Wilhelm Sasnal

In the summer of 2003, I traveled to Poland with four other museum curators as guests of the Polin Cultural Institute and ArtsLink. It was a research trip that offered access to hundreds of artists, many of whom we met and heard speak directly about their work. Soon Polish artists appeared in The American (1938), the 2004 Carnegie International, and residencies at the Headlands Center for the Arts. Paintings by Wilhelm Sasnal appeared on the covers of Frieze and Artforum. Critics and collectors wrote and talked about him, always as a painter.

My introduction to Sasnal’s work came in a condemned building located on the grounds of a hospital for the elderly. Tipped off to Sasnal by a Berkeley collector whose taste I admire, I tracked down the young artist-dealers who founded Flaster gallery and then-Galleria Flaster to see what they had. Our group watched three or four 35mm film and was shown a comic-strip book that came with an audioscassette tape. We saw a few old paintings, on the basis of which I invited Sasnal to participate in the MATRIX exhibition. Some forgotten place, a group show of eight artists from around the globe that offered access to hundreds of artists, many of whom we met and heard speak directly about their work. Sasnal’s choice of this work must be seen as a political comment on the current state of America. The subject is remarkably pertinent. I have been following Sasnal since 2003. In 2005, to present his first one-person museum exhibition in America, and requested that he not do a painting exhibition but instead show film and work in other media.

Sasnal felt very comfortable in Berkeley and was surprised by this reaction. In September 2004, a group of Polish artists were invited to Berkeley, and around the world; President Bush and the policies of his administration were reviled in Poland. After a week with us, Sasnal shared his realization of the real diversity of his practice. I invited him to come back to Berkeley in 2005 to present his first one-person museum exhibition in America, and requested that he not do a painting exhibition but instead show film and work in other media.

For his MATRIX work, Sasnal is filming the images in the book page by page. Bay Area bands provide the soundtrack, using the text from the book as lyrics. The effect is at once straight from an encyclopedia. In September 2004, a group of Polish artists were invited to Berkeley, and around the world; President Bush and the policies of his administration were reviled in Poland. After a week with us, Sasnal shared his realization of the real diversity of his practice. I invited him to come back to Berkeley in 2005 to present his first one-person museum exhibition in America, and requested that he not do a painting exhibition but instead show film and work in other media. Sasnal felt very comfortable in Berkeley and was surprised by this reaction. In September 2004, a group of Polish artists were invited to Berkeley, and around the world; President Bush and the policies of his administration were reviled in Poland. After a week with us, Sasnal shared his realization of the real diversity of his practice. I invited him to come back to Berkeley in 2005 to present his first one-person museum exhibition in America, and requested that he not do a painting exhibition but instead show film and work in other media.

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But inherent in his “everystyle” is an authorial sensibility that reflects his political, moral, and aesthetic response to reality. His subjects often appear isolated and seem to exist in some respects as formal exercises, playing with the conventions of representation and using perspective and form to disrupt our expectations. He works with a reduced language of color and shape, retaining only essential elements like light and shadow, and toys with the notion of duality that is basic to abstraction.

Drawing on a broad range of historical sources and aesthetic styles, Sasnal’s paintings can be so aesthetically varied the viewer might attribute them to different artists. Unlike his films, which are stylistically cohesive, Sasnal’s paintings can and hear. They feel serious, self-aware, and melancholic.

In all of these works Sasnal is highlighting inconsistencies—in political philosophies, in a range of popular cultural issues—and questioning the truth in what is presented. Control to his practice is the idea that ‘Wits can be done to render something faithfully and accurately.’

Hedi Zuckermand Jacobson
Former Phyllis Wattis MATRIX Curator
Director and Chief Curator, Aspen Art Museum

Wilhelm Sasnal was born in Tarnów, Poland, in 1972. He studied architecture from 1992 to 1994 and painting from 1995 to 1998 at the Academy of Fine Arts, Cracow. He learned here how to work with words and work with images.

Selected Solo Exhibitions
2005 Untitled, 2005 (detail); oil on canvas; 19 ¾ x 15 ¾ in.; courtesy of the artist.

2005 Untitled, 2005 (detail); oil on canvas; 75 x 59 in.; courtesy of the artist.

2004 Material Time/Work Time/Life Time, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam 2004 Time and again, Kunstverein, Göttingen, Germany

2003 Paint on the move, Kunsthalle Basel, Basel

2002 3 o'clock road block, Anton Kern Gallery, New York

2001 Show on your hands—Look—Come closer, Foksal Gallery Foundation, Warsaw

2000 The Band, Sommer Contemporary Arts, Tel Aviv

Selected Group Exhibitions


Wilhelm Sasnal was educated in Tarnów, Poland, in 1972. He studied architecture from 1992 to 1994 and painting from 1995 to 1998 at the Academy of Fine Arts, Cracow. He learned here how to work with words and work with images.

Jansen, Gregor. “Petite Sensation.”

Landesman, Mark. “For Your Pleasure.”


Kantor, Jordan. “The Tuymans Effect.”

Kapoor, Bharti. “First Impression.”

Bellini, Andrea. “There Are No Rules—An Interview with Wilhelm Sasnal.”

Selected Bibliography

2 Ibid.


Limited, 2005, oil on canvas, 29 x 30 3/4 in., courtesy of the artist.

Limited, 2005 (detail), oil on canvas, 29 x 30 3/4 in., courtesy of the artist.

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