

ELZBIETA SIKORSKA: FOREST DRAWINGS

Art Exhibit. Opening Reception at the GHI, May 13, 2006. Organizer: Kelly McCullough (GHI). Speaker: Laura Katzman (Randolph-Macon Woman's College).

The GHI hosted the exhibition Elzbieta Sikorska: Forest Drawings (May 13-June 30, 2006), which aligns with the institute's long-standing commitment to examining the social, historical, cultural, and political dimensions of landscape and the natural environment. A native of Poland, Sikorska (b. 1950) earned her MFA in 1974 from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw, and has exhibited her paintings, drawings, and prints both nationally and internationally for over thirty years. She was represented by the venerable Addison Ripley Gallery in Washington, DC (1988–1998), and currently shows with Reeves Contemporary in New York's Chelsea district. Sikorska has been awarded several prestigious artist residencies in Vermont, Maryland, and Virginia, and her work is in the collection of the National Museum of Women in the Arts, among other noted museums. Forest Drawings was inaugurated at the GHI on May 13, 2006 by Laura Katzman, who delivered the following introductory lecture.

I am honored to speak this evening at the German Historical Institute on the occasion of the opening of Elzbieta Sikorska's exhibition, a selection of the artist's expressionistic drawings of wooded landscapes in and around Silver Spring, Maryland. As I was preparing my remarks, I recognized the appropriateness of presenting Sikorska's work at the GHI, for even though the artist was born and educated in Poland, her first move to the democratic West from communist Poland was in fact to West Berlin, in 1985, just four years before the Berlin Wall came down. Although Sikorska's time in the formerly divided city was relatively brief (she immigrated to the United States in 1986), it proved prophetic, as it was in Berlin that she connected with the American academic Richard Pettit, who was riveted by her work when viewing it in Warsaw and subsequently installed it in his Charlottenburg gallery: *Magasin Provençal*. This exhibition planted the seeds for the next phase of the artist's life and career in America.

Sikorska's émigré experience from Poland, though certainly unique, also symbolized the unraveling of the Soviet experiment at large, even if she did not know personally the tumultuous events that were to unfold so soon after her break from Warsaw and Berlin. The charged atmosphere in which she was working in these years was well-articulated by curator Lisa Lewenz in a press release for a 2003 exhibition she organized on

Sikorska's drawings for the Maryland Art Place in Baltimore. Lewenz wrote:

This was . . . an astonishing moment in history, when Mikhail Gorbachev's *Perestroika* had led to elections in Poland that opened its borders to every citizen, offering even people with limited means a "back door" around the Berlin Wall. The timing of Sikorska's chosen move to America [via West Berlin] is even more poignant when considering that only a year after her arrival, at the height of the Cold War, President Ronald Reagan stood before the Berlin Wall and proclaimed "If you seek peace, if you seek prosperity for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe . . . come here to this gate . . . open this gate . . . Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall." While these [watershed] events were separate from the artist, it seems impossible to disengage [such critical] moments from our memory when viewing Sikorska's work.

One does not find direct visual evidence of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the demise of Communism, or even the embrace of the West in Sikorska's production; indeed, there is nothing overtly political or literal in the artist's multi-layered pictures. And yet, her experience as a citizen of a former Soviet bloc country in Western capitalist societies has informed her art in more subtle ways: namely, in the strong sense of place that pervades her work. In her paintings, drawings, and prints, Sikorska grapples quite profoundly with how we as human beings physically and emotionally connect to place and how we negotiate and structure our space, both public and private.

After Sikorska settled in Maryland (via New Hampshire), she had a transformational encounter with the majestic open vistas and intense sunlight of New Mexico. It was at this time that the artist focused on pure landscape imagery (as opposed to landscape as a backdrop to human drama, as it had functioned in her previous work). As a newcomer to America who had not yet mastered the English language or established strong bonds with Americans, Sikorska used landscape as a primal means to connect to this foreign land. She recently reflected:

My move to the U.S. in 1986 brought major changes to my work, and I struggled for some time to assess my new surroundings and make artistic sense of all the new impressions. I tried to find a closer connection to my new reality, and nature proved to be at the center of it. I began to focus again on landscapes, the interaction of color, light, and movement.

Landscape has served Sikorska well for the past twenty years, as nature offers endless fodder for her fertile imagination, her sharp eye,

and her stunning if not awe-inspiring technical facility. She has rendered nature in paint, graphite, conte crayon, pastel, and in a variety of mixed media. Innovative and experimental in her image making, she recently returned with joyous, almost child-like energy to etching, the medium in which she was trained in Warsaw, collaborating with master printers at the notable Pyramid Atlantic Art Center.

Sikorska's oversized drawings of the densely rich activity of forest floors at first glance offer a romantic refuge from our hard-edged urban worlds. Yet these drawings are anything but comforting, as the artist gives us nature in intense states of fertility and decay: subtle and stark, splendid and wrathful. She inventively extracts elements from photographs she takes while walking in the woods, which adds an extra, almost mystical, aura to her "realism." I put "realism" in quotation marks because while her work makes some reference to the chilling naturalism of Casper David Friedrich's Romantic landscapes of the early nineteenth century, it shares even more, I believe, with the abstracted, other-worldly landscapes of the later Symbolist movement. Drawing on both traditions, Sikorska transforms familiar topographies into ambiguous zones that reach far beyond the observed subjects.

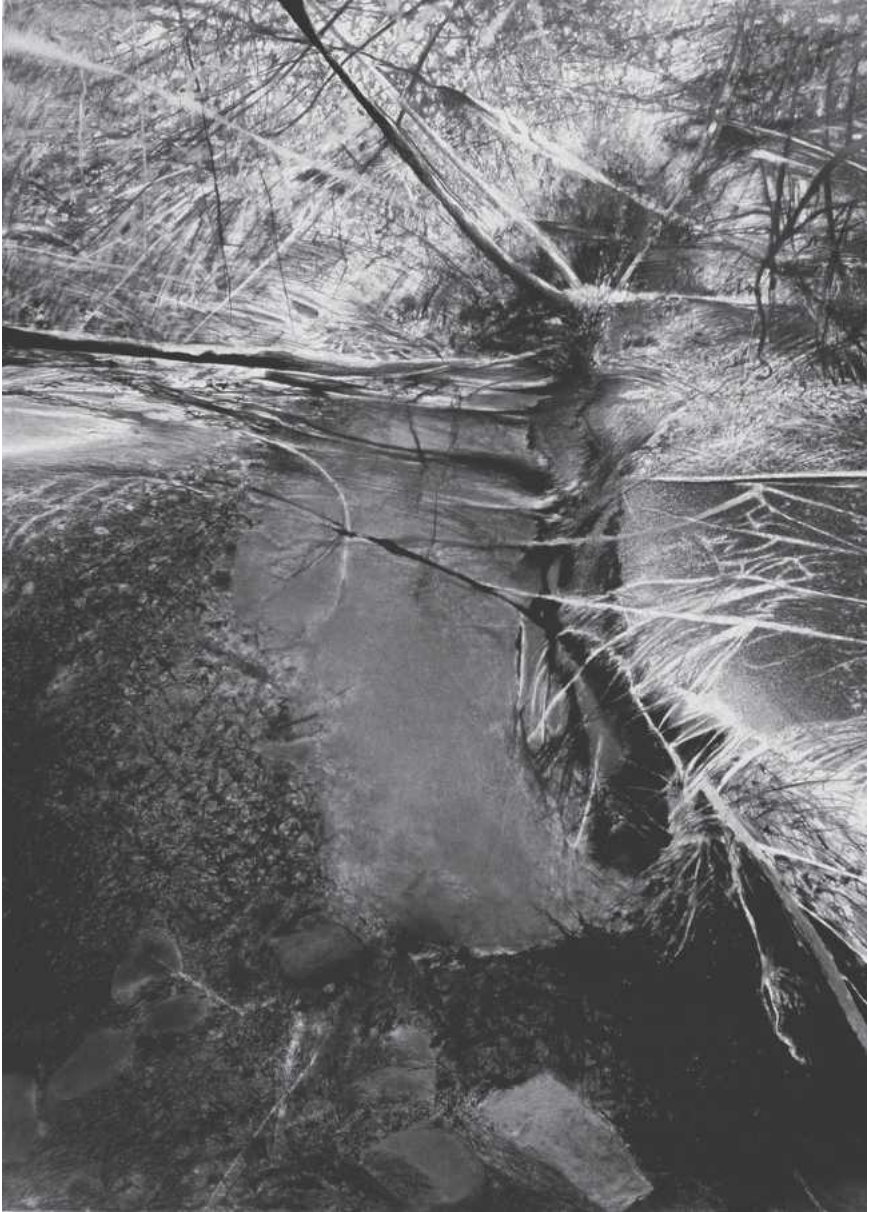
Sikorska imposes a powerful organizing structure onto her subjects, as in *Diamond* (2001) [Fig.1], where a twisted, elbow-like tree trunk, along with velvety reflections, wiry roots, and shadowy paths, at once bifurcate the space and propel us into the unusual ground-level scene. Up close, chaos abounds, as her frenzied markings, hatchings, rubbings, and squiggles, simulating the textures of grasses, branches, brush, and earth, compete for space in a wildly abstract universe. *Dead End* (2003) [Fig.2] displays similar tensions. Exuberant light and fresh green color flood and illuminate the picture, but their origins, along with the precarious gulf between the two sides of the central stream, bridged only by spindly roots and thinly stretched branches, mystify if not alarm.

Where are we in Sikorska's strange woods? Unsettling titles like *Obstacles* (2003) and *Dead End* do not place us on terra firma. Is Sikorska evoking her own uncertain journey from Poland to America during the late Cold War, or is she compelling us to question our place in the woods, a metaphor for the larger world? Either way, this nature-sorceress remarkably transports us from a physical to a psychic realm, which gives her drawings a penetrating psychological charge that places her work among the most compelling landscape painting of our time.

In conclusion, I leave you to ponder one basic yet essential truth about Ela Sikorska, and that is that she does not simply transcribe nature. Rather, like all artists of depth and vision, she does something much more complex and enduring. As she moves in closer and closer to nature, she wants, in her words, "to force the viewer to confront nature in the raw,



Elzbieta Sikorska, *Diamond* (2001)



Elzbieta Sikorska, *Dead End* (2003)

and to experience some of the innate tension in it . . . these close-up landscape images may be seen as a mirror to our emotions, to certain states of the human condition. At the same time [she says she is] trying to reveal the hidden, underlying structure in nature and illustrate the broader patterns of harmony.”

Sikorska’s landscapes thus look both outward and inward. They are not only about a specific place or space, at once physical and psychic, but they are also about how we as viewers experience that place, or rather, how we internalize what remains of an observed space when it is filtered through time, memory, and emotion. This is no small feat for a traditional medium and subject in our forward-looking digital age.