

Notre Dame, A Silkworm's Response



One year on and it appears that when politicians' make monumental claims, we should maintain tempered with low expectations. Admittedly, the ongoing global pandemic has not helped in rehousing Hugo's Hunchback, regardless, [President Macron's claim that Notre Dame would be rebuilt within five years](#) is still a monumental feat befitting the iconic structure. The devastating fire occurred on the 15th April 2019 and lasted for 15 hours, collapsing the roof timbers and prominent spire. The event was a somber moment for all in the architecture community who I'm sure watched the fire in silence with a sobering feeling of fraternité. Despite Norte Dame being a close rival to my home city's Lincoln Cathedral in the twitter based '[Cathedral World Cup](#)', it was a haunting event to watch the life of French Gothic's magnum opus in flux.



Notre Dame: April 2020

Today the cathedral continues its recovery and looking at the remnants I am reminded of the architecture communities' initial response to the disaster which was... flamboyant to say the least. Within days an architectural design competition for a new spire was posited and quickly permeated throughout [architectural media](#). Several shimmering stalagmites were proposed from the seemingly [loose cannons of the field](#), most of which seem vacuous and only justified by the maxim of "the spire that fell wasn't original," which is barely the echo of a poorly reasoned argument. Fortunately, the fate of the new spire is still [undecided](#). But discussing carbuncles is far [more fun when it's done by the royals](#), so I will leave it to them. Instead, the image above of a skeletonised Notre Dame evokes a response to the cathedral from the architecturally trained, [father of Heavy Metal album art](#), Zdzisław Beksiński.



Born in 1929 in Sanok, Poland, Beksiński was exposed to the immense and unbound cruelty of WWII, which undoubtedly influenced his artwork, which is often categorised as dystopian surrealism with a dash of Gothic. He received architectural training in Kraków, graduating in 1955, and received no other training in the arts. Despite this he would revolutionise photographing in the early sixties, pushing the medium away from the [formalised realism of European photography](#), and taking inspiration from the French surrealism of the [interwar avant-garde](#), here we're talking about [Max Ernst](#), [Joan Miró](#), [Yves Tanguy](#) and everyone's favourite [horologist](#) Salvador Dalí.



Changing the course photography was not enough for Beksiński and is not the focus of this article, but, I do highly recommend you look at some of his work as it will captivate you for an evening or two of the current lockdown and perhaps inspire for much longer (see

link: <http://www.muzeum.sanok.pl/en/zbiory/zdzislaw-beksinski/fotografia>), instead we're looking at his materialised dream/nightmare-scape paintings post-photography, which brought the world's eyes to Polish art.



The Horn Player

Understanding the symbolism of architecture Beksiński manipulated the familiar forms of Gothic buildings into flesh and bone creating horrifying interesting organic structures that present socio-political commentary. From the late sixties through to the mid-eighties Beksiński would enter what he described as his “fantastic period” in which he sought to “paint in such a manner as if I were photographing dreams”. Although he often proclaimed his art to have no set meaning and stating that some of his works were even humorous, for [“meaning is meaningless to me. I do not care for](#)

[symbolism and I paint what I paint without meditating on story.](#)” I’ve found his work to be drenched in existential themes, and can only concur with [Guillermo del Toro](#)’s assessment:

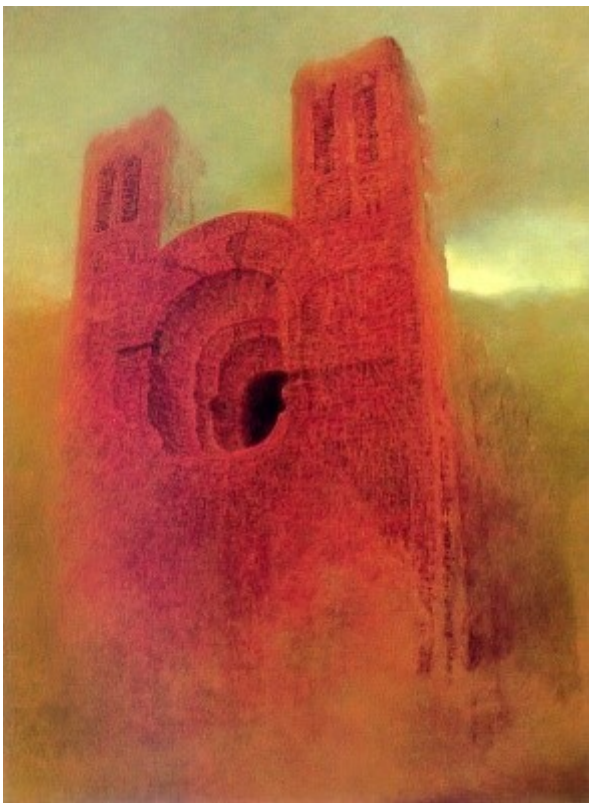
“Beksinski seems to believe art to be a forewarning about the fragility of the flesh – whatever pleasures we know are doomed to perish – thus, his paintings manage to evoke at once the process of decay and the ongoing struggle for life. They hold within them a secret poetry, stained with blood and rust.”



Great Lakes

From looking through his work this phrase 'blood and rust' best summarises what is most striking about Beksinski work and the origin of the punches they throw. Within this fantastic period, his works refract the boundaries of our expected notions of nature, machine, and man in a [Deleuzian Schizophrenia](#). This uncertainty reminds me of the disjointed biology of the 2018 Netflix Sci-fi film '[Annihilation](#)', in which the distinction between lifeforms is blended beyond recognition as [animals grow flowers](#) and flowers grow into animals. It might be a case of serendipity; however, I doubt such a film would be made without the influence of Beksinski somewhere ([and Tarkovsky's Stalker for that matter!](#)) in the ether.

Through this blending of mediums, we find the following paintings of a Notre Dame but not as we know it.



Notre Dame in Flesh



Notre Dame in Bone

These macabre images of Notre Dame constructed in flesh and bone, are truly organic architecture before [Neri Oxman](#) and MIT made it 'Hip', who, speaking of which, was recently featured on Netflix's 'Abstract: The Art of Design' ([S2:Ep2](#)). Although the organic architecture throughout this episode can be created by silkworms or robots their motions are relatively preordained, which is what makes these structures fantastic yet retain control. What gives this organically created architecture such intrigue to me, is the thought of a building which can heal.



Silkworm Pavilion

The [silkworm pavilion](#) featured prominently throughout the episode could be punctured and torched, yet the worms will keep on spinning their yarn till the structure is rebuilt. Similarly, Beksinski's Flesh Cathedral would be incredibly fragile and would certainly be damaged by the local pigeons, but, like a salamander, I can imagine the regrowth of even the most minor imperfection would be near restoration of perfection, not identical but harmonious recreation. As haunting as these images are they represent an architecture that Oxman is at the precipice of, one that lives grows and heals.

We are far from such a world of biological buildings, and yet this way of looking at buildings can have a real impact on the built environment today. As we think of restoring Notre Dame, we ought to look at the building as an organism and accept responsibility for the second prosthetic spire it requires. We can either create a new spire of deconstructivism bling or a new spire grown out of the roofscape that came before enhanced by modern architectural and engineering technologies. I fear that decision on the cathedral will succumb to the fleeting pleasures of the times but as

Del Toro said: “whatever pleasures we know are doomed to perish – thus, his [Beksinski’s] paintings manage to evoke at once the process of decay and the ongoing struggle for life,” and it is this struggle for the life, and character, of the cathedral I’d advocate.

Whichever route is chosen our era will be remembered as sensitive or brutes when it comes to the life of this historic building.



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