

Art & Music

Jan Sawka exhibition opens at Dorsky Museum

by Ann HuttonFebruary 6, 2020Comments closed



Jan Sawka, *Partial Recall*, acrylic on Masonite, 67" x 99", 1957. (Carmie Murphy)

Mounting two art exhibitions on two coasts was not the plan Hanna Sawka and her co-curator Dr. Frank Boyer expected when they pitched the works of Hanna's late father, Jan Sawka (1946-2012), to museums all across the country. It usually takes two or three years to hear back from exhibition coordinators. But within a short period of time, Sawka and Boyer found themselves scrambling with the logistics of holding two very different shows at once: one at the RAFFMA Museum at California State University in San Bernardino and one here at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art at SUNY-New Paltz.

"They're both the flagship show at each museum," says Hanna, a filmmaker and educator. "In California, it's work that my father showed in the 1970s in LA. This one at the Dorsky, Frank likes to describe as 'elegiac.' It's overshadowed by exile, showing the sense of memory and place in one of the more tragic ways it can be seen, which is through the eyes of the exile. My dad created art-works that expressed the longing in being separated."

Sawka's work is in the collections of more than 60 museums worldwide. He lived and worked in High Falls from 1985 until his death. He emerged as an artist during the conflict between the ruling Communist regime in post-World War II Poland and its people. As an activist, his art became representative of the cause against oppression. Boyer explains, "In 1968, Jan was a leader in a protest. The Soviet Anti-Zionists purged out the younger, more radical popular professors from the universities, and the students hit the streets. Jan actually hid out in the mountains." "For one-and-a-half years!" interjects Hanka Sawka, the artist's wife and lifelong assistant. Adds Hanna, "The mountain people were really against Communism. High-level Communists never vacationed there because they knew they could disappear and never be found."

Jan came back when amnesty was declared, which turned out to be a ruse. The government put all the student protestors into a military camp for three months. This only served to coalesce the solidarity among the survivors (not everyone did survive) and to cement long-term relationships among them.

The saga of what took place in Poland during the Cold War is rife with civil unrest and authoritarian crackdowns. Jan's own family had been forced to relocate from Krakow to a less desirable location, because they were members of the prewar intelligentsia – an avant-garde group of artists, architects, intellectuals, according to Hanka. Then, after she and Jan were married and had a baby, it became apparent that they needed to escape. His popularity as a radical artist made them all targets.

It was later that they learned of the intervention by Robert Schulberg who assisted them behind the scenes to immigrate. (He took action on a visa regulation that had been lobbied for by Peggy Guggenheim, one aimed at supporting refugee artists in dire danger.) "For years, we didn't know why we came here," says Hanka. "I told Jan, 'Your talent always saves us.' I believe very close in this power over us. You almost hit the wall, and suddenly a door opens." Long after that door opened, Schulberg came forward to solve the mystery for the Sawkas.

"Jan Sawka: The Place of Memory (The Memory of Place)" features works from private collections and from the Dorsky Museum's permanent collection. Interestingly, this exhibition comes 31 years after a mid-career retrospective of Sawka's work was exhibited at SUNY-New Paltz's College Art Gallery in 1989 (curated by the Dorsky's founding director, Neil Trager).

Most of the paintings and prints now hanging in the Dorsky are landscape-based. Four works are specifically about Ashbury Park and what he saw there. One titled *Ashbury Notebook* comprises numerous baseball-card-sized paintings, mounted and layered in one large piece. A group of four very large paintings, comprised of 12 panels and titled *Ashokan 1-4*, amounts to 48 feet of paint, depicting sunrise to sunset. These were inspired by the Ashokan Reservoir and contain minuscule markings, some indecipherable, and numbers and faces.

"It's technically one artwork," says Hanna. "We don't usually get to show it; it has a strong connection with our region. How it fits in the theme of memory and place is that Mom and Dad chose to live here [in the Hudson Valley] because the region reminded them of this beautiful landscape in Poland where, unbeknownst to each other, they each vacationed as children."

Poor Cards, a folio of drypoint prints, depicts places of significance to the artist. For the first time, a manuscript by Jan Sawka recently discovered in the Library of Congress archives will illuminate this artwork from his singular point of view. And a display of etched plates and a needle give visitors a peek into the process of producing prints. "The prints in New Paltz were purchased by Sam Dorsky, who was my father's representative as a gallerist and did two wonderful shows for him," says Hanna.

When questioned about Jan's conceptual processes in artmaking, Hanna says, "There are underlying themes across all his work that even connect between these two shows, even though they're different visual experiences. My dad would deal with a theme, like commodification or the objectification of women, as in the show in California. He was very interested in the way our minds work. This show is about how we remember things. Each piece contains layers of reality that we see."

"He was painting about us," says Hanka, meaning all of us. "When you see a portrait of people, very rarely was it exactly someone. They are mixed, combined, representing all of us. This is why the young and old like his paintings. They relate to all of us."

Boyer, an adjunct professor in the Art Department at SUNY-New Paltz, elaborates: "Jan had pervasive themes and was very psychological... There's a lot you don't know about the specifics of a piece; it throws you back on your own consciousness. What's going on here? You begin to find that it reminds you of things in your own experience. He was very aware of that. These works were not for him; they're for everyone. He was a disciplined, mature artist. The works are about cognition, and you have to go through the process of becoming aware of this."



Jan Sawka

"The main thing is to be open and stay with it and let it come in," says Boyer. "It has immediate impact, and the longer you look at it, the more it opens up for you. It's not like a lecture. It's an opportunity for you to look into yourself and find your own analogues, your own relation to this.

"He never did a sketch... He seldom used photographs, wouldn't go outside en plein air. Everything was always already an interpretation, distilled into its visuality. He would put a piece of white paper underneath the Plexi and then project from his mind. I'd seen him working often, but I'd never quite connected the dots: that everything was coming from mental images."

Hanna adds, "In the case of the prints, it's unbelievable. He etched on Plexi. You can erase mistakes on metal plates, but you can't make a mistake or change anything on Plexi."

A public opening reception will be held on Saturday, February 8 from 5 to 7 p.m. The Dorsky Museum is open Wednesday through Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and is closed Mondays, Tuesdays and holidays.

Jan Sawka: *The Place of Memory (The Memory of Place)*, Saturday, February 8-Sunday, July 12, Morgan Anderson & Howard Greenberg Galleries, Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, SUNY-New Paltz; (845) 257-3844, www.newpaltz.edu/museum.

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