

Photographing Dreams

conversation with Zdzisław Beksiński

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Zdzisław Beksiński is a renowned photographer, illustrator, sculptor and painter. His apartment smells with brushes naphthalene, varnish, oil paints, fibreboards. It smells like new, as it's just been occupied a few months ago.

I am sitting in the artist's studio, a small room with a table in the middle. "The Tomb" as the Artist calls it, because it takes almost three-quarters of the room space. Inside the table, there's all what a painter needs: cardboard, wooden strips, oils, cans with paint, brushes. All stored for several years in advance.

Behind me, a shelving unit filled with gramophone discs and audio tapes. Paintings in front of me and an easel on the left hand side, just by the window. As far as I know, the Artist works under artificial light as well. There are few adjustable lamps on top of the easel, making equal light shine.

First question, how did you start painting? What was the childhood of the Artist, and childhood of his Art? How did the landscape and home contribute to that?

I don't think my childhood had any direct impact on what I'm doing right now. Perhaps my mother had... She used to bring me books about fine arts. She always kept my sketches. She wanted me to become an engineer. So I did, graduated architecture. For three years I worked as a "slave driver" on construction sites. Later started photography. Also illustration and design. Since 1966 I do only drawings and paintings. However, when it comes to the influence of a landscape, I do not realize it at all. I always lived in strong isolation from so-called "real world". In terms of work, I mean. The interaction with "the real world" is only when I get to buy matches or a canned food for lunch. As you can see in my paintings, the landscape is rather contrived. So I think that I am not inspired too much by the real landscape.

So, is your art not about copying the world, rather an art of inner feeling?

I think so. Almost certainly. I may call it spiritual naturalism. I want to paint like I was photographing the dreams. A reality, however with a huge amount of fantastic details. Maybe other people's dreams and imagination work differently. My dreams

are always images, generally natural in terms of light, shade and perspective. Of course, this is not the end. Here comes the problem of applying paint. I got my own quite specific tastes. Composition related problems, etc. It is hard to fit everything in a short interview. The issues are more professional or more hidden. When it comes to what's on the picture, it always refers to my interior, and never to the environment. I have been asked many times, if these stereotypical houses outside the window bother me. No, they don't bother me. In general, I don't even mention them when I am not asked about. I rather care about my apartment. To make it more comfortable, warm. Acoustically soundproof. Unfortunately, it is not. We constantly hear the neighbours. And probably the neighbours hear me as well, which is inevitable from about 8 am to 22 pm. After that, I must turn the music down. Without music I am not even able to primer the boards. On one hand, music is an essential background. On the other hand, it is an insulator from the sounds of the surrounding world.

A tiny sketch lies on a huge table. A woman's face and a hand with long, beautiful fingers. The hand is trying to grab something.

That's the start of a painting.

Yes. Generally, I start from a sketch, a draft of an idea. Or just vision of an image, never accurate. I usually do more sketches than pictures, as I'm not able to paint all what comes to mind. I store them for later. This is quite ridiculous as sometimes an old idea gets "rancid", and I don't want to pursue it anymore. The image starts out same way as the sketch. But sometimes at the time of the applying the first underpainting, I realize that I would do it differently. One change triggers the need for further changes and as a result, it turns out that it is something completely different than what it was supposed to be at the beginning. Of course, I could hold on to the original concept, but why? Do I have to be loyal to "myself" from last Tuesday? Won't it be enough if I'm loyal to myself from last Friday? I change whenever I'm fancy to. Sometimes, parts of the image seem to me to be so good that it's a pity to paint them over. So, I finish that image and then just start another one with similar elements somewhat in alternate version.

Is your sketch a spatial signal for you? Do you see it in colour?

I rather see it in colour. However, not entirely. Some details emerge from the shadows, like Caravaggio. I don't necessarily leave dark places. Sometimes I know that there should be light behind some details. And the light must illuminate something, unless it's going to be a fog. The sketch tolerates those details marked by a few strokes, emerging from the white paper. The painting does not. It creates an enormous empty space which you need to develop. And I don't know what's in that empty space, because there was nothing there in my original vision. A gesture, a movement, a screaming colour... So that place must be recomposed, cold filled. Often

filling an empty space can spoil the image. This is the cost you pay for not being able to have a dream-photo camera.

How do the surrounding ambient sounds affect your dreams? Do they interfere, hence you listen to music?

In fact, I like to sleep in complete silence. Every little sound disturbs me. But during the day I hate silence. I can even turn on the vacuum cleaner, just not to experience silence. Obviously, there are sounds that I hate: small children, dogs, birds, drunkards. However, most sounds that Warsaw generates (cars, trams, planes, etc.) are basically indifferent to me. They are even nice, if compared with complete silence. So, music is an insulator only when a baby cries next door. I usually listen to music for itself. It is both a habit and a dynamic stereotype. As I said, I can only paint when music is on. I cannot listen to music outside of painting. I would fall asleep at the most beautiful symphonies, watching them from videocassettes or in a concert hall, where you need to engage the eyes. Besides, music sounds unnatural in concert halls. This of course is a joke. But I hate everything „straight from the cow”. I drink instant coffee, instant milk, I eat powder soups and canned meat only, vitamin in pills. Music also must be like powder or tablets. Identical performance for multiple playbacks may in some cases repugnant the most outstanding track. However, in many cases an amplification of song's impact occurs. Specific track in a specific performance turns out to be indispensable as background music. Subsequent recordings, even better, are inferior in effect as a reception scheme has generated. You wait for certain moments which give satisfaction, because they sound like something you expected. It's something like the satisfaction from a good western. The satisfaction gets greater, the more stereotypical is the story. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule, but they emphasize the rule. Anyway, maybe this is just the specifics of my music perception system. Finally, I do not perceive music the way intended the composer. Music serves me, like a walking stick does to a disabled person. I wouldn't be able to paint without the participation of the music.

What are the common points of music and your paintings?

If there is a link between music and painting, it probably is in within architecture of the music and the architecture of the image. In a similar effect in my image, a specific location on a bright color background of other colors, other forms are like certain parts of a musical work in which there is a theme. The theme fades away, blurs. Now it can be sensed, swells and suddenly emerges, sounding clear. I perceive that with my whole body and I would like to express the same thing in my image. Therefore, I do not care if I paint a dog or a tree in this place. What is painted, doesn't matter to me. It is important how it works in the sense of sound, color and sound form located here, not there. So I use the shapes for what I would call musical goals.

In terms of mood?

Of course, in terms of mood. But I'm not a mood producer, using means of painting. I would like to express only the range of moods, which are close to my heart. Let others play with other moods, whichever they like. This is the answer to the frequently asked question, "why is it so gloomy?" or "it is much easier to paint a gloomy picture than a cheerful one", and so on. Ergo, I'm probably a gloomy man, if my images are being evaluated this way. And painting something just because it is more difficult to paint, than what comes from my soul, I find a total nonsense. Let those jolly guys paint cheerful images, if such funny questions come to their minds. And let them piss off. I often had complaints that my painting's character's skin comes off. First of all I didn't know that it is a skin. I liked and still like to paint folds apart, draperies and other such convoluted form. It seems to me that I express myself in this way. The painted is not for me ever so literal as for the viewers, which is those who approach the image with a dictionary of symbols: the tree - a symbol of life, green - a symbol of the postponement, black - a symbol of death, bird, cow, pitcher, coin, grass, heap, all symbols. Mentality of an average European is littered with this crap so much, that he is not able to see anything from being that heap of garbage. He runs around with a dictionary and measures. When something is not correct, he blames the author. Same story was with the skin on my paintings which peels off. I still paint it today, perhaps in different forms. Maybe grass peeling off is for the viewer less severe, but he knows that a grass does not peel off. At least they don't assign me with desire to protest, which they used to do few years ago. Idiocy. I never protested against anything. I was always interested in myself. I hate the term "to mean something by saying something". You see a man in your dream. Instead of head he's got a piece of flesh. He is lying, growing into the ground, talking with you at the same time. You are helping him to grow into the ground, because you stamp on him with one foot, during this neutral conversation. I am summarizing one of dreams I had last night. This situation does not surprise you, or scares. This is a normal dream. Everything about it seems to be ordinary. Only after you wake up, after recalling the details you notice that almost everything in the dream was weird. That would be scary if it happened when you were awake. I call it "direct dream's speech". It is a literal vision, but at the same time the blood is no blood, pain is no pain, crime is not a crime. There is nothing to protest, because it would be equally meaningless to protest against the fact that it's snowing. There is an early Chinese paradox saying that we do not know when we wake up: in the morning or in the evening. But far more likely is the thesis that we wake up in the evening. And throughout the day when we sleep, we try to understand something from the world of the night, which is so great and wonderful that it escapes entirely our miserable thoughts. We are dazzled like small children. Like an avalanche of incomprehensible details. And when we fall asleep, in a dream, we go to work and build those stereotypical settlements, in which it seems to us that we live. Sleeping in the morning we sort all the wonderful details giving them meaning systems, so that they are possible to perceive by our volatile minds. All the content that we add to the vision is already created ex-post. People can name a lot of things, that's why they remain in a happy illusion that they possessed the knowledge. They look at a cloud and say that it's the condensation of water vapor. They look at the

painting and say that it is a symbol of environmental contamination, because the image shows dead fish washed up by the sea. And we should look at the picture, and at the world (as far as it is possible) in a more direct way - like a Martian would look at a cow: for the first time.

Do you have your favourite artists?

Rather not. Although I like surrealism and secession. I already liked secession while others despised it, in 1940's and 50's. Then became interested in art and history of art. It seemed to me from my childhood that Jugendstil and art nouveau were the most interesting period in the arts. You may think I overact. Seeing the inside of my room with stereotypical "Białystok" furniture, tape recorders, amplifiers, gramophone records, tapes, "SKALA" lamps. These are only useful items. Unfortunately, I have 80 square meters for the whole family, 20 of which for my studio. I don't know how it would be if I lived in a palace. Besides, I cannot really make use of anything other than a strictly usable items. As you can see, there is not a single object here in studio, which would be of ornamental function. Bundles of wires, rows of switches, kind of a picture factory. Few days ago Educational Film Studios came to make a documentary. The filmmakers who knew me only from paintings, expected a house filled with cobwebs, old clocks, lamps and magic candlesticks. They expected some nineteenth-century demon, an intersection of Liszt and Towiański. Meanwhile, the door was opened by a stereotypical-looking guy. Only one clock in the house, electronic by the way. They were pretty damn disappointed, as they had nothing to shoot. "Białystok" furniture? But it doesn't mean I make up my love for secession. I just (perhaps the conditions in which I lived, contributed to this) have not learned to use the decorations in the broadest sense of the word. I think that if I lived in a palace, I would not have even a single secession chandelier. I'd rather have a flashlight instead, in case of a power network failure. Perhaps it is an inconsistency. But I would rather see a strong interval between what's the inner life in the world of imagination and what is a normal everyday life. Electric torch is more useful than an Art Nouveau candlestick. The Art Nouveau chandelier is beautiful. Sleep and dream are beautiful. Daily life is primarily convenience and ease of silent functioning.

You've spent a few decades in Sanok. Does province help an artist, or hinders?

I don't know.

So why did you move to Warsaw?

Both your questions suggest there must be a relationship between my move and my work. Have I moved because of work? Or does moving impact creativity? Why on earth it is generally believed that buying new shoes or furniture has nothing to do with work? Moving from Sanok to Krosno or from Krosno to Tarnow has no connection

with the work. But moving to Warsaw certainly has? Moreover, definitely has? "Now you will be able to spread your wings," a young man in Sanok said to me. I assure that "I am not going to spread my wings". I moved to Warsaw only because I prefer big city from a small town. Same as statistical majority of the nation would do. If it was the case, there would not be check-in restrictions in Warsaw and Krakow, but in Sanok and Brzozowie instead. Rush to larger cities is for trivial reasons. If you take off Marie Antoinette's rose-coloured spectacles, through which the intellectual Warsaw citizen used to observe the province, it is clearly visible that life in Warsaw is a thousand times easier, simpler and more convenient than living in Sanok. Summary: I could move anywhere work friendly, but I prefer larger cities from small towns. It is the big city awareness from the studio window and within a taxi range, rather than everyday life point of view. Besides, my life lasts in front of an easel. The easel can be put everywhere, a place has no impact on what's being produced in it.

Certain items on my paintings... I think these are the appearances. For example, if you see a hand holding something, it does not have to be dictated by the desire to express the content of literature, although the content of this may be due to this gesture as it incidentally was. All literary content, arising from my images, is purely incidental. I am not able to erase the associations from the public's mind, with each named and specific subject on my image. That alleged literature, is a relationship between these strings of associations.

The way to self-knowledge... Almost grandpa Freud... It seems to me that it is rather a way to lie to yourself and everyone around you. It is said that a man is looking for the truth. But since ages, it is constantly being discussed. We all know the truth very well, but we're unable to accept it, because it's not acceptable. We are looking for in a desperate manner of lies, that would little dilute the truth, slightly tone down or even obscure, so that the truth only appears in the hour of death. Art is one of those beautiful lies and probably is not anything else. Art as I understand it.