

Reviews

Transcultural Visions: Polish American Contemporary Art

January 14 - March 3, 2001
Mon-Fri: 9 AM-5 PM;
Saturday 10 AM-5 PM.

The Hyde Park Art Center
5307 South Hyde Park Boulevard
Chicago, Illinois 60615
Telephone: 773/ 324-5520
<http://www.hydeparkart.org/exhibitions/>

Poet: But, Jagusia, your hand
--for there is a cage, a twig
under your breast.
Bride: Right.
It's the dart in my bodice
sewn up a bit too tight.
Poet: And what do you feel beat?
Bride: This isn't much of a lesson:
my heart in all this heat.
Poet: And that is your Poland.

Stanislaw Wyspianski (1869-1907),
"The Poet and The Peasant Bride"

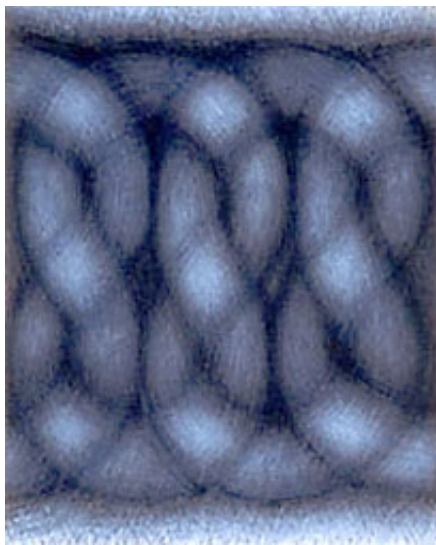


The Aprons, 1997-98
Acrylic/Oil/Collage on canvas
63"x88"
© Mary Lou Zelazny 1998

Our greatest passions and achievements, all man's ideals and noblest acts begin in first experiences -- five human senses. What we make of them, and where, determines who we are -- identity. Some pundit once even noted: 'What is a nation, but the memory of good foods eaten in our childhood?' It all starts in childhood. Even where the language changes, one generation to the next, a certain, shared and undefined sense of things, of relationships, of the world abroad, is carried over and into new environments. "Transcultural Visions: Polish American Contemporary Art" at The Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, runs until March 3, 2001. This exhibition gathers twenty-four artists with varying degrees of Polish identity: the newly arrived; a generation once removed; and artists with only a vague and distant legacy. "Transcultural Visions: Polish American Contemporary Art," is a laboratory, both of art and of identities. But, above all, it offers an impressive selection of quality art.

Mary Lou Zelazny noted in her artist's statement that, "I was surrounded by food and articles of daily living that were foreign, or at least seemed so to me. Despite the intimacies and influences of home, my perceptions were molded by the behemoth of American culture, clearly delineating native from alien." Zelazny's father came to the U.S. from a ruined post-World War II Poland. She notes her Polish maternal grandparents, with village parsimony, recycled and restored "anything that had some remaining usefulness or decorative potential." Zelazny's art at times recalls other midwest artists such as Alan Larkin and Jean Poklop, but here it reconciles and draws visceral response -- meaning, from what the artist might term "resale goods, alley cast-offs," and American popular culture, also recycled and then synthesized into paint. Zelazny's *The Aprons* (1997-98) is dramatic in conception, surreal in its harmony of compositional elements, and authentic in a sensibility which suggests subtle afterthoughts about what lingered from a Polish household life; and about how it confronted a mainstream American Pop society at large, unreal in its conspicuous consumption and disaffection. The visual elements in Zelazny's *The Aprons*, bits and pieces from a varied and affluent society, assemble in a dramatic domestic evocation; as if a flight of memory.

Frank Piatek has noted: "The process of identity for me is



Simultaneous Triple Twist, 2000
Acrylic on canvas
4'x5'
© Frank Piatek 2000

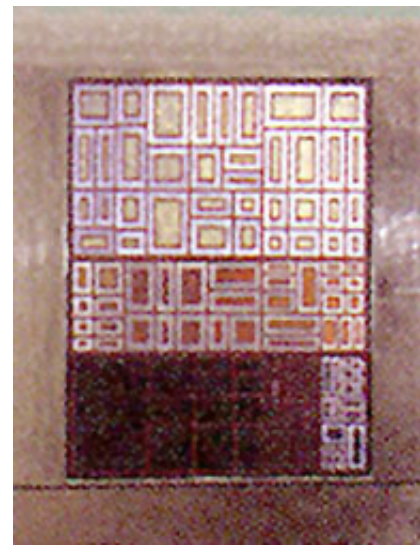
complex, indirect, and symbolic. It contains a continuous history of loss and transformation, and if self-knowledge is to occur, recovery is on some new level." It is perhaps that fundamental insight which has led this artist "to sidestep limiting ideologies within types of Modernism and Post-Modernism that tend to screen, control and negate certain activities of meaning not consonant with their own." Bridging disparate cultural sensitivities at times entails a refusal to be trapped or bound to any without reservation. Piatek has developed a vocabulary of knotted tubular forms, illuminated by subtle, aetherial light and glimmerings. Piatek's rendering often plays with varying resolution; and the artist has commented that: "Tubes are arms, trees, legs, coils, bodies, balloons, Boy Scout knots, dirigibles, parachutes, pillows, etc. I would add to the expanding list: Double helix chains and speculative visions of vibrating Superstrings in multiple dimensions." (The latter a reference to Quantum physics.) Piatek's *Simultaneous Triple Twist* in this showing is a fine example of his art, which is both contemporary and individual. He is featured in *Art Scene, Chicago 2000*. Piatek received his BFA and MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he now teaches.

This exhibition does present several artists who explore the formal aspects of geometric form, and its interaction with color perception: artists who develop upon approaches such as Constructivism -- art emphasizing movement in space, rather than volume. Among them is Marlena Novak whose *Tanka I* (1996:25"x3x2") is executed in encaustic and oil on wood. In this work, a strong and expanded, horizontal "H" element in light blue establishes a central anchoring, a horizon, which counterbalances and competes with a vertical dynamic implied by two blue elements, one centered at canvas top, another centered at canvas bottom. Which axis predominates at any one time subtly varies with the viewer's distance. At a sufficiently far enough viewing distance, the elements coalesce into a unity of pattern. Novak, who studied at the Jagiellonian University, Krakow, in 1987 through a Kosciuszko Foundation exchange, has noted that "The interest in time-space relationships in the work of the Polish Constructivists is an area that I explore in my constructions as well as in my use of a time-based medium." Her art bears out her professed concern in the "social and philosophical implications that exist when one realizes that 'seeing is not believing.'"

Jan Brud offers two paintings in this exhibition, and both are excellent. Brud studied in Krakow, Poland, under the artist Jerzy Nowosielski (who was first attracted to Constructivism and Surrealism, but who later turned to reinterpret Eastern Orthodox iconographic paradigms). In all such avenues, a formal purity serves a transcendental intent, and Brud's paintings bring that to a further development. This artist's use of gilt and silvering in geometricized composition evokes a non-objective art *a la Byzantine* -- a sense of costly jewels in service to a deity of Euclid, a Platonic demiurge. Jan Brud recently exhibited in "The Polish Connection" (July 1999) at the Chicago Athenaeum (reviewed in this magazine).

Both *Celebration* (1994) and *Elegant Solitude* (1995) by James Juszczyk focus on the optical illusion of Necker Cubes: cubes which seem to spontaneously reverse orientation upon close viewing. Juszczyk adds a further ambiguity to a Platonic postulate by the use of vibrating color oppositions. Drawing upon the nature of crystals, this artist "realized how transparency (the ability of light to pass completely through a solid object - the possibility to see the surface and interior - the outside and inside - simultaneously) could be used in my paintings." Both works in this showing are acrylics (each 43 1/2"x39 1/2"). Juszczyk studied at the Cleveland Institute of Art with, among others, Julian Stanczak.

A similar trend in art, represented in this show, is Richard Anuszkiewicz's acrylic on panel, *Temple of Fire* (1980). Anuszkiewicz studied with Joseph Albers and was a leading figure in developing OpArt (Optical Art) during the 1960s. *Temple of Fire* is an exploration of interactions between color and line. Although such art requires a keen understanding of visual perception, Anuszkiewicz himself has noted: "I don't like to use the word 'science,' because people tend to think it is something for which you have a formula." (This artist is profiled by Adrienne Redd:



For Eternity and Everlastingness, Aug. 24, 1997
Oil and gold leaf
24"x32
© Jan Brud

<http://www.netaxs.com/~adredd/Anuszkiewicz.htm>>).



Elegant Solitude, July 1995
Acrylic on canvas
43 1/2"x39 1/2" (unframed)
© James Juszczak 1995

Tadeusz Myslowski is represented by two stonewares: *New York Composite* (1991) and *Towards Organic Geometry* (1992); and by his book, *Towards Organic Geometry: 163 Selected Photographic Images 1972-1994*. Myslowski's contributions to this showing explore the most fundamental shapes and patterns of biology: severe abstractions taken to a near dream state. Ellen Campbell's oil on canvas, *Untitled* (2000: 12"x12"), also appears a biologically inspired art: a school of six-lobed asterisks, each both floral and medusoid; each hung in visual suspension; shading, reflecting, exchanging hues among themselves.

Although Neil Goodman cites the Polish-Jewish artist, Chaim Soutine, as an "alter ego," his sculptural work in cast bronze and limestone displays a fluid geometry which, in this exhibition, accords well with work such as Myslowski's. Goodman's sculpture elegantly, flowingly, echoes basic archetypes of organic form and a vitalist, dynamic torsion.

In the 1960s, *Time* magazine coined the term OpArt to rhyme with Pop Art, and "Transcultural Visions" includes examples of the latter as well. Donald Lipski's *American Flag Ball # 2* (1990: Diameter 32") might well have drawn violent protests in the turbulent 60s, but today seems a symbol of how much everything in America assimilates into everything else: Pop and patriotism, the comic and the critique.

There are examples in this show of popular idiom applied to very pointed, broad societal critique. Ed Paschke's *Dark Sky* (1995) is an example. Much of this artist's work negotiates a fine balance between irony -- a sceptical distance toward ads, media, fashions and *status quo* -- and a fascination with mainstream popular imagery, often extreme, at times even bizarre or shocking. Paschke often seems to produce art, not for 'shock value,' but rather to question why we are not more shocked, or not shocked at what, in fact, ought to be shocking. Bullets. Flying bullets. An orderly pair against a clement sky and joined in image with bright, semiotic forms. At the show's opening, *Dark Sky* was taken by many as a rebus. It may well be a warning to aliens: 'Violent Society Ahead.'

Joseph Jachna left Chicago's then predominantly Polish West Pullman neighborhood to study at the Institute of Design/Illinois Institute of Technology, where he received a BS in Art Education. While there, Jachna studied with Aaron Siskind, Harry Callahan and Frederick Sommer. In recent years, this artist has noted: "my interest demands the mark of human presence," which forms the central focus in his four photographic sequences printed digitally as one (14 1/2"x40"). These are from his *LIFE and ART in the City* project (2000). There is a popular, muralistic vocabulary to this work: a hand in a gesture of oath-taking; clouds and walkway; pigeons and Escher-esque globes containing within... a ladder, a human form -- each overprinted by the letters, L I F E . If it is a dream of human presence, artifacts and symbols, it is at least benign.



Dark Sky, 1995
Oil on linen
34"x50"
© Ed Paschke 1995

Dennis Kowalski's installation, *Tropical Paradise* (1999-2000), seems the closest to Pop Art spirit, although it makes no specific reference to popular symbol or image. *Tropical Paradise* is constructed of feather stone, feather dusters, floor tiles, plastic and varnish; and measures approximately 18 x 120 x 144 inches. Eleven units, each a rock set on a tile and sporting upright feathers, are distributed within the allotted floor space. In spirit, it evokes a home-bound desire to simulate that 'tropical paradise' so often dreamt of by middle-class America: an escape -- or a parody of the dream of escape -- from the hum-drum... the very stuff which enriches the publishers of coffee-table books, and mass media travelogues.

Miroslaw Rogala's *Transformed City Series #4 (Warsaw)* (2000:34"x34"), a silkscreen on clear acrylic glass, is a study in graphic contrasts. Rogala is originally from Krakow, Poland. This is an artist who has viewed art as a dialogue: one which entails both a latter-day, and now traditional, 'receptive' role,' but which as well solicits response and responsibility on the part of the viewer. In much of Rogala's art, to 'see' the work, is also to be called to act because of it. Rogala often refers to a "(V)User," a term coined by the artist for participants who are both viewers and users of his art. With this, there is an implied assumption that 'to use,' in its common American understanding, mandates an involvement -- much as an artist 'uses' his hands and eyes. A natural consequence of this approach is the artist's assertion: "My understanding of freedom and democracy is not only 'rights' and 'privileges' -- the traditional definition in the U.S.A. -- but also of responsibilities." In Rogala, the gallery visitor meets an artist who, while successful and much acclaimed in the U.S. and Western Europe, nonetheless introduces, and indeed, insists upon, a view of life and society -- and with it, an art -- which has in the past century been neglected by influential academic circles here.

That human values, and artistic empathies, are not at odds with new technologies or perceptive intelligence is confirmed in the work of Gosia Koscielak. Here is an artist who has been in the U.S. for eight years, but who also brings a distanced and alternative perspective on our situation in life. This artist notes: "My artistic origins can be traced to the Wroclaw (Poland) school of geometric abstraction and conceptualism (Wanda Gorkowska, Jan Chwalczyk). From formalism I gradually got to the symbolic dimensions of light and space." She concentrates on reliefs, installations and paintings which use natural simple materials (stone, water, sand, wood), blended with state-of-the-art computer graphics, gobo projections, holograms, fiber optics and small video monitors. Koscielak freely concedes: "My compositions are abstract and symbolic." In this exhibition, the artist presents *From the River Bank -- New Oder*. (Koscielak explains that the River Oder demarcates much of the Western border of Poland.) This is a construction of sand upon which laser gobo projection and computer graphic is superimposed: a 'virtual,' conceptual landscape. Gosia Koscielak holds dual MFAs: one in graphics and one in ceramics, and has a Ph.D. in Art History from the Academy of Fine Arts in Wroclaw, Poland, as well as an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. This artist has exhibited in Greece, Holland, Poland, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Austria, Brazil, Norway and the U.S. She is currently featured in *Art Scene, Chicago 2000* (Crow Woods Publishing: 2000).

Thomas Skomski is an artist who originally viewed his ethnic identity with self-doubt, with uneasy ambiguity. Skomski observed: "Abandoning ethnic roots was as unsettling as it was liberating. Along with the possibility of choosing my own 'myth,' came the inability to find groundedness beyond my immediate family history. My response was to seek my ground through art." Skomski is represented

in "Transcultural Visions" by two pieces: *Body Bag* (male) (1995:23" tall), a work cast in hydrocal; and *Backbone* (2000:21"x4"x4"), made of styrofoam. It was an antiquarian distance -- the aura of age, of patina -- which all-the-more focused attention on the expressive essentials in the ancient Greek exultation of human form. Skomski builds on this, with a very modern wit and irony. *Body Bag* (male), true to its name, seems a dis severed casualty of war, an homage to Greek statuary... a humanoid sack of potatoes. It provokes a sense of seeking aesthetic beauty, and a questioning whether that search at times violates some sense of human decency -- should any 'body bag' -- an evidence of fatality -- be dispassionate and unengaged in its review? One senses here both America's Vietnam and the Greek eternity.

The human form need not instigate a social or a moral sense. It may well mentor it. Marion Kryczka has noted: "As satisfying as the concentration on still life painting is, I still religiously continue to draw the figure at least once a week. The direct and experiential nature of figure drawing has been an indispensable practice to me as a perpetual painter. I find that the two subjects now more richly inform one another and need not be separate in a conceptual sense." Kryczka's art appears in "Transcultural Visions" twice: both works are oils on canvas: *Self Portrait with Photos of My Parents* (1998:36"x24"), and the artist's *Cleaning Women at Rest* (2000:31"x41 1/2"). Each is a rich, sensual study in the art of light, and the reality of human form. Marion Kryczka received his BFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and an MFA from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. He is currently featured in *Art Scene, Chicago 2000* (Crow Woods: 2000).

Figurative art in this showing appears in several guises. Katharine Schutta's *The Cleaning Women at Rest* (2000:31"x41 1/2") is oil on canvas. but this artist equally interprets in Photo-collage/C print -- her *Boys and Pencils* (2000:24"x40 3/8"). This artist notes an admiration for the Polish master, Stanislaw Witkiewicz (Witkacy), who annotated his paintings with notes of the various narcotics, stimulants and hallucinogens used during their execution. One finds a speculative fancy coupled with technical discipline in Schutta's art. Schutta was graduated from Bryn Mawr College with a major in art history and a minor in Russian. After her second Baccalaureate, she studied printmaking in Krakow, where she gained an admiration for the posters of Roman Cieslewicz.



Plane, 2000
Oil/canvas+plane model+extension+shadow
16"x13"x15"
© Edith Altman 2000

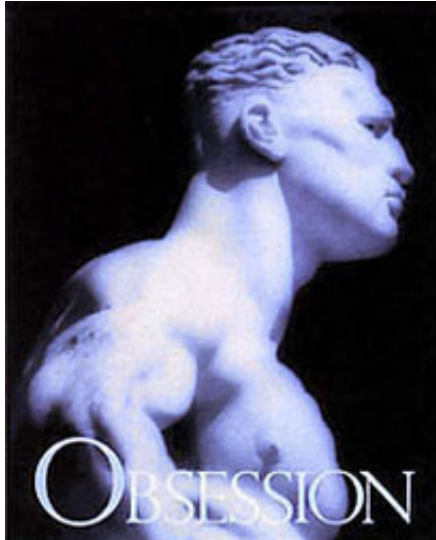
Edith Altman has noted that her art is "informed by the esoteric teachings of the Kabbalah," which she characterizes as "A passage inward and upward from the physical to the spiritual -- where matter becomes spiritual." This artist has further asserted: "This ties me to my cultural history and to Polish Constructivism, especially to Malevich and to his notion of the redefinition of time and space and spiritual accent/flight as a metaphor for the transformation of consciousness." She is represented by *A History of Flight, Part I* (2000:16"x13"x20": 30" for shadow), composed of acrylic paint, wood, construction, text, light. This exhibition features a second work: *Creation=Drawing* (1996:58"x46") rendered with oil stick on conifil (non-woven synthetic). *A History of Flight, Part I* offers multiple overtones, but several viewers at this show's opening sensed a World War I reference. One spies the generalized form of plane, and about it, as if in prophecy, there is a rain of crosses: "In Flanders fields the poppies grow/ between the crosses, row by row...." Human consciousness is not predictable.

Monika Kulicka offers a work from her series: *Drips, Runs, and Bleeds* (2000: 24"x18"), rendered with chlorophyll on paper, and plexiglass. For this artist, the fundamental seed for art is an ambivalent regard toward our age: "I am very much of my times, a believer in technical capabilities of our civilization and profane approaches of our scientists. Yet, I am aware of

the tendency of our own cleverness to twist against us. So I try to counterbalance the highly logical, rational and effective technical world around me with irrational, futile gestures, seemingly naive, foolish acts, with the emotional and intuitive, sometimes desperate or inadequate; my aim is to stir our hidden appreciation of the absurd, to startle minds set by the logic of cause and effect of the machine."



Drips, Runs, and Bleeds, 2000
Chlorophyll drawing
30"x60"
© Monika Kulicka



From *Obsession*, 1993
VHS videotape
© Maciej Toporowicz

This exhibition does include more pointed critiques of modern culture. Maciej Toporowicz's *Obsession* (1993) is part of an extended project. In addition to the artist's VHA videotape, Toporowicz has produced black and white photographs with silkscreen. It may be that the artists born within the U.S. are most prone to accept much of popular image: the advertisements and creations of mass media, and that their dissent or assent is topical, at times even polemical. The Polish born more often come to the images prevalent here with reservations. Toporowicz has asserted that "The fascist dream of purity and Aryan symbolism is often used by modern advertisement. The search for beauty and innocence flirts with desire for pure society. The OBSESSION consists of photographs of Nazi sculptures and monuments combined with photographs from Auschwitz."

(<http://www.artincontext.org/LISTINGS/IMAGES/FULL/1/DJ5C7701.htm>).

In "Transcultural Visions," Tom Czarnopys stands as another artist who asserts the real and natural sense of life. Czarnopys's untitled steel diptych (1991:42"x68") seems a return to the Romantic view of material reality. Here, there is the deep appreciation of natural textures, metals which alter under the actions of air, which possess their specific nature, and for which the artist solicits the viewer's close attention. Czarnopys further offers *Tree Drawings* (1999:14"x14"x5/8"), a work in graphite on lacquered steel panel.

"Transcultural Visions" is rounded out by Kasimir Karpuszek's *Mother Cabrini Green Project, Chicago, Illinois* (1954), and that artist's *Bucky Dome, Aspen, Colorado* (1953). Bill Cass is represented by *Settlement* (1998:60"x48"x2"), an oil on canvas.

This is an exhibition which offers a diverse selection of quality art. Born of first experiences, as is the case with art, the human sense -- sight and the affections, perceptions which arise from it -- all have a say in what we make of them. That determines who we are -- identity. But it is neither determined, nor wildly random. There is, after all, among the Swiss -- despite four languages -- a commonality, a worldview which is shared. Nor would one pretend that Haitians, Cajuns, or the Quebequois, despite a common tongue, are anything alike, nor anything like the Parisian French. And if a mainstream denies an ethnic sensibility -- a challenged perception of the wider world -- perhaps it speaks more of the discontents of an emergent, denatured and homogenized Brave New World. Still, American Southerners are not quite like New Englanders. Those within a distinct community, or an ethnic legacy, may share a sensibility which is not reducible to words. Which is not to say that all the artists in this showing share a Polonian ethos. Some have only the formalities of history. "Transcultural Visions," is, however, an exhibition of consistently fine quality, and one which offers variety: excellent work; a range of expressions.

A question does remain as to whether so many artists can have a bond in common, and it may well be that having a Polish origin, or even a Polish name, in America, prompts a heightened awareness of America's mainstream society. It is as much a self-conscious choice: whether to assimilate eagerly, or to hold back and hold to intimate and different alternatives, garnered in childhood from home and community -- as the deliberate decision to choose America has been for newcomers. And American Art, like American society, has never been a purely 'native product.' It is repeatedly re-created; both its strength and its weakness. It is a process noted by a British poet, settled decades in America:

And as foreign settlers to strange country come,
By mispronunciation of native words
And intermarriage create a new race,
A new language, so may the soul
Be weaned at last to independent delight.

W.H. Auden, "1929"

The artists of this showing are: Edith Altman, Richard Anuszkiewicz, Jan Brud, Ellen Campbell, Bill Cass, Tom Czarnopys, Neil Goodman, Donald Lipski, Joseph Jachna, James Juszczak, Kasimir Karpuszek, Gosia Koscielak, Dennis Kowalski, Monika Kulicka, Marion Kryczka, Tadeusz Myslowski, Marlena Novak, Ed Paschke, Frank Piatek, Miroslaw Rogala, Katharine Schutta, Thomas Skomski, Maciej Toporowicz, Mary Lou Zelazny

Even where expression changes, one medium to the next, a certain, shared and undefined sense of things, of relationships, of the world abroad, is carried over and into new environments.

"Transcultural Visions: Polish American Contemporary Art" at The Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, encompasses a range of quality art, and it is timed to coincide with several other presentations of art with Polish associations, produced since 1945. "Transcultural Visions" runs until March 3, 2001.

Other exhibitions concurrent with the Hyde Park show are at the Chicago Cultural Center, The Art Institute of Chicago, The Museum of Contemporary Art, The Renaissance Society and Gallery 400.

"Transcultural Visions: Polish American Contemporary Art" at The Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago, runs until March 3, 2001 -- an exhibition which gathers twenty-four artists with varying degrees of Polish identity. It is a laboratory, both of art and of identities. "Transcultural Visions: Polish American Contemporary Art," above all, offers an impressive selection of quality art.

--G. Jurek Polanski

Jurek Polanski has previously written and art edited for *Strong Coffee* in Chicago. He's also well known and respected among the Chicago museums and galleries. Jurek is currently a Visual Arts Correspondent for ArtScope.net.