

Remembering Tampa artist Theo Wujcik on first anniversary of his death

By TOM HALL
April 1, 2015

The art world lost Tampa artist Theo Wujcik a year ago. He died on March 29 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. But regardless of style, Wujcik's 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 tomado 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 tomado. I did a thumbnail ballpoint sketch and that's how my chain link fence imagery was born."



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, Wujcik went on to explore a number of other metaphorical constructs, including:

- blind contour drawing, in which he drew the contours of his muse without looking at the paper, a process that served as a metaphor for all the things we don't see and of which we are unaware in our daily lives;
- his Asian Invasion series of super heroes;

- his Zhang Huan series, which prophetically foretold that just as the abstract expressionists took the center of the art world away from Paris, the Chinese are today 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 the young Wujcik 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.

Tamarind was an atelier established by June Wayne for the purpose of turning out high-quality limited edition prints while affording artists an environment that encourage maximum freedom. And Wood ruled with an iron fist. "She didn't allow us to smoke, play any music or put personal items on our desks. But then Larry

Bell came in one day with a TV under his arm. He put it on his desk and watched soap operas all afternoon as he worked. June didn't say a word to him," Theo remarked wryly, noting the deference universally accorded to the elite artists who've made their mark in the highly competitive world of art.

In 1970, Theo Wujcik landed in Tampa, where he assumed the position of shop director of Graphicstudio, an innovative print shop headquartered at the University of South Florida. That's where he first met and formed a fast friendship with pop artist James Rosenquist, who'd just relocated from New York to Aripeka, a picturesque town located just south of Weeki Wachee Gardens on the Gulf Coast.

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.”

But he busted his best move one night outside on an Ybor City street. “I was going to dinner in Ybor City with a friend,” Theo 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 Wujcik’s Jade Series, small scale (12 x 9” to 23 x 20”) 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.

Wujcik has always kept himself open to spontaneous creativity. Inspiration for *Indy Jones*, for example, was a poster of the film character that “was creeping me out” in the stairwell leading up to his Ybor City warehouse, where he both worked and lived. “I finally pulled out the cardboard cut-out and noticed how all the wrinkles of Indy’s trousers point to one place. Raw sexuality. Well, I just had to use it.” And that led to large-scale works like *Mythical Hero* and *Elton John/Boy Blue* that metaphorically mock hero worship.

During his career, Wujcik’s work was included in exhibitions and in the permanent collections of America’s premier art institutions such as New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the Detroit Institute of Arts and Yale University Art Gallery. Internationally, exhibitions



featuring Wujcik’s work were organized by the New World Museum in San Francisco through the United Nations World Environment Programme. *Melting Ice: A Hot Topic, Envisioning Change* premiered at the Nobel Peace Center, Oslo, Norway, traveled to the Bozar Center for Fine Arts in Brussels, Belgium and the Ministry of Culture in Monaco, before closing at the Field House Museum in Chicago.

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

