



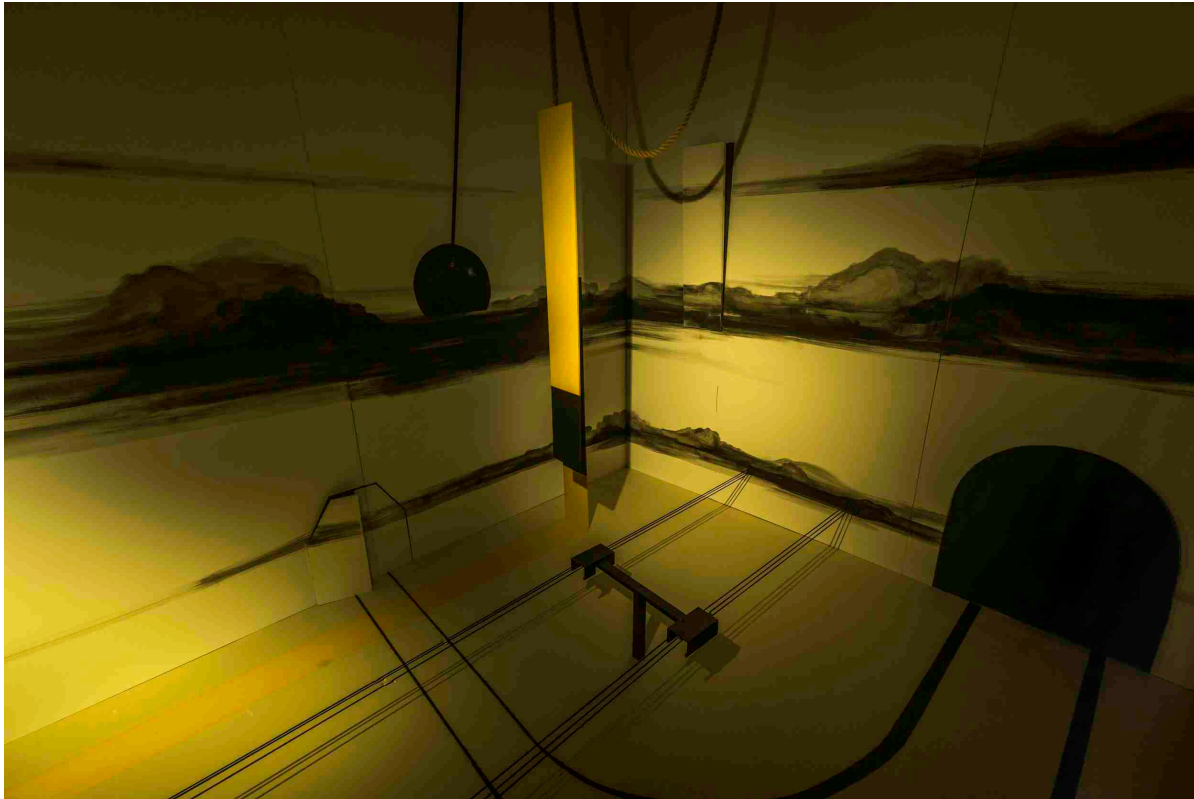
Wojciech Bakowski: dream-like narratives (an interview)

by Veronica Gisondi

Dwelling on the possibilities of images, sounds, and words becomes a way for Wojciech Bakowski to dive into the boundaries of human insight, cognition, and the medium itself – while reveling in the limits of one's own reality

Across temporal recesses, aural interferences and poetic utterances, Wojciech Bąkowski – born in Poznań in 1979 and currently represented by Stereo (Warsaw) and Bureau (New York) – uncloses a microcosm interspersed by inner flights and melancholic excavations. Dwelling on the possibilities of images, sounds, and words becomes a way for Bąkowski to dive into the boundaries of human insight, cognition, and the medium itself – while reveling in the limits of one's own reality. First presented as a series at Stereo in 2021, Bąkowski's charcoal drawings – traced on sandpapered cardboard –

summon granular sleep states, grazing the blurriness of imagination through underexposed, dream-like recollections of prosaic objects, gestures, framings, views. In these nocturnes, where time stretches and memory resurfaces, the transference of lucid dreaming techniques into the sphere of representation leads to a contracted unfolding; a partial cracking of codes and languages; and coming to terms with the impossibility of communication.



Wojciech Bąkowski, *Incomplete Awakening*, 2018, plasterboard, plastic, wood, chipboard, acrylic paint, rope, fabric dimensions variable.
Courtesy of the artist and Stereo, Warsaw.

Could you tell me about the context you grew up in?

Wojciech Bąkowski: I grew up in a housing estate in Poznań. These are blocks made of "large board," the name of a modular technology from the early 70s. I think this environment has influenced the aesthetics of my works, all of them – art, music – and my poetry.

How have you developed an interest in drawing, animation, performance, film- and music-making in particular?

Wojciech Bąkowski: I have always drawn. Other forms emerged when I gained new skills, first in art school and then in art studies. I was unsatisfied with expressing myself in one area. I needed more and more. That's why I started doing it all – movies, music, drawings, objects. Sometimes I worry it's a bit too much. And the reason for choosing the artistic path was probably very simple. I wasn't fit for anything else. My father used to say about me: "He has no prognosis."

[Here is the [link](#) to Voyager, Bąkowski's latest digital album. Ed]

Focusing on your experience in Poznań, Warsaw, and Poland in general, how do you think the history, culture, architecture, and texture of life that belong to these places influenced your take on art?

Wojciech Bąkowski: I guess the existentialism and melancholy of my works comes from the characteristic Polish mentality, although I may exaggerate a bit here. In terms of the viscosity and atmosphere of my art, my childhood fascinations – with the railway for example – and what I was surrounded by – small apartments, corridors, large blocks, elevators, dog barking bouncing against large walls in backyards – certainly played a decisive role.

Throughout your career you have been involved in several group projects. How did they come to be? How does your individual practice intersect with collaborative work?

Wojciech Bąkowski: I only worked in groups at the beginning of my career. It took the form of joint education, as we learned from each other, and promotion, since we were more visible as a group. I'm talking about the Penerstwo group here. But in general, I'm not very suitable for group work – I'm an individualist and I see others as competition.

The press release of your latest show at Stereo begins with a quote of Flannery O'Connor, in which she points to the ability to "make something out of a little experience", stressing how merely "surviving" one's childhood provides enough material to work on for the rest of one's life. How do you relate to this statement, considering that idea of self-sufficiency, and in regard to your upbringing?

Wojciech Bąkowski: I'm glad Michał used this quote. Flannery O'Connor's words describe my approach well. I'm not a traveler, I'm not looking for inspiration in unusual circumstances. I feed on the ordinary, the everyday, the cheap and the easy to get. If I'm traveling, it's rather internal – I find inspiration in my memories, imaginations and dreams. But I don't think that's the only right way; other artists have a different attitude and also make good art.



Wojciech Bąkowski *The Moon, a Star, and an Overhead Light*, 2021, exhibition view, Stero, Warsaw.

Poetry seems to hold a significant role across your production. Together with literature, text and the written form, in what ways has it contributed to shaping your background and views? In terms of process, what value does this type of language hold to you?

Wojciech Bąkowski: I have sensitive hearing. The word has the strongest effect on me. That is why it's at the root of all my actions, and even when it's ultimately not part of the work, it inspires it. Each of my drawings, objects or installations presents a poetic issue. I can't play with pure visual expression. Sometimes I envy artists who can do it.

Could you expand on the significance that spoken word and recitation have in your work?

Wojciech Bąkowski: They have a leading role. Sometimes visuality feels like a modest addition to literature to me – it only tightens the meaning. If I give up using my voice or written text, then I expand the title of the work, like I do in drawings. The word can never be pushed out of my work because it is the foundation of it. Sometimes I say I'm a bad poet who has to help himself with pictures.

You've been performing live for quite some time now. What kinds of needs and questions does live performance address for you, compared to less direct, immediate means such as drawing, installation or film?

Wojciech Bąkowski: I guess it's about my approach to life: I don't respect my own privacy. I use myself as an artistic object. Sometimes I feel that my physical presence – how I speak or walk – is needed to build the right atmosphere in the work. This has become another picture added to my poetry. Of course, vanity and exhibitionism also play an important role. But these are matters of deep psychology – a topic for a longer conversation.

An aspect I wanted to touch upon is the economy of your descriptive elements and the consistency of your concern with quotidian, common, accessible objects. Often, these are things that are within reach and, in some cases, virtually featureless or generic circumstances. Could you retrace the origin of your interest in everyday items, and in the ritual and repetition of the day-to-day?

Wojciech Bąkowski: I'm focused on simple things because they are common with many people; it keeps the metaphors deep. And by "deep" I mean that the metaphor opens up many associations for many minds at once: everyone knows what a leg, a table or a toothache are. I'm looking for the shortest path to the hearts of my audience, so I choose these kind of channels. As a recipient, I do not like erudite, exotic and intellectual snobbery in art. I like when artists use simple, ordinary things – that's when their talent shines. Same with technology. When something is expensive, modern, and mysterious in terms of technology, I lose interest. I admire things that are cheap and done easily.



Wojciech Bąkowski, Polydactyly, 2020, charcoal on cardboard, 30 x 49 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Stereo, Warsaw.

How do you stay true to this bareness, to the 'simple nature' of your subjects, and maintain formal clarity?

Wojciech Bąkowski: In fact, I don't always keep it simple. Sometimes, especially in drawings, extensive symbolism appears. But I always make sure that the content is not too specific – that is, personal – or too general – meaning philosophical. I guess it's a matter of punch power. When boxers, for instance middleweights, switch to heavy weight, they lose their flexibility and punch power, losing to those whose heavy weight is natural. For me, what's between privacy and the collective feels natural. I'm looking for a common field of experience, but from a "pavement perspective". I don't touch on social matters or the intricacies of my family history. Staying in between results in compositions made of simple elements, although not always.

You've mentioned a certain nostalgia for the past before. Time appears often and in many guises across your work: as the ticking sound of clocks, or a phone vibrating, in digits, as well as in metaphorical and non literal forms. Where does your preoccupation with the temporal dimension stem from, and what has been driving your investigation on time in such ways?

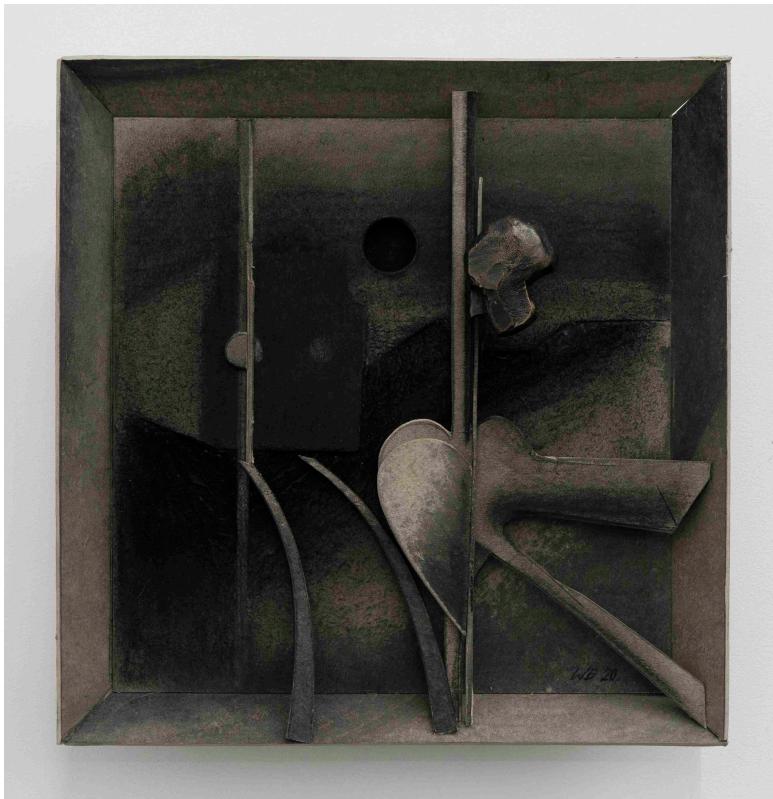
Wojciech Bąkowski: As I said, I'm gazing at the simplest, most basic parts of existence. Time is one of them.

In what ways does time feel simple to you?

Wojciech Bąkowski: I know time is a difficult question in terms of physics and astrophysics. What I mean is time in a person's life. Maybe I used the wrong word – instead of simple, I should say basic, because experiencing it is one of the basics of existence. But in fact, time can curl up and process strangely in feelings and memory. I agree that it is not really that simple.

Moving to the subject of dreaming – it seems to me that, as a phenomenon, it is often mystified. However, rather than being conditioned by pre-existing codes or narratives, your treatment feels specific and personal. Where does your fascination for dreams, sleep, and shifts in human perception come from?

Wojciech Bąkowski: I'm generally interested in the inner life. Dreaming is a special field in itself. Here, thoughts smoothly transform into images and sounds, and some things are symbolized by others. Bugs and glitches appear very often in dreams, lucid dreams and hypnagogic visions. Through them, you can see a lot of truths about the human soul.



Wojciech Bąkowski, *The Heart on the Trail*, 2020, cardboard relief, charcoal, bronze, speaker 35 x 36 x 10 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Stereo, Warsaw.

How and when did your interest in dreams began? Was there a particular event, encounter, or experience that sparked it?

Wojciech Bąkowski: It came out of my fascination with the past. Every morning, I drink coffee and look thoughtlessly at old VHS films from the 80s and 90s, from Poznań – mainly from my neighborhood. It's kind of a ritual. I found these movies on the internet. They are private recordings of strangers. I downloaded them to a flash drive and displayed them on a large LCD screen in my living room-studio. After a while, the images from these movies began to seep into my dreams. I realized I could develop these dreams because I naturally had lucid dreaming experiences from time to time. Then I bought a book on techniques of lucid dreaming and started practicing.

What do you find compelling about these encounters – of diving in the chasm that distances thinking from dreaming, thoughts from images?

Wojciech Bąkowski: I see this chasm as a world in which thoughts and images merge into one, or permeate one another. There are inter-sensory feelings – hybrid formations that are thought, image, and several other things at the same time. It fascinates me.

And why did you feel the need to bring consciousness into an unconscious state by approaching lucid dreaming as a technique?

Wojciech Bąkowski: It's about a my fascination with the past. I'm an extremely melancholic and sentimental person. If someone would have guaranteed me that after my death I would find myself in the Chrobrego estate in Poznań in 1987, for example, I would have committed suicide immediately. Lucid dreaming partially allows me to reach places from the past since they are stored in the brain. I'm trying to get there, with different results. Controlling a dream is not easy.



Wojciech Bąkowski, *The Memory*, 2020, charcoal on cardboard, 50 x 60 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Stereo, Warsaw.



Wojciech Bąkowski, Child Hallucination, 2020, charcoal on cardboard, 32 x 39 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Stereo, Warsaw.

In music as in audiovisual and image-based works, you also seem to bring attention to different timescales and patterns of movement in space through operations of association and superimposition. In particular, your work *Sound of My Soul* made me wonder how “sound” and “soul” (or, more broadly, the sensorial and the spiritual) affect our apprehension of time and reality. Are these kinds of processes pertinent to your research on cognition?

Wojciech Bąkowski: Once, completely intuitively, without thinking, I said that my soul is purple. This statement amused my friends. However, there is something interesting in such jokes for me. I like to describe the atmosphere that fills me most of the time, and I use synesthesia to describe it. I use the word “soul” conventionally, meaning “inner life.” I understand the term as the whole of inner life, together with the perception of time and reality, including sounds. I do not believe in spirit – I’m not a dualist.

In your navigation of the urban environment and human imagination there seems to be a recurring connection, or collision, between an outer, worldly landscape and an inner dimension, or the landscape of the mind. What would you say you are looking for in your inquiry on the limits of cognition, human insight, and artistic language?

Wojciech Bąkowski: Today I received a beautiful album with drawings by Saul Steinberg as a gift. I think we have a lot in common, despite our different aesthetics. He was also trying to create an interior self-portrait, using landscapes, dates, numbers and symbols. It's difficult to show the state of the soul in another way – all the building material comes from the outside. Inside, it is processed and rendered in a system other than reality; a system that, however, says a lot about reality. It's not about making weird, cool narcotic visions – it's about telling the truth. Wittgenstein said that the poet must always consider whether what he says has something to do with the truth, which does not necessarily mean that it is as it happens in reality. I believe this sentence explains a lot.