



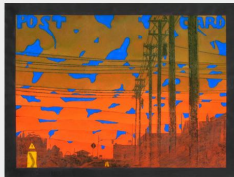
**Jan Sawka at The Dorsky**  
 by Claire Lambe

Curated by **Hanna Maria Sawka and Dr. Frank Boyer**  
 February 8 – July 12, 2020

*Tanaka Rock, art critic, historian, and co-ordinator head of the Columbia University Art Department,* described Jan Sawka as a contemporary Renaissance artist. Jan Sawka, whose work is currently on show at the Dorsky's Morgan Anderson Gallery and Howard Greenberg Family Gallery, at Suez New Palz through July 12, is indeed as described by Beck: throughout his long career as an artist, he has made posters, illustrations, drawings, paintings, sculptures, every form of printmaking, installations, outdoor sculptures, and electronically guided images. His work has appeared in rock music festivals including announcing sets for the Grateful Dead 1989 – 91 anniversary tour, at concert halls, and theaters all over Europe – and from the USA to Japan and Taiwan. He has created artworks for anti-nuclear fundraisers, Holocaust memorials, Human Rights Watch, and the Solidarity Movement. He described himself as a "multimedia man."

The exhibition at the Dorsky, which includes a series of paintings and dry-point etchings, is titled "Jan Sawka: The Place of Memory (The Memory of Place)." The work in this show explores the clear and the obscure inherent in memory and draws on the landscape of his adopted home in the mid-Hudson Valley. Yet the images are primarily created from his interior world: mental images rather than studies from the landscape or photographs, although the faces and figures that he includes appear photographic. The exhibition showcases four monumental triptychs, *Ashokan I – 4*, actually conceived as one piece, depicting a vista of the Ashokan Reservoir framed by the Catskill Mountains, a landscape beloved by Sawka because it reminded him of a childhood holiday place in Poland, his homeland, from where he was exiled in 1976. Like so many immigrants before him, especially reluctant ones, when Sawka found a place in the mid-Hudson Valley that reminded him of home, he settled there – in the town of High Falls – and remained there until his death in 2012 at age 65.

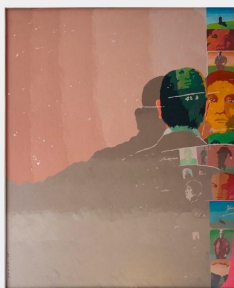
*Ashokan I – 4* is a land and waterscape rendered in the darkest of jewel tones. These works are so much drawing and writing as they are painting – he uses a mixed media of acrylic paint and ink – each work is covered in rows of roughly centimeter-long marks drawn or painted in alternate diagonals and within these are shapes that are reminiscent of hieroglyphics, many are abstract and others include figurative elements. It requires close inspection to see how highly detailed and painstakingly made these works are and according to the artist: "No one really – everything done by hand." The supports (Masonite) are completed at the top edge with an irregular border depicting the mountain skyline of the Catskills and, in the center, the rising and setting sun. Additionally, the works contain small architectural structures built into the canvas (Sawka was first a student of architecture). In a statement on his art, he wrote: "I see design, architecture, and art as one potent mixture of ideas, rules, and challenges..."



— Jan Sawka, Post Card #10, from the series "Post Cards", 1989 – 90, printed seris, drypoint etching on paper, collection Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, gift of the Dorsky Gallery Curatorial Program

At the back of the gallery, the etchings from his *Post cards* – luminous works on Arches paper – are not to be missed. Made using the dry-point etching technique on plexiglass, a material that doesn't allow for mistakes and corrections, they feature places of importance to the artist. They are then painted by hand in watercolor or, in some cases it seems, the paint was perhaps applied prior to the printing. This method has been part of Sawka's practice since his youth, while still in his twenties, he was the youngest recipient of France's "César de la Peinture" and the award of the President of the Republic of France – the President's Award was for "Innovation in the Art of Painting" for his combination of engraving/ intaglio print-making techniques together with traditional painting.

Although some of the works in the exhibition appear abstract, they are really not. They are rooted in imaginative representational imagery – including even the text aspects which tend to be invented. Others are unambiguously representational, such as *Memory, 1887*; this is among works whose treatment and colors are strongly reminiscent of Pop Art but retain a sense of mystery – the mystery that resides in snippets of dreams and memories half forgotten.



— Jan Sawka, The Memory (or The Mirror), 1987, courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka

Born in 1946 into post-war Europe, Sawka came from a highly cultured family at odds with the authoritarian socialism of Joseph Stalin; his father, an architect, was imprisoned by Stalin when Sawka was a boy. As a young man, Sawka was encouraged to choose architecture over other forms of art – the more sensible choice – but after university, he became a creator of under-ground posters. This and other oppositional activities eventually led to him being exiled from Poland. In 1976 he and his wife, Hanka, and their new-born child were able to emigrate to France thanks to an invitation from the Georges Pompidou Center. Jan Sawka was one of the first artists in residence at the Pompidou Center shortly after its opening. The following year, they emigrated to the USA eventually settling in High Falls. Initially, in the US, Sawka made a living by creating commentary illustrations for the Op-Ed page of the New York Times. He soon began showing his work in galleries in New York, Los Angeles and other cities in the United States, and the bulk of his art career has been in this country. The exhibition at the Dorsky, is co-curated by Hanna Sawka, the artist's daughter, and Dr. Frank Boyer.

Featured image: Jan Sawka, "Asbury Notebook," 1981, courtesy Jan and Michael Sokow

This Exhibition runs through July 12, 2020

Museum Hours: Wednesday – Sunday, 11 a.m. – 5 p.m. Closed Mondays, Tuesdays, holidays and intermissions. For more about The Dorsky Museum and its programs, visit <http://www.newpalz.edu/museum> or call (845) 257-3844.

**About The Dorsky Museum**  
 Through its collections, exhibitions and public programs, the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art supports and enriches the academic programs at the College and serves as a center for Hudson Valley arts and culture. With more than 9,000 square feet of exhibition space distributed over six galleries, The Dorsky Museum is one of the largest museums in the SUNY system. Since its official dedication in 2001, The Dorsky has presented more than 100 exhibitions, including commissions, collection-based projects, and in-depth studies of contemporary artists including Robert Morris, Alice Neel, Judy Pfaff, Carolee Schneemann and Ushio Shinohara.



Claire Lambe is an Irish born painter whose works have been exhibited on both sides of the Atlantic; she is a graduate of the National College of Art and Design in Dublin and holds an MFA in painting from the City University of New York. Writing credits include contributing author to *Teen Life in Europe* (part of the *Teen Life Around The World* series), and articles and reviews for this publication. Claire Lambe's art work can be seen [here](#).