Jan Sawka's Amazing voyage

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

THE VOYAGE: SPANNING 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 DECRYPT 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 viewers 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 postcards. 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 escort loophole created by Peggy Guggenheim during the war for top artists, scientists and spies. Normally we would have had to wait nine months to leave by which time we would have been dead,” Hanka said. Meeting with an 89-month-old baby and four suitcases, Sawka instructed a friend to pick up cardboard on next page.
This set toured with the Grateful Dead from 1980-1991 (the “Mega-Dead” period in the band’s history, when they played stadiums). Some of the tarted remnants are on exhibit at the Grateful Dead Archives. (Photo by Neil Trager)

from Poland to New Paltz

Sawka settled in New York, Sawka drew up plans for another exhibit, New York Times. As an artist, Sawka had been waiting for the perfect opportunity to display his work in a museum setting. He finally got his chance at SUNY New Paltz, a small college located in the heart of the Hudson Valley.

Neil Trager, curator of the SUNY New Paltz Museum of Fine Arts, arranged for the exhibit to be displayed in the museum’s main gallery. The show was called “Sawka: The Navigator,” and it included a retrospective of the artist’s work, from early paintings to more recent installations.

Sawka created “Red Road,” left, in 1995 and “Achonan Vier,” one painting from a triptych, in the late 1980s. (Photo by Joanna M. Sawka)

Then (Sawka) 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.

Neil Trager
Former SUNY New Paltz Museum of Fine Arts Curator

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

Sawka created “Red Road,” left, in 1995 and “Achonan Vier,” one painting from a triptych, in the late 1980s. (Photo by Joanna M. Sawka)

“We have a lot of work to do.”

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Tuberculosis is now a forgotten disease, but in the late 1980s, it was a serious problem in the United States. Many artists were affected, and Sawka was eager to do something to raise awareness.

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

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 with the human experience and humanity.

Sawka was always very methodical, so I know where everything is and...
"A View from Zengya," which Sawk created in 2006-07. Photo by Amanda Switzer

From previous page:

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 diaries and journals is scheduled for Nov. 15-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 Teager, reflecting on Han-ka'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 Han-ka's digital work.

"We've dealt with cuneiform and papyrus," said Teager. "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 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 art-works as well as his paintings and sculptures and temporary exhibits," Hanka said. "When the time comes, what to do will be clear. For now, we have a lot of work to do."