

GALLERY GUIDE

Jan Sawka: The Place of Memory (The Memory of Place)



February 8 – July 12, 2020

Morgan Anderson Gallery & Howard Greenberg Family Gallery

**SAMUEL DORSKY MUSEUM OF ART
STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT NEW PALTZ**

*On the cover: Jan Sawka, *The Memory* (or *The Mirror*), 1986,
courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka*

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Introduction

Jan Sawka (1946–2012) was a noted contemporary artist of Polish origin and global reach. He lived and worked in the mid-Hudson Valley from 1985 until his death, conceiving of and producing many of his most notable works in his High Falls, NY studio. This exhibition features expansive paintings and intricately executed drypoint prints that illuminate two aspects of his practice: his fascination with human consciousness, in this case, with memory, and his interest in place, and the places through which a human life passes.

The artist's Cold War-era exile from his homeland adds poignancy to his treatment of place and memory, imbuing these works with deeply felt emotion. Places present to us in memory are a reminder that we are not there. Memory is shown to be a far more complex phenomenon than simple retrieval of stored fact or image. Rather, memory is invoked as an active construction of the human mind, and as such, subject to the uncertainties and vicissitudes of human existence. Memories change, fade, fragment, or fill in with fictional, imagined material.

The sweeping 12-panel painting, *Ashokan 1–4* (1998–99), sets the tone for the exhibition. This complex work

presents four 12-foot wide triptychs that depict a particular vista at the Ashokan Reservoir, NY, combining figurative and abstract elements, memory and imagination, as if a viewer of the Ashokan landscape has entered into a state of reverie. *Post-Cards* (1985–92), a folio of 36 hand-colored drypoint etchings held in the Dorsky Museum collection, takes the viewer on a tour through 36 places around the world that were significant for the artist, as they appeared to him in his mind's eye. For the first time, a manuscript by Sawka, recently discovered in the Library of Congress archives, will illuminate this artwork from the artist's point of view.

The included artworks evince the technical expertise and experimental vigor that were a hallmark of Sawka's practice. A technical cross-fertilization existed between the different areas of his practice. This exhibition illuminates his experimentation between painting and printmaking. For example, drypoints are incorporated directly into *The Letter #3* (1979). In the case of *Post-Cards*, he hand-colored prints, treating them as if they were paintings. Represented here, too, are the techniques of markmaking of one medium in the other.

Sawka's working method was truly visionary, in the sense that he always worked from mental images. Drawing on archives of art historical images and techniques as they appeared in his encyclopedic visual memory, Sawka would synthesize methods and styles, in order to realize artworks that he had already fully visualized.

Technical, stylistic and formal elements of Sawka's work can be traced back to Medieval and Renaissance styles of figuration and composition, yet in his hands, the treatment is modern, being inflected by his awareness of Modernist art, as well as many of the "unfashionable" styles of western and non-western art. An important wellspring of his work is the independent Central European Modernist tradition called "Young Poland" that developed directly from the Symbolist movement around the turn of the twentieth century. Although this movement has stylistic similarities to its Western cousin, Art Nouveau, the Polish movement was profoundly political and served as a means of resistance to oppression and occupation. Facing comparable conditions of persecution, in the 1970s, the young artists of Sawka's generation harked back to "Young

Poland," modeling their stance on those of artists of the fin-de-siècle.

Drawing on these roots early on in his career, Sawka created powerful symbols and statements of resistance to political oppression. But as he continued to explore and experiment, the focus of his work broadened, later creating artworks that symbolize some of the deepest aspects of human consciousness. Many of the works in this exhibition express a profound empathy and a feeling of loss that only exile can bring, leavened by an expansive sense of the beauty that art and nature make available to us. Ultimately Sawka's works speak directly to the human condition, inviting the viewer to find in contemplating them a finer awareness of their own consciousness and access to their own forgotten memories.

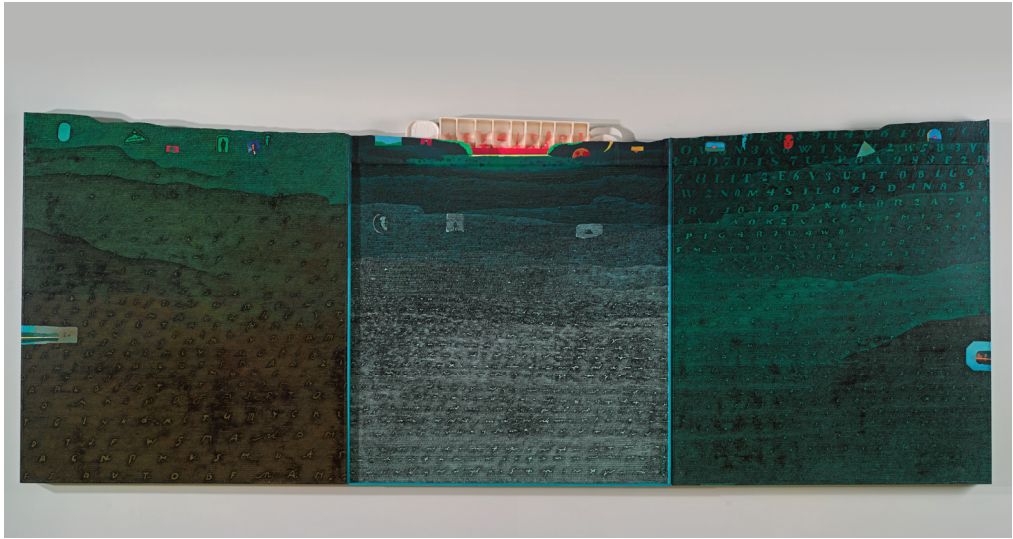
This exhibition comes just over 30 years after Sawka's groundbreaking mid-career retrospective at the College Art Gallery at SUNY New Paltz, curated by the Dorsky's founding director Neil Trager.

— Hanna Maria Sawka, MFA and Dr. Frank Boyer, Guest Curators



Jan Sawka, *Ashokan 1-4* (1), 1998-99, courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka

Jan Sawka, *Ashokan 1-4* (3), 1998-99, courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka



Jan Sawka, *Ashokan 1-4 (2)*, 1998-99, courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka

Jan Sawka, *Ashokan 1-4 (4)*, 1998-99, courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka

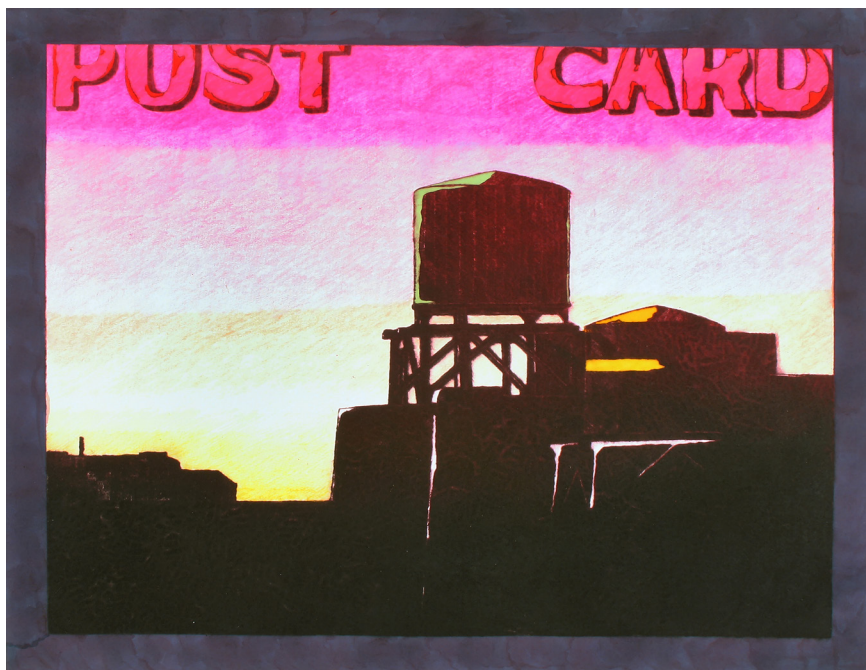


Jan Sawka, *Asbury Notebook*, 1981, courtesy Jan and Michael Solow

Jan Sawka, *Intrusion*, 1987, courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka



Jan Sawka, *Partial Recall*, 1997, courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka



Jan Sawka, *Post-Card #32*, (from the portfolio "Post-Cards"), 1987–89,
collection Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, gift of Dorsky Gallery Curatorial Programs

Exhibition Checklist — all works by Jan Sawka

The Letter #3, 1979

Acrylic, watercolor, ink, varnish on board
48 x 11 in.

Courtesy Jean Feiwel

Asbury Notebook, 1981

Acrylic, graphite, mixed media on Masonite
48 x 73 in.

Courtesy Jan and Michael Solow

Original etched plate for *Post-Card #14*,
1985–92

Etched acrylic glass

19 ½ x 25 in.

Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka

Original etched plate for *Post-Card #22*,
1985–92

Etched acrylic glass

19 x 25 in.

Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka

The Memory (or The Mirror), 1986

Acrylic on Masonite

48 x 40 in.

Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka

Intrusion, 1987

Acrylic, composite on Masonite

38 x 83 in.

Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka

Passing Away, 1988

Acrylic, varnish on Masonite

66 x 96 in.

Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka

Partial Recall, 1997

Acrylic on Masonite

67 x 99 in.

Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka

Ashokan 1–4, 1998–99

Acrylic, ink, composite on Masonite
55 x 173 in. each triptych

Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka

Fading, 2005

Acrylic on Masonite

49 x 81 in.

Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka

Untitled (Tabletop), 2005

Acrylic, enamel on wooden table

38 x 66 x 28 in.

Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka

Post-Cards, 1985–92

Watercolor drypoint etching

Portfolio of 36 prints

20 x 25 in. ea.

Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, gift of

Dorsky Gallery Curatorial Programs,

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Etching needle, n.d.

Wood and steel

5 ¼ x 5/16 in.

Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka

Untitled (painting of etching needle), n.d.

Sumi ink, varnish on board

7 x 16 x 1 in.

Courtesy the Estate of Jan Sawka

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

**Saturday, February 8, 5–7 pm • Opening Reception
for Spring Exhibitions**

Saturday and Sunday, March 28 and 29, 2 pm • Symposium

Jan Sawka: The Place of Memory (The Memory of Place): A two-day symposium co-hosted by The Dorsky Museum and The Kosciuszko Foundation in New York City including panels of scholars who will help illuminate aspects of Jan Sawka's practice, his biography and the social and historic context of his art. Speakers will include Peter Schwenger, Tom Wolf, Beth Wilson, the exhibition curators and others.

Day 1, Saturday • The Person and the Place
at The Dorsky Museum

Day 2, Sunday • Invoking the Inner Landscape
at the Kosciuszko Foundation (15 East 65th Street, NYC)

This event is sponsored by The Polish Cultural Institute New York and
The Kosciuszko Foundation

Saturday, April 4, 2 pm • Public Tour

of our Spring Exhibitions with the Museum's education manager,
Zachary Bowman.

Saturday, May 2, 2 pm • Concert

Ashokan Rising with Matoaka Little Eagle, Gus Mancini, Nfamara Badjie, Peter Head, and E.C. Lorrick. Experience a confluence of Native American, African, Classical, Soul and Jazz improvisation inspired by Jan Sawka's painting *Ashokan 1–4*, performed by unique musicians who share a love of this special place in the Hudson Valley.

Saturday, May 9, 2 pm • Concert

Chopin + Sawka. Both Polish-born political refugees whose work incorporated themes of memory and exile, these artists are united by their stories, surprisingly similar though 100 years apart. Performances by pianist, professor and coordinator of the piano program at SUNY New Paltz, Alex Peh and students in his piano studio class.

SCHOOL AND GROUP TOURS

Please call 845.257.3604 for details and reservations.

Free to the public. Suggested donation: \$5.

Ongoing support for Museum exhibitions and programs is provided by
The Friends of the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art and SUNY New Paltz.



Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art

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Wednesday–Sunday 11 am – 5 pm