

This text is part of the Introduction to the album "Beksinski 2", published by BOSZ in 2002.

By Wieslaw Ochman

Zdzislaw - an Artist and a Friend

Before I met Zdzislaw Beksinski I already knew his paintings. The encyclopedia entry "Zdzislaw Beksinski" occupies some 60 words and does not define the mysteries and meanings either of the man or of his works. I don't believe any painted art, and definitely not the art of Beksinski, can be adequately described in words. You have to discover this art for yourself. The perfect co-ordination of the form and subject of his works bears a metaphysical effect on the observer, and it is difficult to express the essence of that impact in words. Fascinated by Beksinski's works, I conducted a visual experiment. I arranged a series of reproductions by old masters - Velasquez, Titian, Rembrandt, Bosch, and a few others closer to our own times - side by side with some reproductions of Beksinski. I wasn't interested in comparing them, although I'm sure Beksinski shares a joint feature with all of them - a faultless workshop. What I wanted to do was to confirm my belief that Beksinski's art has a deeper, more complex genesis than is claimed by the ambient opinion that his roots go back chiefly to Surrealism. It was clear that the attractive, but rather illustrative character of the works of Salvador Dali was out of place with the profound metaphysics of Beksinski's oeuvre. The power of Beksinski's impact emerged very suggestively from my juxtaposition. The gravity of his ascetic form, sophisticated colour schemes and harmony make his works perfectly concordant and in line with creations universally acknowledged as outstanding. I realised with great satisfaction that it was a good thing Beksinski was alive in our times. In the old days, great artists painted chiefly "on commission". Now, when I am more familiar with Beksinski the man and the artist, I know that even a supreme hierarchy could never force him to do anything "on commission". What he values most is freedom and creative freedom, and no kind of commissioning him for a specific subject could ever be a success. So if Beksinski had been a painter in those bygone days, he would have been painting for himself, which is what he is in fact doing today, too. The fact that his pictures have won universal recognition no doubt pleases him, although he is one of those artists who never goes in for compromise, and definitely not with respect to himself. He sees a picture's beauty in a singular way. For him a beautiful painting, if we are to use the term, is one which has been impeccably made. Hardly ever in conversations with Beksinski are the subjects of his works discussed. A rather superficial interpretation of his works concentrates on the purely anatomical reading of the components of its form. For

me his works are a reproduction of sculpture. Perhaps thanks to the power in these pictures I tend to notice the anatomical aspects of his figures less than I do their painterly descriptions. In the period when fantastic landscape were often the subject of his works, Beksinski also described the situation. There was something mysterious, totally incomprehensible but fascinating, going on in the range and space of his paintings. He evoked an atmosphere that was difficult to describe but coherent none the less. He was painting in a wider manner at the time, using "planes of colour". They were neighbourhoods of colour in a remarkable taste and harmony.

Finally the computer came into Zdzich Beksinski's life. He acquired a colossal amount of knowledge on the subject, amazing and sometimes even embarrassing the specialists. That special character trait of his emerged, which makes him try to master whatever interests him as thoroughly as possible. We did not have to wait long for this artist continually in search of new forms of expression to use the computer to accomplish his visions and to create something which in my opinion is fundamentally different from typical "computer graphics". Beksinski exploits the potential offered by the computer, but he is never influenced by the programs it provides. He has worked out his own language of artistic expression, and the computer is merely the physical means to manifest the artist's imagination. Everyone will agree that these works are "genuine Beksinski". Zdzislaw is not sure how he should treat his computer creations. As unique items, or should they be numbered like short series, like graphics? Here again he has his doubts, because of course they're not graphics. That's just like Beksinski: honest and responsible to himself and his prospective customers.

At one time there came a radical change in the painterly execution of his pictures. He started creating something like a spatial network of sophisticatedly constructed lines, giving the impression of three-dimensionality. There was no question of any chiaroscuro in this. He also limited his palette of colours to three or four, and applied black and various shades of grey in a sensational manner. The story, of which there had been not much before, disappeared from his work altogether, and one element emerged as the subject of the picture. A cross, a figure, or two figures joined together in a weird but still imaginable embrace, a piece of architecture, a face, a cathedral, monumental and domineering female figures marching straight at the observer.

When I ask Zdzich how his pictures arise, thinking of the subject, since I can see the painterly solutions for myself and sometimes am lucky enough to be able to follow the various stages of their creation, he says that in fact whenever he begins at his easel he never really knows what the end result will be like. Of course what is meant are the dreams and visions, but I'm not sure they are the ultimate factor deciding about the shape of the picture. Beksinski paints because it is "his daily bread". He exists through painting. He treats it as a form of existence, and he doesn't really care if people see it as the effects of the work of an artistic genius. The astonishing phenomenon of this art cannot be explained by a perfect workshop or unique subject-matter. I think that in these works there is an energy that makes them attract the eye and draw the attention. They are fascinating both for adults and

young people alike. Beksinski the artist has one great asset. He is not after originality at any price, he does not worry, like thousands of other artists, about coming up with something which will interest the media. In this day and age popularity sells extremely well. What is amazing is precisely that Beksinski achieved fame and success in art thanks to the quality of his work, bypassing the battlefields of visual aesthetics and nihilism, which are often conjured up for special events. He pursues his own painting far from all the manifestos and the isms. He has his ardent admirers, but there are also those who reject his painting. This only goes to show the power of this art. I suspect that Zdzislaw is aware that he is creating a timeless and universal art. I suspect it, because I don't think that any discussion on this subject could lead him to an unambiguous assessment of his own achievements. He must certainly be aware that only an authentic, absolutely faultless and unique oeuvre has any chance of withstanding the test of time, the severest, most objective verifier and judge of aesthetics. The problem of time and existence in it crops up very often in our discussions.

Beksinski doesn't fit the conventional image of artists at all. He is exceptionally modest and - I don't hesitate to say this - distrustful of people. Maybe this is due to the fact that in his heart of hearts he is a pessimist, although in his immediate relations with people he always gives the impression of serenity and composure. He keeps his pessimism to himself, though it must have some sort of effect on his decisions and appraisal of a situation. On the other hand he is a person of unquestionable sensibility, continually giving his support to a variety of charity campaigns and institutions, and donating his pictures for charity auctions.

He loathes official meetings, crowds, or flashy events. It is extremely rare for him to be induced to come to the opening of his own exhibition, and every time he leaves his house for such an occasion it's a big experience for him. This would indicate that Beksinski has his established lifestyle, and excursions of this type beyond his own beat distract him in his work and everyday affairs. When a round birthday was looming ahead for him, he became worried at the mere thought that he could be celebrating it with some kind of official or national forms of recognition. At home he always receives his visitors wearing what he likes best - jeans and a shirt, and the very thought of having to put on a jacket and tie, followed by the further consequences of having to receive the distinction makes his stomach turn. On the other hand he enjoys giving interviews and answering difficult and personal questions.

There are no chance occurrences in Beksinski's behaviour. It seems he can't spare the time for superfluous activities. Perhaps he wants to record his presence within the bounds of existence as effectively as he can. With his painting he's already earned himself a place in history; while the computer is no doubt a good place to register and store his achievements.

When I was singing in the Washington Opera, the album of Beksinski's works came out. I bought a few copies and during the last performance gave them to my colleagues as a farewell gift. All of them without exception were amazed at the quality and nature of these works. One, looking at a sombre and beautiful picture said, "I wonder if this man can laugh." I replied that he had a tremendous sense of

humour and a keen wit, that his attitude to himself and to life was somewhat ironic, but that he loved life, and if there was a chance to win an extra hundred years on the lottery he'd definitely be playing regularly and hoping to win.

I have to admit that Zdzislaw astonishes me with his knowledge, not only on painting. Our discussions on the visual arts always inevitably digress into purely technical matters. It's never a question of artistic elation or inspiration, but rather of the rationality in a painter's ideas.

Music plays an enormous role in Beksinski's life, it's everywhere in his house. His collection of recordings says a lot about its owner. In addition he knows a lot about music; his knowledge allows him to converse freely on a variety of topics. He knows his composers and their works from the Baroque to the present-day ones who are known only to a handful. His opinions on music are very concrete and convincing.

Beksinski definitely has a complex personality, but at the same time he is an excellent conversationalist and a superb friend. In none of his conversations have I ever heard any critical remarks by him about the work of other artists.

Although his work gives the impression of settling accounts with eternity and being an attempt to "tame" the world's greatest mystery, Beksinski is close to life and people. Close to the world, but not to the world of TV and the papers, which doesn't interest him much. He has his own world... I've never seen any newspapers in his house. Either he reads through them quickly and gets rid of them immediately, or he has no use for them, as the outside world, particularly politics, don't interest him very much. So how come he is so well briefed about everything? Probably from "the world's biggest dustbin," as he sometimes describes the Internet. He must certainly be feeling lonely after the loss of his wife Zofia and son Tomek, but he is not alone. I remember Zosia as a quiet, slender and attractive woman with beautiful eyes. At the time she was ill: aware of the situation she was brave, and every time I saw her my admiration for her courage and determination rose. For a few years Zdzich's life was like sitting on top of a volcano. On the one hand there was Zosia, the hours of whose life were running away faster than anybody else's; and on the other there was Tomek, a charismatic promoter of young avant garde music and an excellent translator of film scripts (Monty Python), whose wish it was to terminate his life when he wanted to. Only after his loss did I realise how good his translations were. He not only translated the texts, but transmitted the atmosphere as well, which must have been much more complicated. He was certainly a well-educated, extremely intelligent person, with a tremendous sense of humour.

I always leave the house in ulica Sonaty wiser, not only having seen what Zdzisiaw is working on, but also enriched by a lot of new information in a variety of fields.

Whenever I phone Beksinski, I ask how he is.

"Well, I'm alive and moving about like a fellow in his advanced years," he says.

"And what are you doing?" I ask.

"I'm sitting in front of the computer trying to do something," he replies, "but this computer's slow, I should get a new one, but to do that I'd need to paint something.

Only once I buy a better one it'll already be out of date, because somewhere in the world someone will have come up with an upgraded model, so I'll have to upgrade as well, and as you know, I'm not selling any of my computer works."

"But you're painting?" I continue.

"Yes, but in the morning, when the light's good."

"What are you painting?"

"Now, that I don't know. We'll wait and see when I finish it."

So Beksinski's works sometimes come from a ready vision, sometimes from a dream, and sometimes from the artist's "wandering about" on the board.

A woman journalist once asked me what Beksinski was like. "A genius in painting," I said, "whose works were fascinating in the 20th century and will go on being fascinating in the 21st and later centuries."

In addition he's an ordinary person but mysterious like his paintings. His painting can't be translated into the language of reality, because there's some sort of mysticism about it, in the sense of the impact it makes on the imagination. Beksinski has his mysteries, an explanation of which might perhaps be found in his paintings, but personal references are of no significance in the reception of this art. What counts is the impression it makes, and anyone who has seen Beksinski's work will certainly never forget it.

A subject which sometimes crops up in our conversation is the meaning of his works. Beksinski has consistently refused to be drawn into making comments on this issue, claiming that his works have no symbolic or moral sense. I agree with this, since Zdzislaw is in no way either a moralist or a symbolist. However, since, according to J.L. Borges, "Intelligence is closer to doubting than to nodding in agreement," everyone has the right to their own interpretation of what they see. I shall therefore insist that each of Beksinski's pictures has a meaning, at least for its recipient. Zdzislaw says that when he paints he does not try to communicate some meaningful idea. He paints a picture that suits his imagination of the work's nature. The artist doesn't have to know how his work will influence his recipients. Although I'm not too fond of intellectual and philosophical interpretations of paintings, when I think of Beksinski's works I come to the conclusion that by creating an atmosphere of horror, or sometimes of the grotesque, this artist is building up an illusion which is perhaps a border station between existence in reality and the passage into non-existence or, if you will, into eternity.

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