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Zdzislaw Beksinski - About the artist

By Tomasz Grylewicz

Many Faces of Beksinski's Art - Analysis

The work of Zdzislaw Beksinski may be sub-divided into two periods different in character and duration: his Avant Garde period, which lasted merely a few years, and his second period, in which the artist has been developing his own image, characteristic of his art and recognisable to his recipients. An architect by education, after three years of practice Beksinski quit the profession to devote himself to the visual arts. His decision to enter on a career in the arts coincided with the political thaw of October 1956, which in the arts in Poland - after the previous spell of Social Realism and isolation - brought an enthusiastic reception of the Avant Garde from all over the world. Beksinski joined in the contemporary art trend, and soon earned success and made a reputation for himself, especially in experimental photography and sculpture, in which - alongside his plaster casts - he used untypical materials, such as metal and wire, to build structures delicately balanced on the border between pure abstraction and allusion, frequently distant, to the shape of the human body. This was quite a common phenomenon in that period, within the framework of informal abstraction, and also within modern abstract sculpture.

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The 1960's just as for many of the recent protagonists of hot abstraction, brought a radical switch in the work of Beksinski towards an art trend described in the Polish terminology as metaphorical painting. In the global art the term usually applied to this kind of art is Fantastic Realism, since albeit the scenes presented in it are painted realistically, yet the reality is totally unreal, as if from a world of dreams or hallucinations. Beksinski started to create first drawings and later paintings which were overtly figural and visionary in nature with a strong element of Expressionism: a characteristic of his mature work.

In his drawings made after 1960 there is a palpable fascination by the human figure in scenes full of violence and sex, which was characteristic of the entire movement called the nowa figuracja active in that decade. But his way of presenting the human body started to depart more and more from its real appearance, and Beksinski became more and more fascinated by ugliness: skin that was decomposing and separating from its underlayers, an exaggerated presentation of the network of veins and nerves, bone structure.

In his chronologically later period as a painter alongside the human being, or rather its spectre or corpse, there now appeared new motifs which, putting it briefly, expressed the concept of vanitas, the vanity of the material world, which is doomed to death and decomposition. Each of Beksinski's pictures seems to be saying, 'memento mori: remember thou shalt die,' and the message is especially forceful in his representations of the most widespread religious symbol in our civilisation: the crucified figure. In Beksinski's pictures the Crucified Man, too, has succumbed to the destructive force of time, since all that remains of his body is a trunk without a head or lower limbs, hanging from deformed arms.

This invoking of the idea of vanitas situates Beksinski within an extremely broad tradition, deriving not only directly from Surrealism, which gave birth to Fantastic Realism; but it also linking him with the Late Middle Ages, the times of the work of Grünewald and Hieronymus Bosch; with the Mannerism of the Brueghels; with Baroque; and above all with Romanticism and Symbolism, with the works of Arnold Böcklin and Alfred Kubin. Beksinski paints vast expanses of wilderness or boundless stretches of billowing sea, dramatically convoluted vortices of clouds over the horizon; mysterious burial-grounds and ruins;

Gothic cathedrals structured as if of bone or built of dry, twisted boughs; shipwrecks; skulls, skeletons, wolves, nocturnal scenes; the glow of moonlight etc. But he penetrates even more profoundly into the world of unreal reality than was possible in the art of the nineteenth century. His visions become more individual, typical only of his own personal visions, of his own individual style.

His scenes, which might even seem quite likely, are marked by a spectral deformation. Beksinski is capable of endowing an ordinary setting with a grotesque atmosphere, achieving a demonic effect of alienation.

Beksinski's visionary painting took on its full shape in the 1970's. This does not mean stagnation. His creativity has been evolving all the time and undergoing transformation in the subsequent decades. The 1990's brought another significant transformation within his permanent paradigm of style and content. He sublimated his expressive means more and more. He reduced his motifs and signs, concentrating on the figures and faces, mutated and made unreal. As always, he was interested in the structure of the body surface, treated almost always autonomously, however, separately from the inner construction. His third dimension, perspective depth, was reduced to a plane, a smooth background in silvery greys. A specific kind of decorativeness appeared.

Every artist has some sort of image, some sort of vision that fascinates and terrifies him. Such an image lurks deeply hidden at the bottom of the layers of his sub-conscious, closely guarded from the light of day, since it is too personal, too sensitive. This applies especially to those artists who, using the world of their inner imagination, paint fantasy. Their rudimentary, traumatic visions are materialised in their works in forms artistically processed and adapted to such an extent that their original meaning is neither clear nor legible to recipients. Sometimes however the artist reveals just slightly more of the mystery surrounding his visions; sometimes this happens in those of his works which are not typical in terms of form, in which the elements of aesthetic transformation have been reduced to a minimum, while the pictorial content has been presented more unambiguously and explicitly. Thus they may constitute a specific kind of key to understanding a given artist's work, providing the symbols and motifs in them recur in other works

by him in an artistically more sublimated shape.

In two of Beksinski's 1968 heliotypes there are some naked figures: a man hanging from a post and a beautiful woman who is torturing him, her face covered by a scarf or a wisp of hair. There exists a direct narrative relation between the two figures. In the first picture the woman is pushing a sharp object into the man's side; in the second one his dead body hangs motionless, and the woman holds the sharp object she has just taken out. These two small works are distinct from the background of Beksinski's graphics and drawings by their realism, and especially through the magical effect of the three-dimensionality in the idealised treatment of the very sensuous, youthful female nude, as contrasted with the cumbersome man.

The figure of a beautiful woman often symbolises death. An example of this is offered by Jacek Malczewski's Thanatos series. On the other hand the archetypal association of death with eroticism, and the elements of masochism and misogyny suggest links with the Polish graphics artists and masters of drawing of the interwar period, especially Bruno Schulz. These works relate not only to a strictly erotic content. The figure of the hanging man will return in his numerous presentations of the Crucified, which perform the function of a metaphor for the artist's fate - a typical feature of Expressionism in the wide sense of the term.

We should recollect here that Beksinski does not like the content of his work being too concretely analysed. Although the presentational layer tends to be extremely developed in his works, he never fits them out with literary titles, as if ostentatiously, as his forebears, the Surrealists, did. That is why the symbolism and significance of his works may be even more elusive. Rather the recipient is immersed in a specific, sombre atmosphere, instead of deciphering particular visual signs and symbols. In this sense Beksinski's art is asemantic, in compliance with the artist's declarations. However, at the bottom there are the archetypes, profoundly hidden in his sub-conscious, which express man's most primitive impulses: fear of death, decomposition, and ugliness, and fascination by physical beauty and eroticism.

Tomasz Gryglewicz

Professor Tomasz Gryglewicz is an art historian. He has been a fellow of the Jagiellonian University Institute for the History of Art since 1973, and the Institute's Director in 1996-1999. Since 1995 he has been Head of the Department of Modern Art , a distinguished connoisseur of contemporary art, author of the books Grotoska w sztuce polskiej XXw. (The Grotesque in Polish Twentieth-Century Art), Kraków, 1984; and Malarstwo Europy Srodkowej 1900-1914 (Central European Painting, 1900-1914), as well as of numerous publications on late 19th- and 20th-century painting. He is also an art critic, and a member of AICA.

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