

JUAN VINCENTE ALIAGA - Time, Nov. 22 1999 INTERVIEW

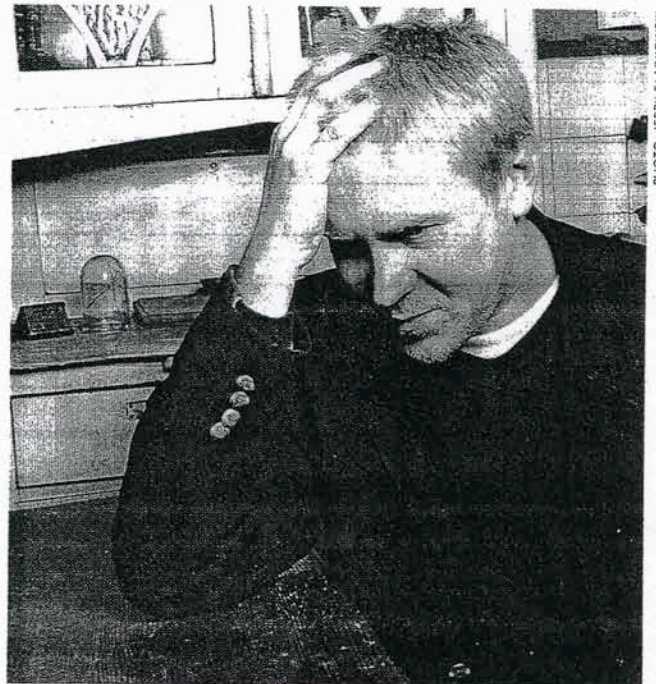
Miroslaw Balka: Life and Death Struggle

Where were you born? In Warsaw, in 1958. I spent my childhood in Otwock. You've portrayed your childhood in many of your sculptures. Not directly. My work does not reflect reality literally. But growing up in Poland, where the influence of the Roman Catholic church was so domineering, must have left traces in my personal experience, and hence in my art. My work is mostly about hiding, not about showing. Shadows became more important to me than light. My childhood days were not happy ones. You graduated from the School of Fine Arts in Warsaw in 1985... For my graduation show I invited people to a house in Zuków. What I wanted to do was too holy, too important for me, to be framed by the walls of the school. I found the house of a woman who was crazy and spent a week there. That week was more relevant for me than my five years in the school. According to the teachers, the artist was supposed to have his/her head in the clouds. I didn't like that concept. Art should be based on real experiences. These were what you called your "active openings"? Yes. Inside the house there was a piece entitled *Remembrance of the First*

Holy Communion. The figure of an altar boy, made of plaster, stood next to a table. His head was made of a red cushion with needles in it. That was a reference to suffering. People were invited to take some needles, but they did not know what to do with them. I wasted too much energy on these "active openings". I stopped doing them in 1988.

Did you take a political stance against Communism? I don't think so. Some artists showed paintings in the churches - a lot of stuff with crosses. That was very bad art. There wasn't a Polish equivalent of Russian social realist art. There was no pressure to impose any artistic doctrine. People in Poland just accepted Communism as a way to survive. If one joined the party, there were many more possibilities to have a better car, a better life. Politics are always dirty, even with good intentions.

Were you aware of the international art scene? I knew what was going on in the States, but I didn't care much. Life was running fast and I wanted to find myself. Most of the materials you use in your work (ash, salt, soap) look fragile, precarious... They're as fragile as our lives. I know when I put soap on some pieces that, sooner or later, it will come off. Also, I use rusted works as a way to show how sick or old that piece is. I don't like well-finished, polished works. My pieces will die - it's the process of life. Can you talk about your Absolut work? It's rather optimistic. The lines and dots are Morse code for Absolut Vodka. The Morse alphabet was the first international commu-



Miroslaw Balka: "Saints were my childhood heroes... there were no pictures of Spiderman."

nication language. Also, Samuel Finlay Breese Morse was connected with art - he devised the first machine to cut marble - and he lived in the same period as Lars Olsson Smith, who created Absolut Vodka. The light inside the bottle makes me think of a lighthouse guiding people on the right route. It represents the spirit. You once told me that as a child saints were your heroes. Who else could it be? I had no comic books. There were no pictures of Spiderman or Mickey Mouse at the time. We went to church every Sunday and I spent hours gazing at the images of saints. These spoke to me about loneliness, sadness, violence. The victims became my heroes - I could take care of them. Without saints there would be no history of western art. In 1993 there was a fire in your studio... Eighty per cent of my drawings were destroyed. I still haven't grasped what that fire meant for me...

A memento mori, maybe? Many of your works deal with infirmity and death. Maybe. Death is our future. My grandfather Viktor worked as a monumental mason in cemeteries. This is a relevant fact. Showing the weak moments of life is important. I try to say to people that being alive and safe is what counts. Being good to others is the main advice I can give.

Interview by Juan Vicente Aliaga.

FAVORITE ABSOLUT IMAGE



ABSOLUT RUSCHA.

"I really like *Absolut Ruscha*. The image of the lonely wolf is very close to my life and art."

WHERE TO SEE MIROSLAW BALKA

L'autre moitié de l'Europe, Galerie du Jeu de Paume, Paris, January 2000. *Tate Modern*, London, May 2000.