

BEKSIŃSKI AND HEAVY METAL: A SURREAL LOVE STORY

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AUGUST 17, 2015

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Heavy metal as an art is a patchwork collage cobbled together from myriad influences. To most, it is music birthed from the pangs of blues filtered through the larger-than-life presence of arena rock. As a visual medium, it is thunder and lightning, a disguised fool in motley traipsing on Shakespeare's grand stage for the amusement of a rapt audience. As a philosophy, it is an ardent path of enlightenment embraced antithetically by those seeking excess and simplicity alike. Metal is a rich medium that has taken the very best and the very worst from Tolkien, Nietzsche, Dali, Leary, and Danto. It is a left-hand path whose rigor and landscape are shaped both by the traveler himself and by the pilgrims that went before. Today we explore another progenitor to the grand heritage of heavy metal. Today we discuss the influence of Zdzisław Beksiński.

Art is a reflection. Visual media often refracts the inner machinations of the soul when viewed by another artist. A stirring piece of art, like a poignant selection of music, may say much without words. Is it any wonder then that metal musicians are often inspired by striking pieces of art and use these pieces as thematic bases for their music? Few artists, however, may claim as wide a breadth of influence on the genre we know and love as Zdzisław Beksiński. The Polish artist, born in February of 1929, is most widely known for the infernal, tormented landscapes he painted during one of the distinct

periods of his career. However, there is much more to the artist's oeuvre, and his work is often broken into four segments. The first segment saw him dabbling in surrealist sculptures and photography while working as a construction worker up until the early 1960s. After settling into a certain aesthetic cradle which most of his work would adopt, he began painting. His first painting segment, spanning from the early 1960s to the mid 1980s, is easily his most famous and characterized by the fantastic, surreal visions that would inspire metal musicians the world over. In the mid 1980s, Beksiński sought to distill his work into the perfection of form and crafted his own signature style in the process. He ended his artistic career by experimenting with digital photography and manipulation in the 1990s. Sadly, Beksiński's life was taken when his caretaker's teenage son, angry over the fact that Beksiński would not loan him money, stabbed him to death.

Beksiński's art is best described as apocalyptic. He uses a powerful sense of detail to highlight surreal, uncanny forms that leer and jeer in inhuman fashion. It is no wonder then that so many metal artists, especially those trading in the more extreme and blasphemous elements, would find kindred spirits in the warped images the painter conjured. Interestingly, Beksiński has stated that some of his art was meant to convey humor; although his subjects seemed to be outpourings of inner turmoil, the artist refrained from releasing anything too personal, even going so far as to burn a number of paintings in the late 70s. The world is a grim, ugly place; Beksiński understood that, and perhaps the humor is found in embracing and choosing to live within a fallen world.

Khthoniik Cerviiks - *Heptaedrone* (2014)



For the release of their debut demo on the inimitable **Iron Bonehead Records**, German black/death alchemists bedecked *Heptaedrone* with an altered version of a 1973 Beksiński painting. This piece is easily one of the artist's most recognizable works and has been used on a number of different album covers. Most notable about the painting's use here is that it has been washed in a deep red, perhaps to indicate looming fear and ravenous decay. The original is hardly less imposing, though. The painting is primarily concerned with positioning a crawling, vaguely-arachnoid and potentially wounded humanoid in the foreground against a burning vista in the background. The collapsing structures vanish into a vista of smoke and flame. Perhaps the crawler is a survivor, a lone scavenger seeking shelter after the fall.

I'm uncertain if the band knowingly selected an altered version of the painting with focus placed more on the crawler than on the inferno along the horizon. However, the red hue fits the thematic purpose of the band. Khthoniik is derived from the Greek word [khthon](#) and implies a location beneath the soil, deep within the firmament. The addition of Cerviiks then seems to indicate a sort of terrestrial womb, but the spiraling, swirling riffs and barbaric vocals on the album imply not a glorious birth but a rotting, barren mother caught in her death throes. Each song is another lament of Gaia, dripping with blood and rage, as the percussion roils and shifts like the tectonic plates in a final cataclysm. Perhaps we are the crawler, attempting to eke out some meager existence before all life is subsumed by the darkness.

Blood of Kingu - *Sun in the House of the Scorpion* (2010)



Blood of Kingu, a band that should be familiar to readers of this blog, used one of Beksiński's untitled paintings from 1977 as the cover for their second full-length. The art, featuring an imposing lupine creature walked by an uncannily humanoid figure, is one of the most iconic images of Beksiński's first painting cycle. This phase in the artist's career, typified by fantastical, apocalyptic landscapes dotted with obscene detail, also served as a vehicle for the techniques with which he experimented during his first artistic phase when he busied himself with sculptures. Painted figures were typically marred by injuries or obscured by bandages or other shrouds; shadows obfuscate everything. Noteworthy in this painting is Beksiński's infamous use of texture. You can almost feel the rot and decay in this painting through your screen while the wolf's bristled fur and the tree's thorny branches scrape against your delicate skin.

Like the artwork, *Sun in the House of the Scorpion* is a piece characterized by deep, arcane foreboding. Every element of the music, like the jagged textures and angles of the painting, warn you of a mysterious, devastating power. Tracks like "Those that Wander Amongst the Stars" and "Morbid Black Dreams Bringing Madness" leak unease like the noxious vapors pluming about the perverse tower in the background. Even the lunar elements align. All of the music is characterized by Roman Saenko's shamanic drones and infernal growls, and listeners could easily picture these profane incantations vomiting forth from the mouth of the gnarled man in the painting. There is an eldritch

power to Blood of Kingu's music, one that lurks in Beksiński's forbidden landscape. You have been warned.

Wolok - *Servum Pecus* (2006)



Black metal eccentrics highlighted the offbeat nature of their first full-length with an insidious Beksiński painting from 1980. The piece, though firmly grounded in the fantastical depictions of the his latter painting career, displays the artist's emerging obsession with accentuating a single form in his compositions. By framing the subject, an unholy maelstrom of bone and limb, within the context of a livable space, Beksiński dichotomizes the unorthodox with the natural. Details seem to incorporate elements of religious iconography and human anatomy, perhaps hinting at a battle for the soul and the complexity of the metaphysical.

This unorthodox nature and systemic deconstruction is at the heart of *Servum Pecus*. Songs follow nonlinear paths, and the vocals coalesce amid washes of noise. "Phallus Absconditus" employs an unnatural tone to warp and augment the atmosphere, and "Mankind Euthanasia" opens with a bizarre twisting of notes to corrupt and alienate the regular black metal elements. The entire album is drenched in uncertainty, much like the grey tone through which the painting on the cover is filtered. When it comes to the mores of black metal, nothing is true on *Servum Pecus*, only that which is permitted.

Antestor - Omen (2012)



The album cover for Antestor's *Omen*, their first release in seven years, is adorned with an untitled Beksiński painting from 1983. This painting was clearly crafted during Beksiński's transition from the fantastical, nightmarish landscapes of his first painting period to the second conceit, marked more by emphasis on form. The background is entirely devoid of detail, marked only by the unnatural light that would cast inhuman shadows across the majority of this period. The subject is a gnarled, humanoid figure crafting what we as viewers can only imagine to be some otherworldly music played through an otherworldly horn. Antestor's rationale for using this painting in particular is direct. In HM Magazine Issue 163, the band commented on the cover, "The cover shows a half human, half monster apparition with almost unlimited amounts of fingers and knuckles playing a single instrument, heralding and announcing with its music. In very many ways, Antestor is just like this apparition. Our music represents the more broken and monster-like feelings of our humanity, like the apparition in this picture. It seemed a very fitting cover for our return after seven years of silence."

The music of *Omen* certainly seems to capture the fragility evoked by the detailed, gnarled form in the painting. The music is dense, intricate, yet not without beauty. Black metal tropes are accentuated by an elegant, even pained atmosphere, garnished with key melodic leads ("The Kindling") or delicate piano flourishes ("Benighted"). The music is challenging and heavy, but there is something mystifying about it. It leads you somewhere exotic, as if carried by a cleverly disguised Pied Piper. It is a return to form accentuated by an embrace of the warped but majestic nature of the world around us.

Decayor - *Recurring Times of Grief* (2009)



Decayor are a death/doom band from Ireland, and the group made the wise decision to christen their debut EP with a Beksiński piece. The painting in question was created in 1986 during Beksiński's distinct second painting phase. The painting shows the almost complete transition toward a focus on foreground form. The image in question bears the vague semblance of Beksiński's characteristic "T-cross" for which he would become widely known. Unnatural lighting and smoke effects add a muted, layered texture to the cross which appears to be crafted from the bones of the dead. The monochromatic form seems to imply decay, anguish, and sorrow.

Fitting, then, is the painting for *Recurring Times of Grief*. Decayor play a melancholy, even morbid brand of doom metal. Each of the three long tracks transcend the usual funereal nature of this subgenre by implementing dynamic tempo shifts and howls of agony that materialize from the miasma of sorrow created by the standard doom riffs and synth washes. These moments of emotive fury seem to bubble to the top of the grave like the image rising at the top of the cross. The music is structured and textured in typical sepulchral fashion, yet like every Beksiński piece, unique elements always emerge from the mire.

I encourage you to learn more about this great artist by visiting his [website](#). Art connoisseur Piotr Dmochowski is largely responsible for the preservation

of Beksiński's legacy, so I encourage you to check out his virtual [gallery](#). Last, you can find a more thorough list of artists inspired by Beksiński's art [here](#).