

ANDRZEJ WROBLEWSKI

Retrospective

WAR CONTINUES TO BE A FACT OF LIFE AND, FROM GOYA

TO BOTERO, ARTISTS CONTINUE TO DENOUNCE ITS INHUMANITY AND

DEVASTATION, ITS TERRIBLE SYMBOLISM UNCHANGED.

An exhibition of a wartime Polish artist at the Muzeum Narodowe in Warsaw is a poignant reminder of how little has changed, and of the timeless, evocative power of art.

Andrzej Wroblewski (1927–1957) is an iconic figure in the history of Polish art. A romantic hero, whose premature and mysterious death before the age of 30 etched his name forever onto its pages, he remains strikingly contemporary, both in his subject matter—alas!—and style.

Before disappearing while on a solitary hike through the Tatra Mountains, Wroblewski managed to produce an astounding and diverse body of work, changing his style drastically in the process and breaking the path for a new generation of Polish artists.

From the then-prevalent social realism to abstract expressionism, this highly engaged artist wasted no time, his talent staunchly in the service of social and artistic causes.

At the start of his career, Wroblewski had a lot in common with other international artists of the political left such as Italian Renato Guttuso and France's André Fougeron.

His works were also greatly influenced by revolutionary Mexican art, and later on, the cinema.

The Warsaw exhibition, commemorating the 50th anniversary of Wroblewski's death, features a projection of Federico Fellini's seminal film "La Strada", whose character of the strongman Zampano is portrayed in a series of colourful, modernistic gouaches.

Wroblewski's most remembered and to this day controversial images come from the series *Rozstrzelania* (execution by gunfire), painted when he was a 20-year-old student at the Art Academy of Cracow.

Haunting, gut-wrenching, they were a visceral response to the horror of WWII and the occupation of Poland.

He wrote at the time, that he wanted to create paintings "unpleasant as the stench of a corpse". The result are terrible, moving images equal in their emotional impact to Picasso's *Guernica*, or Goya's paintings of the execution of Spanish patriots by Napoleon's troops, *The Third of May*.

Heartbreaking scenes of people dying or just about to die, broken bodies, faces frozen in pain are executed in a modern, minimalist style. With an economy of colour, Wroblewski manages to transmit the wrenching horror of these final moments; the blue of the falling body, ever so briefly suspended between life and death, is icy cold and the ashen grey of the man still standing has the texture of fear.

The faces are almost featureless, the bodies reduced at times to silhouettes, and the overwhelming tension inherent in these works lies in the merciless static composition, from which we cannot avert our eyes, in the surreal assemblage of bodies twisted upside down in the throes of death, their shadow staining the wall where they just stood.

They form a macabre pantheon, the living holding hands with the dead, the young and the old, the artist spares us nothing, offers no solace. Wroblewski's art cries out in a voice that still reverberates today, from Africa to the Middle East, where bodies of falling civilians continue to leave silent shadows on nameless walls.

His death came at a time of great changes in international contemporary art, particularly in Britain and the US with the emergence of pop-art, and one cannot help but wonder what turn his career would have taken, and where his artistic explorations may have led this fascinating artist.

Dorota Kozinska

March 9–May 6, 2007

Warsaw National Museum
Al. Jerozolimskie 3
Warsaw, Poland
www.mnw.art.pl



Andrzej Wroblewski,
Rozstrzelanie Surrealistyczne
Courtesy: Warsaw National Museum