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Celebrating Sawka

Visionary artist
showing, speaking

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Neil Trager

This is the mammoth and vivid 10-story-tall backdrop Jan Sawka created in 1989 for the Grateful Dead's 25-year anniversary tour.

International art legend dreams big

BY DEBORAH MEDENBACH
Times Herald-Record

Utopian Direction owner James Anthony was at an opening for his own microscale multimedia sculptures when a friend suggested he accompany a group of art collectors to High Falls to see the work of Polish resistance artist Jan Sawka.

The exhibited projects at Mo-honk Arts included paintings of Sawka's "Towers of Light" monument proposal for Abu Dhabi, drawings for the Jerusalem Peace Monument – which won an American Institute of Architects excellence in design award – and drawings for the "Water in Colours" multimedia installation for Kaitehofe Island in Hamburg, Germany. Obelisks and "magic boxes," made with high-tech UMU glass, modeled the technology that would dominate cityscapes with ever-morphing images and laser shows.

Anthony, who had worked for the Museum of Modern Art for years, remembered Sawka's Polish resistance posters from a MoMA show years before. This was something else entirely.

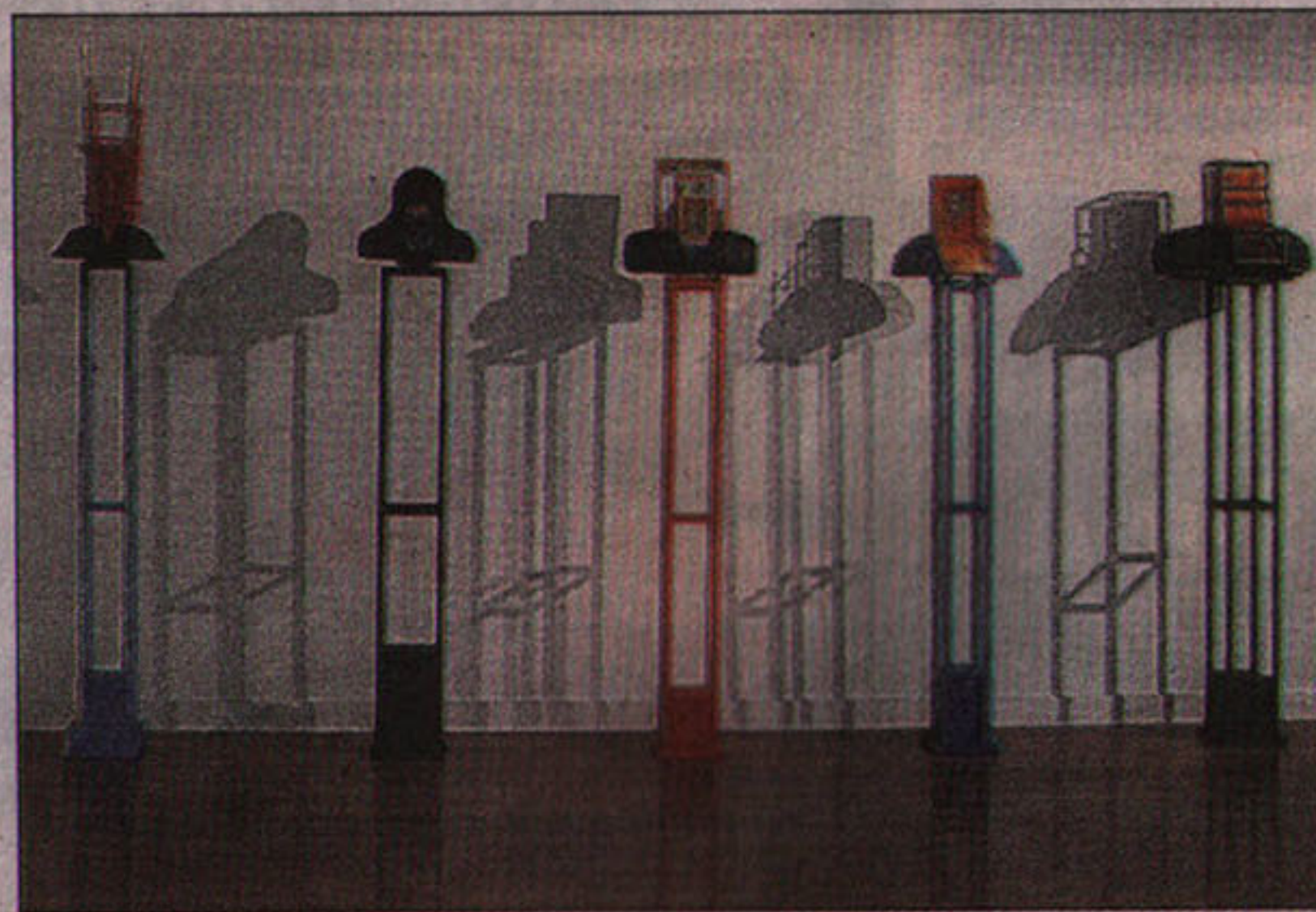
How did a master Polish poster artist become a star of the international science-heavy public art scene?

Thank the Grateful Dead and the Japanese.

In the late 1980s, a limousine pulled into Sawka's driveway and a lawyer stepped out, wanting a studio tour and information about Sawka's experience in set design. The lawyer's client, Jerry Garcia, wanted Jan to design the stage for the Grateful Dead's 25-year anniversary tour. The result was a brilliant 10-story marvel of colored canvas banners that graced stadium shows for two years before being retired in tatters.

"I learned that the Japanese government had been collecting data on me. They had 1,500 images of my work when I only had 600," Sawka said.

They viewed his Grateful Dead project as a brilliant beginning that could only be enhanced with the best in Japanese technology. Hiroshi



DEBORAH MEDENBACH/Times Herald-Record

Some of the works available for viewing at Red Eft Gallery in Wurtsboro. The gallery is celebrating Sawka through May 7.

Matsumoto, chairman of the International House of Japan, connected Sawka to the country's finest scientists, film studios and architects.

"I said, 'But I can't really use a computer,'" Sawka said.

"They said, 'See, you have an assistant with three doctorates in computer science.' 'But I don't know anything about fiber optics.' 'This man here is a master of glassworks. We need you to experiment with it.'"

They had scientists in abundance. What they wanted were his dreams.

Sawka's paintings, prints and multimedia work are in 60 major museums around the world. His public installation projects are so sophisticated that when a computer part broke on one of his art pieces, the repairman got a call back from the FBI instead of Best Buy, wondering where they got a chip like that.

"I'm really excited to have an

IF YOU GO!

What: "Passion and Art: A Festival of Artist Jan Sawka"

When: 3-7 p.m. Fri., noon-6 p.m. Sat., noon-5 p.m. Sun., through May 7

Where: Red Eft Gallery, 159 Sullivan St., Wurtsboro

Price: Free

Call: 888-2519

Visit: www.redeftgallery.com

What: "Sawka Summarizes" gallery talk

When: 2 p.m. April 17

Where: Utopian Direction, 7 West St., Warwick

Price: Free

Call: 248-8678

What: Reception following talk

When: 6-8 p.m. April 17

Where: Red Eft Gallery

artist of the international caliber of Sawka in my gallery," Anthony said. "Technology impacts our culture in countless ways. There's a brain drain of energy going into military mind-sets. Here we show development of a creative future for this technology instead."