

“Little” Comments About the Postcards by Jan Sawka

From a letter to Elena Millie, curator in the Library of Congress Division of Posters and Prints, 1992

#1

“THE SKY”

I was living in a garage at the outskirts of ancient Cracow for two of my most important years, 1971-72, while working with STU Theatre and helping poets to publish their poems illegally... With a friend, another member of STU, originally a nuclear physicist turned hippie and actor, we rented this garage. We lived in it and had a studio. We sat on the doorstep during the wee hours, dreaming. Talking art and plans, planning trips. We listened to tapes of Woodstock, Hair and Dylan. The sky over Cracow was dark with an unhealthy haze of pink, smoke and Sulphur pouring from the nearby steel mill... We were free, floating in the space of the night and a dream...

#2

“THE CHIMNEYS”

Two years later I came to Paris. I was invited by two young curators at the Pompidou Center. They saw my side-show at the Poster Biennial the summer before, liked it and decided to “try” me out... I was tired, amazed and confused. My French was limited to Merci Bien, English is not their forte... I stayed with one of the curators, at his Montmartre flat. The maze of narrow streets, practical isolation from the street (the language barrier) – I hated to ask for directions home. I tried to memorize all the turns. And this is what lingers on in my brain to this day, the chimneys, typical Parisian chimneys, two million of them in existence. But these pictured are mine, forever...

#3

“THE FIELD”

This goes back to the mid-sixties. I studied in Wroclaw, Southwestern Poland. I started to date a girl, a new teacher, who got her assignment at a little town, 30 miles west of Wroclaw. One afternoon I arrived by train to meet her, an hour too

early. I walked aimlessly around the town. A little forest, through it a cut with a gravel road. I was walking slowly in the deepening shadows of the upcoming evening. And suddenly, light exploded. A field opened up, flat and enormous, running toward the horizon, full of the blinding light of the sunset. What a view, what brilliance of Nature's Designs... To a child-artist, still in the very formative years, it was a true shock, this unexpected glory of land and sky and air...

#4

"THE ALLEY"

Since I was a child, I was fascinated by Mean Streets, back alleys, the amazing zones of twilight, where the city meets the suburb, a good street turns darker and the first working class bars smellishly open their arms... Little workshops, parking lots, somewhere in Poland or in London, or in Turin, where I saw a truck being loaded with a couple of low, cigarlike racing cars, obviously some antiques from the fifties... My mind was full of sudden, suspicious questions, "why here, a robbery or some illegal exchange?"

I passed silently, unnoticed. The picture remains, and the night, and the smell.

#5

"RAILROAD STATION"

Not a station really, rather the huge junction of tracks, near an industrial town. That's it.

In the late fifties, after Stalin died, the Scouts returned to Poland. For only a few short years they remained close to their original character. Later they were squashed into the old mold of a political, militaristic caricature.

But I joined them in those years. I was 11 or 12.

We tried to follow tradition and make routine cross-country marches, with a compass and all the countryside to ourselves is what you see in this picture...

#6

"THE SUBURBS"

While in Wroclaw, I lived in small rented rooms, usually at the city fringes. I worked, usually painting into the early morning. Battered, with eyes full of sand, I would unwind, watching the awakening of the world, my last cigarette in hand.

"They" were waking up, to scramble to work...

And me, a free spirit, was going to rest.

The first victories of a sick mind...

But, what a color of the air, what a serenade of shifting shadows and turning colors, what hope all around, A New Great Day...

#7

“ASPEN, COLORADO”

My first visit to the States. Aspen Conference, Bicentennial.

Together with Shigeo Fukuda I drifted off course. Instead of going to listen to Milton Glaser or Tom Wolfe, we drove some miles out of the village. We left the jeep on the shoulder of the road and slowly began to walk over a meadow. I was tired, jet-lag pushing me down, chaos governing my mind. Two weeks before, I had left Poland and I really didn't know what to do...

I was truly in limbo. Somehow, I knew where I was, in MY DEAREST OF ALL DREAMS, in America, but the reality of it still escaped me.

The grass was so green and rich it almost glowed like in an acid trip. The air was sharp and only helped to intensify the colors around.

We walked in silence, suspended in space with a breeze playing with the grass.

For a moment, it looked like we never would reach the end of the meadow.

Then I spotted an incline, sort of a deeper color of the grass, nothing dramatic. I started to follow it and slightly to the right I spotted A THING. Two mailboxes so familiar, so well-known from American movies, from Vermont to Oregon...

Ha! I had arrived!

It was America. Real and on my own small, private scale.

#8

“MANHATTAN FROM THE WHITESTONE BRIDGE”

It was late August and we had dropped our friends at JFK Airport. A quick operation one way, a major pain returning home. After crawling across Queens, we started to climb the Whitestone Bridge. And then, traffic stopped. We sat idling with the air conditioner's compressor wailing in agony for an agonizingly long time.

To the left, we saw the amazing view of Manhattan, partially obliterated by smog, terribly two-dimensional, in a haze of the summer's heat.

Slowly, darkness overwhelmed us, the first lights were twinkling, the shapes of bridges outlined by blue lights.

I was wondering aloud, "How could somebody sane survive fifteen minutes in this hell..."

All of the days, months, years, struggles of our eight years spent there came back to us. The spectacle of memory, a silent film's décor.

#9

"MAISONS ALFORT"

In Paris, we moved to a suburb, across from the Boulevard Periferique, to Maisons Alfort. 5 minutes off the Metro station, 100 meters from the Marne's banks, almost the countryside. The streets were empty for most of the day. The houses, some more opulent than the rest and belonging to professionals, while the smallish and cheap ones like ours were all walled. Not fenced. Walled.

We stayed for a year and a half.

We knew only one person.

An Italian lady, 65 years old.

After 45 years in Paris, also a stranger.

#10

"BLIZZARD"

To unwind, to reflect for a moment, to sort things out; I take Hanka and we go to the Ashokan Reservoir. It is a body of water, separating us from Woodstock. It looks like a Norwegian fjord, sort of. Great during warm days, the dog runs free, chasing our daughter on her bicycle. The asphalt road, closed to traffic, runs along the water. One day, we went in late November. The weather looked OK, but while two miles from the car, on this road, the wind suddenly came.

The sky started to change, grey clouds racing across the waters. The sun died, last rays illuminating the flurries of the first blizzard of the winter of 1987...

We ran toward the car, still turning our faces toward the spectacle unfolding before our eyes.

#11

“CROSSROADS”

Our first vacations in France. Paris is boiling. We are penniless. Tired and still shocked after Poland has closed her borders to Us. A friend, a theatrical writer, offers a week in the country.

"Nothing special, just countryside, 100 kilometers from Paris," she says.

Of course we go.

What a difference.

For the first time, I understand the meaning of "rich, sleepy France". Real COUNTRYSIDE. Rolling hills, opulent greenery. The humming of bees.

I slowly walk with my one-year-old girl sitting on my shoulders. The fields are turning reddish, Summer at its peak.

A moment of happiness, almost church-like silence. I almost pray to stop this moment, to freeze it forever ...

#12

“EAST SIXTIES”

For two years, little Hanka attended a Catholic School, some four blocks from home, at 62nd or 63rd street and 3rd Avenue.

We took turns with my wife, to pick up the little one from school. Often, waiting for the doors to open, bored to death I was fantasizing about how New York must have looked a century

ago or so ... The street was lined with the brownstones, the church closed one end. No modern additions, concrete cubes or co-op towers. If not for the cars and buses ...

And the aluminum lamp posts, the only current intruders, the block would look like a movie set for a Teddy Roosevelt story ...

#13

“THE GARDEN”

One wall in my studio is full of big windows.

Every day I have a perfect study "From Nature".

What a treat. The paradise of all four seasons.

Even during the oppressive days of early December, the beauty is overwhelming.

#14

“THE MOUNTAIN”

For years, my parents would take me to a mountain village, near a famous river gorge in the Pieniny Range, about 100 miles south of Cracow.

It was a family tradition, a part of our life, to go there. Summer did not start until we went there.

I remember every wrinkle of the field, every stand of pine trees, it is all engraved into my memory.

Crossing a bridge over the fast racing river you turn your eyes to the right and see the famous range of the Pieniny. I crisscrossed it so many times I can't count.

When you turn your head to the left you see a distant range.

Not as pretty and dramatic, without the white towers of limestone. Rounder, softer, with little islands of meadows, the mountain stands still, on the sidelines of Nature's Spectacle.

I never climbed its gentle slopes. She kept her secrets away from me.

It's why it intrigues me the most.

#15

“THE PIER”

I don't swim. I hate water.

One day in the Summer of 1982, at the New Jersey shore, I had my closest encounter with THE SEA. A rainy storm was howling over our heads for a couple of days. Crowded in a rented room some blocks from the beach, we were going bananas. Mostly me, as usual.

I dislike vacations, after a week I feel crazy and try to paint or draw.

I left the house and walked along the shoreline, completely deserted aside of some teenagers braving the wind.

I stopped by the pier, the only one around, with a little cabin at its end, a sort of fishermen's club.

The pier was fighting the storm, shaking and vibrating.

Instantly, I was scared and lured by it. I walked slowly, with my heart pounding in panic, walking over the planks, seeing the wild waves underneath. Finally, from behind the cabin, I watched the storm, feeling like a yachtsman struggling against the raging sea. I was terrified and overwhelmed by a strange and vague understanding of the allure of THE OCEAN.

It is not my cup of tea, for sure, but at least I could feel what it means to those who go and fight the REAL THING.

#16

“RABA RIVER”

When I was a really small boy we would go to a house in the countryside, at the foothills of the Beskidy Mountains. We would stay at the old dacha of my once prosperous family. In the summertime, we walked two miles to the Raba River, a lazy little blue ribbon of water. Surrounded by bushes, it silently went by, hardly a threat.

But every time we approached it, I got chills.

My grandmother had told it over and over, hundreds and hundreds of times, pestered by us to recount it again.

The Story of the Big Flood Of 1933. The Raba River swept away and carried houses (one was observed to still have a candle burning inside), cattle and even bridges.

THAT little NOTHING, carrying bridges, could you imagine?

#17

“L.A.”

I flew to L.A. non-stop from Paris in March of 1977. It was the first time. Half-dead, I was picked up by a friend and he drove me to his Benedict Canyon house. Past the Bel Air gates, Beverly Hotel and all that Hollywood jazz. I had a shot of scotch and collapsed. The next day, I was idling away some time at the friend's office, 6121 Sunset Boulevard. The windows of the office were tinted, they are all tinted there.

I saw the low contours of Hollywood spreading around. Completely unromantic, bare, discolored by the tint, faceless.

Only a nearby row of Queen Palms were there to telegraph a message to me – “Hey, you, this in fact is Los Angeles, no kidding...”

#18

“A WAREHOUSE”

In Maisons Alfort, we would stroll around, crossing the Marne to the fringes of Bois de Vincennes. It was a gray area, full of mysterious buildings, some remnants of 19th century Institutions, some appearing to be secretive installations (certainly

our impression only). Like the one depicted here, this old corrugated warehouse, freshly painted, but still empty. "It is waiting for James Bond," Hanka concluded...

#19

"ASBURY PARK"

Our first "resort" in America. The cheapest rooms, an air of despair, the decline of nearly-beautiful, but too-grandiose casinos, and an empty and crumbling amusement park that remembered the turn of the century. But it was the first vacation we spent on our own, not at someone's mercy. And this is why I remember it more fondly, than walking in downtown Courmayeur from the Cristall Hotel to the English pub, which looks more ridiculous in the Italian Alps than a casino in Asbury Park.

#20

"TUSCANY"

May 1972. I try to travel cheaply across Tuscany. The train is the mode I choose. Third class. It stops at every station and in between. A young Hemingway had to have been evacuated from the Front to the hospital in the same car, I'm sure. In 1917. The train tries to pass over the Apennines. It is agonizing. Half-asleep, with my face one inch from the greasy window, I come to know the curves, shapes, and incredible proportions of the Tuscan landscape. Little towns, sepia-colored walls and the roofs of one thousand delicate gradations of red. Little ravines spanned by three-century old bridges. The trees appear to have been designed to complement the houses and structures built around the pines and cypresses. The best lesson from the chosen land of the Man from Vinci and Il Commendatore from Modena...

#21

"MONTMARTRE"

Our host in Paris, the Pompidou curator, lived in Montmartre, on the less fancy side, to be precise. We arrived from Poland at the beginning of Summer. Nothing worked. We were left in his apartment to wait for his arrival back from vacationing in Deauville, as well as for the opening of the new season. Great time.

Every day, or rather, every evening, when our child was asleep, we would stand in the window. It was the first opportunity to open the window after another day of 100 F heat.

Everything around us was one hundred fifteen percent Parisian and Montmartre. The stairs, so typical. The shapes of the doors and windows. The noise. The entire timeless picture was lit in jarring, glowing colors by an immense billboard overlooking the corner of the street. An amazing contrast, almost surreal. I told Hanka if somebody made such a picture, people would think it was a montage...

#22

“THE MONUMENT”

They are everywhere. In Russia and Prussia. This is one that I pass every year when I go to visit friends in New Marlboro, MA. It stands in a little town whose name escapes me, at a fork in the road. It is partially camouflaged by bushes. It probably honors the Civil War dead.

Such monuments are so ubiquitous, you take them for granted, like boulders, old oak trees and street signs. The public Memory at work.

#23

“THE STORM”

Sometimes it happens. Nature produces a masterpiece of ABSTRACT ART. When, in the late afternoon, during full summer, the wind picks up during the full stillness of the hour. And the air darkens suddenly. The line of the distant forest merges with the sky, both turning dark blue. The lighter fields, a minute ago flush with color, age rapidly. They gray and quickly turn blue, joining the forest. For a split second, all is one, a wild abstract painting. Suddenly, deeply inside the blue nothingness, above or below the line of the horizon, now invisible, lightning flashes. In an instant, rain races over you. All turns gray. YOU run for cover. The spectacle is over.

#24

“VILLA”

Asbury Park again. A goldmine of vistas.

About five blocks inland from where we would rent a room for the summer, a no-man’s-land begins. “They” have crossed the tracks and slowly crawl on. The locals comment.

In the middle of this zone, a villa stands. Still in great shape. Full galore. Empty, no “For Sale” signs. We ask how long it has been empty. The locals say that it is for sale, for real. The owners panicked and are trying to sell, no thanks...

You walk by and watch the villa with unusual intensity. Like you are watching a soldier just rushing to clear the minefield. You hope and pray, but you know he has no chance. Like somebody stricken by a sudden cancer.

Deep inside it cries to you how awful it is to die at such an age, with no wrinkles and standing on beautiful legs.

#25

“MILANO”

In 1972 I arrived in Milano, Italy. With a theatre. Travelling with a countercultural pack of crazies from Cracow, Poland, Bradford, England and Vermont (Bread & Puppet). We were scheduled to perform at Teatro Piccolo, to amuse the Establishment. The hosts told us that the hotel was being “NEGOTIATED” for us. Go and enjoy the city, come later.

Fueled by a pizza and espresso, we started our day. Along Via Magenta we reached IT. Almost invisible, in the gloomy lights of restoration teams, it looked great. More dream and pure legend than the real thing. THE LAST SUPPER. By The Master. We drove to the “hotel.” A crumbling motel, really a truck stop. Sort of a Third-World’s truckers’ haven. Turks, Bulgarians, the occasional Pakistani. And we, the hippies. In Milano, Home of the Last Supper...

#26

“ROME”

There are cities where you feel instantly at home. They are located in Europe, however not in Scandinavia or England. Neither in Switzerland, with the exception of Lausanne.

It is Prague and Cracow, Nancy and part of Paris. Barcelona, too. Florence, Verona and Pisa.

And Rome.

They are all Rome. The walls with ancient plaster, doves, watered streets just before dawn.

And the windows, opening wide, Venetian style, reflecting the sun and the sky. You walk slowly, aimlessly and happy. You know they were there, they will be forever.

Nothing matches an early morning, around six thirty, espresso in your hand and the sun rays dancing on the walls reflected by the opening windows.

#27

“THE GIRLFRIEND’S HOUSE”

When I was 17, during the holidays in the mountains, I dated a girl. We walked and kissed. It was all we did. It ended immediately when school started. Mutually. I don’t remember her name and she doesn’t mine, for sure.

But I remember the house she stayed in. The balcony and the steep roof. I could point it out to you immediately if I am ever in the same village again...

#28

“ZABRZE”

I was born there.

And lived there until 1964.

It was the most polluted place in the world. Ten coal-mines, several coal-processing plants within –

HERE MY TYPEWRITER HAS GIVEN UP...

I MUST CONTINUE BY HAND...

True, it is a place everybody wants to leave. Soon. Today...

My family, originally from Cracow, was “relocated” here in 1945. My favorite spot was a railroad bridge. I would slow down for a second and focus my eyes on the horizon line where the tracks came to the sky’s border. The escape route...

To a colorful world...

I couldn’t wait, and never looked back...

#29

“THE RESTAURANT”

Asbury Park revisited. A corner lot. Concrete infested by weeds and garbage. Nondescript shape, boarded. Slowly, you start to “decode” the shadows of letters, and the text emerges – “Asbury Park Inn” ...
Somebody ran it, people stopped by, ate here, drank beer, smiled...
Small thing, nothing to write home about.
But still, the remnant, the place of somebody’s dream...
There are abandoned castles, why not inns...

#30

“FLORENCE”

Actually, it is Florence’s Belvedere, the fort towering over the city, the best vantage-point.
When the weather permits...
One day I climbed the hill, in a rainy, misty morning, hoping for an abrupt change of the weather.
Not today, sorry...
I sat there, soaked with the drizzle, and waited.
I studied a group of cypresses and a lonely pinia (ed. note: pine).
Outlined by the mist, like a sculpture, a Gaudi creation, only a silhouette against a reddish sky.
Florence never appeared as the backdrop. But it was there. I know, because I was sitting at the Fort Belvedere, a mere 2 kilometers across the Arno river from the Botteghe Oscure at the Galleria Uffizi...

#31

HONFLEUR

My Parisian hosts took me to Deauville, a combination of Atlantic City and Newport, R.I., all in a grandiose European style. A strange excursion – they were raging Leftists. Deauville and Leftists? How is this supposed to work?
It works, because it is France.
For five days you struggle against the Establishment. And by Friday, you rest. With the Establishment. Nice Combination.

From Deauville we drove to Honfleur, a tourist mecca of today – a town of painters, an Arles of the North – Gauguin, Matisse, van Gogh...

My curators were happy – how great it was to see all those painters together... Starving, penniless, distressed – this was my sarcastic comment, to myself.

We drove back. Suppertime.

Halfway to Deauville we stopped to admire the Channel. In the red haze of the reflected sunlight somewhere in the bay...

I stood silent thinking about all the souls of those great colleagues “flying merrily around picturesque Honfleur,” which was put on the tourist map by them, according to the Michelin Guide...

#32

“TANKS”

During my first visit to New York in April of '77, I stayed at Westbeth – a strange place. An old factory turned into an “artist’s condominium.” A studio belonged to some Polish-American foundation. Instead of a three-month stint, I got a week. A week for free is a week, isn’t it?

The place is situated between SoHo and the Village...

You don’t see Wall Street with its Twin Towers, you don’t see the Empire State Building either.

What you see are the water tanks – the equivalent of Parisian chimneys.

What a strange animal such a tank is, all wooden, with fresh planks – sitting on top of the entirely-concrete mountains of buildings... only in America, my friend...

#33

“MOHONK MOUNTAIN”

This is a short-cut from New Paltz to my village, over Mohonk Mountain, a steep cliff with a glacial lake on the top and a hotel that looks like the set of a horror movie...

During the summer, up through September when everything is turning red and yellow in Upstate New York, Mohonk as seen from this road looks like a Brazilian jungle – so rich and dense.

Driving a car, you reach the summit of a little hill and suddenly, the road drops. The car gains speed. You go quickly downhill facing the enormous body of the

mountain, dark with its forest, for a short moment it really scares you, you feel like in the Amazon jungle...

The car reaches the bottom of a small valley and climbs uphill again...

Suddenly you see the familiar pine trees, nothing exotic. You know, you're home.

But, thanks to this magic moment, you have passed into another world, if only for a minute or so, but you have been there...

#34

"POUGHKEEPSIE STATION"

There is an old warehouse across the tracks at Poughkeepsie, NY Station. You can see that it was repainted over and over countless times... I don't know if "J.D. Johnson" is still located there or if it is being carried on, continued for the pure sense of being a graphic landmark. The composition is slightly rough, obviously during each repainting, some finesse of the original design is lost. I love it. I love all old commercial "murals" that are slowly fading and being replaced by glowing, standardized billboards...

#35

"BROKEN PLATE"

It is not really a broken plate. Rather, when I knew my series is close to its end – I tried to push through the layers of memory and dig out the oldest of the very first "notes" from my life...

And the results are here – probably, I'm not sure; some tree, the sense of nature, earth, a house...

We all are holding them, as our "archeological findings" from the past – the older we get, the more vivid they start to be...

#36

"ON THE ROAD AGAIN"

I'm happy now – I have my home, permanent, my land, a sense of belonging. I can't complain.

But... Every time I travel, quite often these days, I have a moment, or two...

The moment when you drive over the gentle curve of a country lane and you see a valley, a house, the hills in the distance.

And something deeply inside of you makes “a line...” – “Let’s stop, look it over, what a place, it would be great to have it, to see the vista, to settle here...”
The moment lasts a couple of seconds, you smile to yourself, drive steadily, unmoved, until you spot another point, it could be somewhere in Italy or France...
And the voice inside starts again...

Love, Jan