because inspiration is naturally intrinsic. Reproducing something by means of a camera or a brush is not natural behaviour of man. First, it had a magical, then a cultic meaning, while today it's something that's collected and hung on walls. The approach is different, but actually it's still the same way of thinking.

How about the idea to build reliefs made of metal sheet? Where did you get it from?

When I was doing these things, I found out somebody in Spain and in Poland was doing something like that, but I had no idea about it. It must have been in the air then.

I started as a howling expressionist, later very quickly I switched over to abstract art, because it was trendy at that time; I was young and wanted to be in vogue. But that precise, mathematical abstractionism didn't suit me at all. In my works there was always something connected with physique. It was also visible in Lebenstein's art, his abstract works were in a way figurative.

How come you started sculpting?

There were only few sculptures - I didn't have proper conditions, materials, a suitable atelier or strength. I made a few heads of plaster and maybe two figures of metal sheet, which resulted from reliefs. They are housed in a museum in Wrocław, some of them are already destroyed, because before there were stored in the Cistercians' monastery in Libiąż.

In Sanok I also saw heads with a very interesting patina.

I simply wanted to saturate the plaster with something and at that time I just happened to have this stuff. These were industrial varnishes. You know – plaster is plaster, it falls on the floor and you don't have the sculpture any more. The materials which are available today simply didn't exist (at least in Sanok). You could get something in Warsaw or Cracow, where they had special shops for visual artists. Being a member of the union, from time to time I got a list of provided things from Rzeszów: green paint – 1 piece, brush number 20 – 5 pieces etc. I

took everything I could. It wasn't until I moved to Warsaw that I could buy everything. Since 1977 I sometimes brought foreign painting materials from London. And when I had no cash, I simply stole paints from the bus factory. I worked in the main designer's office. When they wanted to get rid of me, they moved me to the placard paint shop. I didn't care what I was doing, though, because I needed money. In the paint shop I had a manager who painted pictures in such a way that in the production house he had 10-15 pieces of hardboard cut, on which he next put the sky in one sitting; when it dried up, he painted the grass; later he made the line of a forest and a dot of a cloud on the sky. After the forest dried up, he put there a peasant's cottage and in the end – a little birch tree in front of the cottage. It was “honest work”. This way he painted several pictures and sold them for 20 zł a piece, as far as I can remember. A quarter of vodka cost 19.50 zł at the time, so he believed it was a sufficient pay for his hard work.

One day I sneered at these clouds, to which he said: “so paint them yourself if you're so smart”. In that period I didn't have the faintest idea about oil paints, but I painted some cumuluses. Seeing that he shouted: “holy crap, you've got Kossak's stroke of brush!”. It was the best compliment I'd received, apart from another one I heard in Cracow when I painted a

piece of art in a loo. Later he tried to paint a nude from a Czech album, I sneered again and painted a lady in the soft porno style (which was poor, anyway, as I didn't have the foggiest idea about it).

At this moment he had a brainwave and said: "sign it". I thought: "bugger, if I leave my signature on it, it's gonna be the end. So I told him: "you sign it". He did. On the next day I come to work and what do I see? A part of the storeroom has been separated for the painting of bare butts. Whenever I painted something, he came and asked: "can I sign it?"

Could you comment the words of Leonardo da Vinci from „A Treatise on Painting”: *a painter or a graphic artist should be alone so that the pleasure of the body won't harm the spirit, especially when he devotes himself to the work of thinking and considerations which constantly bring images to his mind, give a material to be kept in memory?*

Every painter thinks in his own way. As I'm alone, I can't say that solitude is my favourite form of functioning. I'd function much better if there was some family at home. Maybe the guy had some other kind of solitude in mind.

Are the figures and objects that fill your works merely requisites, building blocks or do they mean anything?

They hardly ever have any concrete meaning. If you paint a representative painting, there must be something in it. Abstractionism has taught me to look at a painting like a painting, and not at what it represents. Certainly, I mean the atmosphere, I'd like these figures to have a form. Sometimes I refer to some other painting, for example to a lying figure. I remember that at the time of Bierut I saw a newsreel in which they showed the depth of the capitalist art fall and a few-second shots contained fragments of paintings, among others a lying figure. It was different from what I'm painting now, but till today, whenever I paint a lying figure, I remember the one from that newsreel.

Did Bacon and his art influence your works?

Not directly, because I found out about Bacon's works quite late. Everybody sees similarities, though. Today I could say there's something similar in the sphere of thinking, but I really didn't know his works. It's harder for me to defend myself against the alleged influence of Bellmer. Long time ago I took a photograph of a nude wrapped in a string while I really knew the drawings of intertwined hands by Bellmer. This influenced me, because I used similar elements in painting. But I didn't know that Bellmer used to photograph such stuff until Dmochowski brought me an album of Bellmer's photography from the 30s.

Can your art be interpreted as a kind of apocalypse in everyday life, in which what exists has already gone and while going, it still proves its existence?

You know, it's a too complicated and too sophisticated question. I don't think about a painting this way. Here you can even find a copy of an excerpt from the Romanian press: "Apocalypse Ass Beksiński". I hung it, because it made me laugh, and "ass" in the Romanian language means "according to", that is, "Apocalypse According to Beksiński". I don't feel like prophesying an apocalypse or anything of this sort, and people see different things in my

works. For example I made a painting which now hangs in my bedroom and is meant for my carer in the future - if I become infirm. I started preparing the room for a housekeeper-to-be, so I thought that the paintings should be mild (though I suppose she'll hang *Sunflowers* by van Gogh, Christ or some photos of her children or deceased husband, anyway).

I painted a face which seemed gentle to me. A women's press journalist that I knew visited me and said: "it's a macabre skinned face". I thought: "Jesus Christ, I'm in a muddle, I want to paint a gentle picture and people always associate it with an apocalypse". Recently a doctor from the plastic surgery hospital in Biała Podlaska sent me an album with an inscription. These were photos of for example a child with a cheek gnawed down by a dog, with a jaw popped out, before and after an operation. I guess he also interprets my paintings this way. I wrote him a long letter, explaining that it's not the point, that it's not what my works are about. I don't want to show people with smashed jaws. If I paint a jaw, it's a construction of something that doesn't have a counterpart in reality. It seems to me that there's nothing macabre about these paintings. Chekhov throughout his life thought he wrote comedies, but he's claimed to have written dramas and tragedies. When I say that I want to paint nice pictures, they claim I'm lying. It's important to me that a picture is painted well, whereas

people look at what is painted in it: a naked girl by a pond is a nice painting, but a hanged man or a drunkard who's puked all over himself - an ugly one, though the drunkard might be ten times better painted than the young lady. Everything is contained in the quality of painting.

You know, art historians can unerringly tell synthetic cubism from the analytic one, late Renaissance from early Mannerism, but they are never able to distinguish between a good and a bad painting. An acquaintance of mine described two paintings in a museum from the turn of the 19th and 20th century, presenting Easter Monday in the countryside. One was painted in a professional way, something between Tetmajer and Fałat, while the other one in the same colours was painted by a bungler. And she – an art historian – didn't see the difference between them, which she would probably have seen if there'd been Fałat's signature on one of the paintings. It was the same story with van Meegeren. I read about his fake Vermeer's paintings, which were so supposed to be brilliant that nobody could tell them from the originals. When I saw them in the album, I thought these people had buttons instead of eyes. How could something like that be considered Vermeer ?

As a matter of fact, you paint for yourself. We, painters, chase our own tail. When we manage to catch this tail with our teeth – we are delighted. When we are barking with joy, the tail falls out of our mouth and the chase begins anew. These are the moments in which it seems to us that we've succeeded, but not all people view it like that. Everybody perceives it in their own way.

Interviewer - Tomasz Mistak.

Prepared by - Art&Business

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