



Remembering Hudson Valley Artist Jan Sawka

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An exhibit at The Samuel Dorsky Museum in New Paltz chronicles the late counter-culture artist's memories of childhood in exile during the Cold War.



Sawka's art installation for the Grateful Dead coincided with the fall of communism in Poland in 1989. Photo by Neil Trager

Jan Sawka grew up in Communist-controlled Poland in the 1950s. By his late 20s he was a star counter-culture artist and activist, whose convictions led to forced service in Poland's military punishment battalion and later expulsion from Poland.

The multitalented artist-architect continued his successful career, first living in France, then New York City, and finally, in the Hudson Valley.



The Sawka family in 1985, at the Sid Deutsch Gallery in NYC, the gallery that presented Jan Sawka at the time. Photo provided by Hanna Sawka

During his career, he painted, sculpted, made prints and did theater design. He created editorial drawings for *The New York Times*, designed the iconic *Solidarity* poster, and created a 10-story-tall art installation for the Grateful Dead's 25th Anniversary tour, whom he heard for the first time while imprisoned, on an illicit broadcast of the Woodstock Festival. Many of his major works were created in the Hudson Valley at his home/studio in High Falls, where Sawka lived with his wife, Hanna; and their daughter, Hanna; until his death in 2012.

The exhibit *Jan Sawka: The Place of Memory (The Memory of Place)*, which runs from Feb. 8 to July 12 at The Samuel Dorsky Museum in New Paltz, uses the late artist's work to visualize the remembrance of exile.



Sawka's Solidarity poster (1981) was an integral part of raising money for the AFL-CIO Polish Workers Aid Fund. Copyright Jan Sawka Estate

"The Cold War experience of being exiled by the communist regime is not just something that influenced my father's work, but it is a theme in this exhibition," says Hanna Sawka. A filmmaker and educator, Jan's daughter curated the exhibit with Dr. Frank Boyer, a professor at SUNY New Paltz. "The memory of places that he could not return to, especially at some poignant moments, is explored in works that are part of this show."

The exhibit also reflects beloved familiar landscapes, including a sweeping 12-panel polyptych titled *Ashokan 1 to 4*, a work that combines figurative and abstract elements.



Ashokan 4 (1998-99) / Copyright Jan Sawka Estate

"They represent a view of the Ashokan Reservoir from a favorite spot where my parents went for strolls," says Hanna Sawka. "It is very much an artwork about a beloved place, but it is more than that. It is figurative, but treated in such a way as to be quite abstract."

Jan Sawka and his wife chose the Hudson Valley because it reminded them of a region in Poland's Pieniny Mountains, where they each vacationed as children.

"At the time they bought the property, the fall of communism seemed like an impossibility," says Sawka. "They didn't think they would ever see the Pieniny Mountains again."



Partial Recall (1997) / Copyright Jan Sawka Estate

Jan Sawka: The Place of Memory (The Memory of Place) features a folio of drypoint prints titled *Post-Cards*, taking viewers through 36 places of significance to Sawka, including Mohonk Preserve. "My father loved taking walks [there], especially the foothills," says Sawka. A recently discovered manuscript by Jan Sawka will add context the artwork.

The Samuel Dorsky Museum exhibit is one of two Sawka exhibits scheduled for this year. A sister exhibit titled *Golden West? Jan Sawka's California Dream* will open at the Robert and Frances Fullerton Museum of Art in San Bernardino, CA, one week before the East Coast opening.

