

Last year quite richly abounded in outdoor festivals, revived editions of the long forgotten metal events, and closed niche endeavours. It was also a great time for the promotion of the illustrative and drawing art. Surely everyone remembers the poster for the first edition of Prog In Park. The second edition of the festival has been recently decorated with a distinctive graphic design. We could not refuse the pleasure of talking to a young and talented - graphic designer, illustrator, author of a clothing collection, musician - Kuba Sokólski!

Hello! I'll start with a regular question, what was your 2017 like? There was much to do with i.a. Merkabah since you put out a well-received album entitled Million Miles. You were also working on artworks for the music industry. It seems that it was a very fruitful time for you.

It was indeed a fruitful time, but in many terms, it was also one of the hardest periods that I happen to remember. Tons of work and hardships of life, in general, were extremely tiring. Fortunately, this year seems to be much more promising, though even busier, which makes me very happy.

Let's return to your beginnings. Are you able to tell me when you've developed an interest in the widely understood art and drawing?

I don't know whether it's good or bad, but I knew from the very beginning that it was the job for me. My father was an artist (he produced jewellery), so as soon as I started to show interest in art, he did what he could in order to foster the passion (I was given sketching accessories, painting albums, etc.) I have been drawing since I was a child. At first, it was comics and fantasy, then when I was a teenager I discovered the works of The Great Trinity: Beksiński, Giger and Starowieyski, thanks to whom I began to be fascinated with surrealism. It was much easier from that time on.

How was it with music? Was it just a different form of art? Or maybe an inextricable bond with drawing or the opposite way?

Quite the opposite way. Music is like a force to me. I have a more emotional approach towards it, treat it as 'fun.' Drawing is like a craft that I've been learning since I was a child, and about which I know much enough to take money for my work. What's more, I even have a certificate validating it! (laughter). Artistic aspect is of course equally important. I'm very grateful that I can make a living (at least temporarily) of a creative job that gives me so much satisfaction and fulfilment but it's my occupation, and that's why professionalism is expected of me in this field. Artistic masturbation sometimes has to be put aside (laughter).

And how great was the influence of your parents on your interest in music? Was it your father who infused you with the passion?

He didn't do it himself, but he was the one to support it the most. He has opened my eyes to such jazz drummers like Art Blakey and Billy Cobham, he has also introduced me to Tangerine Dream and Jan Garbarek, in other words, to artists that have remained one of my greatest inspirations ever since. However, my passion for music had blossomed in like primary school where me and my friends would passionately discover new bands, either through MTV or through blindly bought cassettes, or thanks to my friend's older brother who instilled grunge and metal into us.

When have you decided to combine your skills and interests, which resulted in i.a. creation of drafts of posters and artworks centred upon the metal scene?

The first artwork I've ever made was probably a draft for a band called Lethal Dose in something like 2005. When Lethal Dose split up, Lostbone (which I also had a pleasure to work with) was created of its remains, but I don't know if incidentally the cooperation with Hunter's T.E.L.I. wasn't the first one. I'm not really sure. Anyways, from the more important things, later there was a project with Żywiołak's debut album. It so happened that I held on to a more music-oriented society, so I got to know different people (fans, musicians, promoters) at live gigs (which I attended obsessively), and when somebody took up a topic of my drawing endeavours, first cooperation offers were made. It so happened pretty naturally.

Which project has caused that your works have started to gain more interest?

Oh, I have no idea... I have an impression that with almost every published work there's a slight stir, and new projects appear on a regular basis, but it's difficult to tell whether any of them was my 'breakthrough.' But maybe the box set for the Hell Comes Home label has gained a bit more attention? It was definitely the most demanding and complex project on which I was working back then. As a result of that collaboration, a cooperation with Scientist (ex-Yakuza) was set up and it lasts until this day. So yeah, I definitely owe some of my later accomplishments to this very project.

You avoid using skulls or similar elements in your works. However, there's a lot of quirky reptiles, bugs, and insects. Have you knowingly resigned from using symbolism identified with metal or was that completely natural?

I've never been particularly attracted by drawing skulls (sometimes I have a weakness for some animal skulls, but, in fact, avoid the human ones). They've always been trite and corny to me. And despite the fact that I have nothing against their appearances in other artists' works, I prefer to apply less obvious motifs. As far as scary things are concerned, I've always felt a tight bond with body horror and Lovecraftian themes. Later on, I've developed close feelings to old drawings, esotericism, and psychedelia. I've never wanted my drawings to be typically 'dark' or 'satanic.' I even avoid using the black colour (laughter). I've always gone with organicity, weirdness, 'structurality', etc.

Are you an adherent of handmade projects? Could you elaborate how does the process of preparing the project look like from start to finish?

I usually begin with a computer sketch that aims to determine the general composition, motifs, colouring, etc. It's above all a quick and convenient solution that allows applying loose corrections, which as everyone knows, are inevitable when working with clients. On this basis, I prepare a more detailed pencil sketch (a hand works in a different manner on paper than it does on a tablet computer, so it's here where the matter gains a proper shape and structure) that later becomes the base for the final illustration. Later on, it's only laborious execution of proper drawing with a technical pen, ink, and fineliner. Digital processing for the end, which means cleaning and colouring.

Do you happen to have creative crises? How do you cope with them?

Of course! And how great they sometimes are! Unfortunately, I have no panacea for such crises. They often get me during the conceptual stage of the project. A classic crisis looks like this:

prolonging lack of inspiration, scribbling on a sheet of paper, long hours spent for aimless researches, frustration, etc. But the worst crises usually get me in the latter stage of the project when I begin to question my own decisions, and when I face the risk of ditching the entire work. Sometimes when I work over the final drawing I overanalyze it unnecessarily, and when something is not right, I begin to do everything anew, I change the conception, I correct, I remove...

Are you inspired by works of other artists?

Not really. I'm more interested in being on the same page, using the same language, and if we are able to understand each other aesthetically. I would often work with bands whose music was not really my cup of tea, but they knew what they expected of me, so our cooperation went pretty well.

Is it easier for you when the band determines what they expect, or when you are given the so-called free hand to create artworks?

It's usually somewhere in between, and that's what I like the most. I get some keywords, an outline of the concept behind the album (if there is such a concept), lyrics for inspiration, several graphic references and that's basically all.

For the second time you were responsible for the creation of the marvellous poster for Prog in Park festival. How did the cooperation between you and the festival organizers commence? It seems to be a great honour on a global scale.

I'm not the one to judge it, but frankly speaking, I'm incredibly grateful that I could work on this project and that my posters got really positive feedback.

As far as the cooperation is concerned, years ago I created a poster for the gig of The Ocean and Burst. It was organized by Show No Mercy, a collective which comprised people later associated with KnockOut Productions. Since the music world is pretty small, I managed to uphold the relationship, as we regularly met up on live gigs, etc. Once we had a small talk during which an idea of another cooperation blossomed, which begot the said posters.

Does the cooperation with clients tend to be difficult and arduous? When is that?

Generally speaking, my clients do not happen to be troublesome, but once I worked on a project with a client who had a really concrete and extravagant vision of the project. He, unfortunately, didn't understand restrictions resulting from the format and the technique I use. While making the request, he wasn't fully aware of how I work and create my drawings, which resulted in numerous misunderstandings. The whole process was extremely fatiguing. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to talk him down, and what's more, the remaining band members began taking part in the project, which resulted in receiving emails from 3 different people, each one with different and often contradictory remarks. Eventually, in order to maintain peace of mind and sanity, I had to set my teeth and lead the project to an end. Fortunately, such situations occur very rarely.

Referring to your activity in Merkabah in which you play the drums, was it the first instrument that captured your attention? Do you play any other instrument?

Yes, drums were the first instrument I've taken up, it happened by chance if I remember correctly. In primary school, my friend played the guitar, and one day an idea of setting up a band came out of

nowhere. We asked ourselves a question what (except for the guitar and vocals) is the most important instrument that facilitates playing in a band, and it was the drums.

Apart from that I also experiment with electronics. Sometimes I also strum the guitar and sing my throat out, but drums are the only instrument I'm actually able to fully comprehend. The rest is just a loose fun (or in other words: even looser than my playing).

You've also tried your hand at tattoo making. Do you have serious plans for taking up the art of embellishing one's body, or is just some kind of a jumping-off place?

I'd definitely not want tattoo making to surpass my illustrative works. I'd rather want those two activities to be fairly equal to each other. I feel as if I've been frozen in my niche. Since I've been closely connected with the tattoo world for years, it seemed to be a pretty natural step to me. Anyways, this idea has been maturing within me for years, but unfortunately, it's only now that the circumstances are getting accessible enough to let me immerse in that. I hope for a success.

Recently a new collection of t-shirts of your design has been brought to the shops. Was designing for a clothing company challenging for you? How does such a project differ from your everyday work?

It was definitely a challenge. There were so many patterns comparing to the time I was given, so I had to speed up the pace of my work for many weeks in order to meet the deadline. Adding to that, it was a completely unexplored ground. I didn't really know where to venture and how to approach the matter. I came to the collection with a more conservative approach, trying to give heed to the broad target of the large brand that is Medicine, simultaneously reaching for motifs typical of my creative activity. I hope that my patterns succeeded in taking my artistic world to the mainstream without frightening away too many clients.

Some time ago you were invited to exhibit your works at the Filler assembly taking place in Milan. Lots of artists associated with the punk-hardcore-skate scene gathered there. Could you tell me about your impressions related with participating in that event?

It was a great honour to me. Apart from some organizational blunders, I generally have pleasant memories of the event. However, the biggest drawback of the festival turned out to be its location because the entire happening took part in the suburbs of Milan. It affected the turnout and moods of the artists, especially of those who came from afar, were gloomy. However, I managed to sell my works there, so I didn't return with the feeling of the total failure. Additionally, meeting all those great artists was definitely worth the effort.

I'd like to return to Merkabah for a while. Do you sometimes feel that you don't entirely devote yourself to one project? Don't you ever feel the lack of power? Are you not afraid of burning out?

On the contrary. I regret that I don't have enough power to lead MORE projects (laughter). Not that I have a lot of them (I'm not a Ziółek, Rumiński or Nihil), but I have some (not only music-oriented) ideas in my head that most often get lost somewhere in the unconscious or end up as loose thoughts flung somewhere in a conversation and are never to be used. It's even more frustrating. Maybe it's an early middle age crisis, but I'm definitely more painfully bothered about the fact that I can't try everything I'd like to more than about the fact that I can't be the best in some field. I'm attracted to

the new musical collaborations, science, novelties, challenging myself, etc. I don't want my words to be perceived as if they were uttered by a coach. I also don't want them to sound as a corny Paulo Coelho saying, so I'll go with this: I definitely see a higher risk of burning out while lingering in one point and closing in one's own domain. First and foremost, new projects are the perspective of personal development and it's pretty exciting to me.

The artwork for the Million Miles album is quite minimalistic comparing to your previous projects. Is it the music that determined the direction?

While preparing projects for Merkabah I generally try to look for different solutions, unlike when I realize other band's requests. Our aesthetics is much broader and less specified, so I tried to do something atypical, more enigmatic and unsaid, something that has a better correlation with our music. It's a fine jumping-off place from the more figurative, condensed works I have to deal with on a daily basis.

Are you able to say or point out what do you want to express with the music you're playing with Merkabah?

No. (laughter). Our music is the resultant of 4 different sensitivities, so I think that every guy from the band fills the cauldron with his own set of emotions, which gives it some kind of dynamics and variety. The meaning itself varies from album to album. The recent one, "Million Miles", is definitely journey music. It's more impressionistic and illustrative stuff. It can be described as kind of a telling, but we don't want to get too pretentious with its meaning. Every work of ours is a concept album of its own, but usually, the story behind the music is some kind of a narrative that isn't a key factor for understanding the given album. We regard it more as an intertextual play with meanings, motifs, and references that may be discovered or not.

So what we can hear on Million Miles is a compact recording of your pursuits? Do I get you right?

It's more the result of a looseness that we felt after Moloch. It's music that's obtained naturally and we didn't want to restrain it by any means. We just wanted to get more room for breath. We tried to use different means of expression than we've done so far. Thus, there's more thinking about the tone, composition, space, etc. It's decidedly a more spacious work than our last one.

What is the crowd reaction during live gigs? Is Polish audience open to experiencing your music?

I sometimes worry that it's music for no one, but on the other hand, we hit some kind of the niche of listeners, and our concerts are generally well-received. In any case, no matter how often we happen to perform for a less typical audience, there are always people who are moved or intrigued by our music. It's really valuable because it means that somewhere in our musical cauldron of shit we're able to convey more universal emotions that may be caught even by the most random listener. That's more valuable to me than any genre elitism or technical masturbation. If my music is capable of stirring a person who is completely unacquainted with it, that's the greatest honour I can imagine.

Do you have any plans for the subsequent album? Will you continue with the style taken up for Million Miles, or will you try some loose experimentation?

We'll definitely experiment. Not much of the new stuff has already been created, but I can tell you that our new album will be a surprise.

Could you reveal what will come next from you?

Some t-shirts, several artworks, and probably a poster.

Last words belong to you. What would you like to add?

Reality is an illusion!

Thank you for the conversation.