

JAN SAWKA'S

Amazing voyage

A brilliant artist's life
ended suddenly,
but his vast body of
work will go on ...

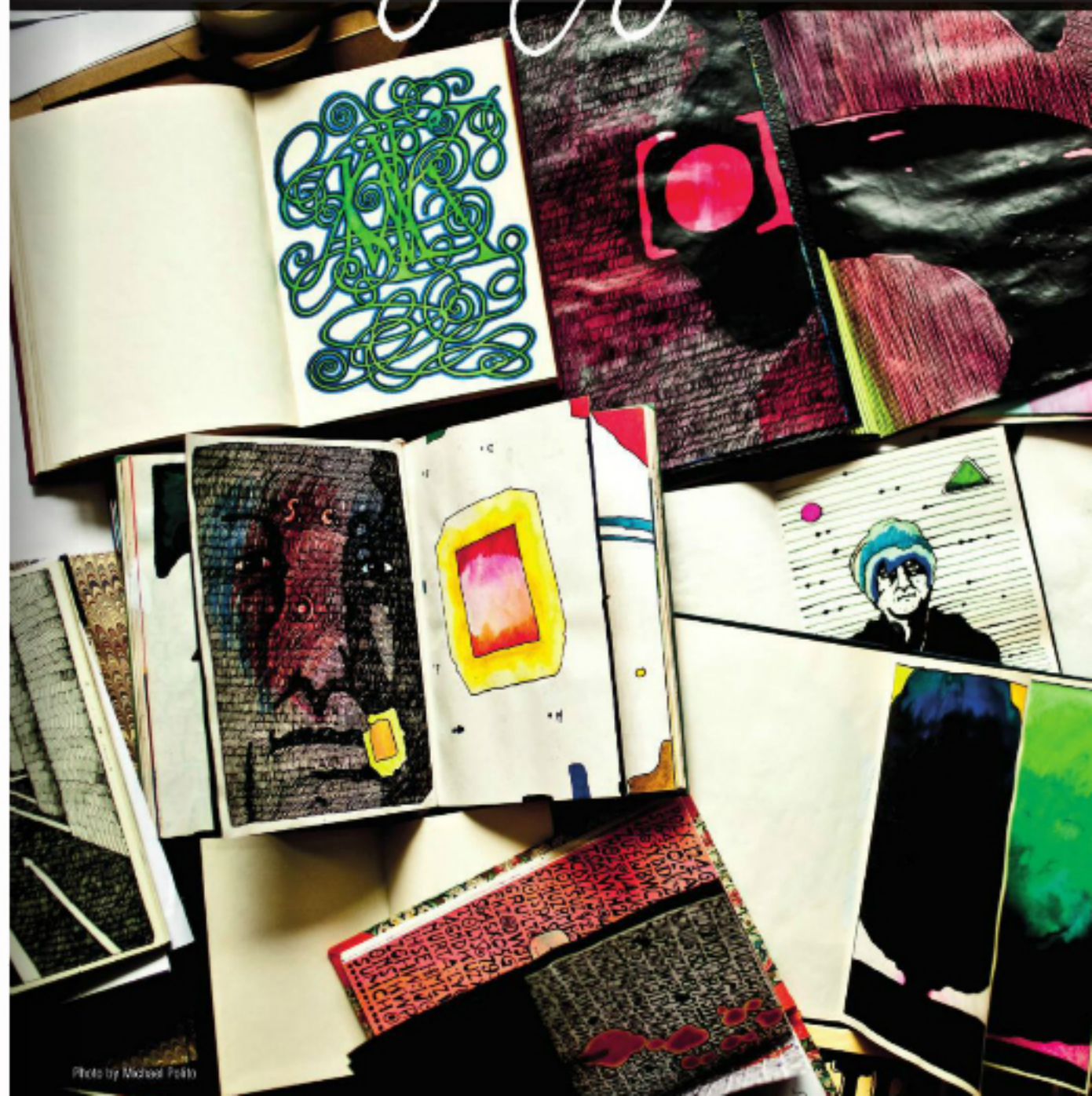


Photo by Michael Fokko



Hanna and Hanka Sawka with UMU sculptures "Sun Tower" and "Calligraphy Tower," on next page. UMU is a form of "smart glass," regulated by electrical current. On the preceding page are Sawka's journals, which will be displayed Nov. 1-Dec. 15 at the Stevenson Library at Bard College. A reception will take place from 4-6 p.m. Nov. 7.

Photo by Michael Polito



Jan Sawka, with his model for the Peace Monument, Jerusalem, won the 2011 "Excellence in Architecture" award in the Unbuilt Category from the American Institute of Architects with the jury comment, "Poetry and Passion, who could argue with this concept?" Photo by Hanna M. Sawka

By Deborah Medenbach

THE VOYAGE: SPINNING EARTH. A LONE EVERYMAN PERCHED IN A SKY of letters and formulas. The great cities and temples. War. Peace. There are so many hints and layers of symbolism in the final 1,200-image masterpiece of the late artist Jan Sawka that the viewer squints to decipher which layer to attend to first.

Sawka died suddenly on Aug. 9 at age 65 in his High Falls studio, where he spent the last 28 years creating artwork in so many mediums that curators are at a loss to categorize him.

In Poland, he was achieving international recognition for his work by the time he was 27. "Art markets didn't exist there. Everything was controlled and censored, right down to business cards and obituaries," Jan's widow, Hanka, remembers. "There was no other way for artists to make a living than to make posters. That's why Polish posters were so outstanding. Jan was trained as a printmaker and painter, not a graphic artist. He'd have to make two posters

a month for us to survive."

For his own amusement, Sawka often layered political meanings into his artwork, slipping past the censorship bureau. He continued this role as symbolic commentator when he fled to the U.S.

"We had two days to leave from Paris on a tourist visa thanks to an exit loophole created by Peggy Guggenheim during the war for top artists, scientist and spies. Normally we would have had to wait nine months to leave, by which time we would have been dead," Hanka said. Fleeing with an 8-month old baby and four suitcases, Sawka instructed a friend to pick up

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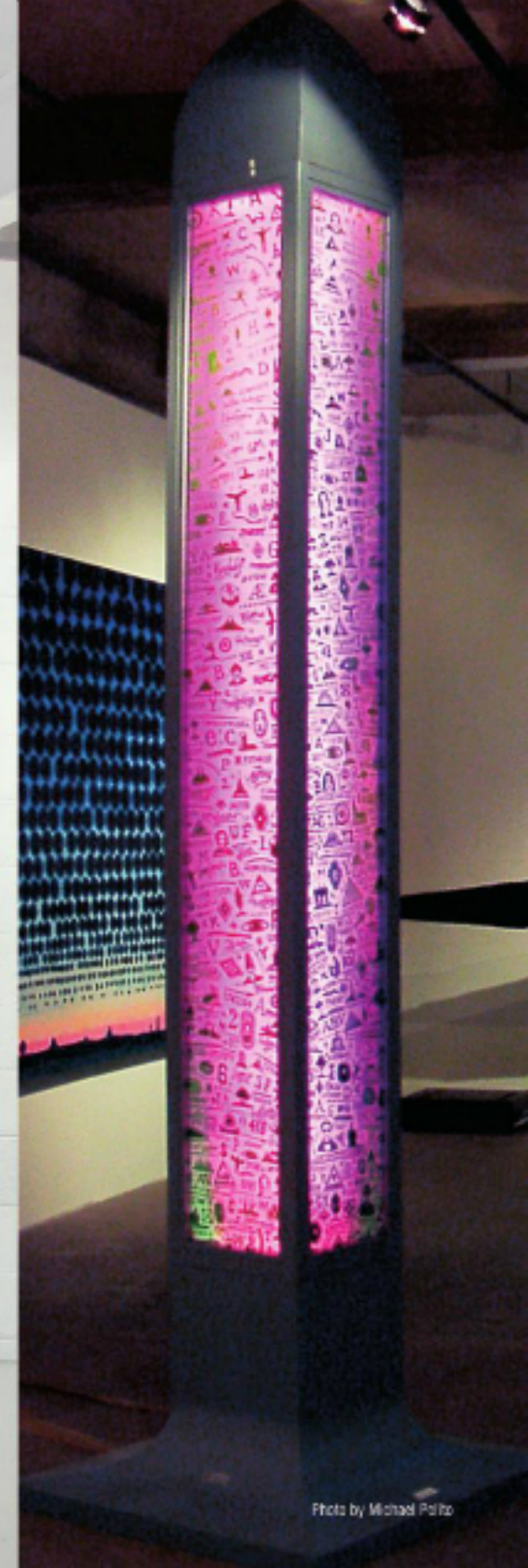


Photo by Michael Polito



This set toured with the Grateful Dead from 1989-1991 (the "Mega-Dead" period in the band's history, when they played stadiums). Some of the tattered remains are on exhibit at the Grateful Dead Archives. Photo by Neil Trager

tubes of drawings from his house the next day. The friend arrived to find the windows and doors of the orderly house smashed and the artwork gone.

From Poland to New Paltz

Once settled in New York, Sawka drew op-ed illustrations for *The New York Times* with as much edgy double-entendre as he'd used to breeze by the Polish censors. Sawka cruised art galleries with a box of international press clippings instead of a portfolio, demanding representation. It wasn't long before the long-haired, bearded artist got what he wanted. When he moved to Ulster County, a retrospective show of his paintings, prints, posters and constructions launched at SUNY New Paltz. He was 42 years old.

"I was meeting with him on a weekly basis to discuss his work," said retired

SUNY New Paltz museum curator Neil Trager. "Then he started talking about a project with the Grateful Dead, and I couldn't quite wrap my head around it. These were ideas that germinated and grew into a massive artwork, 144 feet by 67 feet."

Trager documented the artwork's installation in stadiums that toured for three years for the Grateful Dead's 25th anniversary. The art was in tatters by the end, with segments trashed or stolen. One intact side panel is held at the Grateful Dead Archives at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

"It's a huge piece of canvas—one of those things that was designed to look good in a stadium context, and it doesn't do justice to Jan's vision when you unroll it here," said Nick Merriweather, head archivist at the Grateful Dead Archives, which is housed in the college library. The collection also

"Then (Sawka) started talking about a project with the Grateful Dead, and I couldn't quite wrap my head around it."

NEIL TRAGER

Former SUNY New Paltz museum curator

includes Sawka's project correspondence with Jerry Garcia. "His letters were works of art. Essentially illuminated manuscripts," Merriweather said.

Sawka collaborated with scientists in Japan in the 1990s for complex science-heavy designs that incorporated the newest materials and computer technology for massive community installation designs. One kinetic projection and set design called "The Eyes" toured with Steve Winwood and the



Sawka created "Red Road," left, in 1995 and "Ashokan View," one painting from a triptych, in the late 1980s. Photo by Hanna M. Sawka

band Traffic in 1995.

"The Voyage" was completed just months before his death, is now in pre-production, and designed to accompany a score by Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart for his 2014 spring tour.

'We have a lot of work to do'

When an artist's work encompasses thousands of drawings, prints, sculpture and community art installations, what becomes of the work when a heart attack leaves wife and daughter standing among neatly packaged storage rooms filled with a lifetime of expression?

"Our long-term goal is to have a museum with a staff that can take care of it," daughter and filmmaker Hanna Sawka said.

"Jan was always very neat and methodical, so I know where everything is and

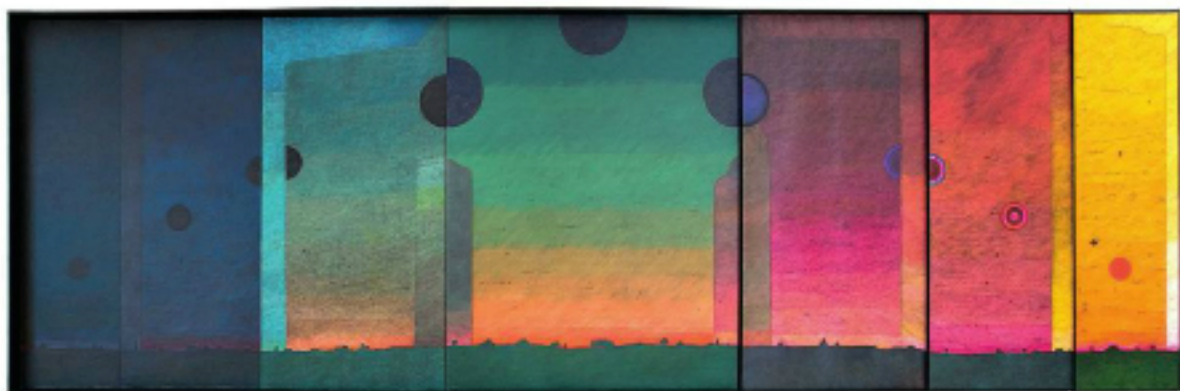
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Taking 'The Voyage'

"THE VOYAGE" IS a series of 1,200 illustrations seen in large-scale, high-resolution projections with high-tech lighting effects in a 90-minute multimedia experience. The installation is designed to accompany the live music and soundscapes of Mickey Hart and his band. "The Voyage" tracks the life story of a character named Adam as both an individual and the Everyman, connecting world religions and cultures through the unity and diversity of human experience. "The Voyage" bridges concert and theater experiences and will be produced at concert venues throughout the United States, followed by a world tour with Hart and his band.



Sawka's most recent portrait, taken by his daughter in spring 2012.



"A View from Zengyo," which Sawka created in 2006-'07. Photo by Ananda Switzer

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where all the projects are," Hanka said. "He prepared to such an extent that those project packages could go out as they are and the projects could be realized."

The family's first focus is to shepherd "The Voyage" through production and create a documentary film. A show of Jan's never-exhibited personal drawing journals is scheduled for Nov. 1-Dec. 15 at Bard College and a memorial exhibit at ACA Galleries in New York City in the spring.

"It's a tough question every artist's estate has to face," said Trager, reflecting on Sawka's work both as a friend and curator. "I think what they have indicates such a range of work, I can envision a number of museum shows."

Perhaps the largest conservation challenge is Sawka's digital work.

"We've dealt with cuneiform and papyri," said Trager. "They don't require any mediating technology: You can just look at them and if you take care of them, they're fine. For an artist like Jan, whose work straddles and embraces all of these technical divides, it's especially poignant. None of us really knows what it means to preserve a data stream for 10 or 20 years. How many bits need to flip before the data stream is irretrievable?"

Like those bits, the artist's layers of cultural and historical meaning, woven into the work like secret talismans, are equally ephemeral.

"We'd like to keep his work together. It will require years of work to create a museum where you could experience these technical pieces in a media room, see his animated artworks as well as his paintings and sculptures and temporary exhibits," Hanna said. "When the time comes, what to do will be clear. For now, we have a lot of work to do." ■