

The Memory, acrylic on Masonite, 48" x 40", 1986.

"The place of memory within the human consciousness is the theme of the show," says Frank Boyer, a professor of art criticism at SUNY New Paltz who curated the show with Sawka's daughter, Hanna Sawka, was a friend of the artist and has studied Polish contemporary culture for the past 30 years. "It's about how the memory of a place operates for the exile-and for everyone. Jan was focused on people finding themselves in the reflections of his artwork. He had something to say, but he strongly invited the viewer to participate."

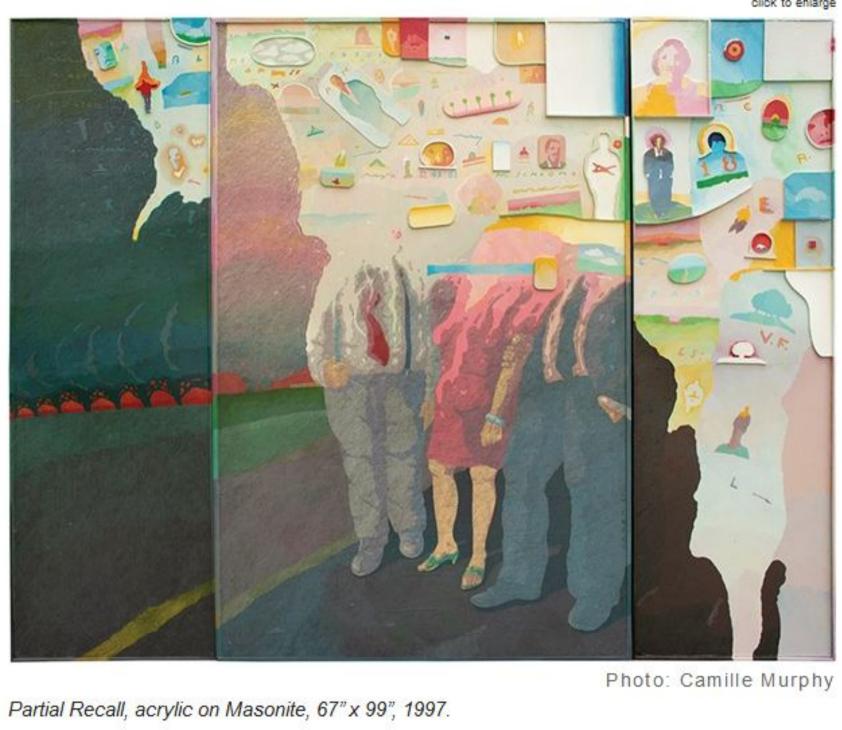
Another large-scale work, Asbury's Notebook, inspired by a trip Sawka and his wife and

Photo: Amanda Schweitzer

daughter took to Asbury Park back when it was a decrepit and forlorn place, reminiscent of the resorts of post-war Poland, is bordered along the bottom edge by clustered buildings and telephone poles silhouetted against the fiery afterglow. Here the surface plane consists mostly of darkened sky, in which dozens of tiny scenes and symbols are suspended like rows of heraldic shields. In Letter No. Three, which commemorates a theater in Krakow that had burned down, seven panels, whose symmetrical, hierarchical arrangement, from the smaller panels at the ends to the large central one, suggests a Medieval altarpiece, are covered with discrete, tiny images, a cacophony of memories comprising a memorial. Sawka's technique of mixing acrylic paint with ink and his use of nuanced grays, which recalls

the poor-quality printing of magazines in Poland (an Iron Curtain equivalent of Warhol's sloppy machine), amplified by his juxtaposition of letters with figurative imagery, infuses the works with ambiguity, as if they were prints, not paintings—documents vulnerable to the passage of time. This contrasts with his use of bright reds and oranges, which in some instances conveys the sublime effects of the sunrise or sunset and in others, a sinister, destructive force (as is the case in Intrusion, in which a tongue-like shape of bright red successively invades the three panels of gray sky, which are filled with ghostly, tomb-like symbols and figures; according to Boyer, the poisonous plume alludes to the industrial, heavily polluted region of Poland where Sawka was raised.) Also of note is 36 Post-Cards, which consists of 20-x-25-inch identically sized drypoint

etchings, each hand colored with watercolor and bearing the word "post card" wittily integrated into the visual design. Each is accompanied by a text extracted from a recently discovered letter Sawka wrote to the curator of the Poster and Prints Division of the Library of Congress, which owned many of his works; the letter, written at the request of the curator, describes each scene. The texts are illuminating in that they reflect Sawka's wide-ranging travels as well as his connection to his native country. "We thought one of the paintings depicted the Hudson River, but it turned out be a tiny Polish river at flood-tide," notes Hanna. click to enlarge



"Jan Sawka: The Place of Memory (The Memory of Place)," runs February 8 through July 12 at

the Dorsky Museum. On March 28 and 29 at 2pm, the Dorsky, the Kosciuszko Foundation and the Polish Cultural Institute will host a symposium on Sawka's work featuring the curators; scholars Peter Schwenger, Tom Wolf, Beth Wilson; and others. The symposium will take place at the Dorsky on March 28 and the Kosciuszko Foundation, located at 15 East 65th Street, in New York City, on March 29. A parallel exhibit, "Golden West? Jan Sawka's California Dream," will open on February 1 at the Robert and Frances Fullerton Museum of Art at California State San Bernardino. Newpaltz.edu/museum



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