



Jan Sawka retrospective in High Falls

Posted by Jeremiah Horton on May 18, 2016 in Art | 0 Comments



Jan Sawka in his High Falls studio

- Share this article**
- Tweet this
 - Diigo it
 - Add to Delicious
 - Share on Facebook
 - Stumble it
 - Subscribe by RSS

Imagine a retrospective art exhibition that included not only an artist's varied works, but also the people whose lives he influenced. If that were possible, you'd need a space as big as an airplane hangar to house the work of Jan Sawka, a country the size of Poland to contain the lives directly or indirectly affected by his monumental contributions.

Choosing Poland as a site for such an exhibition is obvious. Sawka, who died in 2012, was a freedom-loving son of Poland, forced into exile by a government terrified of art's political potential to subvert the status quo. His patriotic (which is to say, anti-Communist) posters on behalf of the Polish political underground and the Solidarity movement nearly got him arrested before he, his wife and daughter made a hair's-breadth escape to America in 1977.

An exhibit of such scope is of course impossible. But Sawka's wife Hanka and their daughter Hanna have assembled what might be called a retrospective microcosmic version of his works, courtesy of the High Falls Emporium and the Wired Gallery. The space may be modest, but what gallery founder Savan Melknyan hopes to accomplish with this exhibit is as ambitious as it is true: to put the tiny hamlet of High Falls on the art world's map. How many communities ten times the size of High Falls have been a haven for the likes of Marc Chagall and Jan Sawka?

"They were both exiles," Melknyan said. "Chagall from the Nazis and Sawka from the Communists."

All the world knows about Chagall; it's a pity that all the world doesn't know more about Sawka — though after a visit to the exhibit, which opens on May 21, you may find yourself struck by the familiarity of what you see. Sawka was a multimedia artist and an architect whose more than 100 political illustrations for *The New York Times's* op-ed page gained him notoriety. Or maybe you attended the *Crateful Dead's* 25th anniversary tour in 1989 and you remember the dazzling multidimensional set that Sawka designed for the band. Then there were the paintings that found space on some of New York's most prestigious gallery walls.

One commentator has described Sawka's mastery of so many media as "a politician's nightmare." No sooner was the public introduced to a dazzling painter than Sawka could be found designing a theater set for a new Arthur Miller play or winning an architecture award for his Peace Monument in Jerusalem.

It was that way from the beginning. In his 20s, Sawka was every inch the countercultural artist and political subversive. He looked unlike the *Dead's* Jerry Garcia, a figure who would loom large in his future. He made a quick reputation for himself as a set designer and graphic artist who was equally at home in the avant-garde theater, cabarets and jazz festivals.

Sawka's burgeoning reputation as an artist and as a rebel caught the attention of the Polish authorities. He was expelled from Poland in 1975. The family lived in France for a short while, until he learned that the regime planned not to renew the family's one-way passports. It was then, with only three days remaining on their residency cards, that they successfully emigrated to the US.

He designed cutting-edge stage sets for the *Crateful Dead* and later for Traffic's reunion tour. He collaborated with the playwright Samuel Beckett. His hand-colored fine-art prints can be found in the Library of Congress. His paintings grace public and private collections across the globe.

In his later years, Sawka was drawn to Japanese art. Shoji Katagishi, curator of the Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo, Japan, described Sawka as "a man who loves to work. He is a man with an unlimited supply of ideas and imagination. He is a man who dips, over and over again, into his infinite fountain of imagination."

And most of his art, Melknyan will gladly remind you, was created by Sawka over 27 years at the converted stable that served as his studio on Old Route 213 and is now packed with many of the pieces that don't reside in more prestigious, better-known environments. Faced with a brief tour of his studio, teeming as it is with his canvases, models, projects-in-process and pieces complete, his wife and daughter were asked, rhetorically, if Sawka ever slept. Together, Hanka and Hanna Sawka replied, in slightly astonished tones, "No." "His art was everything," Hanka Sawka said.

Reflecting on the years, Hanka Sawka recalled how fraught the family's passage to America had been, as an illustration of how deeply a totalitarian government can affect a person's expectations and understanding. "I cried for nine hours after we fled Poland," she said. "I thought America was this terrible country."

She discovered otherwise. The family lived in New York City from 1977 to 1985, when a successful triple exhibit in the city brought in enough money to purchase the studio and the modest home where Hanna Sawka grew up.

In the upstairs studio where Jan Sawka lived and died, his wife and daughter face a melancholy task that will require the energy that their husband and father brought to his art: Hanka Sawka stands in the center of the studio. The floor is invisible beneath the parapety of works that he left behind.

She points to a cluttered desk where a gutted computer sits amid an array of paper and artmaking tools. "He was working here," she said, gesturing at the desk. Then she gestures toward the rest of the room. "Now it's more like time to sort it out and manage this estate," she said.

The visitor is overwhelmed and admits it. Hanka Sawka understands. "It's hard not to be overwhelmed by my husband," she says with a knowing smile.

"Jan Sawka in High Falls" opening reception, Saturday, May 21, 4-7 p.m., High Falls Emporium, 10 Old Route 213, High Falls; www.thewiredgallery.com

SAUGERTIES
KNIGHTS OF COLUMBUS

— presents —
ELDER LAW AND ESTATE PLANNING WORKSHOP

Tuesday, June 7, 2016
4 - 6 pm

Register at www.es-lawfirm.com

JK'S
MEMORIAL DAY AND MEMORIAL DAY WEEKEND

Remember to visit the **KUDRYNIA SHOPPING** located right next door!

Enjoy your Memorial Day Weekend!
PLEASE DRIVE RESPONSIBLY!
Remember to sign up for our free Customer Loyalty Discount Program!

BARD SUMMERSCAPE
Opera, Theater, Dance, Music, Film, Solopertent, & the Bard Music Festival!

Puccini and His World
fishercenter.bard.edu

INDEPENDENCE DAY
FOOD VENDORS WANTED

For July 4th Celebration
Cantine Field Saugerties

Contact: Sandi 845-246-3464

Event is Sponsored by Saugerties Kiwanis Club

Stay in touch with the latest releases that are about to hit the big screen

Join now

movietalks.com

- Most read**
- Almanac Weekly's calendar of events (May 25-June 4)
 - Bob Dylan Birthday Bash in Woodstock
 - Tiny Houses featured at Art & Crafts Fair in New Paltz
 - Top event designer to share his secrets in Rhinebeck
 - Kids' Almanac: May 26-June 2

ALMANAC WEEKLY Search

Popular tags
Kingston, New Paltz, Saugerties, Poughkeepsie, Woodstock, Rhinebeck, Ulster, music, event, volunteerism, Bardonia, Bard, SUNY-New Paltz, events, Ulster Performing Arts Center, Hudson Valley Theatre, nature, Art, movie review, Keller's Farm, Ketchikan, Hurricane Irma, Bob Berman, book signings, bookstores, Golden Horseshoe, Cabaret Venue, Catskill, Hudson Valley Seed Library, Ken Grossman

History
Places
People
Kids' Almanac