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PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

A Polish Satirist Obsessed With Identity

By SARAH BOXER

"Witkacy" is one of the shorter, tamer nicknames the Polish writer and artist Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz (1885-1939) gave himself. He signed his letters with "Chevalier de St. Vitecasse," "half-crazed Witkacy," "completely pulverized Wit," "the overworked and half-dead drunk Onanislaw Spermacy Wyfiutkiewica" and "Witkasinski del Campo Vasto and what not."

There is no shortage of evidence that Witkacy, a protomodern polymath who appears to have been Marcel Duchamp, Franz Kafka, Julia Margaret Cameron and Antonin Artaud all rolled into one, was obsessed with the problem of identity.

Many of his plays and novels involve alter egos or doubles. He made self-portraits in different disguises and moods, giving each one a name: "Professor Pulverstone," "Lord Fitzpur," "Mahatma Witkac." He did automatic drawings under the influence of various narcotics, indicating the drug's name next to his own. He often entertained friends by pretending to be someone other than himself.

And he mocked commercial art by setting up a business called the Portrait Firm, which produced and priced pastel portraits according to how much the model's face would be deformed. The firm was staffed by a bunch of imaginary employees, all of whose names were variations on Witkacy.

You might think such a satirist of human identity would oppose the idea that photographs can capture a person's inner essence. You would be wrong. Witkiewicz was always after what he called "pure form," art that pursued the mystery of existence. From 1911 to 1914, a decade before he founded the Portrait Firm, he made close-up portraits of his family, his friends and himself that have the melancholy intensity of Julia Margaret Cameron's photographs.

Witkiewicz would set up long, emotional photo sessions and wait until "his subject attained the sense of 'inner unity,' " or at least until "he or she assumed an expression of someone struck by the strangeness of existence," writes Stefan Okolowicz, the owner of Witkiewicz's negatives and archives. Then Witkacy took the picture, very close up.

It is these portraits — albumen prints, gelatin silver prints, pigment prints and gum bichromate prints — that make up the bulk of the 88 works in "Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz: Photography" at the Robert Miller Gallery. Organized by the gallery and two museums in Germany, the Photo Museum of the Munich City Museum and the State Gallery of Moritzburg, this exhibition of Witkacy's photographs is the first to reach the United States. And it suggests that Witkacy's comic obsession with identity had a dark source: his sensitivity to the transience of every moment.

This exhibition is, in other words, the serious side of Witkacy. Although there are three mocking self-portraits (one frowning, one with the mouth agape in horror, one with head in hands) as well as two bizarre hallucinogenic drawings, including one of himself emerging from a cocoon, the show is mostly somber portraiture and self-portraiture.

Witkacy centered most of his portraits on the eyes. In certain cases, he got so close to his subjects that the camera would not focus. In his portrait of Anna Oderfeld, he stationed the girl so the light from the windows would be reflected clearly but not sharply in her eyes. The white of that reflection merges with the whites of her eyes, giving them a swimming quality. One portrait Witkacy made of his intense, rascally looking friend Tadusz Langier is even stranger. Once again, the light from a window shines in the subject's eyes, but his head must have moved up and down during the shot, because the white specks became white tracks.

Not all of the eyes are blurred. Witkacy got a piece of water pipe from his plumber to attach to the lens of his camera so he could focus it at a very close range, and he often cropped his shots to get the part he wanted. Witkacy's self-portrait with thick mittlike fingers gripping a melancholy head is as clear as can be. So are some of his portraits of his bespeckled friend the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski. A soft pinkish picture of the pianist Artur Rubinstein, cropped at the forehead and cheek, is distinct and delicate enough so that one can see the dark perimeter of his pale irises and the lines in his eyelids.

Witkacy spent a lot of time looking into his mother's and father's eyes. His father, a contemplative-looking old artist, changes little from portrait to portrait. His mother, though, is frighteningly mercurial. A picture of her from a normal distance shows her looking ordinary and friendly in a peasant shirt. A little closer up she appears frazzled, as if she might cry. Her lips are cracked. In the same portrait, printed so that her neck and face are bleached out, she looks psychotic, with hair like straw. Closer up her freckles appear completely out of control, a pox on her face. One of the secrets of these soul portraits is that the closer you get, the crazier people seem.

Proximity is kindest to Witkacy's fiancee Jadwiga Janczewska, who committed suicide in 1914, and cruelest to his wife, Jadwiga Unruh, who married him in 1923. The pictures of his wife are ordinary and overlighted, as if taken out of a sense of duty. But the portraits he made of his fiancée have a romantic current running through them. According to the catalogue, after Janczewska committed suicide, Witkiewicz mourned her death by printing some of her portraits and purposefully marking them with spots "as if to suggest the process of decay."

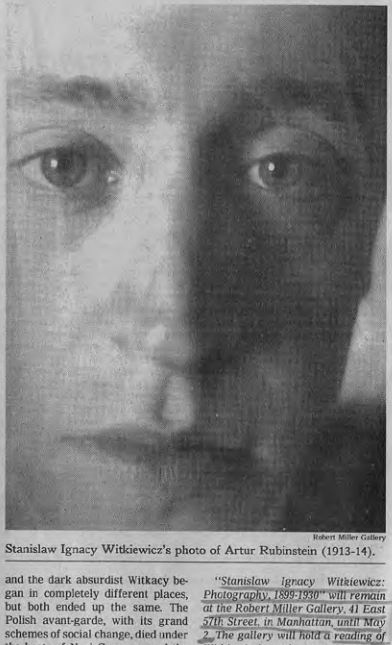
In this exhibition, there are three versions of a single shot of Janczewska. She is dressed in a loosely tied robe, with her hair piled on her head and an enigmatic smile on her face. The gelatin silver print is clear, mischievous and sexy. The second, a blotchy albumen print, makes her look as if she's coming apart. The third, a faint, yellow gum bichromate print, turns her into a ghost. She is a lesson in transience, proof that even a face captured on film in one moment is a malleable thing.

Witkacy was a committed individualist who shunned every movement that came along in Poland: Constructivism, Suprematism, Surrealism, Formism, Unism. If you want to see just how far he was from the stream of things, it is instructive to see Ubu Gallery's show of Polish avant-garde art, an impressive collection of drawings, paintings, photo-collages, posters and books from the many movements kicking around Poland from the 1920's to the 1940's.

In the 1920's, when Witkacy was setting up the Portrait Firm, sardonically mourning the disappearance of art and the individual, the rest of Poland was pursuing better living through better lettering and social action through splicing.

Wladyslaw Strzeminski was drawing maquettes for the journal Praesens with red, yellow and blue letters floating playfully on a grid. Stefan and Franciszka Themerson were depicting the mechanization of Europe in a film that spliced shots of abstract photograms, the head of a bull sitting on a tooth, a fat man feeding himself and a conveyor belt carrying sliced apples. Janusz Maria Brzeski's "Birth of the Robot" series included a photomontage of a robot in a helmet hosing down human beings lying in front of a factory. In other words, the mechanization of Europe put Witkacy in a funk, but the rest of Poland's artists seemed energized by it.

The earnest Polish avant-garde and the dark absurdist Witkacy began in completely different places, but both ended up the same. The Polish avant-garde, with its grand schemes of social change, died under the boots of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Witkacy killed himself in 1939, the day the Red Army invaded eastern Poland. Most of his work was destroyed in a fire during the Warsaw Uprising in 1944.



Robert Miller Gallery

Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz's photo of Artur Rubinstein (1913-14).

"Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz: Photography, 1899-1939" will remain at the Robert Miller Gallery, 41 East 57th Street, in Manhattan, until May 2. The gallery will hold a reading of Witkiewicz's works on May 1 at 6:30 P.M.

"The Polish Avant-Garde, 1920-1945" will remain at Ubu Gallery, 16 East 78th Street, Manhattan, until May 16.