

## INTRODUCTION

by **Tadeusz Nyczek**

(Translated and adapted by Piotr Dmochowski)

Like certain other great painters of our century Beksinski was a trained architect—a profession he had always disliked and which he claims to have undertaken only under pressure from his father.

He was born on the 24th of February 1929 in Sanok, a small town in the south east of Poland. He did not leave it until 1977, except to fulfill the demands of his profession: first he went to Cracow to complete his studies at the Institute of Technology from 1947 to 1952, then he spent three years in Szczecin and Rzeszow to comply with the work obligations imposed on graduates of higher education in the years when Poland was being reconstructed.

From that period of "architecture" he was to retain an unpleasant memory of a profession practiced against his will and exclusively in the so-called "field of execution".

"It's useless to talk about it," he was to say one day in an interview. "Once I finished my studies I worked for a few years in a building enterprise as a slave-whipper on the building lots."

Photography was the beginning of his artistic creation. Beksinski started to photograph once his studies in architecture ended. Soon he gained renown and recognition in the professional milieu. He even became a member of the Union of Polish Artist Photographers - he who always declined any form of membership, which he felt to be recruitment. Several exhibitions of his photographic works earned him numerous articles and monographs. Like his paintings later on, his photographs aroused as much enthusiasm as criticism. The object was already no more than an excuse to which the artist preferred the "mental circumstances" by which it was accompanied. For example he once photographed a female nude where the body had been firmly tied with string, just like a joint of meat. Or he put side by side the face of a child and that of an old woman. Or else he sought the desired effect by combining various photos, one of which represented a little girl with flowers in her hair, another a broken doll, and yet another a stretched-out corpse.

A conclusion suggests itself in relation to the first period of his artistic creation, the end of which corresponds to the end of the nineteen-fifties. A

conclusion which is essential for the understanding of the artist's personality: his tendency towards deforming reality. And yet due to the technique which he employed - photography- Beksinski never came closer to reality than in that period. For as a device photography seems to provide a true representation of the real world. However it was precisely the real world that was unfamiliar to Beksinski. What counted for him was the universe modified - to a very large extent - by "mental circumstances" and by his own vision of it. Deformation played a fundamental role in this, serving as an intermediary moment where the man and the artist could interfere with time and space to form his own world anew. Therefore even if Beksinski was attracted by the artificial side of photography, it was precisely the necessity of referring to objective reality which constituted an inconvenience.

Beksinski simply and beyond any doubt hated things natural and things real. In an interview granted several years later he was to say:

"I abhor everything which is "natural", everything which comes "directly from the cow", as the Poles say. I drink instant coffee and milk powder, I eat powdered soups and only canned meat."

So specific and so rare in our times when the majority of people and especially artists shun omnipresent artificiality, this mental feature was to determine, to a large extent, the qualities of Beksinski's art.

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During this time, Beksinski was engaged in drawing as well as photography. This involved, for the most part, compositions executed in pastel. They contain elements of human figures deformed to such an extent that they give the impression of semi-abstract structures. Expressionism was certainly a very particular manifestation of "the spirit of the time". In that period it prevailed in art in general and especially in Poland, which in the mid-fifties experienced the era of the so-called political "thaw" linked with the events of October 1956. Art, dominated until then by the doctrine of socialrealism, started to liberate itself from the bonds of orders and interdictions. Novelties from the world were quickly penetrating into the Polish artistic milieu, which was always ready to assimilate them. Consequently young painters proposed expressionist painting which was distinguished by the richness of colours and facture treatment, and at times clearly referred to abstract tendencies.

Touched by the "spirit of the times" Beksinski became for a certain period a fervent spokesman of these changes. Later on he was to admit that like most enthusiastic beginners at the time he had been influenced by a "fashion".

This submission to a "fashion" is perhaps most evident in his first works created at the turn of the fifties and sixties and in the early sixties. This is when he produced a number of purely abstract compositions, using various artistic procedures: drawings, paintings, reliefs in plastic materials, but also in wire and sheet-iron, sculptures and low-reliefs in plaster.

Beksinski tried different forms and different materials, in compliance with the demands of the period, but also in accord with his inner predispositions. For the works in sheet-iron and wire as well as the reliefs in plaster, though abstract in form, left him free nevertheless to remain expressionist. The artist, unable to stand geometric abstraction, achieved wonders in terms of technique, density and complication of plastic materials, always serving expression. The sheet-iron and wire were treated with acid, heated and forged until they reached an extraordinary density. Because his works were made by superposition, according to the rules of low-relief, the author obtained such a variety of effects, that already in this period his creations were felt by the public to possess narrative features. Critics discerned in them images of bombed cities, landscapes of death and destruction. Thus the terminology of a misunderstanding which would henceforward grow apace, was already established. Of course in the atmosphere of the recently ended war a literary interpretation of Beksinski's works was only half surprising. But already the author felt the need to sweep away such interpretations since, as he puts it, he had never intended any such meanings.

It was only his first true "fine art" exhibition in Warsaw in 1964, presenting mainly drawings, that made Beksinski known as an artist with a fully developed artistic personality. The exposition provoked many critical opinions, but nevertheless aroused some genuine enthusiasm.

Although Beksinski had belonged already for a number of years to the Union of Polish Artists and Designers, he remained practically unknown to art lovers. It is true that he displayed his reliefs during the Poznan exhibitions in 1958. But if at that time he existed at all in the minds of the public, it was rather as an architect. Even more so since the exhibition in question took place in the premises of the Architects' Association.

But it was only the next exhibition, which took place three years later in 1967 in the capital of Poland, that distinguished Beksinski in the eyes of the public and the critics as he is seen and recognized to this very day. On this occasion the artist presented his drawings which were firm both in terms of construction and content, but very different from the semi-abstract forms of the pencil drawings created in the fifties and early sixties. These drawings, executed mainly in pen and black ball-point, were now - without exception - figurative. Reproduced since then in numerous catalogues, newspapers and other publications, they have become representative and characteristic of the "true"

Beksinski; works which at first sight can be identified as being in the "Beksinski style".

These drawings surprised the spectators both by their artistic form and by their subject-matter. For almost without exception they could be qualified as "erotic" - a very dangerous thing in those days. It was a vivid, aggressive and biological eroticism, bordering on pornography. Yet something prevented over-categorical definitions something which turned the attention from the erotic aspect of the works and directed it elsewhere: namely towards a specific treatment of the human body. The manner in which the bare bodies of men and women were drawn was obviously not realistic. Neither was it naturalistic. These bodies appeared to be in a state of advanced decomposition: the flesh was separating from the bones which pierced through the ruined skin. The skin too seemed to be peeling off and detaching itself. But as if he were not yet satisfied with the effect, Beksinski made the skin look like a spider's web which was coming away from the body and was already living its own life as an added object. The same applied to the veins and the blood-vessels which were partly exposed, partly drawn on the same level as the skin. They remind us of threads linking together, and literally so, the bodies of the human figures.

In terms of eroticism these representations were of a very particular nature. As if he wanted to dismiss the charge of creating pornography, or sado-masochist illustrations, Beksinski applied himself to a thorough elimination of any appearance of reality in the figures of his drawings. Only a few fragments recalled the natural structure of the human body. The whole gave an impression of great precision, while other details, that is to say the face, the eyes, the wings growing from the shoulders, created the sensation of a world which resembled the world of humans, but which in fact was peopled by beings having as many points in common with us as birds, bats, midnight spectres, ghosts and vampires. What was human in those figures - their aggressiveness, their suffering, their erotic activity - gained an additional dimension through contact with the accessories of decomposing bodies, rottenness and wasting away.

In this metaphor Beksinski expressed, perhaps unconsciously, the most concise definition of life: birth is the beginning of death. For the rapture of the sexual act is very near to the final ghastly grin.

However, this explanation does not exhaust the hidden meanings of his drawings: their eroticism offered Beksinski a special chance to express his hidden dreams and to openly brand the psychological barriers of every man brought up in the Polish morality of the fifties, a morality which bordered on puritanism. The deformation of the figures, their "unreality" was no doubt meant to turn the attention of the spectator away from the painter himself and to

prevent the identification of his anxieties and his obsessions with those of the main figures of his drawings. Their sometimes strongly marked grotesque elements were supposed to create an additional distance and to place the more shocking thoughts and gestures "in inverted commas".

The same functions probably devolved on that peeling of the skin, on the uncovering of the body's structure, on those ropes, spider webs, those limbs that embrace and wrap themselves around the silhouettes of men and women. Exposed in the foreground, they were to turn the attention away from the subjects they concealed behaviour which is quite natural in extreme or simply awkward situations. We all know such situations: someone makes an intimate confession in public - confused, he tries to cover his tracks by talking more loudly, pitching his voice higher, with a fixed, artificial smile.

Beksinski **ascribes** some other meanings to those dense works filled with veins, bones or spider webs: he **claims** that a flat, smooth surface simply irritates and bores him. This is supposed to be the cause of the drawings' density, of the laborious filling up of every bit of free space with something concrete, something visually attractive. What is more, he was to apply this principle to his entire creation, hence also to his painting. One day he admitted to one of his interlocutors during an interview: "... it is quite simply a need to paint something in every part of the picture, an impulse which is certainly common to many modern and past creative artists ... When I paint a nude I feel an overwhelming need to cover it either with writing, or with little veins, or various details which are pictorially interesting, among which you can also find that skin-drapery. When I paint a wall, I want the roughcast to peel off; when I paint an interior I want it to be covered with spider webs, I want a floor strewn with waste, rags, garbage and filth of all sorts. To my eyes a nice body, a smooth wall, a row of straight windows, a clean interior, a shining floor are and will remain the synonyms of BOREDOM."

This self-definition deserves to be reread. It gives the lie to, or at least tries to clear up a number of misunderstandings that have accumulated around more than one motif of this art of his, which has become smothered by the passions of intetpreters. Motifs which could be thought intellectual or artistic, and which are at times the result of coincidence. More than one figure, more than one accessory is the fruit of an accident in the game which the artist plays to fill up the space in his paintings.

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The year 1970 was the last year of exhibitions devoted exclusively to his drawings. In the following years Beksinski organised a few mixed exhibitions,

composed of paintings and drawings, but henceforward a growing place devolved to paintings. His last drawings date from 1973-74. (Beksinski began drawing again in 1988).

They barely resemble the first ones which, until 1968, were of modest dimensions and executed in pen and ballpoint. Since 1968 they have been large, averaging 40 in X 28 in, and are executed in charcoal. Strictly speaking they are paintings in black and white - works which differ from painting neither in form nor in subject. The charcoal technique allowed him an extended use of soft chiaroscuro in a "naturalist" manner. The charcoal pictures of Beksinski constitute one of the highest achievements of modern drawing. They show his rare skill in means of expression, which few artists have ever attained.

During the years 1965-66 Beksinski studied oil painting. It took him a long time to master this pictorial technique and to attain the degree of perfection to which he aspires in everything he does. He resolved to present his works in oil at the "Contemporary Gallery" in Warsaw in 1970, after as much as five years of studies. Organized by the untiring enthusiasts of his art, Mr and Mrs Bogucki (who were the first to discover his talent), the exhibition made a deep impression on the public, who at last saw the entire work of Beksinski. His oeuvre continued to provoke strong controversy and from then on was to divide people forever into his devoted followers and his sworn adversaries.

All through the seventies Beksinski exhibited his works several times, each time with increasing success. Very quickly he became one of the leading figures in Polish contemporary art. His works would now be sought by collectors, bought by museums and private artlovers. No longer did anybody doubt that his painting was a remarkable manifestation of the art of our times.

In 1978 one of the last great exhibitions of Beksinski's work (in the organization of which he personally participated), and also one of the last in Poland, took place in the "STU" theatre in Cracow. Henceforward the artist ceased to exhibit his paintings in public. Nevertheless the "Wahl Gallery" presented several of them in 1981 and in 1987. A collector of his paintings, Renzo Margonari, organized a few exhibitions in Mantua in Italy. Piotr Dmochowski presented the paintings of Beksinski in Paris, Metz, Dusseldorf and Antwerp in 1985, 1986, 1987, 1988 and 1989. But anyone interested in the works of Beksinski will find the best opportunity to see them in Poland, in all the big museums as well as in the museum in Sanok, his native town and in Czestochowa where a representative quantity is gathered. To justify his refusal to exhibit, Beksinski **claims** that he fears to have his paintings damaged or spoiled during various removals. Of course that is only part of the truth ... However it is certain that like every perfectionist **he attaches** great importance to the technical quality and solidity of his works. He **chooses** the

material which he has many times scrupulously tested and which he absolutely **trusts**: fibre-board. **He dips** it in various resins to guarantee its resistance and longevity. In the same way he personally **prepares** and executes simple handy frames of tested solidity. In this extreme care for the qualities of craftsmanship, technique and material in his works, he **claims** to find a glimpse of hope that they will survive and leave a trace of his presence on earth.

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When we look at his paintings we first of all have the impression of a spiritual and aesthetic attitude of exceptional coherence. Both in subject and form this art perceptibly turns to the past and refers to the great classic models. The solidity of his technique confirms this link with tradition and increases its value. Each of his paintings is a material proof of the nonconformity of his ideas, passions and artistic convictions, which are at odds with the artistic conceptions of the 20th century. That is not all: this art is also a challenge to the overhasty, bungled, evanescent workmanship of many so-called "modern" creations. In those terms the art of Beksinski appears as anachronistic. But it would appear that the time confirms that his ideas were well founded. After a long period of the supremacy of the avant-garde, a period of "instinct", "gesture", "spontaneity", artists are learning once again that Great Art is great work, great suffering, great skill in technique and technology and patient effort in craftsmanship. Professional solidity is becoming - or reasserting itself as - a quality in demand.

Finally the interior life of the artist consists of, as in the past, a field for artistic penetration. It may be that with his specific anachronism, Beksinski **is confirming** his role as a precursor of ideas which seem to be awakening.

However a closer examination of his work reveals that this anachronism is but a partial return to classical art. For in many ways Beksinski remains - and oh! how much so - a true son of his times.

First of all it is his demand for an artistic expression free of any external constraints. In fact according to the traditional conception, art was ancillary to patrons. Works of art were commissioned and paid for by them, and they were supposed to glorify the object of their workmanship, if not themselves. A commissioned work was something natural which bore no pejorative connotation. Only as late as the 20th century did the problem of totally

autonomous artistic creation reach such a scale. Of course the independent gesture of the artist has been known for a long time, but it was raised to the level of a consecrated principle only in the century that we live in. Beksinski refuses all commissions and even rejects simple suggestions: "For me it is enough to know that someone expects a picture from me and I find it impossible to work. As long as I am relaxed, as long as I feel that I can afford to spoil my painting, to stop halfway, to do what I want / .. ./ I find this activity agreeable and I could spend the rest of my life daubing away at my paintings. When I work on a commission - painting becomes a real burden," he declares in another interview.

This attitude is worth underlining since it constitutes part of a larger, more important whole, in which egotism, autonomy and spiritual exploration are interwoven. These three principles concern practically everything which in any way relates to the painting of Beksinski: the artist's attitude towards the world, towards art, towards his own activity, as well as towards what he paints and how he paints.

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In most cases the notion of isolation goes hand in hand with the choice of a road, of an existential and artistic program. Anchoretism has many different sources and manifests itself in diverse forms. The anchoretism of Beksinski is complete, since it has nothing to do with making a conscious choice or adopting a form of behaviour. It is a solitude in the midst of people and in the centre of art, a solitude which does not derive from any circumstances, but from the deepest structure of his soul. **He is** solitary in the middle of a great city, in his family, surrounded by the noises of the street and by the sounds of modern electro-acoustic devices. **He is** alone among his friends, among the buyers of his paintings and the journalists who **ask** him questions. And yet the person who knows only his legend would be surprised to meet the real man: this modern anchorite was not a voluntary hermit. His lifestyle, apparently very ordinary, was in no way a gesture of abandon and rejection, except perhaps for the meaningful fact that he keeps up no contact with the artistic milieu. For his solitude was of a totally different nature.

When in 1977 Beksinski left Sanok to settle in Warsaw it was generally felt as a break with his former voluntary seclusion. That is how, in full view of thousands of spectators accustomed to certain standards of behaviour, the "lone wolf of Sanok" entered the racket of a European metropolis. For those who willingly see in the behaviour of artists a tendency towards ritual, this change



of residence meant treason. The social code of 'savoir-vivre' gladly presents the artist as a touchy individualist taking refuge in his own universe, inaccessible to others, far-off and provincial. The great tumultuous cities seem reserved for modern avant-garde creators who are as boisterous and superficial as the places where they live. Warsaw in the life of Beksinski meant for many people the end of an anchor.

To think like that however was to misunderstand the essence of his solitude. A solitude which was by no means attached to the reality of a small town or of a metropolis: "The centre of the world is in the place where I stand," **he says**. In the mouth of another it would sound like a terribly presumptuous declaration. When Beksinski **says it, it is** only a statement of fact: wherever he **goes** his solitude **goes** with him. Settling in Warsaw changed nothing in his life or his creation. His artistic inversion proved a true attitude, unlike those people to whom every new circumstance in life inevitably constitutes a source of fresh inspiration. Beksinski's decision to live in the capital did not proceed from any ideological reasons, nor did he break off with his interior seclusion. It was a simple fact which resulted from the circumstances of life. Hence it remains an incident without any influence on the essentials.

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Since 1973-74 Beksinski has devoted himself exclusively to painting. He usually **employs** oil techniques, but has been aware of the advantages of acrylic for a long time. For those who look at them casually and judge them only by the objects depicted in them, these paintings do not change very much from one period to another. The same motifs reappear cyclically at irregular intervals: heads or silhouettes wrapped in a peeling spider-web skin, profiles of faces in forged helmets covered with various designs, crucifixions, burning cathedral houses, soaring objects, cadaverous creatures roaming about, figures of "kings" draped in fantastic robes and standing in tordly poses, landscapes of seas or prairies with motifs of solitary trees, tombstones or persons sitting in chairs. The accessories are many but they reappear more or less regularly. In terms of representation one could say that Beksinski's brush turns on almost fixed orbits.

This is not true for the way he paints, **which is** constantly evolving as the artist **grows** older and more experienced. Above all, it has been modified, thanks to his chosen techniques (oil, acrylic ...), the pigments he employs and the dimension he adopts for every painting. These technical considerations **have** at times a more determining influence on the solution of problems

concerning the construction or the choice of motifs than do recent spiritual or cultural events in the life of the artist or in the world around him.

Nevertheless his works always preserve the same relationship with reality: they are close to it, but they never turn into its straightforward reflexion. Beside the elements which give the impression of being painted from nature, there are others which present purely fantastic features. Here is an example: the hand of a man. Its normal appearance seems evident: a hand has five fingers. The fingers have fingernails. But with Beksinski this hand will by no means be realistic. It will always be slightly larger than the natural proportions would demand. The veins will seem a little too swollen for the hand's age and the effort it is making. The wrist and the forearm, however, are painted in an almost conventional manner. The artist will not mark the muscular structure, for what interests him to a greater extent is the gesture and the expression of the hand.

The reason for this is that Beksinski never **paints** from nature. Each object **assumes** its own proper form, invented by its creator, even though this object remains strongly based on its realistic and probable appearance. From this spring the specific features of this painting, which correspond to the interior universe of the artist: a strong impression of a faithful representation of nature followed immediately by the sensation of unreality. The sky of Beksinski, although it resembles the natural sky, is never a real sky. Even the clouds, so often represented by the artist, are only clouds which he has invented, though at first sight they seem photographically precise. The sky can be yellowish in one painting, ochre in another, or elsewhere, emerald, red, etc. But it is always identical: seemingly real, but oh, how fantastic ... Beksinski's tree is always the same as well. A leafless tree with thin bushy branches, at times bent by the wind which is always a violent wind and sweeps away every living and dead thing present in the painting. The surface of the land is most often scorched earth or a swamp with still pools of water, or else some undefined "base". It can be strewn with either bones, sheets of paper, or twisted entrails. When painting a house Beksinski never **depicts** a window or a doorway, a door with a doorknob, or a roof with a chimney. Instead of the window there will be a dark opening veiled with a spider web, and coming from within there will be tongues of fire. Instead of the door one will find a black orifice, leading nowhere. The bones and veins depicted in these paintings seem to come from anatomy textbooks. But even a cursory glance will reveal that they have strictly nothing to do with reality.

The striking resemblance between the exterior world and these visions entirely unconnected with it proves beyond doubt the dreamlike origin of this art. Indeed it is in dreams that we see a deformed world which nevertheless seems to us quite natural. In dreams our hands, which have five fingers each,

stretch out hundreds of them without surprising us. In dreams we stride about a hill in flames without getting burnt. Just as in dreams we walk across an empty field and although there is no mud, our legs refuse to carry us.

Beksinski certainly **accepts** the interpretation of his art through dreams, though his visions usually **make** their appearance in waking life. To arouse a vision which is later rendered on a panel of fibreboard, a moment of "second sight" suffices: for example a piece of paper falls to the ground, a tuft of hair trembles in the wind while a man alights from a tram. The commonest association, the simplest explanation for this painting is, with good reason, the influence of dreams. Beksinski explicitly **confirms it**: "I paint a lot, and it is possible that in the daytime I trigger those functions of the brain which favour dreams in the night. It was during childhood and youth that I had the most interesting dreams. I have painted, at most, two or three paintings directly inspired by dreams. Night-time dreams and daydreams share the same mechanism of free association. In psychoanalysis it makes no difference whether the patient relates an authentic dream or a fantasy invented from beginning to end - his psyche is encoded just as much in one as in the other."

Dreams are the key to the riddle of his paintings, even though the visions at their source originate in daydreams.

Dreams ... It is impossible not to think of surrealism. Especially since the artistic technique also brings it to mind. The comparison between the paintings of Beksinski and the work of Salvador Dali or Giorgio de Chirico seems evident. However Beksinski **declares** that to a large degree this is but an illusion: « ... If I have anything in common with surrealism, it is only the method of free association. I feel a closer link with 19th century painting than with surrealism. Of course it is possible to discern certain influences of surrealism in my painting, but I am indifferent to how it is labelled by the critics. »

But even if they were related, there would still be a fundamental difference between Beksinski's painting and surrealism. This difference lies deeper than appearances reveal, but also it is more fundamental. Namely the surrealists formed an ideological program for their art. This program obliged them to employ specific pictorial procedures. Hence the surrealists implemented, both in theory and practice, a model of art which was opposed to previous models such as "realism" and conventional rationalism. In order to fight their adversaries more effectively they had to consistently apply the rather simplified rules of inversion. Consequently, in their works a fish had to stand erect and as far from any water as possible, while a set of drawers had to come out from the neck of a giraffe. What the surrealists were aiming at was to fight realism with its nearest and most obvious opposite. It is clear that Beksinski **does** nothing

of the sort. First of all he was not fighting anyone or anything. His fishes lie on the sand, thrown out of the sea, and his people do not walk on their heads. When in the paintings of Beksinski we note different creatures, the origin of their presence has nothing to do with the realisation of a program aimed against rationalism. They are more likely to originate in the world of obsessions and the subconscious of the author.

"I clearly see rather the EXPRESSION of what will be painted than its precise material form. I have to discover this form in the painting even if it means transforming it several times. Hence I sometimes paint something unforeseen, because suddenly, in the chaos of the composition, in that "battlefield", I see something different which, like Rorschach ink-blot, becomes fascinating enough for me to put aside the original vision and keep it for another painting. What is more, I often tackle one subject several times, for I feel that it is not yet what I wanted to do. At times the original version is simply incomplete, since I sometimes hesitate over certain details. So I paint two or three more or less similar versions which nevertheless differ in certain respects. Sometimes many years separate these paintings, for in the meantime I paint other things. As a result I often paint, painted and will continue to paint the sea, planets and phenomena in the sky, blind eyes gazing into a void, light, doors, a road everything, discounting any symbolism that might be attributed to me with hindsight, that stays rooted in my mind and wants to reveal itself. »

Beksinski was the recorder of subconscious visions and the stage director of paintings. He was the recorder when **he reveals** the vision buried within him. He was the stage director when he **paints** it on the fibreboard. The first **gives** form to the impulse of the subconscious. The second **directs** the action of the will. The visionary **imposes** the subject. The stage director **turns** it into a work of art.

The neatness, the particular nature and the unique atmosphere of these paintings immediately draws attention. There are "agreeable", "nice" paintings despite the juxtaposition of colours and forms which could be felt as shocking. There are also "repulsive" ones whose atmosphere is heavy and uncongenial to contemplation. But the obsessional nature of certain images and the repetition of the most shocking motifs is no accident: it is a means of making the spectator familiar with them. The tireless reproduction of these images is a way of gradually softening their macabre appearance. In endlessly coming back to them, Beksinski **hopes** to accustom the spectator and to make him accept them without fear. Those who have lived with these pictures know that the artist was right: the exterior aspect of the anecdote and the horror very quickly disappear. What remains is a permanent sensation of beauty. One ceases to identify or notice the objects in the paintings, just as the horrors of war and the

physical suffering of the Crucifixion depicted in old paintings no longer arouse feelings of identification or surprise. As one sees the paintings of Beksinski again and again, as one lives in their permanent presence, they lose their outward appearance. With time the gaze of the spectators becomes more subtle and penetrates higher and deeper: "My efforts tend, or at least I think so, towards reaching the state where the object in a painting would not be identified or even noticed, just as one doesn't catch the sound of the wind outside the window. It would not be noticed, because in the consciousness of the spectator the object has - in a manner of speaking - melted into the picture during so many years, in such a great number of museums and reproductions that it has become an integral part of the picture. For example we are hardly ever capable of perceiving the true message of the Crucifixion. Of course I am speaking not of the mystic meaning, but of the exterior message, whose sheer horror would strike any European suddenly realising its full import," Beksinski was to say in a later interview.

Not to appal, but to paint beautiful paintings - that was the paradoxical desire of a man whose works are filled with accessories of death, decomposition and destruction. His goal was to reproduce them endlessly, to infinitely represent them, until the spectator gets used to them and no longer notices them, in the same way as the 19th century painters succeeded in filling their works with men dying from their wounds on battlefields, slaves being put to death, blood and corpses which, however, no longer shock the spectator and are not an obstacle to his direct appreciation of a beautiful painting.

He goes even further - the artist dreams not only of making the spectator forget the horror of the accessories but of making him forget their very existence. For when he paints shapes, what he would really like to show are lines and hues. When he **paints** objects and human figures he was in fact interested only in the forms. Yet the concession towards figuration did not necessarily facilitate the dialogue of the painter with the public. Beksinski would like the people to "breathe" his paintings. To accept them as one accepts colours, air, and light. But people never stop asking questions: Why does the woman have green hair? Or why is the car covered with blood vessels? The public would above all like to know what the paintings of Beksinski "mean". For his part he demands something which is probably impossible in our times: that people contemplate his paintings in the way that a child absorbs the world when it sees it for the first time. Let them forget about objects, let them cease to follow the interaction of the accessories, and above all let them renounce the quest for a meaning at all costs. He would like us to preserve the spontaneity of a child who is able to seize a frog without disgust, and not be surprised to see in his paintings coffins soaring in the air and blazing cathedrals with sensual mouths and windows for eyes.

"There is an old Chinese paradox", Beksinski **says** in an interview, "according to which we do not know if it is morning or evening when we wake. A far more probable theory is that it is in the evening that we wake, and during the day, when we are asleep, we are simply trying to understand an infinitesimal part of the nocturnal universe which is so vast and magnificent that it completely escapes the attention of our lowly minds, so obstinately intent on classifying and arranging everything. We remain gaping and spellbound like a child before an avalanche of incomprehensible details. And when we fall asleep, in our slumber off we go to work and build cities of stereotyped homes where we find ourselves living - or so it seems - in the morning, still fast asleep. We try to put some order into all these wonderful details and assign them systems of meaning so that our insufficiently lively minds can perceive them. Hence the literature we append to visions is all created with hindsight. Man is too expert at naming things, which is why he labours under the fond illusion that he has acquired the knowledge of all things. He looks at a cloud and says that it is condensed water vapour. He looks at a painting and says that it is a symbol of environmental pollution for in that painting fishes thrown out of the sea are lying on the beach. However we should as far as possible look at that painting and above all at the world in a more direct manner, as a Martian would look at a cow: with a fresh eye."

But we live in the 21st century which seems so rational to us, and we insist on seeing meaningful objects in the paintings of Beksinski; we want to see the answers to current problems.

Beksinski **refuses** to capitulate: "What is painted is never as literal to me as it is to the spectators who approach a painting with a dictionary in their hand: a tree - the symbol of life; green - the symbol of rebirth; black - the symbol of death ... A bird, a cow, a coin, a pitcher, grass, some excrement; for him they are all symbols. The mentality of the average European is crammed with all sorts of "trash" to the point that he can notice very little for himself / .. ./ He runs about with his dictionary which he ceaselessly consults in order to discover meanings. And since there is always something that does not fit, he blames it on the author."

Beksinski did not like symbolism. Just as he **dislikes** narration. He honestly **admits**: "I detest the expression: « this means ... ». What's painted should be nothing other than what one sees. "Nothing" should bring nothing to the mind."

In this way the search for certain mysterious hidden relations, supposedly existing between the objects and the human figures in these paintings, is completely futile. This painting does not offer any ideological message. It has

nothing to do with the social or political convictions of the artist. In the same way it tells no story. The rectangles of fibreboard filled with colours should be no more than windows onto another reality, the inner reality of the painter - a reality offered him by the blessing of dreams, visions, and imagination. A blessing which God or Nature offers to every man. The fact that people stop before these paintings and patiently examine them until they find a meaning probably tells us more about the spectators than about the painter. That great dustbin we call "the association of ideas" - into which the 19th century placed a goodly contribution gives everyone a chance to show off. If one made an experiment and placed in front of Beksinski's painting any number of spectators, one would not find two identical opinions on the presumed "message" of the artist. The reason is that there is no message. And if during contact with the paintings of Beksinski each spectator finds a different message, it is because he seeks an answer to the questions which cross his own mind and which are totally alien to Beksinski. No "discovery" can be considered as "right", since in the intentions of Beksinski there is none. The projection of the personal fears and convictions of the public while placed before a mirror would be the only result of this game.

It is true that the error is easily committed if one does not take care. This is the error of mistaking the exterior aspect of these paintings for the profound ambition of their creator. He strives to paint the Mystery. He is concerned with the mystery of the human psyche in state of non-rational "visitation" - the semi-mystic state of the inner accord of a man with himself. Since it is impossible to put it into words, that is to rationalize the irrational, it must be expressed through an atmosphere. Yet the latter must adopt the form of phenomena and objects. For the artist they are accidental and secondary, but they may well distract the spectator. Thus gliding from "Mystery" to mysteriousness, from the essential to the meaningful, the public will see in a particular painting the ruins of Warsaw, the obsession of Auschwitz or the ecological danger of water pollution after an atomic explosion. The painter feels perplexed when confronted with these interpretations, for he cannot follow every spectator and explain to him that the problem lies elsewhere. That is how the message received deviates from the message transmitted, so the numerous interviews which Beksinski has granted are just a waste of time. In any case the majority of spectators will continue to discover in these paintings only what appearances suggest: a narrative message, a recounted story or at best a series of literary or philosophical symbols. And even then it will be for the most part a « philosophy » in the popular style: "We and the eternity", "ecce homo" "the way the world is going", etc. It will probably take a long time before all this fades away and disappears in the process of being viewed and reviewed, and before the essential fact of this painting's mysticism and beauty shines through without the disguise of meaningful words. Until finally a dialogue "from soul to

soul" establishes itself between the artist and the spectator; an inarticulate dialogue of pure emotions.

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A complex relationship exists between the painting of Beksinski and music. The relation is strong, but it runs along winding paths. It results from an "addictive" need of Beksinski's to surround himself with sounds while he **works**. This need was inseparable from his personality and was an inherent part of his legend. The universe of music was for Beksinski perhaps a more natural environment than the reality of his flat, or of the street which he crosses. He was incapable of painting without hearing music, but - so he claims - he never **listens** to it when he was not painting. These two means of creative expression were united for him in an inextricable knot of mutual dependence. Any unwitting visitor who **comes** to his atelier at such a time was obliged to make an immediate retreat. The loudness of the music would literally drive him out. And yet to suspect Beksinski of drawing inspiration for his painting from music was only partly justified. It was equally superficial to suspect him of entering a state of ecstasy due to the volume of the sounds.

In fact the explanation lies elsewhere and artist has often spoken of it himself; music is the only wholly and thoroughly irrational, undescrivable and, in its own way, "metaphysical" art. Its abstract and direct nature makes it possible to be transported by its light and shade without feeling the need to "understand". Its impressive atmosphere takes man through every state of spiritual satisfaction. Music enables our imagination and our human sensitivity to float in the regions of intimate shamelessness without our having to justify - even to ourselves - our innermost feelings, a piece of sentimental kitsch, or childish satisfactions. But music is also capable of expressing, far more completely than can brush and colours, that direct communication between being and soul, between reason and Mystery.

It is no coincidence that Beksinski **affirms** that he wants to construct his paintings as one constructs symphonies. Their architecture **fascinates** him to such an extent that he **indicates** it as his source of inspiration. The evocative force of musical poems is indeed close to his art. His paintings create analogous feelings to those aroused by romantic symphonies. But the "romanticism" of his painting is not a sublime caress of the soul. It rather represents passion and pathos, mystic terror, and mysterious reflection.

It is clear, then, that Beksinski would rather listen to 20th century music than to any other. Quite significantly he **cannot** stand baroque music as it was too elaborate, "rational", and based on the harmonic structure of a canon. The



music he **likes** begins with Schubert and ends with the early works of Schonberg. His preferences continue into the 20th century, but they concern only those composers who refer to the tendencies of the past. His favourite composers are Wagner, Mahler, Brahms, Richard Strauss, Bruckner, Tcnelkowsky, Scriabine, Sibelius, Karlowicz, Franck and Schmitt and, among the contemporaries Honegger, Shostakovitch, Hindemith, Frank Martin. He also **listens** to "Pop" music when it is based on a "heavy" rhythm and on "soul". His collection of records was inexhaustible and **includes** several thousands of items, some of them unique.

The analogy between music and painting constitutes another, though indirect proof of the quasi-abstract (despite the screen of figurative accessories) nature of Beksinski's art. Since the "meaning" does not mean anything, since the artist can change all the elements that go to make up a painting and replace them with others, there is nothing to stop us seeing a red sky as a red spot rather than interpreting it as a city supposedly on fire.

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Beksinski **derives** intense pleasure from the collection of his own paintings. He **likes** to surround himself with his paintings. He **covers** the walls of his studio with them as if with wallpaper, he **places** them in the remaining rooms and hangs them in the hall. After a time he **forgets** their faults and **finds** it agreeable to live in a familiar world filled with what he **calls** "his pets".

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Those who search for meaning in the paintings of Beksinski readily charge the artist with a taste for cruelty. Those skinned bodies, skeletons and grave-yards, closed eyes and pierced skulls appear to them as the scenery of a "theatre of horror". They blame the artist for practicing the art of facile shock. And yet the artist was right when he **retorts** that a dream does not hurt that it is not cruel. He **feels** a deep revulsion at the sight of misery, humiliation and death: "I hate books and anything concerning the Occupation. With me it is a rule not to watch Japanese films, for I feel sick just at the sight of harakiri," he said in one of his interviews. What he **paints** and how he **does** it "results neither from cruelty nor from a desire to impress the public ... For me a painting is something very far from reality ... It conveys an imaginary reality. A dream can be frightening but it is not cruel as a photographic document can be. There are probably people

who associate blood in a painting with blood flowing from a wound. Perhaps I'm deviating from the rule, professionally speaking, but I can swear with absolute responsibility for my words that for me it is only the question of well or badly applied paint that dominates my paintings and nothing more."

This declaration is not surprising if one remembers Beksinski's attitude towards photography, which he had once practiced. Even then he did not present reality as it is. He rather created another reality which he filled with elaborate images, more artificial than realistic. Of course painting offers richer possibilities of transforming reality or creating a new one. Hence we should not doubt Beksinski's words when he affirms that the "theatre of horrors" puts on its plays in the imagination of the spectators and has nothing to do with the intentions of the artist. However no one can help it, alas, and people will continue to be afraid of dreams, just as they will always be terrified by images of death, whether they see it in photographs of dead soldiers or in the form of a red stain on a stretched canvas. The battle against "literary" interpretations of Beksinski's paintings is often reminiscent of Don Quixote tilting against windmills.

It is true that his art contains an atmosphere of impending death, of extreme moments, the lambency of states close to destruction. Something akin to a subcutaneous cancer gnaws the landscape, the people and the bodies. Hence Beksinski's tendency towards modernism and secession is not surprising. The decadence expressed in the paintings of Moreau, Beardsley or Bôcclin is in a way close to the spirit of his creations. Nevertheless, Beksinski was that rare thing, a remarkably lucid man. He was conscious of the dangers of a pure and simple return to the decadent attitude, despite the fact that such an outlook could be justified. Well aware that certain analogies inevitably end up as spiritual kitsch, he **conceals** his attitude behind a mask of mockery, grotesque, and even parody.

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Like all men with truly complicated characters, Beksinski **likes** clear classifications, transparent definitions, indisputable decisions. Because his introverted nature **compels** him rather to descend into the depths of his "self" than to fritter away his energies in hundreds of habitual gestures, he **rejects** many forms of "normal" life in order to concentrate only on those he **considers** to be the most important. The fact that he did not participate in the life of the artistic milieu, that he **solicits** neither titles nor medals, that he did not go to the theatre or to other painters' exhibitions, could result from eccentricity. In truth it was an interior choice and a philosophy of life.

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The hundreds of intersecting lines which can be traced in Beksinski, both the man and the painter, join together to answer the fundamental question: what should one follow - the heart or the reason? "In my particular case the borderline does not run along the alternative: representational or non-representational, tradition or avant-garde, painting or extra-pictorial means of expression. It lies elsewhere and at the same time it passes through the whole history of art that I know. It is the division between cold art and ardent art, intellectuel and romantic art, and so on. One could go on multiplying the epithets. I feel close to ardent, romantic, expressive art. Never mind the language it speaks," said Beksinski. On this side of the dividing line are situated not only romanticism and expressionism, but also mysticism, mystery and madness.

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Finally let us say what is obvious: the work of this painter, so rich, fascinating and profound, whose perfection and visions are at times breathtaking, is made up of anxieties, loneliness and the consciousness of nonentity. For when someone has the courage to enter the depths of existence where we are haunted by phantoms, he will find before him the images of Plenitude and Emptiness. Few people are given access to this position. It exists beyond time and space, for it only appears in the place and at the moment that it chooses for its confidants. To these few Beksinski belongs.

He was in the habit of telling two stories with a similar gist. One is taken from "Don Quixote", the other from Kafka's "Trial". In the first Don Quixote makes a cardboard helmet and strikes it with his sword to test its resistance. Of course the helmet falls to pieces. The knight never tests his helmet again. The second story is the one which the priest tells to Joseph K. in the famous scene at the end of the "Trial". It is about a man who waits at the gates of the Law and of the guardian who prevents him from entering. When the man dies after waiting all his life in vain, he learns that this gate was meant for him alone, and that now it will be forever closed. These two stories have the same moral. They describe the fragility of life and the power of death. They represent the illusion man nourishes about his own existence. Since Nothingness awaits us behind every door and life is but a Great Waiting Room, an Unfulfilled Hope, all that remains for us to do is to patiently wait before the gates of the Law until death comes, and to produce useless things like cardboard helmets. Hence to create art is to conceal the horror of death, by making a Beautiful Mask which keeps the artist from falling into madness.

"Painting keeps me enclosed in a well-ordered zone of obvious affairs. The

consciousness that all I do is of no importance, that I could just as well raise parrots or lie down and stare at the ceiling, does not hinder me in my daily efforts to become more perfect, it does not stop me being irritated when someone damages one of my paintings, and it does not prevent me constructing solid frames which will make my painting last. » Or making cardboard helmets...

Knowing that the feeling of absurdity and of nothingness is always present in the consciousness of the painter, no one will be surprised at what he **paints**. For he only **paints** what the Other World represents in This World. If man is submerged in nothingness, as Sartre wrote, and if women give birth on tombstones, as Beckett put it, then it all comes down to one thing: One should give birth on tombstones at least for the sake of having something to put into those tombs.

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Zdzislaw Beksinski was assassinated the 22 February 2005

by Tadeusz Nyczek (Translated and adapted by Piotr Dmochowski)