

# gulf coast times

ARTS | EXHIBITION

## Theo Wujcik - Artist's Artist

By: Tom Hall, Arts Writer

Theo Wujcik (1936 – 2014) was a creative who thrived off the unexpected.

From May 29 – August 8, his work is being featured in a summer long exhibition entitled *Theo Wujcik – Artist's Artist* at The Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at Florida SouthWestern State College.

The focus of a 10-year retrospective at FSW in 2012, the late artist Theo Wujcik's current exhibition combines his final group of large-scale paintings (the so-called *Blue Chip Series*) with work in a variety of media created with fellow artist Bob Rauschenberg as his primary subject. Representing the culmination of exchanges originating in the 1970's between Wujcik and our Gallery namesake, *RAUSCHENBERG (Blue Chip Series)* (2014) was completed in Wujcik's final months of life – while battling cancer. The last portrait of Rauschenberg in a small series of editioned prints, silverpoint drawings and paintings included in this exhibition, this "Blue Chip" series canvas is featured alongside Wujcik's brightly-colored interpretations of Jim Rosenquist, Takashi Murakami, Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons and numerous other artist-colleagues and friends.

The art world lost the Tampa artist a year ago. He died on March 29, 2014 at the age of 78 from complications relating to cancer.

A rebel in the tradition of James Dean, Wujcik refused to be defined by a single genre in art. But regardless of style, his work contained two common denominators: bold, in-your-face color and the unabashed, often-irreverent use of metaphors to express some insightful commentary on the human condition or the state of art in the world today.

Wujcik credited friend and GraphicStudio colleague James Rosenquist with the latter, "I wanted to do a picture of a tornado destroying the world," Wujcik explained during a Gallery Talk that marked the opening of a 10-year retrospective of his work at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery in 2012.

"But I couldn't draw. James Rosenquist suggested I work in metaphors, and while I was visiting an archaeological site in Tampa, I came across a cyclone fence that was in the form of a tornado. I did a thumbnail ballpoint sketch and that's how my chain link fence imagery was born," he said.

Wujcik went on to use the device to reinterpret works by Da Vinci, van Gogh, Theodore Gericault, Rodin and Robert Rauschenberg, and a number of his Chain Link works were subsequently displayed and acquired by prestigious museums such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh.

Following the success of *Tampa Tornado* in 1984, the artist went on to explore a number of other metaphorical constructs, including: blind contour



drawing; his *Asian Invasion* series of super heroes; his *Zhang Huan* series about the Chinese replacing New York as the vortex of the global creative realm; and his uncharacteristically small scale *Jade* series, in which jade and bottle caps symbolize the marriage of Asian and western influences in the world of contemporary art.

Born in Detroit the ninth of 10 children, Wujcik dropped out of high school to enlist in the army, which stationed him in France, in a little town just outside of Bordeaux. Affronted by the shabby travel posters he saw all around, he made a quick trip to the Px for a set of watercolors and poster board. Although he had no formal training in art, his travel posters were such an improvement over the existing versions that he was put to work making the posters full-time and inculcating in him a smoldering passion for artistic expression.

When Wujcik completed his service and returned home, he used his eligibility under the G.I. Bill to enroll at the Center for Creative Studies in Detroit. "I knew I'd found what I wanted to do with my life, and I never looked back," Theo related during the 2012 Rauschenberg Gallery Talk.

Exhibitions in New York, Boston and San Francisco led to awards from the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation and the Ford Foundation, and that paved the way for him to join the Tamarind Lithography Workshop in Hollywood, California, where he trained as a master printer. Later, Wujcik assumed the position of shop director of GraphicStudio, an innovative print shop headquartered at the University of South Florida, where he met pop artist James Rosenquist.

Wujcik's personal and professional life took an abrupt turn in 1979 with the end of his marriage. He joined the underground punk scene in Ybor City and together with some USF students founded Mododado, a nihilistic art group that used recycled junk from trash bins to create multi-media artworks. "Andy Warhol would paint from 9 to 5 every day and then grab his camera and go hang out with the wealthy. He lived his art. I did too," said Wujcik at the Rauschenberg opening. "I hung out at the punk clubs drinking and dancing all night. I still have a few moves."

Wujcik has always kept himself open to spontaneous creativity, apparent in his work such as the *Jade Series*. He busted his best move one night outside on an Ybor City street.

"I was going to dinner in Ybor City with a friend," Wujcik explained. "We saw a pile of wood that looked like something we might use and came back to investigate after we ate. When we turned over the wood, we saw all of these jade screens. 'They're mine,' I shouted right away. 'Yeah, they're yours,' my friend immediately agreed."

That fortuitous encounter led to mixed media works consisting of jade, bottle caps, wood, acrylic and fiber that is a metaphor for the marriage of East and West in the world of art today, a world the artist sees shifting inexorably to China in the coming years.

Even after learning in October 2013 that he had late-stage cancer, Wujcik continued to paint. His last exhibit opened at the Galleri Urbane Dallas in February of 2014.

*Theo Wujcik – Artist's Artist* will be on display at the Bob Rauschenberg Gallery at Florida SouthWestern State College from May 29 – August 8, 2015. For additional information, call (239) 489-9313 or visit [www.RauschenbergGallery.com](http://www.RauschenbergGallery.com).

**- Tom Hall is an amateur artist and collector himself. He is an aspiring novelist who writes art quest thrillers. His first work, entitled *Private Collection*, fictionalizes the rediscovery of the fabled billion-dollar Impressionist collection that Parisian art dealer Josse Bernheim-Jeune lost during World War II. Hall lives in Estero, Florida with his fiancée, Connie.**