

EXTRACTS INTERVIEWS BEKSINSKI

FROM WITH

Choice of extracts from interviews, presentation and underheadings by
Piotr Dmochowski. 1985

1. THE MAN

ARCHITECTURE

"I am an architect by profession. It's no use speaking about it, really; it was such a long time ago... I entered the Institute of Technology only under pressure from my father... After finishing my studies I worked for a few years in a building enterprise as the slave whipper on building lots"

("To Find in the Heart and Under the Eyelids" and "To Photograph the Dream")

THE ARTISTIC ROAD

"Since 1966 I have devoted myself exclusively to drawing and painting... I began with abstract low-relief in metal. The change in orientation came gradually. First as well as the abstract works and works "for the drawer", I started with small figurative drawings, the form of which still remained very unrealistic. Then came the period of oil painting. At the same time the manner of representing things also modified itself, leading always closer to realism, or, if you like, to colour photography."

("To Photograph the Dream" and "For Oneself and for Others")

"I started as an expressionist painter just like many other young artists of that period... human figures crying out in the desert people my first paintings, together with stone-headed

men, women giving birth, beings that fornicate, defecate, beings that are being shot or hanged..."

("Interview")

"I was perfectly capable of executing five large paintings in a day... Because I was devoid of any critical approach toward my own paintings and quickly lost my patience, I did not see any reason why I should work to a greater extent on what spontaneously came forth in the beginning... But I believe that it was only at that time that I was sincere... or maybe simply naive? For later on came a time of reflexion and I was able to ascertain that life had no sense... Finally there came the moment for wearing a mask when I joined the avant-garde. It is true that I did not change my opinions, but I was very much ashamed of having made a fool of myself. Henceforth I adopted a mask, or if you like, "a style"... Of course all these are but half-truths, for to sort out and describe everything that had determined my artistic road would take thousands of pages without ever exhausting the facts."

("Interview")

INSPIRATION

"I have a strong preference for the theatrical. I love childish pathos. When you say "Art" I immediately see a 19th century engraving showing a young man in a languorous pose with a cloak advantageously thrown around his shoulders. It could be Byron, Pushkin, or Napoleon on Elba. It doesn't matter anyway-I am sure I never saw such an engraving. It is the result of a compilation of images which I saw during my childhood and which, for the rest, were completed by my imagination. On the horizon there is a stormy sea and a sailing-ship in distress. The sky is full of heavy clouds pierced by lightning. It would be appropriate too, if on the horizon, black birds were flying

and there was a hanged man's body swinging from a tree.

Obviously nature denied my "actor-self" the restraint of good taste. My "observer-self", on the other hand, has plenty of it, thanks to the education I received, which condemned 19th century art as incurably decadent. Yet what can be done if the "actor-self" still holds a strong conviction, resulting undoubtedly from his spirit of contradiction, that art begins only where seven suns glow in the zenith, where dark clouds cover the rest of the sky, where thunder booms, the curtain of the Temple is torn, a rain of blood is falling in torrents, thousands of snakes creep up from every side, and the dead rise from their graves. A voice descending from heaven or from the depths of the earth would be very welcome to complete the picture...

As you see the "observer" finds it quite easy to make the "actor" weary of his visions... yet how can one explain the irresistible attraction, the overwhelming need of the "actor" to dig in the scrap-heap full of snakes, deaths'-heads weeds and witches? Why not seek inspiration in flowers and playing children? I could easily find a rational reply from the "observer's" point of view. But you rightly guess that it would not be a true answer.

This ambivalence, that confronts attraction with anxiety, when exposed to the reaction of others to this Macbethian mixture, provokes a dual attitude in me towards my own creation: on the one hand I aspire with all my soul to express myself sincerely and without concealment, like people in Russia in the olden days, who would rip open their robes to bare their chests and bow humbly in worship of the earth; on the other hand however, for the sake of prudence most probably, I would like to step aside and merely animate a dummy who would express all my feelings for me. Thanks to this stratagem I would always be able to avoid being hurt if my spectators jeered at me. I could simply tell them: "Can't you see it's not

me, but that stupid dummy?..." And I would add deceitfully: "Please, do not mistake one for the other. I am a serious man with good taste." In fact this game of sincerity and fear literally kills each one of my paintings."

("To Paint as you Leave your Fingerprint")

OTHERS

"I hate to look at other people's paintings. I am paralysed by a sort of inability to represent a certain thing as soon as I discover that it has already been painted by others. This "anti-inspiration" is worse than a complete lack of inspiration. I was certainly happiest when my ignorance still gave me the impression of being the first to have an idea for a painting."

("Interview")

"For conventional reasons, probably, I am compared to Linke or to Bosch. It makes me furious. Nevertheless, I must admit that even though I cannot accept the entire work of Bocklin, yet his "Island of the Dead" made an immense impression on my childhood, an unforgettable impression which is still present today."

MUSIC

"If I have a quest to fulfill, if there is a presence by my side and if I feel a passion for something, it is above all for music... I listen to it 10 to 14 hours on end, without paying attention to fatigue."

("To Paint as you Leave your Fingerprint")

"I already told you: I cannot paint without listening to music. But neither can I listen to music if I am not in front of my easel."

("To Photograph the Dream")

When I hear a composition by Scriabine... I am like a snake hypnotized by a fakir's flute... I love above all any music which is sad, tragic, ecstatic, powerful, melancholic, neurasthenic and even grotesque, just as I hate music which is calm, gay, high-spirited and full of humor; a light, frivolous, popular and dancing kind of music... I cannot help it and my preferences are a puzzle even to myself."

("To Paint as you Leave your Fingerprint")

"I remember when as a young student of architecture in Cracow in the early Fifties I heard the Third Symphony of Szymanowski for the first time at a matinee concert. I was stunned to the point of forgetting my camera, the fruit of two years saving, in the concert-hall. This sensation and this dazzlement followed me for many years. Do you want to know what parallel I draw between paintings and symphonies? I demand the same thing of them: to be in time and to create a state of ecstasy... Art is a way of groping for a vision... which would arouse in us at least a weak echo of the Unnamable. The music of the late 19th century and early 20th century brings me closest to that end. I understand it the best and it is what touches me the most... My link with music results from a desire to construct the same dramatic architecture as in my favourite symphonies."

("To Find in the Heart and Under the Eyelids")

"The repartition of vivid colours in relation to the other colours in my paintings is like a musical theme, as in a symphony a motif appears, is blurred, comes back in a crescendo, is finally accentuated and becomes pure and complete. I feel this metamorphosis with all my soul, and my paintings are a constant quest towards it. Hence it is of no importance to me whether at a given point. I paint a dog or a

tree. What I paint is but of small importance. The essential point lies in the successful musical effect and in the successful "sound" of hues and forms."

("To Photograph the Dream")

POLITICS

"At the end of the sixties and at the beginning of the seventies, in private conversations and in public discussions I frequently encountered the opinion that my work was a vehement protest against the war in Vietnam. It was astounding. First of all because I have never used my painting brush to sign petitions. And if I was to begin, I would find enough causes for revolt close at hand. Without going all the way to Vietnam I would find plenty in the country where I live. Secondly because it is one thing to have the pluck to burn one's draft card in New York, and another to peacefully "protest" in Warsaw by means of a painting which will be sure to receive a medal. I have always felt disdain and disgust towards this sort of "protest".

("Meaning is Meaningless to me")

"Must I say it again? when I paint a nude I just have to fill it with writing, with little veins and other pictorially attractive details. I do not deny that when I paint a wall, I like it when the roughcast peels off. When I represent the interior of a room, the floor must be strewn with rubbish and the corners covered with spider webs. A smooth body, a straight wall, a well-ordered row of windows, an empty room or a shining floor have always been synonymous with BOREDOM.

I have always nourished a naive hope that all that I said just now is quite obvious to others: even a layman would be aware of it. However... see how in order to explain my paintings they bring with them their great cannon loaded with clichés of Vietnam, Auschwitz,



With the painter H. Waniek

Photo : T. Beksinski.

"Ecce homo", "Homo homini lupus est" and a "where do we come from and where are we going?", an Apocalypse and the end of the world."

("Meaning is Meaningless to Me")

CINEMA

"I always dreamed of being a film-director. Life never gave me a chance to do so.

... But by this I do not mean creating films in the ordinary sense: films that tell a story. My ultimate aim would be to make a film which would become music... which both in action and iconography would be managed to a greater extent by the laws of musical architecture than by a literary outline. A literary outline in a film is not only useless - it is irritating.

...To give you a recent example to help you better understand what I mean by a film created after the fashion of a musical composition, I will remind you of a few extracts from Fellini's "Roma". Do you remember the director's car and the vans loaded with cinema equipment entering the city? Or the nocturnal rally of motorcycles?...

("To Paint as you Leave your Fingerprint")

ECCENTRICITY

"Silence during the daytime fills me with horror. To avoid it I am ready to switch the vacuum-cleaner on. Of course there are sounds

that I hate: the noise of tractors, the cries of children, birds and drunkards. But the majority of sounds emitted by Warsaw, be they those of cars, trams or planes, are neutral, or even pleasant, when compared with complete silence."

("To Photograph the Dream")

"For the last two years I have been eating a Frankfurter sausage and two potatoes for every meal. I feel nervous at the thought that it could change."

(Letter to Piotr Dmochowski. July 7 1985)

DISCRETION

"... That is why I do not try to impose my works on others. I rarely exhibit and when I agree to do so, it is constrained and forced, without enthusiasm and only under pressure."

("Painting is my Form of Existence")

2. HIS QUEST

TO SURVIVE

"I would like my paintings to survive me. I know that is an absurd desire. To last... In the naivety of my youth I decided one day "to last in my creation". So I feverishly started painting, drawing, sculpting... However, as I gradually penetrated the truth, the creation became a simple question of habit. A need for customary gestures and feelings. Today I paint to "avoid looking" at things which hit the eye; to "avoid understanding" what is self-evident; to pretend believing in "survival through art". So I continue to paint, though I am aware of the futility of my efforts.

And yet I paint to "survive in my paintings"-but to survive as a tombstone, the mummy of a Pharaoh, or a letter in a bottle thrown into the sea, survives.

This absurd game between lucidity and hope

animates all my creations. When I gaze upon them impartially, I discover a mixture of true and false, of serious and grotesque, of artificial and naturalist."

("Painting is my Form of Existence")

"I started to paint, I paint and I shall continue to paint for two reasons. The first is the cause. The second is the aim. The cause is what I understand least. It is mysterious and lost in the darkness of my childhood. At best I have a supposition concerning something which since my earliest childhood compelled me to draw everything that appeared in my imagination... The aim, on the other hand, is composed partly of despair and partly of cynicism. Despair, since to become incarnate in my own paintings is the only available means for me to fight against death. Cynicism, because I am aware that European culture treats a work of art as a sacred cow. A cow which is respected and preserved with infinite care; which lasts and will make me last."

("To Paint as You Leave your Fingerprint")

"They say that man seeks the truth, but all he really comes up with is idle words. We all know the truth, but we cannot accept it, because it is unacceptable. Until the moment of our death we desperately invent lies to dissolve it, filter it or repress it. Art is one of those beautiful lies. It is no more than that."

("To Photograph the Dream")

"There is a passage in Kafka, the profoundness of which filled me with horror the first time I read it. I mean the sermon from the "Trial"; it's about a man who goes to the Law. The door is guarded by a warder. Though Kafka did not mention it, I do not have the smallest doubt concerning this: the door is a one-way door... What we can find beyond the door is probably Truth. What we leave behind us simply has no existence... Yet I am afraid to loosen my grip on this miserable nothing. That is where the torment of my creation and of my inner being takes place; creation is but a search

through a dustbin and an anxious glance towards the door from which the light of the Law spills out..."

("To Find in the Heart and Under the Eyelids")

TO PHOTOGRAPH THE DREAM

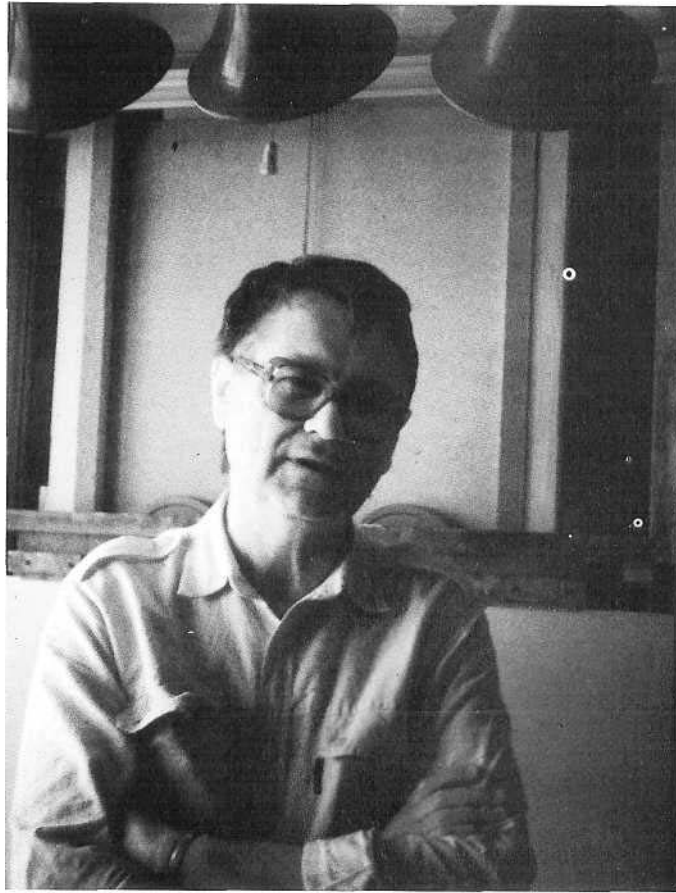
"The ultimate aim of my creation is to manage to take a photograph of dreams. I only struggle to improve my technique in order to come closer to that ideal: to achieve the ability to photograph dreams."

("To paint as you Leave your Fingerprint")

"The visions at the origin of my paintings are "a kind of image" in "a kind of reality". In a still undetermined form they spring up like lightning, though not without most of the details. As a complete whole... Sometimes I even know whether the paint should be laid in a thick or a thin layer. At first sight it may seem that the painting is there ready and waiting. All there remains to do is to paint it. Unfortunately that is only an illusion. For what existed one second ago turns out to be only an indeterminate impression like "a movement full of anxiety", or "a gesture full of pride". And even if I retain more of the fading vision, there still remain points which are void or imprecise. The vision is really very brief. It lasts no more than a second. I do not have the time to retain all of it. Then I ask myself: "What am I going to do with all those empty spaces? Should I leave them black as Caravaggio does? Should I fill them with a many-coloured mist as in the canvases of Turner? Or should I place imaginary objects there?" It is because I yield to that last temptation that all those skulls, coffins, serpents and witches appear, burning with impatience to fill every unoccupied corner of my paintings, to create a sensation of "Horror vacui". But to complicate your task I will confess that I am ashamed of them. So before I let them inhabit my paintings I put

them between inverted commas, apply makeup to them, or partly hide them."

("To Paint as you Leave your Fingerprint")



1985. Photo: P. Dmochowski

"Think of that old Chinese paradox which says: "Do you know when slumber ends: in the morning? or maybe in the evening?" In fact we awake at twilight... During the day, when we are asleep, we pass our time trying to understand the world of the night, which is so huge and magnificent that as a whole it slips from our lowly minds, so obstinately intent on classifying and arranging everything... Like children, we are dazzled by this avalanche of incomprehensible details, and still asleep, we work and build stereotyped houses where we think we live; in the morning we organize all those extraordinary details and give them meaning, which brings them within the reach of our dull minds. And the literature which we add to the visions is created retrospectively."

("To Photograph the Dream")

TO EXIST

“For me the expressions: “Modern Art”, “Present times”, “Style”, “artistic evolution”, “progress in the arts”, are devoid of any meaning. I feel an aversion towards the word “Art” itself. For me, my painting is simply a form of existence.”

(“Painting is my Form of Existence”)

TO SAY NOTHING

“I cannot conceive of a sensible statement on painting. At least I feel incapable of any. Is painting not made to be looked at? And the need to paint is like all other needs: motiveless. When you are hungry you eat because you are hungry and not because the hunger does you harm. The same thing goes for painting. Every attempt to explain it is lost in words. All motivation is unnecessary, the latter being assigned with hindsight.”

(“To Find in the Heart and Under the Eyelids”)

“I must underline that what I paint is my spiritual self-portrait. The “World of objective creatures” does not enter it at any moment. However there exist “thing-paintings” which I invite you to look at. But do not interpret them, for they are made to be contemplated, just as music is made to be listened to, and chocolate is made to be eaten.”

(“To Find in the Heart and under the Eyelids”)

3. HIS CREATION

NEITHER MEANINGFUL...

“As far as the method is concerned, supposing that a method of creation exists, I paint simply what comes effortlessly into my imagination. That is why I never think about “what this means”. As soon as a vision comes to my mind, as soon as I “see”, I immediately

feel like painting. And what I see is never a story that could be put into words, it is visual; it is emotional. And that's all. Painting a picture takes a long time. Much longer than the satisfaction aroused by the original vision. The longer it takes the more I feel like modifying, completing and transforming the primitive image. The feeling is born on the one hand from growing indifference towards my initial emotion, and on the other from the growing attraction of what I have already painted. It is a sort of forward action and backward reaction. Whether they take place at the beginning of the work, or come afterwards, these metamorphoses are always "extrasensorial" and non-discursive. I must put strong stress on that! For this reason I can only be perplexed when asked what my paintings mean. I do not know what my paintings mean, and to tell the truth I could not care less. What is more I ask myself: why do people so insist upon understanding them?"

(“Painting is my Form of Existence”)

... *NOR SYMBOLIC*...

“The things I paint have much less meaning for me than for certain spectators. The latter approach a painting, clutching a dictionary of symbols. “Ah!,” they say, “here is a tree. It must be the symbol of life. And here there is greenery: undoubtedly the symbol of resurrection. And black: that is death.” A bird, a cow, a coin, or some excrement: all symbols; ordinary European consciousness is full to the brim with symbolic trash. Apart from all that garbage he does not perceive much more and he nervously goes through museums with his eyes fixed on his dictionary to see if it all fits together or not.”

(“To Photograph the Dream”)

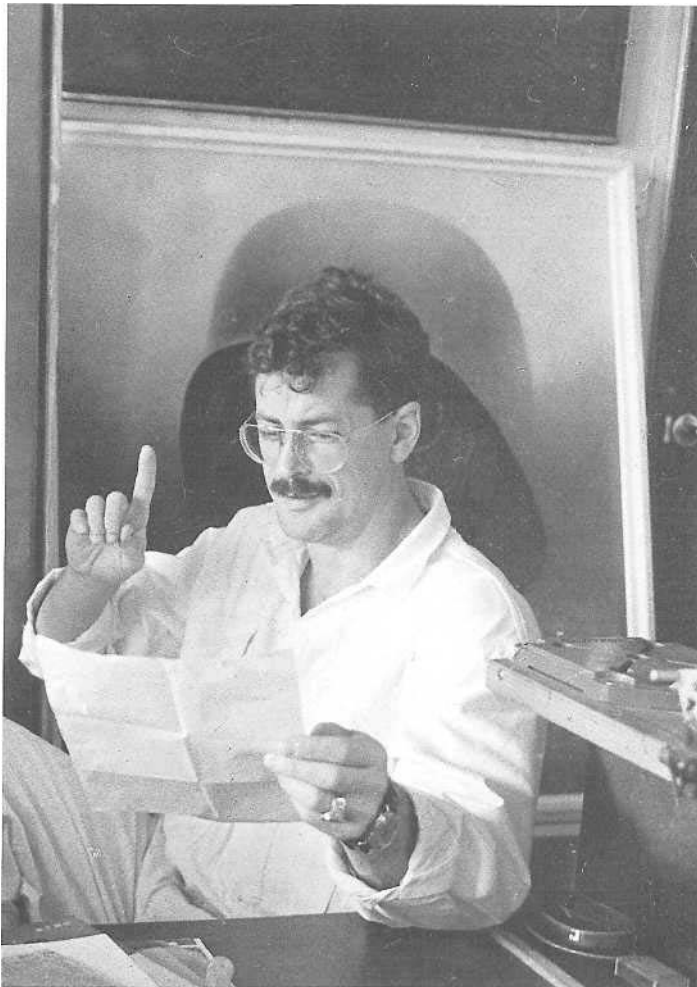
“I do not like it when something takes on a meaning other than the one its appearance evokes in the most straightforward manner.

And as I already said in relation to my paintings, meaning is meaningless to me. I do not care for symbolism and I paint without meditating on a story.”

(“Meaning is Meaningless to me”)

“By the way: to seek symbols in my paintings-in the word’s popular and historical meaning — is a vain undertaking. You should know that my vision will not alter if a cow replaces a queen, and if a cloud of birds takes the place of a forest. The essence will remain intact if the atmosphere and the impression I wanted to convey are unchanged.”

(“To Paint as you Leave Your Fingerprint”)



... *NOR CRUEL*...

“It is often said that I “hurt people’s feelings” and I am reproached for cruelty. And

yet... A work which displays cruelty deeply offends my feelings, whether it is realistic or whether it relates to a historical fact. I am ready to leave the cinema when the action takes place during the Occupation. The authors of such reproaches do not see the difference between the expression of an anxious state of mind and a purely realistic representation of something horrible. This I have never done and am not likely to do... Another error consists in seeking cruelty in what is evidently a mockery: for instance in figures which look as if they were taken from a women's fashion magazine and whose skin is peeling off. My detractors would prefer to see carefully separated, on one side a pictorial version of a photo in the "fashion" style, and on the other side human bodies burned with napalm! Everything would then fit perfectly into the most perfect stereotypes of the average television viewer."

("Meaning is Meaningless to me")

"In any case the point is not cruelty, or a wish to make the ladies shudder. My paintings are remote from the real world. They express an imaginary vision, a dreamlike reality."

("For Oneself and for Others")

...BUT WELL EXECUTED...

"I try to make solid the things that I do. Solid in the most prosaic sense. Solid things have a better chance of 'surviving', although survival is a phantasm. For this reason I take care that the paint does not peel, that the colours are resistant and that a rigid frame guarantees a long life to the drawings. Well, I know that these are the efforts of a Don Quixote who makes his helmet out of paper..."

("Painting is my Form of Existence")

"I am greatly preoccupied with the problem of craft, and I treat the question of professionalism as a matter of first importance... When a vision appears under my

eyelids I also see the way in which the colour should be laid in order to create the illusion of a certain imaginary reality, without making the pictorial surface too smooth. For the work of the Holy God can be observed from any distance and under any lens. Even beyond an electron microscope, reality appears. A smooth painting, on the contrary, is immediately disappointing under a magnifying glass: all you discover here is colour. Its precision turns against itself- the more precise it is, the more its poverty is evident. How rich Turner's paintings are! The eye and the spirit discover more in them than reason could demonstrate. But maybe I myself am a victim of an illusion..."

("Meaning is Meaningless to me")

"In fact a painting is only interesting if it attains the transparency of glass through which what has been painted appears as if it really existed."

("To Find in the Heart and Under the Eyelids")

...AND BEAUTIFUL.

"I quite simply have been trying from the very beginning to paint beautiful paintings. Beautiful. Of course you will take such an aspiration for coquetry. And yet it is the essential thing, the only thing that counts: to paint beautiful paintings. No less than that."

(Extracts selected, presented and translated by Piotr Dmochowski)