



**Ryszard Kaja** (born 1962 in Poznań, Poland) – Painter, graphic artist and stage designer.

When first asked to write an artist statement in English for Ryszard Kaja's *Flora, Phallus, Fauna* exhibit, I knew a challenge lay before me. Not only is Kaja one of Poland's most beloved and prolific contemporary poster designers, he has also designed more than 150 theater, ballet, opera, television, and film sets in Poland and abroad, including France, Germany, Brazil, Argentina, Israel, and Egypt. Through email and friendly conversation, this charming, cherubic, shy, yet often hilarious man gave me a patchwork glimpse into his Slavic Baroque aesthetic, his love for his native country, his distaste of current trends in graphic design, and—most importantly—his personal world view.

Following in the tradition of his father Zbigniew Kaja, member of the acclaimed "Polish Poster School," Ryszard applies mixed techniques to his poster-making process:

I use everything: pen, pencil, ink, color ink, gouache, coffee grounds, tea, ash—everything that's around me .... Artists try to be international, trendy, cool. I am a little outsider. I have my world and it is a very Polish world. Some posters now are too similar to Western posters, killed by computer programs like Photoshop. Everybody thinks "I can do it!" So many directors think they can make posters themselves in a cheaper way. One click: The colors are beautiful. Second click: The letters look nice. Next click and they are drunk off their own satisfaction.

The key to Kaja's posters is how masterfully he uses subjective truths. Like pulling a hazy memory from the attic room of his own personal theater, Kaja draws inspiration from photographs and journals of his travels, and trinkets that clutter his studio, to create exquisite heartfelt images that often poke fun while at the same time illuminating a sharp detail or likeness that can only be achieved with a perceptive eye, rendered by an intelligent hand. *Flora, Phallus, Fauna* will be his first solo exhibition in North America. The Hinge is pleased to announce that Mr. Kaja will attend the opening reception on April 6, 2013. Special thanks to Krzysztof Marcinkiewicz, owner of Galeria Plakatu, in Wrocław, Poland, ([polishposter.com](http://polishposter.com)) for supplying the posters for this event.

#### Biography

1984	Graduated with a degree in painting from the Academy of Fine Arts, Poznań (now ASP) under Norbert Skupniewicza.
1985–1990	Chief set designer at the Grand Theater, Łódź, Poland.
1991–1994	Chief set designer at the Opera and Operetta in Szczecin, Poland.
1995–2003	Chief set designer at the Grand Theater in Poznań, Poland.

Kaja currently lives in Wrocław and Warnowo, Poland, where he works as a free agent.

- Translation and additional information provided by Chris Smentkowski.

**Chris Smentkowski** (born 1973, in New Jersey, USA) – Curator, artist, musician, and dissident.

*Flora, Phallus, Fauna* is the second exhibit of Polish poster art Smentkowski has curated in the USA. Chris has had both solo and group exhibitions of his oil paintings and ceramic works and is the founding member of the noise band Brain Transplant. Chris currently lives and works in St. Louis, Missouri, USA

## Introducing Polish Poster Art

The story of Polish poster art starts in France at the end of the 19th century with Jules Chéret's invention of the color lithograph. Established Polish painters such as Józef Mehoffer, Stanislaw Wyspiański, and Wojciech Weiss embraced this new medium, incorporating elements of Polish folk art with Art Nouveau and Social Realism. The resulting images, produced mainly for art openings and theater and ballet performances, were distinguished in quality and were immediately regarded as high art, leading to the first International Exposition of the Poster held in Kraków in 1898.

When Poland gained independence in 1918 after the first World War, artists Stefan Norblin and Tadeusz Gronowski adapted the poster using it for advertising and tourism. As the country fell to Communist rule after World War II, however, Polish posters initially survived to propagate the Soviet agenda. This is also when things got interesting. The state had control of media during this period, so there was no commercial interest in advertisements. In the 1950s, this lack of commercial pressure, coupled with the relaxation of oppressive Stalinist policy, ushered in a period of creative experimentation in which Polish poster art took off as a unique form.

The state did not care how the posters looked, as long as they were made, and there were plenty of great artists-- Henryk Tomaszewski, Wiktor Górka, Jerzy Flisak, Jan Młodożeniec, Waldemar Świerzy, Jan Lenica and Franciszek Starowieyski, among others--ready to take the poster to the next, bizarre, unrestricted, and surreal level of self-expression and artistic interpretation, beginning what is now known as the first "Polish Poster School". For many years during this period, every film, performance, concert, festival or other public event had a commissioned poster. By 1968, the world's first poster museum was opened in Wilinów, just outside Warsaw (the museum still thrives today: <http://www.postermuseum.pl/>)

The next wave happened in 1970s Wrocław. For artists like Rafał Olbiński, Jan Sawka, Jerzy Czerniawski, Jan Jaromir Aleksiu, and Eugeniusz Get-Stankiewicz, nonconformity and dissension became the norm. Theirs were primarily conceptual posters, abstracting further upon what had already begun with the previous generation. Polish poster artists like Andrzej Pałowski and Wiktor Sadowski saw some success in the 1980s, but cuts in arts funding took their toll, and many artists at this time fled the country to find work elsewhere. *Solidarność* (the rise of the Polish labor movement, also known as "Solidarity") contributed to the decline of Polish poster art in the 1980s. With *Solidarność* came economic interest, and the interpretative freedom abundant in poster art under state control was hampered by studio and company demands that the poster as advertisement represent their product more directly.

So, what about recent activity in Polish poster art? Krzysztof Dydo opened the Galeria Plakatu Kraków in 1985, which has held more than 200 poster art exhibitions in Poland alone. Since its inception the gallery has held annual poster competitions, helping to keep the struggling tradition of the art alive. Throughout this period artists like Andrzej Kilmowski not only clung to the Polish poster as an art form, but faithfully kept its spirit of individualism and interpretation. Kilmowski, in particular, used these traditions to launch a career in graphic design. Additionally, and more recently, the international scene has seen resurgence in printmaking, graphic art, and DIY culture. With these elements already on the rise, younger Polish artists have embraced the rich legacy of Polish poster art, producing some of the most important posters since the golden age of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Artists like Kaja Renkas, Homework (the duo of Joanna Górka and Jerzy Sakun), Ryszard Kaja, and Michał Książek reflect back on the imagery that made the state-supported posters so popular, but are continually influenced by contemporary culture, often bringing a touch of humor harder to find in the political tumult of the past.

*Chris Smentkowski*