

Zdzislaw Beksinski - About the artist

By Wieslaw Banach

Artistic Road of Zdzislaw Beksinski*

A few sentences are all that is required to present the biography of Zdzislaw Beksinski. He was born on 24th February 1929 in Sanok (now South-Eastern Poland), with which his family had been connected ever since the times of his grandfather Mateusz Beksinski. In 1947, on finishing grammar school in Sanok, Beksinski enrolled in the Faculty of Architecture of the Cracow University of Technology. After graduation in 1952, in compliance with the regulations for the employment of graduates then in force, he lived first in Cracow and later in Rzeszów, and finally, in 1955, returned with his wife to Sanok.

He initiated his work as a photographer, and in 1958 presented some excellent work at several exhibitions in Warsaw, Gliwice, and Poznan. However it was his work in drawing and painting, and partly also in sculpture, that brought him his first successes. In 1964 Janusz Bogucki put on an exhibition of

his work in the Stara Pomaranczarnia in Warsaw, which turned out to be his first major success, since all the exhibits were sold. The exhibition Bogucki organised in 1972 presented a new trend in Beksinski's work, which years later he would call his 'fantasy period', which continued in his biography until the 1980's. In the summer of 1977, following a decision by the authorities of Sanok to demolish Beksinski's family house, the artist and his wife and son moved to Warsaw. In February 1984 he became associated with the Parisian marchand Piotr Dmochowski. In 1997 Beksinski started his computer photographic montages.

Beksinski's numerous exhibitions in Poland and abroad, and also the substantial number of publications by him, including catalogues and albums, and the innumerable interviews with him and films about him have put him into the narrow group of the most talked about and best known Polish artists. He once made the following ironic remark about his own life, 'Writing your own biography is a sign of even greater vainglory than making declarations like the ones I have written at the request of the makers of this catalogue. But whereas occasionally it might seem to me that I know what it is I'm thinking about, and that I'm thinking what I'm thinking, which makes me feel right to tell someone else about what I think I've been thinking about; I'm certain that I don't know anything

about my own past except everything, but everything is about as much as nothing. Presumably the most important fact from my life is that when I was ten I got an air-gun for my name-day, and that later I shot at chickens with it, but is this fact of interest to anyone besides myself? Apart from that, presumably I was born, and I shall be doing my best not to die, but I'm sure I won't manage it.' Beksinski does not participate in what's known as the life of the arts, preferring the seclusion of his studio; he doesn't even attend the vernissages of his own exhibitions. That's why in his case it's not the official biography, which has no sensational events in it, is the most interesting thing, but his artistic life, which is associated with all the changes that have taken place and are taking place in his work all the time.

Finishing film school and making films was the young Zdzislaw Beksinski's dream of a career. However, his father persuaded him to study a more practical subject, and in a war-devastated Poland architecture seemed a practical option. He made up for his unaccomplished dreams by turning to art photography. His work in photography shows him as an exceptionally dynamic artist in search of his own, strong mode of expression. He moved from mocking the Socialist Realism, through quasi-reportage, a variety of experiments with form, a quest for interesting and diversified textures, to works

which were close to Surrealism or Expressionism. The confrontation of the face of a child with that of an old woman, the portrait of a girl with a torn-out face, a head covered in gauze, nudes tied up in string, or montage consisting of a couple of photographs (usually reproductions) and a completely unconnected text stuck onto a slab make the viewer anxious and provoke questions about the sense of the associations that arise.

However, the unusual power of the artist's imagination could not find its full expression in photography owing to the technical limitations, but it was freely expressed in his drawings, paintings, and partly also sculptures. Nothing has survived of his juvenilia sketches, except for a school tableau. Beksinski created an artistic workshop for himself and arrived at his own form of expression by sheer hard work, in a solitary manner, with no corrections from tutors or friends. His early pictures were Expressionist in character: 'Figures crying out in the wilderness,' he recalls, 'people with heads of stone, women in childbirth, people in the act of copulation, defecation, dying, people being executed by firing squad or by hanging, prisons, windowless cities etcetera etcetera. In terms of style it had something of Cwenarski or Wróblewski about it; I could even do five large-size paintings in a day; I was absolutely uncritical; I got impatient quickly, so I could see no sense in polishing off or

touching up what had been rapidly painted in tempera or sketched in charcoal onto a huge sheet of cardboard. Nevertheless I think that was the only time I was really sincere. Or maybe just naive?' We know this period only from what Beksinski has told us about it, since he destroyed all that he did in the period, judging it too exhibitionistic and naive.

The explosion of abstract art that occurred around 1956 turned out to be particularly fascinating not only for the young generation. It was in this trend that the idiosyncrasy of Zdzislaw Beksinski's talent manifested itself, allowing him to achieve his characteristic individual climate using his own means. His black or white reliefs in diverse textures suggested destruction. By piling layers of plaster and paint on top of each other he was hoping time would intensify this process, slowly and irregularly revealing new layers.

However the drawings and sculptures he was creating were distancing him off from pure abstraction. In his sculpture, in which he applied the negative form he had borrowed from the works of Henry Moore, there were two dominant motifs: the head, and the human figure. On the other hand his drawings revealed vast ranges of an aggressive and sombre vision, and the dominant theme in them was eroticism. Some of these drawings later acquired titles which the artist made up post factum on the basis of a game of loose associations.

He would apply a diversity of techniques on diversified formats: pencil, pen, crayon or charcoal drawings, monotypes, heliographs. That was when a whole spectrum of his seeking after form revealed itself: from his 'classic', symmetrical arrangements, to his dislodged compositions, or ones which contradicted the basic principles of composition. In some of his works the lines were delicate, fine, almost invisible; in others the drawing would become virtually a monochromatic painting, spacious and with a play of light and shade. The eruption of subjects, the drastic way in which they would be presented, and the freedom in approach to form and composition revealed an artist unboundable by any barriers, aesthetic or customary. Beksinski opened up to the subconscious, not afraid of what he would encounter in it, and it was from these experiences of drawing that the paintings of his 'fantasy period' developed. That was when a technique to which the artist has remained loyal to the present day was confirmed and stabilised: his painting in oils, less frequently in acrylics, on hardboard. Using the smooth side of the board, he would paint in such a manner so as to hide all the brush-strokes, to conceal the entire process of painting. The picture was to be a mirror image of an inner vision, and an observer looking at it was to become oblivious of the technique of painting, and of the very nature of the painting as 'painting'. He said at the time, 'I

wish to paint in such a manner as if I were photographing dreams. This is an apparent reality, which nevertheless contains an enormous amount of fantasy details. Perhaps other people's dreams and imagination work in some other way, but with me they're always images which tend to be realistic in terms of the play of light and shade and perspective.' When he put these works on exhibition in Warsaw in 1972, he split the recipients into intransigent opponents, who regarded what he was doing as a reality that was not art, or that it was simply kitsch, and into whole-hearted enthusiasts, who acknowledged his work as the most exciting occurrence in the contemporary arts. He also achieved something absolutely unheard of: he aroused the interest of the mass recipients, who are, after all, quite indifferent to what is the most exciting occurrence in the recent arts. It seems that he filled a vacuum with his painting, which in world art had been partially filled by Salvador Dali, but had no counterpart in Poland, though Dali had nothing in common with Beksinski, except for the mimetic technique and the surrealist atmosphere, but with an entirely different poetics. The public, which had become tired of experiments with form, and perhaps also of the monotony of the alienated artistic language of the Avant Garde, turned with curiosity to painting which applied traditional means to dramatically express the anxieties of the age. In his scrutiny of the sub-

conscious, Beksinski addressed the same needs of his public, which had been aroused by psycho-analysis and existentialism. His visionariness and its dark mysteriousness transferred the dimension of the observer's experience from aesthetic and intellectual contemplation to the psychological sphere. But a great deal of misunderstanding arose over the reception of this art. On account of their apparently literary quality, Beksinski's pictures called for some sort of key for their deciphering. Brought up on Romanticism and especially on the symbolism of *Młoda Polska* (Art Nouveau), more and more often the Polish observer wanted to have their content and symbols explained, particularly by their creator, who refused to give any explanations at all, and even declined to give the most elementary explanation of all, titles for his pictures. 'I never ask myself, "what does it mean?" either with respect to my own pictures, or anyone else's. Meaning is absolutely meaningless to me. It's worth as much as the taste of chocolate in a literary description. I can't understand how the question of meaning can be so important to people as regards their relationship with art. . . . However, what I encounter most frequently is a semantic reception based on a description of the objects in the picture. From my point of view and as regards my own paintings, nothing could be further from the truth. . . . A semantic and

semiotic analysis of vision is as absurd as a schoolbook criticism of Konrad's Great Improvisation speech in Mickiewicz's *Dziady* [Forefathers' Eve - the greatest classic of Polish Romantic literature]. What's important is not what is visible but what is hidden... Or in other words, what is revealed to the soul, not what the eyes can see and what can be named.' But not only the question of interpretation evoked controversy. Beksinski was accused of a range of formal inconsistencies and of having departed from the Post-Impressionist concept of the picture as a pictorial plane filled up in a particular order. The order in Beksinski's pictures was purely psychological in character. The play of colours, the meaning of colour, texture, compositional relations etc. seemed irrelevant to him, or even obstacles in the achievement of his aim, which was the manifestation of a sub-conscious vision. In the categories of this kind of aesthetics his pictures appeared absolutely worthless, bereft of all problems belonging strictly to painting. Beksinski evaded this kind of evaluation, defending the right to apply his imagination freely. The exhibitions held by Teatr Stu of Cracow in 1977 was deliberately entitled 'Pictures by Zdzislaw Beksinski', instead of 'The Paintings of ...'. The artist wanted to definitively dissociate himself off from traditional aesthetic evaluation. The brush was only a vicarious instrument for the formulation of his visions, just as nowadays the computer is

becoming something of the sort. 'I prefer to be observed from the point of view of psychology, or even psychiatry, rather than of that artsy-fartsy Art with a capital A,' he said in one of his interviews.

His most spectacular of group of pictures from the 1967-1983 'fantasy period' is in the collection of the Muzeum Historyczne of Sanok. It is an extraordinary witness to a vision full of drama, anxiety, and destruction not so much of the outside world but rather of a spiritual or psychological world. In a winter landscape with a repulsive emptiness and deadness, a blind boy leads a cadaverous figure made up of junk. Somewhere in the distance a rider with the head of a bird is moving in the same direction. The boy is pointing with his finger at something we don't see in the picture, something neither he nor the corpse-like figure can see. Where is this strange crusade heading for? In the centre of a metaphysical landscape of 1978 there are some ivy-covered ruins of an edifice. Each of its apertures leads into a different space, into a different light and time. Is it real? 'There's an old Chinese paradox which says that we don't know when we wake up whether it's evening or morning. It sounds far more likely that we awake in the evening, and that all through the day when we are asleep we try to understand the world of the night, which is so splendid and enormous that it eludes our miserable powers of reasoning

and ordering completely. We stand like a small child, bedazzled by an avalanche of incomprehensible details, and when we have finally fallen asleep and in our sleep go to work and build those stereotypical settlements in which we think we live, in the morning when we are asleep we arrange all those marvellous details and endow them with an order of meanings, so as to make them perceptible to our not very bright intellects.' In another of his pictures, a small figure moves holding a torch moves through a ravine of monks' corpses. Is there some outcome of this voyage through Beksinski's pictures? Do we experience this half-waking dream in the same way as he does, or in some other way, each of us weighing up his own anxieties and secrets? Is this dream of Beksinski's pictures for us - to use the words of Witold Gombrowicz - 'pregnantly terrible, with an undiscovered meaning,' where 'everything touches us more profoundly, more confidentially than even the most burning of the day's passions'? Pictures are painted, after all, to make an impact with their atmosphere on our feelings, not with their content on our intellect.

The 'fantasy period' brought Beksinski fame and it seemed the artist would remain loyal to it. But already by the early eighties he was gradually abandoning this spatial and most often landscape visionariness, restricting his motif to one or a few figures, usually placed against an indefinite

background. His pictures became much more synthetic; and now it was not the 'photographing of a dream' that was the most important, but painting itself. 'I'm. going in the direction of a greater simplification of the background, and at the same time of a considerable degree of deformation in the figures, which are being painted without what's known as a naturalistic light and shadow. What I'm after is for it to be obvious at first sight that this is a painting I made.' In the 90's a certain differentiation may be discerned in the manner of painting chosen by the artist. In some of his works figures are produced with a sculptor's sensitivity, and occasionally are even reminiscent of his sculptural forms of the 60's Some of his pictures appear not so much to have been painted, rather as sketched in coloured lines, from the topsy-turvy of which figures emerge and conduct their solitary dramas. Finally there are pictures executed in an extremely pictorial, synthetic way, in which the automatic operation of form and colour precedes the theme presented. In the computer photo-montages of his recent years there is a return to the painting of the 'fantasy period', with spatial landscapes carrying a heavy metaphysical charge. The artist applies a far-reaching degree of deformation in almost each of his objects, including the human body.

The phenomenon of Beksinski's art is associated above all with the embodying, 'materialisation'

in his artistic techniques of 'images of the sub-conscious', which are no doubt symbolic of his inner experiences, and to a large extent symbolic of the spiritual states of contemporary man. The terror of death, disintegration, destruction, loneliness, is ever-present. Whether Zdzislaw Beksinski's art is leading us to despair, or whether it works on the grounds of a catharsis; whether he light which we encounter all the time in his art brings just a little bit of hope - will forever remain the personal reflection of each of its observers.

Wiesław Banach

Wiesław Banach - art historian, director of Historical Museum in Sanok. He is an author of numerous essays and reviews on Beksinski's art. He also prepared and oversaw many exhibitions of the Artist. The Museum in Sanok has a large collection of works by Zdzislaw Beksinski.

*This text is part of the Introduction to the album "Beksinski", published by BOSZ in 1999.