

Photographing a Dream

a conversation with Zdzisław Beksiński

an interview by Jan Czopik for Polish magazine “Tygodnik Kulturalny Nr 35”, 1978.

Zdzisław Beksiński's (a renowned photographer, illustrator, sculptor and painter) block apartment smells with brushes naphthalene, varnish, oil paints, fiber boards. It also smells like new, as it's just been occupied few months ago.

I am sitting in the artist's studio, a small room with a table in the middle. A “Tomb Table” as the Artist calls it, because it takes almost three-quarters of the room. Inside the table, there's all what a painter needs for his work: cardboard, wooden strips, oils, paint cans, brushes. All is stored for several years in advance.

Behind me, a shelving unit filled with gramophone discs and audio tapes. There are paintings in front of me and an easel on the left side, just by the window. As far as I know, the Artist works under artificial light as well. There are few adjustable lamps on top of his easel, so the light shines equally.

My first question is. How was your painting born? What was the childhood of the Artist, and childhood of his Art? How did the landscape and home contribute to that?

I don't think my childhood had any direct impact on what I'm doing right now. Perhaps my Mother had... She used to bring me books about fine arts. She always kept my sketches. I was to become an engineer. So I did. I completed my architecture degree. For three years I worked as a slave driver on construction sites. Later, I started photography. I also did illustration and design. Since 1966 I deal only with drawings and paintings. However, when it comes to the influence of a landscape, I do not realize it completely. I always lived in a strong isolation from the so-called “real world”. In terms of work. The interaction with “the real world” is only when I get out to buy matches or a canned food for lunch. As you can see in my paintings, the landscape is rather contrived. So I think that I am not inspired too much by the real landscape.

So your art is not about copying the world. Is it rather an art of inner feelings?

I think so. Almost certainly. I can call it a spiritual naturalism. I want to paint like I photographed the dreams. So apparently it's a reality, however containing a huge amount of fantastic details. Maybe other people's dreams and imagination work in a different way. My dreams are always in form of images, generally naturalistic in terms of light, shade and perspective. Of course, this is not the end. Here comes the problem of applying paint. I have my own quite specific tastes. Composition related problems, etc. It is hard to fit everything in a short interview. Anyway, these issues are more professional or more hidden. When it comes to what the picture shows, it always refers to my interior, and never to the environment. I was asked many times, if these stereotypical blocks outside the window bother me. So, they don't, at all. In general, I don't even mention it when I am not asked. I rather care about my flat in this block. To make it more comfortable, warm. Acoustically soundproof. Unfortunately, it is not. We constantly hear the neighbors. And probably the neighbors hear me as well, which is inevitable from about 8 am to 22 pm. When a curfew begins, I have to turn off the music. Without music I am not even able to primer the boards. On one hand, music is an essential background. On the other hand, it is an insulator from the sounds of the surrounding world.

A tiny sketch lies on a huge table. It represents woman's face and a hand with long, beautiful fingers. The hand is trying to grab something.

“Is this the beginning of a painting?” I asked.

Yes. Generally, I start from a sketch which is just a note of an idea. Or a sudden vision of an image. I never do accurate drafts. There are usually more sketches than pictures, as I'm not able to paint all which comes to my mind. I store it all for later. It is quite ridiculous, as sometimes an old idea gets rancid, and I don't want to pursue it anymore. The image starts out same way as the sketch. But sometimes during applying the first underpainting, I realize that I would do it differently. One change triggers the need for further changes and as a result, it ends up something completely different than what it was supposed to be at the beginning. Of course, I could hold on to the original concept, but why? Do I have to be loyal to "myself" from last Tuesday? It is not enough that I will be loyal to myself from last Friday? So if I am fancy change, I change. Sometimes, parts of the image seem to me to be so good that it's a pity to paint them over. So, I finish that image and then just start another one with similar elements, somewhat in alternate version.

Is your sketch a spatial signal for you? Do you perceive it in color?

I rather see it in color. However I don't see it in its entirety. Specific details emerge from the shadows, similar to Caravaggio. I don't necessarily leave darkness in the dark. Sometimes I know that there is light behind those details. That light must illuminate something, unless it's going to be a fog. The sketch tolerates those details marked by few strokes emerging from the white paper. The painting does not. It creates an enormous empty space which you need to develop. And I don't know what's supposed to be

in that empty space, because there was nothing in my original imagination. There was just a gesture, a movement, a screaming color... So that empty place has to be composed, cold filled-in. It often happens that filling an empty space spoils the image. But these are the costs you pay for not having invented a camera for photographing dreams.

How do the surrounding ambient sounds affect your dreams? Do they interfere, hence you listen to music?

In fact, I like to sleep in complete silence. Every little murmur disturbs me. However, during the day I almost hate silence. I would be ready to turn on the vacuum cleaner, so as not to experience the silence. Of course there are sounds which I don't like: tractors, small children, dogs, birds, noisy drunkards. Although most sounds which Warsaw generates (cars, trams, planes, etc.) are basically indifferent to me. They are even nice, if compared with complete silence. So music is an insulator only when a baby cries at the neighbors flat. I usually listen to music for itself. It is both a habit and a dynamic stereotype. As I said, I can only paint to music. I can not listen to music beside painting. I would fall asleep watching most beautiful symphonies on a videocassette, or in a concert hall, where you need to engage the eyes. Apart of that, music sounds unnatural in concert halls. This of course is a joke. But I hate everything „straight from the cow". I drink instant coffee, instant milk, I eat powder soups and canned meat only. Vitamins in tablets. Also music has to be like an instant powder or tablets. Identical performance in multiple playbacks may in some cases repugnant the most outstanding track. However, in many cases, an amplification of song's impact occurs. A specific track in a specific performance turns out to be indispensable as a background music. Subsequent recordings, even better, are inferior in effect as a reception scheme has generated. You wait for certain moments which give satisfaction, because they sound like something you expected. It's something like the satisfaction from a good western. The satisfaction gets greater, the more stereotypical is the story. Of course, there are exceptions to this rule, but they emphasize the rule. Anyway, maybe this is just the specifics of my music perception system. Finally, I do not perceive music the way intended by the composer. Music serves me, like a walking stick used by a disabled person. I wouldn't be able to paint without the participation of the music.

What are the common points of music and your paintings?

If there is a link between music and painting, it probably lies within architecture of the music and the architecture of the image. In a similar effect in my image, a specific location on a bright color background and other forms are like certain parts of a musical work with theme. The theme fades away, blurs. It can be sensed, swells and suddenly emerges with clear sound. I perceive that with my whole body and I would like to express it the same in my image. Therefore, I do not care if I paint a dog or a tree. What is painted, doesn't matter to me. It is important how it works in the sense of sound, color and sound form located here, not there. So I use the shapes for what I would call achieving musical goals.

In terms of mood?

Of course, in terms of mood. But I'm not a mood producer, using means of painting. I would like to express only the range of moods, which are close to my heart. Let others play with other moods, whichever they like. This is the answer to the frequently asked question, "why is it so gloomy?" or "it is much easier to paint a gloomy picture than a cheerful one", and so on. Ergo, I'm probably a gloomy man, if my images are being evaluated this way. And I find a total nonsense painting something, just because it is more difficult than painting whatever comes from my soul. Let those jolly guys paint cheerful images, if such funny questions come to their minds. And let them piss off. I often had complaints that my painting's character's skin comes off. First of all I didn't know that it is a skin. I liked and still like to paint folds, draperies and other convoluted forms. I think I express myself in this way. The painted is not for me ever so literal as for the viewers, who approach the image with a dictionary of symbols: the tree - a symbol of life, green - a symbol of the postponement, black - a symbol of death, bird, cow, pitcher, coin, grass, heap, all symbols. Mentality of an average European is littered with this crap so much, that he is not able to see anything from behind that heap of garbage. He runs around with a dictionary and measures. When something is not correct, he blames the author. Same story was with the skin on my paintings which peels off. I still paint it today, perhaps in different forms. Maybe grass peeling off is for the viewer less severe, but he knows that a grass does not peel off. At least they don't assign me with desire to protest, which they used to do years ago. Idiocy. I did never protest against anything. I was always interested in myself. I hate the term "to mean something by saying something". You see a man in your dream. The man instead of a head has a piece of living flesh. He is lying on the ground and grows into the ground, talking with you at the same time. You are helping him to grow into the ground, because you stamp on him with one foot, during this neutral conversation. I am just summarizing a dream I had last night. This situation does not surprise you, or scares. This is a normal dream. Everything about it seems to be ordinary. Only after you wake up, after examining the details you notice that almost everything in the dream was weird. That would be scary if it happened when you were awake. I call it "direct dream's speech". It is a literal vision, but at the same time the blood is no blood, pain is no pain, crime is not a crime. There is nothing to protest again, because it would be equally meaningless to protest against the fact that it's snowing. There's an early Chinese paradox saying that we do not know when we wake up: in the morning or in the evening. Far more likely is the thesis that we wake up in the evening. And throughout the day when we sleep, we try to understand something from the world of the night, which is so great and wonderful that it escapes entirely from our miserable thoughts. We are dazzled, like small children. Like an avalanche of incomprehensible details. And when we fall asleep, in a dream, we go to work and build those stereotypical settlements, in which it seems to us that we live. Sleeping in the morning we sort all the wonderful details giving them meaning systems, so that they are possible to perceive by our volatile minds. So all the literature that we add to the vision is already created ex-post. People already can name a lot of things, that's why they remain in a happy illusion that they possessed the knowledge. They look at a cloud and say that it's the condensation of water vapor. They look at the painting and say that it is a symbol of environmental contamination, because the image shows dead fish washed up by the sea. And we should look at the picture, and at the world (as far it is possible) in a more direct way - like a Martian would look at a cow: for the first time.

Do you have your favorite artists?

Not really. Although, I like surrealism and secession. I already adored secession at the time others despised it, in 1940's and 50's. Then I started my interest in art and history of art. It seemed to me from my childhood that Jugendstil and Art Nouveau were the most interesting periods in the arts. You may think I overact. Seeing the interior of my room filled with stereotypical furniture "Białystok", tape recorders, amplifiers, gramophone records, tapes, "SKALA" table lamps. Only useful items. Unfortunately, I have 80 square meters for the whole family, from which 20 for my studio. I don't know how it would be if I lived in a palace. Besides, I can not really make use of anything other than a strictly usable items. As you can see, in the whole studio, there is not a single object, or even a trifle, which would be of ornamental function. Bundles of wires, rows of switches, it's a kind of picture factory. Few days ago a movie was filmed here for the Educational Film Studios. The filmmakers who knew me only from paintings, expected a house scenery full of cobwebs, old clocks, lamps and magic candlesticks. They expected some nineteenth-century demon, an intersection of Liszt and Towiański. Meanwhile, the door was opened by a stereotypical-looking guy. A clock in the house was only one, electronic. They were pretty damn disappointed, because there was nothing to shoot. Furniture "Białystok"? But it doesn't mean that my love for secession is fake. I just (perhaps the conditions in which I lived, contributed to this) have not learned to use the decorations in the broadest sense of the meaning. And I think that if I even had a palace, I would also have no room in it for one even secession chandelier. Instead, I would rather have a flashlight ready in case of a power network failure. Perhaps it is an inconsistency. But I would rather see a strong interval between what is the inner life in the world of imagination and what is a normal everyday life. Electric torch is more useful than an Art Nouveau candlestick. The Art Nouveau chandelier is beautiful. Sleep and dreams are beautiful. Daily life is primarily convenience and ease of silent functioning.

You've done a few decades time in Sanok. Does the province help an artist? Or hinders?

I don't know.

So why did you move to Warsaw?

From the order of your two questions, there's a context assuming a relationship between moving and my work. If I moved because of work. Or, moving impacts the creativity. Why on earth is it generally believed that buying new shoes or furniture has no connection with the work? That moving from Sanok to Krosno or from Krosno to Tarnow has no connection with the work. But moving to Warsaw certainly has? Moreover, definitely has? "Now you will be able to spread your wings," a young man in Sanok said to me. I assure you "I am not going to spread my wings". I moved to Warsaw only because I prefer big city from a small town. Same what statistical majority of the nation would do. If it was the case, there would be no housing check-in restrictions in Warsaw and Krakow. But in Sanok and Brzozowie instead. This rush to larger cities is caused by trivial reasons. If you take off Marie Antoinette's rose-colored glasses, through which the intellectual Warsaw citizen used to observe the province, it is clearly visible that life in Warsaw is a thousand times easier, simpler and more convenient than living in Sanok. So to sum up: I could move anywhere where I had conditions for work, but I prefer larger cities from small

towns. This big city awareness comes from my atelier's window and within a taxi range, rather than from everyday life. Besides, my life runs in front of the easel. The easel can be put in any place which has not even slightest influence on what's being produced.

Certain items on my paintings... I think these are the appearances. For example, if you see a hand holding something, it does not have to be dictated by the desire to express the content of literature, although the content of this may be due to the gesture as it incidentally was. All literary content, arising from my images, is purely incidental. I am not able to erase the associations from the public's mind, with each named and specific subject on my image. That alleged literature, is a relationship between these strings of associations.

The way to self-knowledge... It's almost grandpa Freud... It seems to me that it is rather a way to lie to yourself and everyone around you. It is said that a man is looking for the truth. But since many years, it is constantly discussed. We all know the truth very well, but we are not able to accept it, because it's not acceptable. We are looking for it in a desperate manner of lies, which would dilute the truth a little, slightly tone down or even obscure, so that the truth only appears in the hour of death. Art is one of those beautiful lies, and probably is not anything else. Art, as I understand it.

Translated by Andy Teszner