

For You or People?

an interview by Krystyna Nastulanka with Zdzisław Beksiński

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translated by Andy Teszner

When I asked you for an interview, you said that we need to postpone it, because according to the horoscope, you're having bad days. Do you believe in astrology?

Let's say, I believe in everything.

Everything as if nothing?

I am credulous wherever I get to deal with unverifiable matters. So, I believe in astrology, parapsychology or psychotronic. I am also inclined to believe in green men with antennas on their heads, fortune-telling, etc. Everything irrational. Are you surprised?

No, I am not. Your paintings already reveal an unconventional personality. Besides, you are already known for that. For example, they say you like sound of a tractor and can't stand dog's barking. You don't mind sound of a vacuum cleaner, though get disturbed by bird's singing. And many other strange things like that. So, I was prepared for surprises. The first one hit me at the doorstep. Your studio doesn't resemble any art ateliers that I know. If there were no paintings on the walls, it would look like electronics engineer workshop, for example.

All you see, the tapes and music equipment.

So, you are a music lover.

I listen to music for ten or even fourteen hours a day. At night I use headphones so that my neighbours do not go crazy. Because I like loud music.

Not too loud, possibly?

For me music is never too loud. I would like to turn up at full volume, not only from stereo speakers on the walls, but also from the ceiling and floors. I would stand somewhere in the

central point so the sound wall would hold me in place like a cushion. Unfortunately, this is not possible in a block of flats. I have to play it at a moderate volume, which is nothing compared to the hurricane of music which I used to make in my old house in Sanok.

Do you work and listen to music simultaneously?

I cannot work otherwise.

Does your art correspond with what you listen to?

No, a painting takes a very long time, so during painting I listen to various tracks.

What music period is closest to you?

Well, somewhere from Schubert to early Schonberg. Modern music too recently, especially the one which resembles the nineteenth century.

So, nothing earlier than Schubert?

No. I don't like baroque music as it is overly order structured. Though I appreciate Baroque paintings, except David, whom I hate. When I'm fancy some orderly notes, I prefer to play on a little Casio computer.

Is music expression most important for you?

My God, I don't know music at all. I just use it as a tool. And I love it. But do I use it as intended, I really don't know. Apparently, Ravel cried when listening to Petrushka or the Spring Festival. This is also an example of a contrary use.

However, your preferences are probably an expression of some deeper affairs, an artistic constitution connected with your art. How do you see your paintings in the tradition of press art?

I refer to 19th century tradition. I mean in terms of the workshop, not perception, composition, lighting or a way of presenting objects. Although the 19th century landscapes strongly affected me.

Looking from a different point of view, the critics find in you some relationships with many artists, quite distant from each other, such as: Bosch, Breughel, Blake, Breton.

From among those you mentioned, Blake is closest to me. More Turner. It doesn't mean of course that I like to paint "Turner" style. I am attracted by vision in his paintings.

Besides vision in your art there is also some content, symbols, a layer of meaning.

Rather, viewers attribute some content to them. I am amazed, listening to the next contradictory exegesis of the same image given by various people on Monday, Thursday and Friday of one week. Which confirms me in the belief that it is as if a projection test. Anyway, I do not like talking about my paintings. My attitude towards them is probably autistic and I think that their content is simply not transferable.

However, when you watch a tiny and lonely human figure in a commodified and threatening landscape, not a play of colourful spots and forms - it is natural that you are looking for a message in this picture, a reflection on the world.

Unfairly, because my paintings, regardless of what I paint, come from the experience of abstractionism. I started as an abstractist. If, for example, I present a figure without eyes, this fact should not be analyzed from the depth psychology or political content. For me, the value of my paintings lies in what they represent from a painting point of view, but of course I also mean the atmosphere that I am trying to express, which I feel, but which I cannot name.

Do you think that the admirers of your paintings and the buyers perceive them in this way?

I'm not sure. Those who buy or collect them, collect them according to some principle - some collect landscapes, others - heads.

Do you sell a lot?

Rather yes.

Willingly?

Not really. Recently I try not to sell. And if someone really wants to buy, I ask him to come in half a year. Because even my worst paintings have something important to me. Despite the mistakes that I see perfectly. I would like to have a very large house so I could put them all on the walls.

And not show them to anyone?

To selected people.

But you exhibit a lot. I saw your art in galleries such as Zachta, Desa, Alicja&Bożena Wahl.

Generally, I exhibit rarely and very little. What you saw in "Desa" was intended for sale. In Poland, the notion is that the exhibition is something more than offering goods, and probably saying that I am reluctant to exhibit, this is the point I mean. As for the exhibition in Zachęta, it was not organized by me. The paintings were borrowed from private collections and from the museum, I did not have any in common with this exhibition. In summary: I can not stand exhibitions. I paint only for myself.

Apparently, art is a social fact. For yourself or for people?

Only madmen are not contradictory internally. I would like my paintings to hang in some homes, and at the same time I am sick when I sell them. So I'm probably perfectly contradictory.

How do you accept criticism?

I do not attach too much importance to this. In our country, the role of artists is diminished, because art is not taken too seriously. On the one hand, there is a shortage of revolver magazines, and on the other hand - fast-reacting criticism. Besides, I read very little, especially little in the field of art. Music is the only channel that art can reach. I'm reluctant to see exhibitions, I do not even attend my own because it puts me in a state of nervous tension. And on someone else's - or what I do not like, or I like it, which means that someone else paints as if I wanted to paint, but I cannot, which in turn plunges me.

Is there anyone who paints the way you would like to paint?

Never without reservations. Recently, I came across an album by a Swiss painter - Giger, which I also do not fully accept. But I was impressed with his craft. He does something similar to what I do. And probably he's not alone. Maybe there are twenty or thirty of us?

Have you never encountered them in your travels?

I could not meet because I don't travel at all. I've never been to Czechoslovakia. I am particularly allergic to the inconvenience of tourism. If I knew a boy would bring me

suitcases to the hotel and open the car door, maybe I would go somewhere. But because it does not threaten me, so I'm sitting at home.

You are an architect by profession, right?

Yes. Since childhood I used to draw, even had exhibitions in my provincial gymnasium. I dreamed about film school, but my father convinced me that that time is not suitable for artistic activity and persuaded me to architecture. I worked in that profession for only three years and only in the construction.

Do you think, like many architects today, that this field does not give you - for reasons known in general - the chance of self-realization?

No, I was just into something else. And as to the widespread complaints about the barracks style of housing estates, "one must cut one's coat according to one's cloth". It is simply immoral to discuss about the beauty of architecture in a situation where thousands of people are waiting 12 years for an apartment, and the same number live like animals. Unfortunately, we must build barracks.

Have you learned your painting skills from your studies?

Probably not. I studied drawing in architecture. And I have never achieved more than enough. We were given twelve hours to draw an act. I did 3 quarters of an hour and spent rest of the day in the cinema. Does the Academy teach to paint? I would have serious doubts. For many years academies were teaching the impossible, namely artistic sensitivity. However, an Academy graduate does not know how to use primer, what types of paints to mix with and which ones to use with - not. One knows virtually nothing about transferable knowledge and what should be conveyed. But he knows second-hand - almost everything about what is not transferable. As a perfectionist, I tormented all the graduates of the Academy I knew personally in the matter of the workshop and did not learn anything, read all available and contradictory textbooks of painting technology. And finally, I screwed up irretrievably number paintings using the wrong technique. Those which I haven't screwed - only time will show. In Poland, however, perfectionism is not appreciated, perhaps due to national laziness. I think we are all too lazy when it comes to long-term systematic work.

And you too? I don't think so.

Me too, to some extent. When I paint a human face, I would like to catch every fold, every skin pore, and every drop of sweat in it. And I get tired quickly. And sometimes I would like to skip this picture. Not to mention that I cannot always afford the precision I have set myself. On the other hand, I definitely do not suffer what is considered an achievement -

nonchalance of contemporary art. I know that my views on art are extremely unpopular and that it is associated with my long-term residence in the provinces.

This is bit funny today, probably?

But still... It's like explaining certain features of my painting through my interests in photography. It was a bit different. It began with low-metal carvings, abstract things. Only later I gradually changed. Firstly, along with the abstract works, I began to make small drawings depicting myself. Very unreal in terms of the presentation form. Then oil paintings, changing the way of presentation. All was getting closer to realism. Or, if you prefer, a colour photography showing peculiar and rather dreamlike reality.

And when came what you describe as the theater of cruelty?

I don't find anything like this in my art. I hate such things. I hate reading and watching things related to, for example, occupation. I do not usually watch Japanese movies, because it makes me sick when I see the hara-kiri suicide. I really have no idea where these opinions come from?

Your paintings from a few years ago eagerly show characters stripped of skin, naked muscles, blood, wounds. People memorise these things.

It doesn't come from cruelty or desire to shock. I like to paint the skin. To me, art is something distant from reality. As I already said, a picture shows an imagined and dreamlike reality. A dream can frighten but is not cruel in a sense of a documentary photography. Some people would probably associate blood on the image with a blood leaking from the wound. Maybe that's what I do to know the host, but responsibly I can state that for me this is just a technical problem of applying the paint. Besides, there is content. An imagined content. Something that doesn't exist and has no real counterpart. Maybe you will see a contradiction here again, but we have already agreed that I'm unable to run away from contradictions.

Exactly - they say that you combine the traditionalism of technology with radical innovation in your painting. Do you agree with this opinion?

This is not so important to me. The most important in art is what we come up with. Therefore, a naïve philosophy about stars in the sky seems to be more valuable than scholarly contributions to structuralism. I would like to remain an amateur in art.

And how do you feel in Warsaw? Because you recently moved from Sanok? How do you feel in this environment?

Let me start from the end. The environment is not what I stay away from. I hate this stereotype of existence of a socio-political structure. Although, of course it is difficult to avoid contacts with some institutions. For example, writing CV's required by some artistic institutions. On this occasion, I realized that my artistic biography falls into almost into a few sentences because I've never been abroad, haven't received any medals. I do not belong to an artistic group, nor have I played any honourable functions. My biography is shorter than an average biography of a twenty-year-old, even though I'm already over fifty. So, I stay away from these matters as much as I can, and just live in my ivory tower ...

In a block of flats in Warsaw's Służewiec?

Oh yes. I would prefer to live at the intersection of Marszałkowska Street and Łazienkowska Route, because there is supposedly the largest noise ratio. I would not be the loudest outsider there. And I would most happily like to live in Hamburg or New York, in a boiling, infernal cauldron, a monstrous human conglomerate.

Don't you think that this extraordinary taste for the world's metropolis might come from a longtime quietness of your garden in Sanok?

Possibly.