



PROJEKT 1981

PROJEKT: *You have graduated as architect, so how has it come that you are a painter?*

ZDZISLAW BEKSINSKI: Generally speaking, the answer is quite simple. I am incapable of working in a team. Architecture implies collective work. If I could build quite on my own and for myself, I would be an architect in the same way as I am a painter. I enjoy only individual action. I do not care on what scale. Perhaps I would be happier producing large wall paintings, but only if I owned the paint and the wall and if the deadline, the manner of execution and everything else depended entirely on myself. The case being different. I prefer small pictures that fit a room and that are painted in a cramped studio. If I accepted a commission, I would be anxious to satisfy my employer. So why take on such obligations?

P.: *In the late 1950s you were an innovative photographer and produced metal reliefs, consistent with the spirit of contemporary avant-garde. So why did you give up that*

line a few years later and dedicated all your time to drawing and later to painting of a irrational character?

Z.B.: Questions beginning with "How did it happen..." are always the most difficult to answer. In retrospect, we tend to forget motives which prompted our decisions. For instance, I have not done a single drawing for five years, but always wanted to return to it as soon as I had finished the next two paintings which I had the fancy to finish, and then the next two. Then, for a change, I would no longer feel inclined to draw, then a year passed, and then another year and it is quite probable that I shall not draw in the coming ten years. Then, in another interview, I shall have to explain why I have given up drawing. Something similar has happened with photography. I still have all the equipment and even from time to time buy something new. Occasionally, it occurs to me that a good many things could be done mainly by means of photography, but in fact I feel more and more detached from it. There is no reason to deceive myself: I am almost sure that I shall not return to photography. It is a long time since I last did it, different stereotypes have meanwhile made their impact; finally, technological inertia acts as a drawback. In my case, painting is like running a factory: I have to provide myself with material, I have to equip my studio, etc., etc. The evolution of my vision and imagery is yet another matter. It is a very slow and fluid process, too. I would say the moment when I worked in accordance with contemporary avant-garde was the second stage in my career. I started as an expressionist, just as did many young Polish painters at that time. I did not know any of them. Nevertheless, what I did at then and what seemed to flow right from my "soul" was almost identical with what they did: silhouettes crying in the wilderness, people with heads of stone, women in labour, people caught in the acts of copulation, defecation, death, in front of a firing squad or on the gallows, in prison, towns without windows, and so on, and so forth. Stylistically, there was something of the spirit of Cwenarski and Wroblewski in it; I was even able to produce as many as five large-size paintings a day, I was absolutely uncritical, I got bored easily and saw no point in putting finishing touches to what had been very quickly daubed in distemper or charcoal on a large cardboard sheet. And yet, I think that it was only then that I have been really sincere. Or perhaps merely naive? Because later came a period of reflection and I saw that I had not the first to discover expressionism, nor the first to think that life was senseless. I even began to be

a little ashamed of myself and wanted to be even more detached that I had been unrestrained in my outcry. I believe that my joining the avant-garde was, in fact, the first mask I have put on. It does not mean that I had changed my views but, ashamed that I had been a fool, I adopted a style as a mask. And I adopted a style that was in the lead. But I do not think that I owed really much to what I saw in other people's work. In fact, I have never been very interested in what others do. There must be some incidental factors which affect everyone alike and cause all the works of art created in a given period to appear fairly similar. Today, I am not surprised, that I was blamed for imitating people of whose existence I had never heard because my paintings, or rather reliefs of that period, were not much different from the average national production. Then came the third change leading towards my present work. I think that I felt rather uncomfortable in the mask I wore but, at the same time, my road towards naive sincerity was closed too, so I chose something which seemed to be another mask, though less uncomfortable. This is not the whole truth but one would need thousands of pages to explore and describe all the sources of this particular sequence of events. Even then it would not exhaust the subject.

P.: *While changing the direction of your research, did you not feel that, perhaps, there was not much hope for you in the field of avant-garde and you would not be able to establish your individuality by means you had used hitherto?*

Z.B.: I think that one can fulfil oneself to the same degree in any style. When I welded my iron reliefs, I would often realize that I envied the painters of the past their neat studios which smelled of paint and I was overcome by the naive, simple need to paint at the easel. Of course, it turned out later to be as terribly hard work as the welding of iron sheets.

P.: *What role of the Boguckis' Gallery play to stimulate your art? For many years the Boguckis were the sole organizers of your exhibitions.*

Z.B.: With my total inability to organize career I do not think that I would have had a single exhibition had it not been for the Boguckis. I first met them in the 1950s, when I was a photographer who did a little bit of drawing and a little bit of painting. When they were mounting a photographic exhibition, a friend of mine literally dragged me to the Boguckis' flat in Cracow, together with a few other photographers. I must have had some photographs of my painter's beginnings on me - I do not remember details now.

Then for a few years, I probably worried the life out of the Boguckis who were anxious to promote my work - a task as rewarding as rubbing a cat the wrong way. Like all maniacs of their own art, I was absolutely crazy about protecting my works from damage. I raised thousands of obstacles of which I am now quite ashamed, but at that time I was afraid they were irresponsible people, likely to waste all I had done, prompted by a passing fancy... I have not changed much: I still hate exhibitions.



P.: *At the time of your avant-garde structural research, you made a superb relief with the motif of the cross, entitled "Malte" after Rilke. To what extent is literary inspiration responsible for the transformation in your art?*

Z.B.: I cannot say much about that period in my career. If I remember rightly, the title could have easily been different and there would have been nothing wrong, at least from my point of view, if the painting had not been called "Malte". To my memory, the painting was not a fully successful materialization of visions which occurred to me during the reading of Rilke. I said "not fully successful" in the sense that I have never succeeded in painting or drawing exactly what I wanted. The result was and always is different from my intention, it always goes somewhat askew. Luckily those who see my work are not aware of it, but let me assure you that it is a terrible feeling not to

have a single painting exactly as I wanted it to be. When I was ready with the relief, I named it "Malte" but I do not think it is of great consequence. I must say that I do not remember exactly how it was.

Certainly, I draw inspiration from literature, as I do from music, observation of my surroundings and all things within and without me, but the inspiration is, so to say, casual, incidental, fragmentary. For instance, three years ago I saw from a No 19 tram an old man at the stop at Unii Square in Warsaw, with a wisp of grey hair tousled by the wind. I have repeatedly tried to paint this wisp and place it in a picture, but I have never succeeded. When I finally make it (if I ever do), shall I have to entitle it in accordance with the original inspiration? What for? I have had a number of such fragmentary inspirations. I have recently dropped a painting half-way when I realized that it was almost literally my friend's drawing I had seen a few years ago, which artist is, in turn, blamed by critics for being under my influence. One can ask here who is under whose influence. I certainly did not imitate him consciously. But we are inspired by everything around us, though I do not think that it is intentional or fully realized.

Literary inspiration does not differ from other kinds of inspiration, it is on a par with them. What is more, it does not necessary have to be predictable, considering the expression of the work lying at its source. One can be inspired by an insignificant detail. For instance, from the rather strenuous reading of Hawkes's "The Lime Twig" I remember the frozen bomber at the beginning but I think it is because I had for some time felt tempted to paint old aeroplanes. Later was discouraged by a painting by Woodroffe with an old rusted bomber in the background. That is why I hate looking at other people's paintings. Anti-inspiration or being unable to paint something because it has been painted by someone else is even worse than a total lack of inspiration. Hence I was the happiest when I believed that I was the first in the world to arrive at certain ideas.

P.: *You absorb contemporaneity mainly or even solely through a music of violent impact. How does it affect your artistic vision?*

Z.B.: Well, let us not exaggerate. I simply like music and listen to it while working. As for the contemporary, I perceive it as probably everyone else does, though it has little effect on what I do. Nor am I convinced that music really acts as a direct inspiration. For instance, pop music does not inspire me, but acts as a stimulant, like

coffee or sugar. It is pure pleasure devoid of the element of mental experience. I rrean thing is generally true, but certainly there are exceptions to this rule as there are to all other rules. When I paint to the sound of pop music, my body moves in away which makes work more difficult, so what I do appears quite senseless. But when I turn the volume down, I feel a lack of something without which I cannot work. As regards classical music, i can really speak about something bordering on inspiration. It simply seems to me that I think about a painting in terms of a late 19th century symphonic poem. And that is why I do not care what is going to be painted; the important thing cannot be expressed in words but I do hope I am able to convey it in my best paintings. It is a kind of elation which cannot be defined but which really exists and has found its most powerful expression so far in post-Wagnerian music. This is speaking generally, for I feel it also in the works of much later composers, such as Shostakovich, Honegger or Britten.

P.: *What is the reference of your art to the output of great visionaries of the past, such as Gustav Moreau, Arnold Bocklin, Odilon Redon, Blake? What can you say about the Young Poland inspiration which is quite obvious to your public?*

Z.B.: The question answers itself and I do not really mind. As a rule, I am compared with Linke and Bosch and in both cases I do mind. I do not accept all of Bocklin but his "Island of the Dead" made a great, unforgettable impression on me when I was a child and this impression survived until this day.

P.: *In a number of your paintings and drawings, the chief role is played by symbols, signs or accessories such as the cross, skeletons, or a skull, which have functioned in art for ages but in a way differing according to the period. You use them in a stylistic version reminiscent of modernism or, at times, Romanticism. It is a conscious intention?*

Z.B.: All I want to do is to p a i n t. One cannot escape tradition. A painting as such, an object hanging on the wall, defined by its geometric shape, framed, looked at and commented upon is as a whole the result of tradition. Both contemplation of a work of art and conversation about a work of art, are elements of tradition, which have penetrated even conceptualism. Why, for Heaven's sake, should I, of my own free will, give up other traditional elements, such as the dim glimmer of varnish, composition of figures, and so on? From the very first pictures that I saw in'childhood in churches and

people's homes, I have gradually built up the idea of a painting in my consciousness. And I wish to materialize this idea. It can be done through opposition, irony, in inverted commas, from a distance and through persiflage, but it can be also done literally and naively. I use my accessories for the large part quite consciously because they are, in my opinion, linked up with the idea of a painting, linked as closely as the frame or the hook at the back. And what if I use a particular sort of accessories? I have not got so many. All the greatest pictures in the world resemble one another and it does not really matter what they represent. Personally, I prefer painting a fantastic, irregular ruin to a contemporary regular office building, the main reason being that in the former case work does not bore me. The message of painting does not dwell in the accessories but in the unspoken. At most, accessories or rather the preference for a certain kind of accessories reflect the artist's mental disposition. But I do not paint in order to initiate spiritual contact. To be quite honest, I do not really know what it is all about. I simply feel an urge to paint. And whether I have too much or too little imagination... I must say that I do not think much of imagination. A tree against a misty background means more to me if it is well painted than all of Magritte.

P.: *Your work is strikingly uneven. Some paintings seem to unveil a mysterious, eery world, but there seems to be even more that annoy one for their banality. Do you classify your works according to your own hierarchy?*

Z.B.: I would certainly not like to annoy anyone with banality. I believe that I am not banal, but that is only my own belief. Is it not a matter of reading false symbols into what I have painted? Quite naturally, I regard some paintings as good and some as poor. Good work is the fruit of good luck or a good period. I always want to paint well but I do not always succeed in doing so. I am speaking about my own judgement. A poor painting results from the chosen method on the one hand, and the chosen object on the other. As regards the latter, I often find half-way that I do no longer believe in what I am doing. It happens as rule with figurative scenes and I feel as if I have suddenly seen the scene I am painting through a window and had to describe it in words. It does not apply to landscapes with which there are formal problems but this is not the subject of the question. To return to what the public may find banal: I think that what happens is misinterpretation. When one paints real objects, each of them evokes a number of simple associations but not all of these associations are apparent.

For instance, the first association evoked by the word fish is not the same with everybody. What will be the first association for one person, may be the seventh association for another and the hundredth for yet another. A number of real objects painted in one picture naturally prompt an interplay of first associations, according to certain fixed schemes, e.g. the symbolic scheme or surrealist scheme after Magritte style. As I have often said, in my case notional associations are only a by-product resulting from the fact that I paint real or almost real objects which enter into mutual spatial relations in a painting, though not of a notional type. Certainly, the word fish evokes a certain primary association with me as well as with others, and if I paint a fish in certain surroundings, I cannot discard the entire baggage of associations, but nor do I, by any means, use them in a creative way. If I do not paint a red fish hanging from a balloon (which is something I do avoid), I believe that it is clear to everyone that a fish is a fish and nothing else. Nevertheless, if I paint dead fish that the sea has thrown on to the sand, which apparently is as natural as a tree against a misty landscape, because the fish are presented in a most plausible situation and environment, it does not mean that I have avoided the danger of response bordering on literary banality. Incidentally, I am describing a concrete work painted a few years ago which I have grown to loathe because of the commentaries speaking about the traditional "fish on the sand" or, still worse, "a protest against the danger of ecological catastrophe". But I did not think in this way originally; what I thought was quite simple: I painted the sea and the dead fish thrown ashore. And nothing else. And if I should ever paint a nude girl with a skull in her hand, it would be neither "love and death" nor "vanitas". Banality functions only as a by-product. Once a painting has been finished I very often realize ex post facto, from public response and opinion that high brows have read something else into my work than I have.

P.: *Enthusiasts of your art argue that it reveals the depths of an extreme existential experience. Opponents see it as a masterly show of a fairly stereotype horror. How would you verbalise the message it conveys?*

Z.B.: I think that all I want is pretty paintings. Simply pretty. You may easily call me a poseur, it would not be the first time that I meet with such a question and such a reaction to my answer. But I really want to paint pretty pictures. At the source of my definition of a pretty painting lies a large Baroque or 19th century altar piece or a dark

landscape in an old home, hanging in company of family portraits and other landscapes; in such a company there would undoubtedly be a place for a painting by Vermeer. That does not exhaust the subject but I am quite sure that I do not want to produce horror... I would find it a very nice compliment indeed if someone told me that what I paint is morbid. I am very strongly attracted to the morbid, which does not imply that I relish the common cold; what I mean is morbidity in 19th century understanding of the term. I mean something which attracted Thomas Mann. Hence, in some respects, Wojtkiewicz is closer to me than Vermeer, but only in some respects. Perhaps the synthesis for which I strive is quite inconsistent and unattainable...