

# Bełkssiński: The Art of Painting

**BOSZ**



# Bekksinski

## The Art of Painting

I met Zofia and Zdzisław Beksiński at Grażyna and Wojciech Noszczyk's. I had the pleasure of meeting many interesting people at that time, but this encounter was special to me, because I had wanted so much to get to know the artist, whose works I admired.

I saw Beksiński's works for the very first time at the Noszczyk's, and for the second time – when together with Jerzy Duda-Gracz, we paid a visit to Alicja and Bożena Wahl's Art Gallery. Jerzy decided to buy one of the pieces then – he was a huge fan of Beksiński and was fascinated by his art. The new painting was hung next to a banner by Władysław Hasiór in Wilma and Jerzy Duda-Gracz's apartment in Katowice. As I found out later, they actually admired each other. Once, while talking about painters, Beksiński said that Duda-Gracz was an artist capable of painting practically anything he set his mind to.

I remember that night so vividly also due to the fact that Beksiński surprised me with how little he spoke. By then, he had already made an agreement with an art dealer from Paris, who – as Beksiński described – with dozens of pages of a complicated contract, gained an exclusive right to sell Beksiński's works. It also stipulated that the artist was required to submit to the art dealer a specific minimum of works every single year. That was what Zdzisław and I talked about that time. To my doubts as to whether such a prominent artist should give up his artistic freedom and bind himself with a contract like that, he replied that it was more convenient for him because he did not like taking care of selling his paintings, and thanks to the agreement, his works were bound to be purchased and he had financial stability. It was the end of the period of the Polish People's Republic and indeed, one thousand dollars per painting was decent money.

But times changed and with them the value of dollar and the prices of paintings. Art galleries were opened, the first auctions were held, and suddenly, it turned out that such a deal was a limitation rather than a promise of a comfortable life and artistic activity. At the time when I was already visiting the Beksińskis personally, Zdzisław was still paying the price for the contract. In order to perform his obligations, he had to paint a predetermined number of works for the art dealer. Hence the change to a smaller format and a series of sandstone-like heads – artistically flawless, because Beksiński hated half-measures.

Sometimes, he would speak about it but I never heard from him a single word of complaint regarding the art dealer. He also never accused him of ill intentions, although there were

people around him who suggested as much. “Well, it just happened,” he replied calmly and that was the end of the discussion. Some time later, he confessed to me that he and his representative from Paris talked over a lot of things and there came – as he said himself – a period of “peaceful indifference”. But he was not happy with the book that the art dealer published about him, and Zofia, Zdzisław’s wife, was even more concerned about it.

All of my visits to the Beksińskis’ were pretty much similar. I always took my car and arrived at block six in Sonaty Street in Warsaw at a specific time. I usually parked opposite the window of Beksiński’s studio. I did not look up, but out of the corner of my eye, I could see Zdzisław in the window with a camera taking a series of photographs of me from afar. He would use them later to create some fantastical digital image that would not resemble the original photographs in the slightest.

I walked up to the main door, pressed three-one-four on the intercom and took the lift to the third floor. At the door, I was greeted by Zofia with a smile and by Zdzisław, who rarely showed any emotions. I entered a rather narrow corridor. To the right, there was a kitchen, then a small computer room, then a studio with easels by the window, where Beksiński worked on his pieces. The windowsill had paint stains all over it. “Imagine, the painter who was doing my walls also wanted to paint the windowsill white. I barely managed to stop him, because he insisted it would look nice,” Zdzisław complained once.

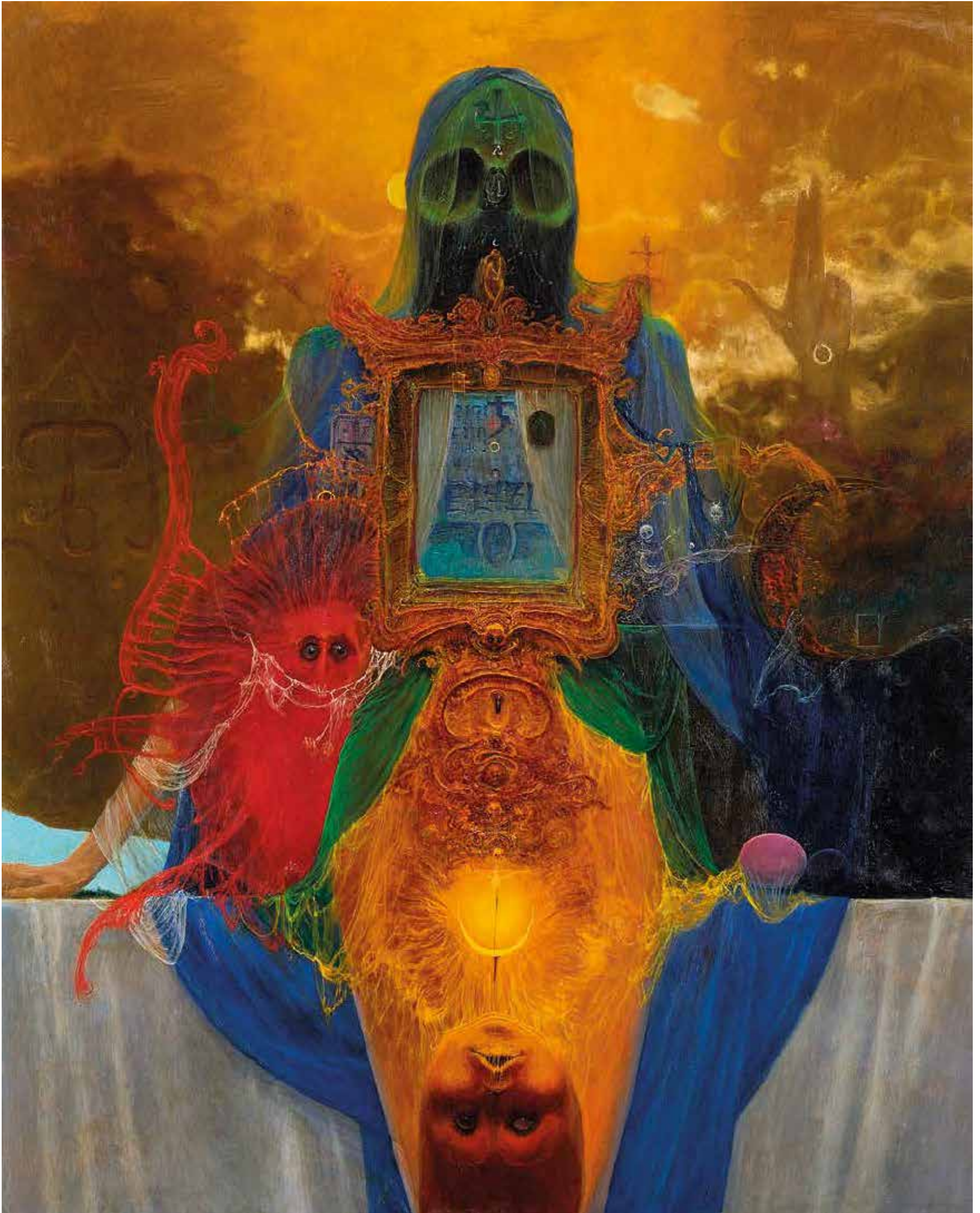
I was always quite tempted to go and take a look at what he was working on at the time. During one of my visits, I peeked into his studio and saw on an easel a female figure as if walking directly towards me. I immediately noticed the pearl-grey hues and as usual, a great drawing hidden deep underneath the painted matter. The following week, I paid another visit to the Beksińskis and after we said our hellos, I sneaked into the studio again. I saw the same format, but with some fantastical, majestic edifice instead. “Have you finished the woman?” I asked him. “No,” he replied. “She is underneath the building now. My brother-in-law said she was ‘very nice’, so I painted all over her and turned it all into a cathedral.”

Because the word “nice” did not speak to Beksiński at all in terms of the quality of work and the value of a painting.

Our meetings took place in a small room left of the corridor. Right next to it, there was the bedroom and the storage room with the works that were already finished. When Zofia was still around, we had famous Blikle doughnuts and talked



Sanok, 1976



BA74, 1974, 122 x 98 cm



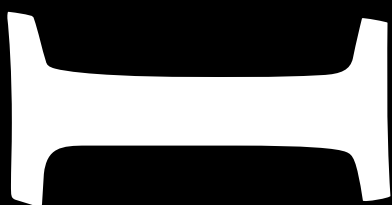
BL75, 1975, 73 x 87 cm

Zdzisław Beksiński was born on 24 February 1929 in Sanok. After the failure of the November Uprising, his great-grandfather, Mateusz Beksiński, a soldier, whose hometown was Koprzywnica (then in the Russian partition), escaped Russian persecutions and moved to the Austrian partition, where he settled down in Sanok. Together with his cousin – an insurgent like himself – Walenty Lipiński, they established a coppersmith workshop and were very successful; soon, the small company became a large factory. Before World War I, it manufactured trams and carriages, and after World War II, it was transformed into the state-owned Sanok Bus and Coach Factory “Autosan”.

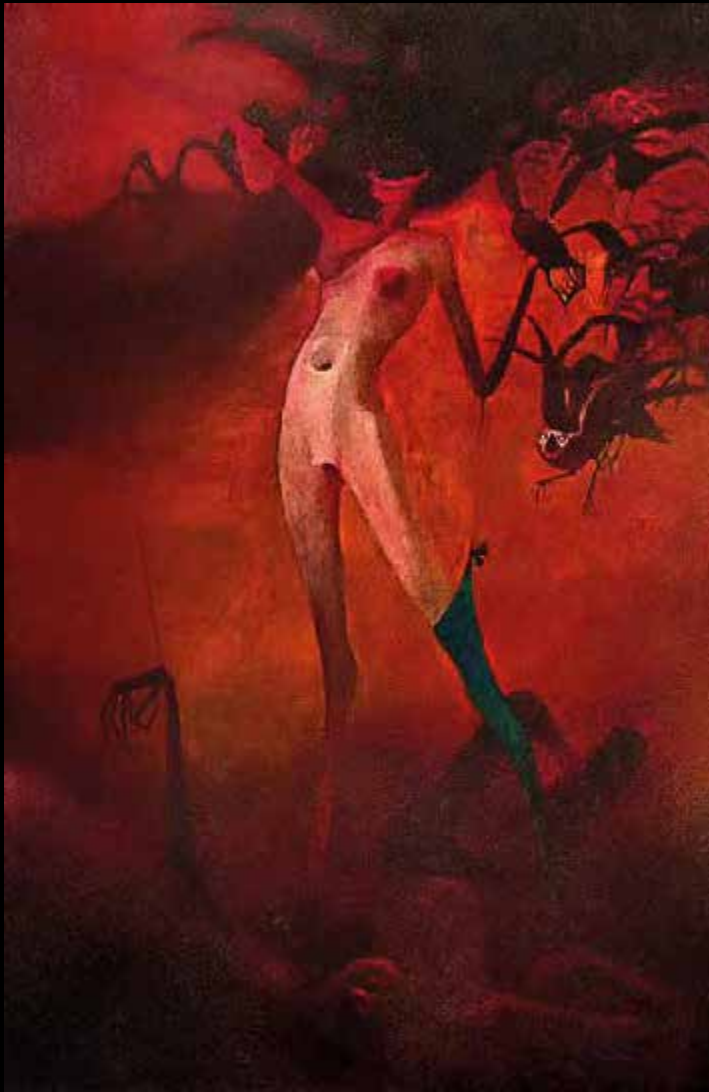
The Beksińskis were one of the wealthiest families in Sanok. The artist's grandfather, Władysław, had an Engineer's degree and designed several buildings in the city. His father, Stanisław Beksiński, also an engineer, held various high positions in the city. Zdzisław manifested his artistic talent already as a child, and as he claimed – he inherited it from his father. His mother nurtured his gift and meticulously stored all his drawings. After graduating from the Sanok high school in 1947, on the request of his father, Zdzisław began an architecture course at the Kraków University of Technology, although he himself preferred film making at a film school. While in college, he bought a camera and developed an interest in artistic photography. In 1959, he abandoned this technique for good, despite taking quite successful excellent individual, staged, very personal pictures. Since childhood, he had enjoyed drawing and for years this was his chief, or should we say: natural means of expression. In the 1950s and 60s, he practised abstract art in the form of paintings, reliefs, and partly figurative sculptures. The critics saw this and considered him an outstanding, original artist. However, at some point, he turned his back on avant-garde endeavours, believing that it was not new forms that mattered in art but what he personally wanted to express.

Zdzisław Beksiński was thus a man of many talents. Apart from being involved in art and photography, for a short period, he also wrote short stories. For years, he dreamed of making his own films, wrote scripts, wanted to make music concrète, and for this purpose, he built a studio at his home in Sanok. As an employee at the “Autosan” factory, he designed several bus bodyworks. He used to say that he could do something else rather than paint, but only in front of an easel did he feel free.

Since his youth, he had been collaborating with the Historical Museum in Sanok, which purchased his best works







BA66, 1966, 123 × 79,5 cm



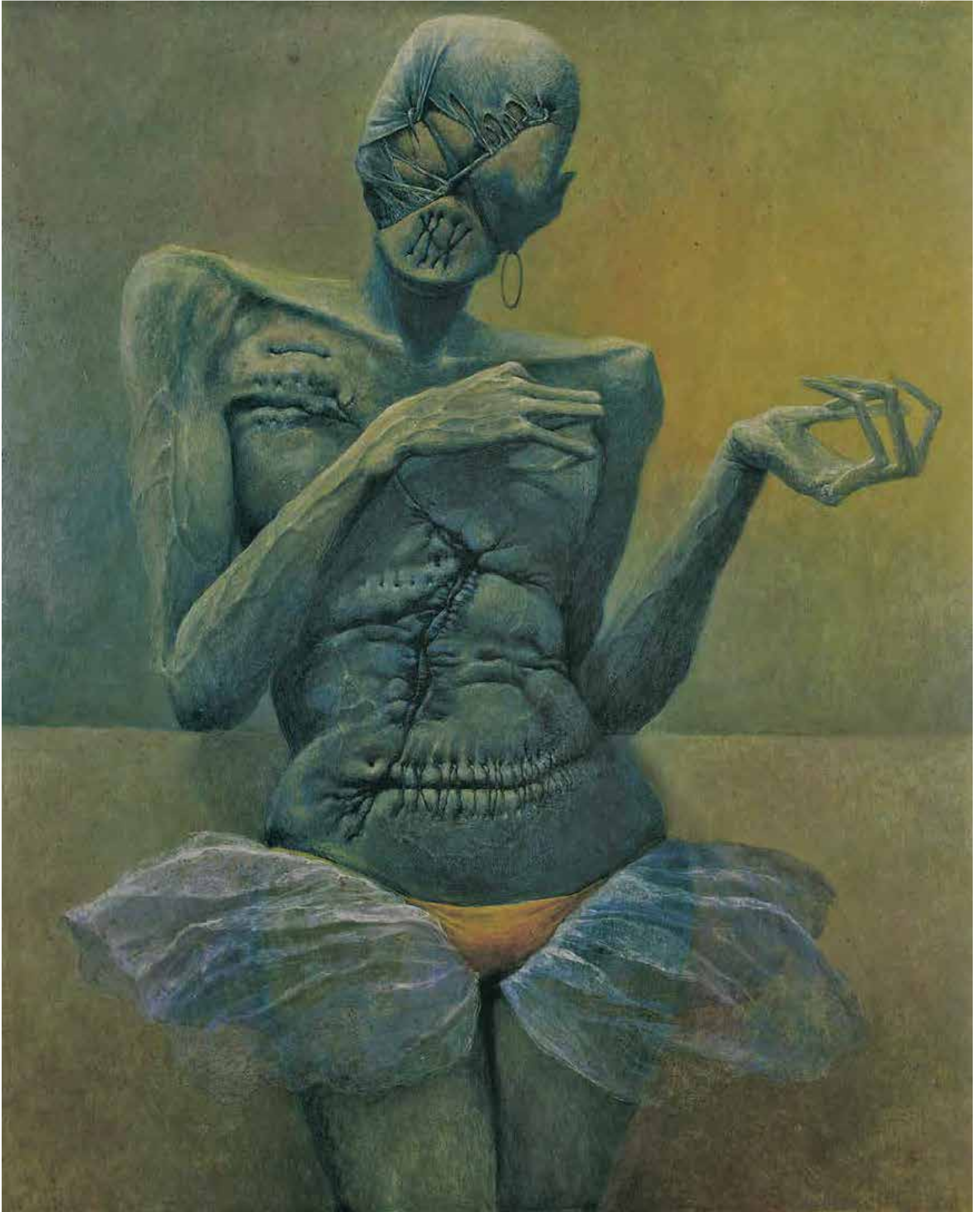
BE69, 1969, 123 × 99 cm

at a discount for years. The resulting collection became one of the most representative displays of his art. In 1984, he got in touch with Piotr Dmochowski, who became his art dealer for an entire decade, with almost exclusive rights to buy his pieces. Once the contract was terminated, the artist became closer to the Sanok museum yet again and regularly expanded its collection of his works. The museum, in turn, presented Beksiński's art at exhibitions in various cities across Poland. Already during his lifetime, a permanent exhibition of his works was established in the castle, and a south wing was designed in order to house the Gallery of Zdzisław Beksiński. Operating since 2012, the gallery has already received hundreds of thousands of visitors, and the approximately one hundred temporary exhibitions of Beksiński (including several abroad) organised by the gallery have been viewed by almost the exact same number of people.

The artist was friends with the author of this text – first an employee, then the head of the Historical Museum in Sanok – which influenced Beksiński's decision to donate all of his legacy to the museum collection after his death. Apart from the presentation of the artist's oeuvre, the museum has also contributed to the making of documentaries and feature films about him, and has published books about his art. In order to raise awareness of his paintings and achieve the best quality of print, in 1998 – while Beksiński was still alive – the museum entered into collaboration with the BOSZ Publishing House from Olszanica, which resulted in a series of superb albums. Today, Zdzisław Beksiński is famous almost all over the world, and his paintings are even more interesting to regular viewers, as well as artists in various fields looking for inspiration in his works.

This book focuses on the key period – regardless of how much we value his photography or abstract art achievements – in Beksiński's artistic career, and to be more precise – on oil and acrylic paintings, which were the apple of the artist's eye between 1965–2005. The book does not mention his drawings or digital graphics, which he turned to in the last decade of his life. It includes the artist's activity until his death on 21 February 2005, when he completed his final work in the afternoon.

In a letter from 27 May 1969 to Aleksander Szydło, Beksiński writes about large-scale drawings, which were very time consuming and took him five to six days of work. He also mentions that since last spring, he has been trying to paint, and he has even exhibited one of his paintings, but he



AB69, 1969, 125 x 101 cm



BA70, 1970, 92 x 74.5 cm



AA70, 1970, 98 x 122 cm (detail)



A.A. 1970, 98 x 122 cm



A.F.75, 1975, 87 x 73 cm

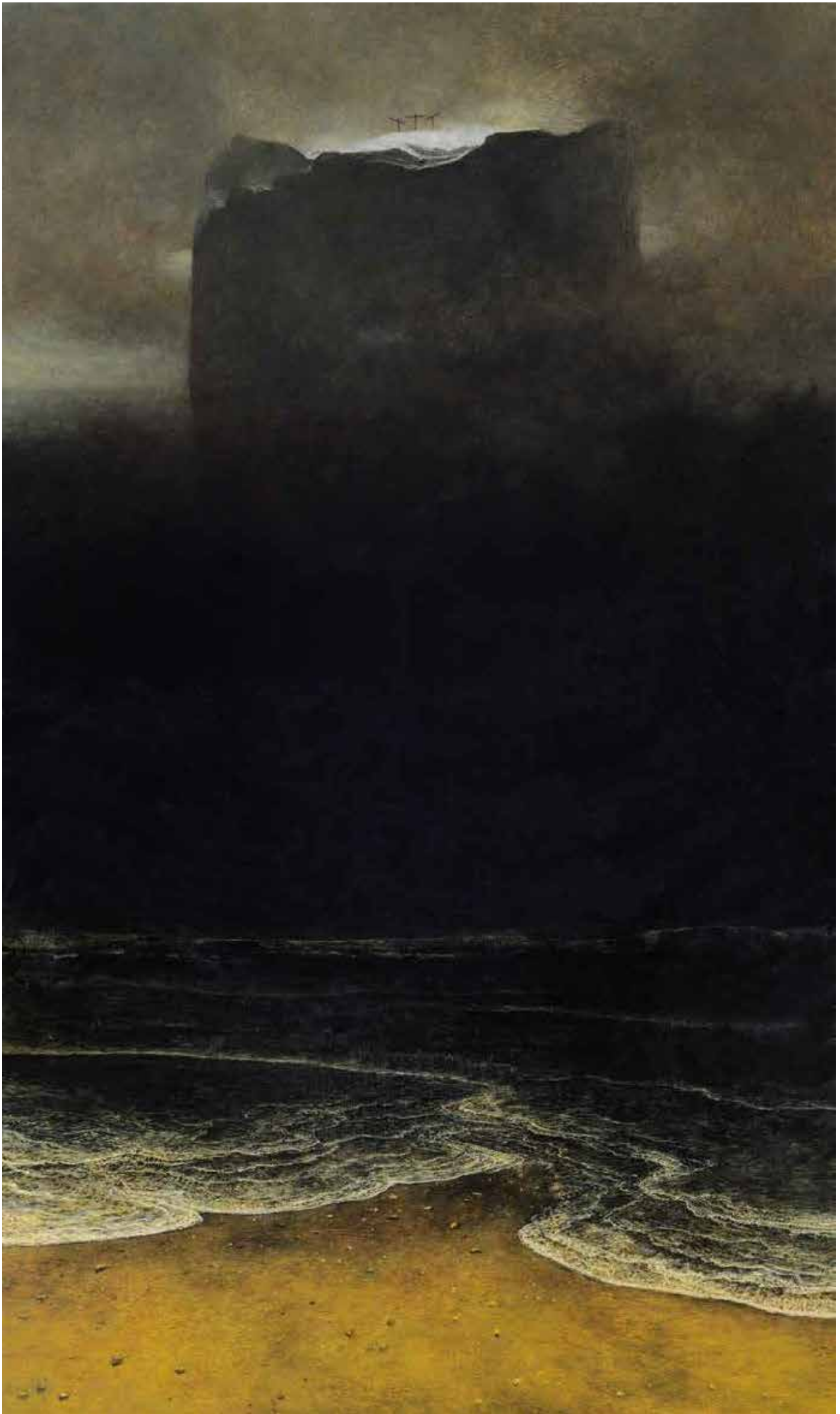


BG74, 1974, 73 x 87 cm



BL77, 1977, 122 x 73 cm





AB77, 1977, 122 x 73 cm



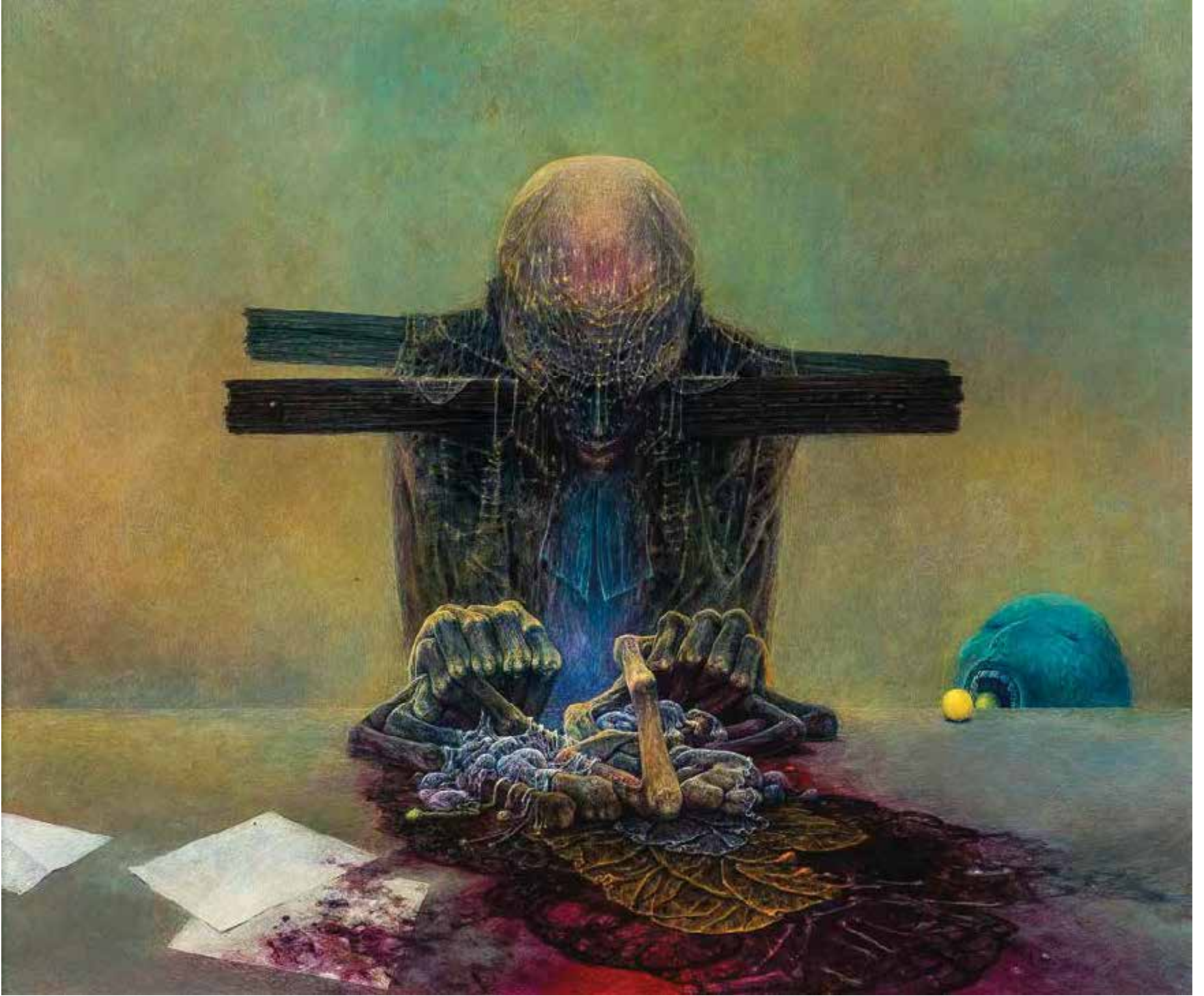
AE78, 1978, 87 x 73 cm



AA78, 1978, 87 x 87 cm



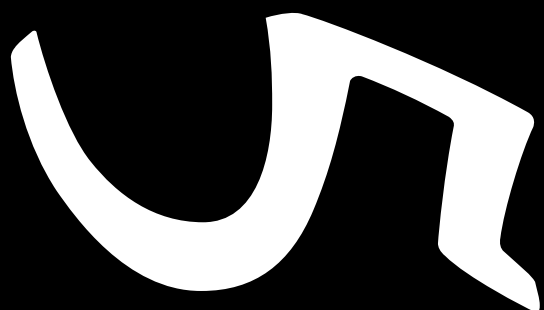
XXX, 1982, 86 x 71 cm



BF82, 1982, 73 x 87 cm

As we already know, Beksiński always firmly refused to comment on his paintings and inspirations that would indicate the hidden meanings (the meaning is, after all – as he said – meaningless). In the case of one work, he included quite a lengthy and detailed description of this matter in a letter to Piotr Dmochowski, which is worth looking at. He formally did not call the painting *Katyn*, but the name is widely used, also by himself. The piece is dated at 1984, although – according to the artist – it was created in late autumn the year before:

“In 1982, as I heard on Radio Free Europe a broadcast on Katyn, I borrowed from a friend a book published in London many years earlier. I guess the title was *Katyn Massacre in Light of Documents* – in fact, I knew the case pretty well since the occupation, and now it was just to reverify some of my ideas about it. As I was reading some excerpts (it was early 1982, martial law, an atmosphere conducive to reading), the image of what I wanted to paint started to emerge, although initially, as I began with the book, I had no artistic intentions involving the text. The first version of my painting is a 73 × 87 cm landscape format and was sold by the Wahl gallery (I guess) already in 1982 or in early 1983. It was quite a poor piece, the figures wearing helmets and greatcoats, floated in the air like clouds, in general, the idea that inspired the painting weathered in the process, I didn’t know what I was painting, all I knew was that it was not worth much – Sińczak even wanted to buy it, but Krauze discouraged him claiming the work was ‘declarative’, and he saw in it a response to martial law, something like a ‘spectre of an army above the homeland’ or so, in general, nobody had the slightest idea what inspired it. I felt the format had to be enlarged, but at that time I didn’t have such a format, nor did I have the means or materials to frame it, etc. Only two years later, with all the materials, I revisited the original vision from the beginning of 1982. The first plan was to present people standing and partly emerging from a quasi-trench on some kind of a swampy pond filled with dark-red-and-purple liquid, and some remains visible in it too. Obviously, the low-ceiling curse came into play and I was unable to paint the bottom comfortably (...). The pond turned into a broken roof, with heads and a helmet visible underneath; the roof was painted over and redone so many times that I don’t even remember what it looks like now: there is some pit and trench or something unidentified. The things above it were easier and faster to paint. Quite quickly, instead of individual figures, I made a kind of ‘concretion’, without specifying which arm or leg belonged to whom – I thought it was better that way; problems began



to pile up as I exhausted the subject – as usual, I started to feel restrained by my own plan and it seemed to me that by abandoning the initial idea, I would produce a better painting. Anyway, this is my normal mode of action, which I am a bit ashamed of, so I would never accept a commission, even from myself, because a painting, as it expands, starts to dictate the rights of what it is supposed to be, and clutching at the primary concept is pointless. As I work, I am merely the servant to the painting, which grows according to its own rules, rather than to the idea that gave rise to the painting. So, there was the problem of the crowd standing in a kind of expectation of something that was not there; I felt it was necessary to add something, but I didn't know what it could be that would tie a group of people or a crowd of people dressed in helmets and greatcoats. I thought of something that would float in the air in the foreground, e.g. a flying helmet – I would have to paint it in a way that was unlike all the rest, so that it would be more tangible, sharp, polished... I gave up the idea and decided to put a Zeppelin in the background, in the yellow sky, but because the background was blurry, hazy, the people on the horizon barely marked as an amorphous mob, I had a problem, because I couldn't paint the thing afar (the Zeppelin) sharper than the things in front of it. So I made it emerge faintly from the right, but it looked as if it were a Pershing. So I added an inscription 'Zeppelin' in the foreground under the people's feet. It looked bad. I painted over the word. I moved the Zeppelin to the front, so that its controls were in sight, but it only made the whole vision worse (the point was to make it look as if it were pulling out rather than hanging in the sky in all its glory), but it seemed to me that it was getting better. On two helmets, I added spikes modelled on the German army in World War I. At that point, a painter that I knew and his wife came to borrow money (...). The colleague came from a different era than his wife. So when I said the painting was called the Zeppelin, she first thought about the band Led Zeppelin, and he – the Prussian military. They were exchanging exegetic nonsense for almost the entire time they spent at my place (...). After they left, I said 'fuck' and painted over the airship, because to me it seemed 'poetic', but it was perceived quite opaquely, whereas I want the people to understand something that I am unable to call in a sensible way. That was it. I have never worked on that painting again. Now you know everything."<sup>25</sup>

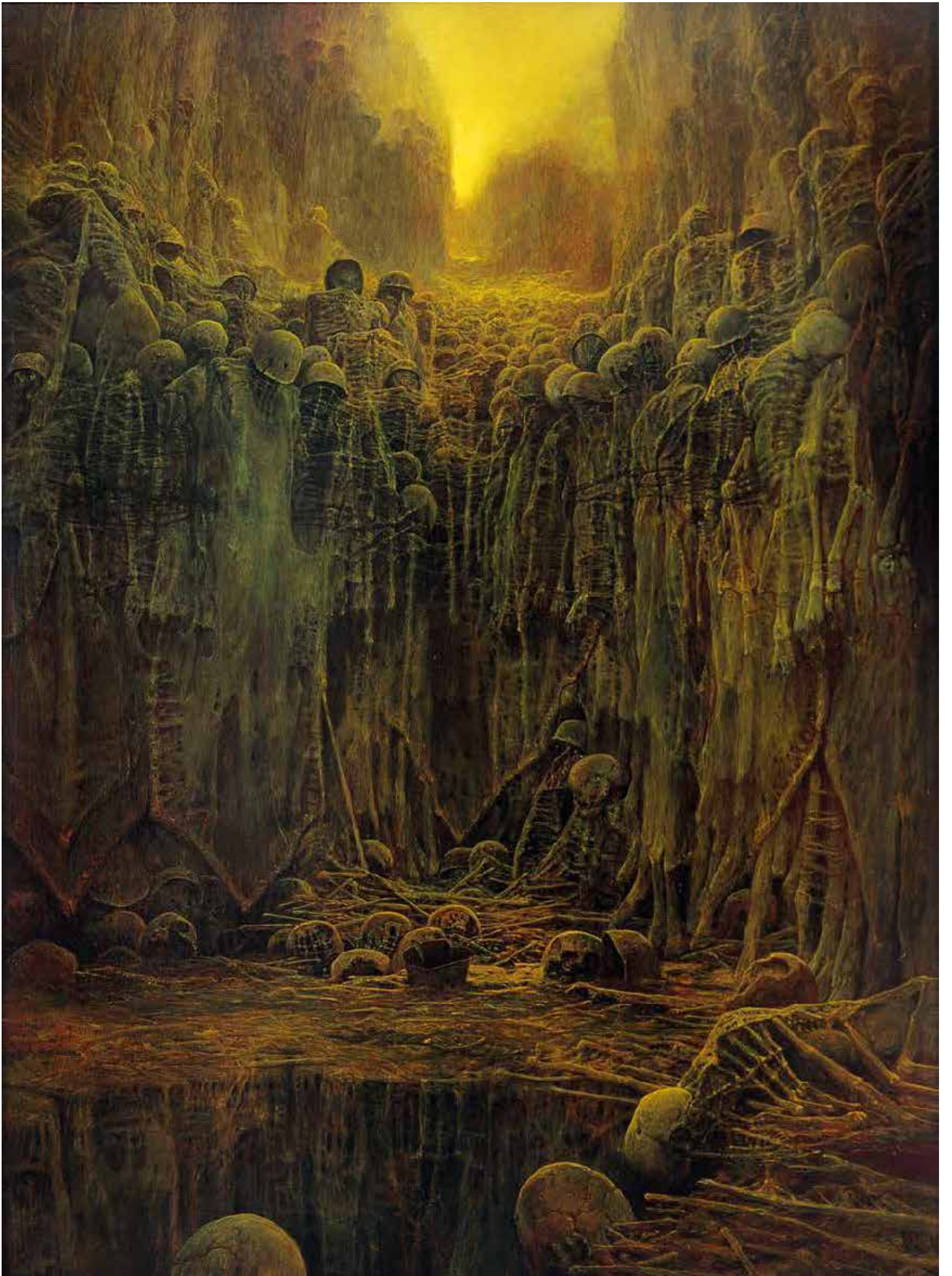
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<sup>25</sup> Letter to Piotr Dmochowski of 04.09.1984. Piotr Dmochowski, *Korespondencja pomiędzy Zdzisławem Beksińskim a Piotrem Dmochowskim*, vol. 1: *Lata 1983–1995...*, op. cit., 149–151.



BS82, 1982, 61.5 x 73 cm

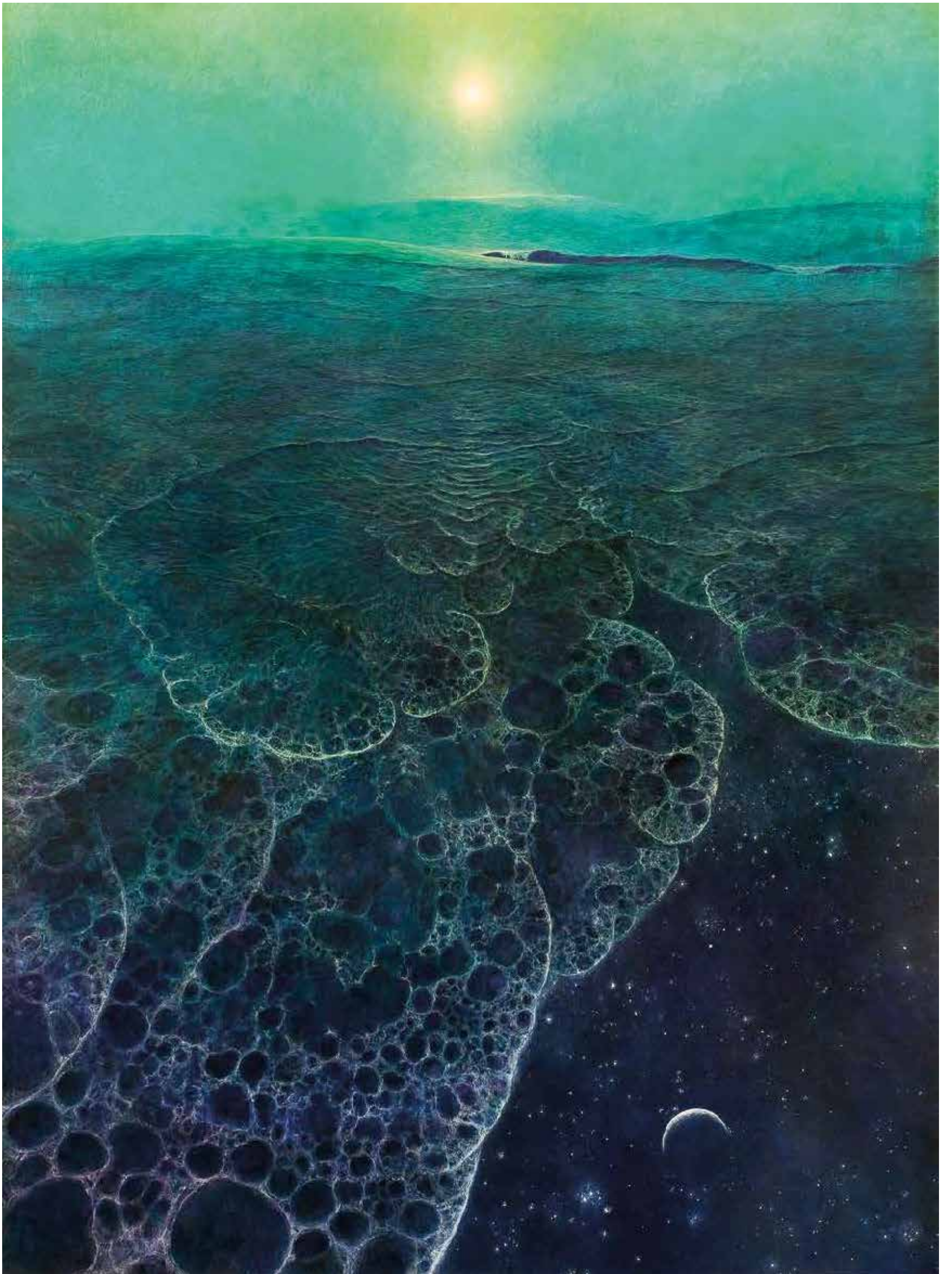




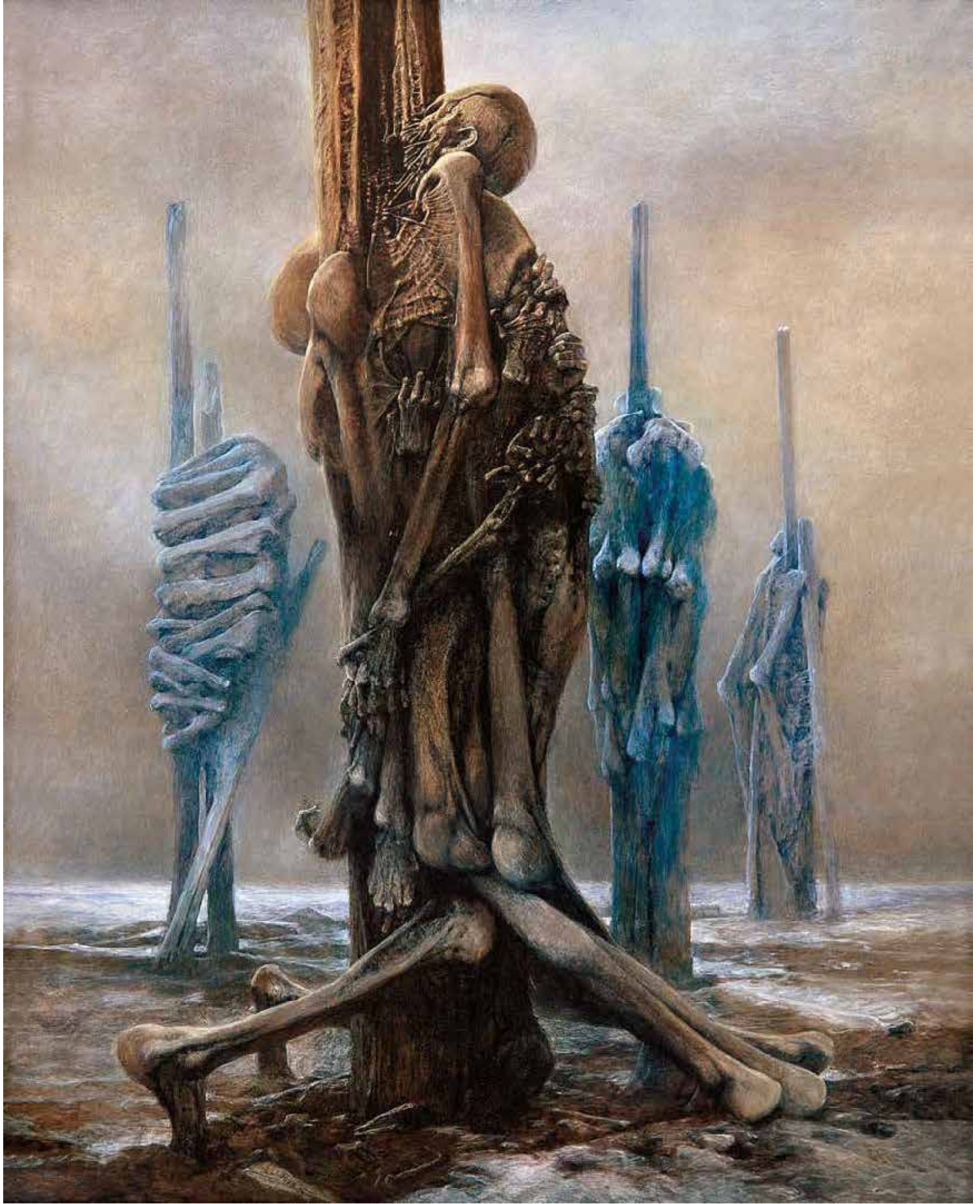
BD84 (Katyń), 1984, 122 x 98 cm



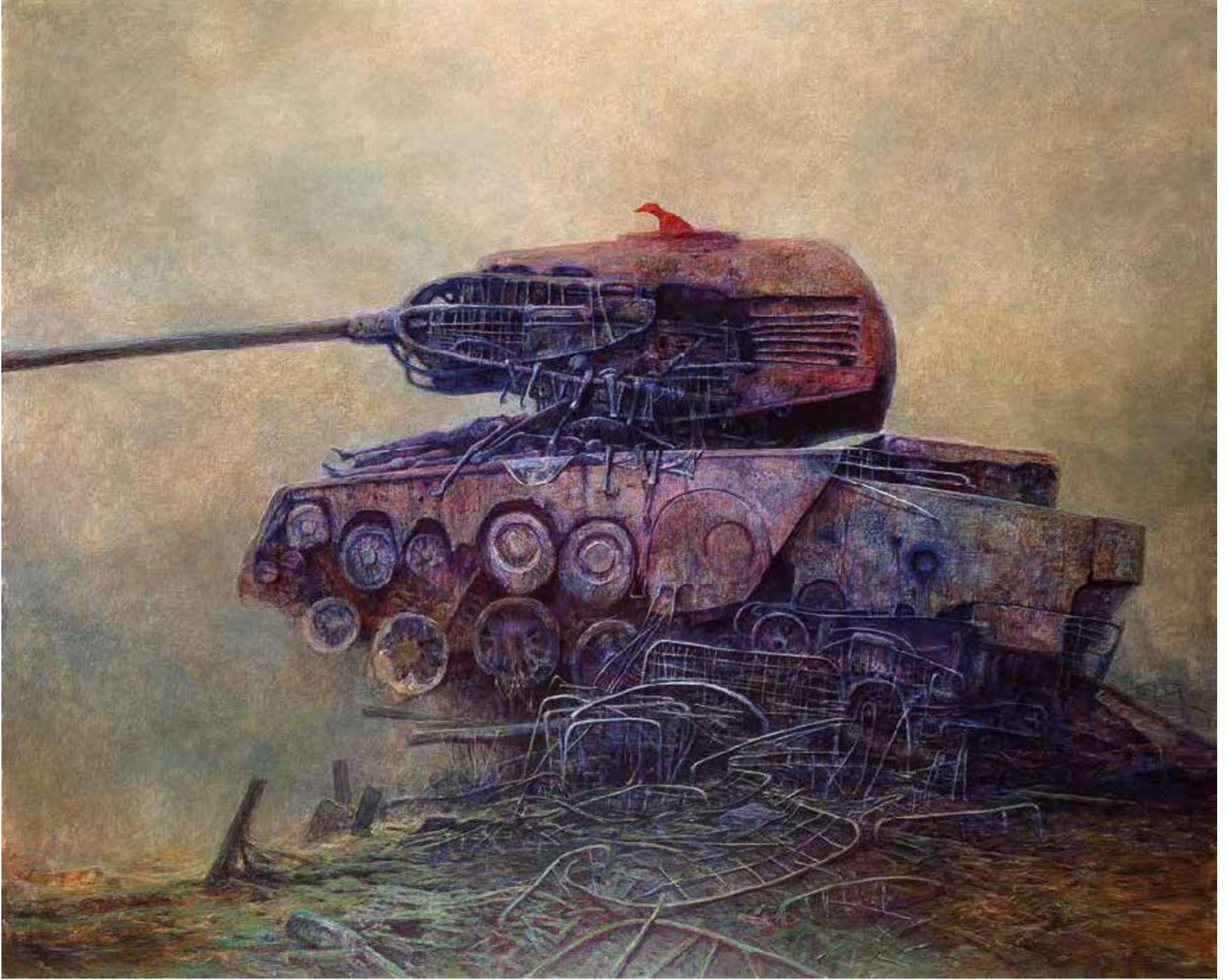
OZ, 1984, 87 x 87 cm



W/N, 1984, 123 x 98 cm



KT, 1986, 120 x 98 cm



EA, 1986, 98 x 120 cm

“I have finished the painting 45=A6, with a figure on a horse painted according to the new method, so that the drawing-like grid encapsulates the whole surface. I think it is quite a good painting and I may come back to it to improve something, but for now I underpainted an acrylic one, which I previously busted my gut to do and abandoned. I begin to hope that I may yet do something meaningful, because if I kept painting like this for a while, I could make my drawings look the same. It is finally almost a drawing.”<sup>32</sup>

This is what Beksiński wrote on 14 December 1995. Fed up with the way he had been painting so far, the artist saw light at the end of the tunnel – he developed a new technique. The discovery coincided with his terrible family situation. A week before, his wife was diagnosed with an inoperable aortic aneurysm and was given no more than three years of life. Beksiński was devastated by the news. He was about to face a time of extreme tension until her death on 22 September 1998. But he also painted a number of great paintings at that time, which – unusually – he would be happy with.

The newly found technique was after all connected to drawing, which had been one of his interests since childhood. He used to say that even when he needed to explain something, he took a piece of paper and a pencil, because that was the easiest way for him to communicate. There is also his enthusiastic letter from 1965, in which he expressed his admiration for drawing: “Drawing is a technique of improvisation. You do not return to anything, plan anything, the mood changes as you go, the work grows, oh, drawing is the best of all!”<sup>33</sup>

He did not expect he would achieve similar possibilities with paint and brush. Surely it was not as unconstrained as he had seen it thirty years before, but still, in his last years, by means of this technique, he developed new ways of artistic expression. Interestingly enough, the use of thin intertwining lines enabled him to achieve a very delicate colour range. He often combined such tangle of lines with empty spaces (YA, B6, Z9 from 1996). We would have a hard time trying to tell what they present. In the maze of lines, anatomical features and sometimes even entire figures get lost. Mostly, human bodies or heads are the focus, sometimes an animal, and only on rare occasions (BŻ from 1997 or O6 from 1998) architecture, seldom – wood (WŁ from 1999).

These lost-in-details compositions have one thing in common, which is typical for Beksiński – sadness. Their



<sup>32</sup> Zdzisław Beksiński, *Dziennik* of 14.12.1995. HMS Archives.

<sup>33</sup> Letter to Aleksander Szydło of 04.06.1965. HMS Archives.



Q4, 1996, 73 x 92 cm



BB94, ca. 1994, 92 x 88 cm



W2, 1995, 132 x 98 cm

expression may be subdued, but you cannot miss the tragedy within him. The metaphysical perception of existence encounters the pain of the loneliness that consumed him after his wife's death. Although he said clearly that what was going on in his personal life was not the topic of his art, the sorrowful experiences at some point strengthened his metaphysical fears. Among the topics or motifs in the almost abstract world was a particular form that he might have subconsciously absorbed as a child while watching icons in the Sanok museum. It is a presentation of the Holy Mother and Child, mostly as Hodegetria or Eleusa. At times, while explaining to someone which painting he meant, he said it was a Madonna with Child. His *Diary* entry on the painting Y4 from 1996 is quite surprising: "It presents several figures in various arrangements using a drawing technique, but with a plain bottom part. The title could be 'One-Legged Madonna' or 'Lame Madonna'."<sup>34</sup> Obviously, those paintings have no religious context, it is just about their layout and form.

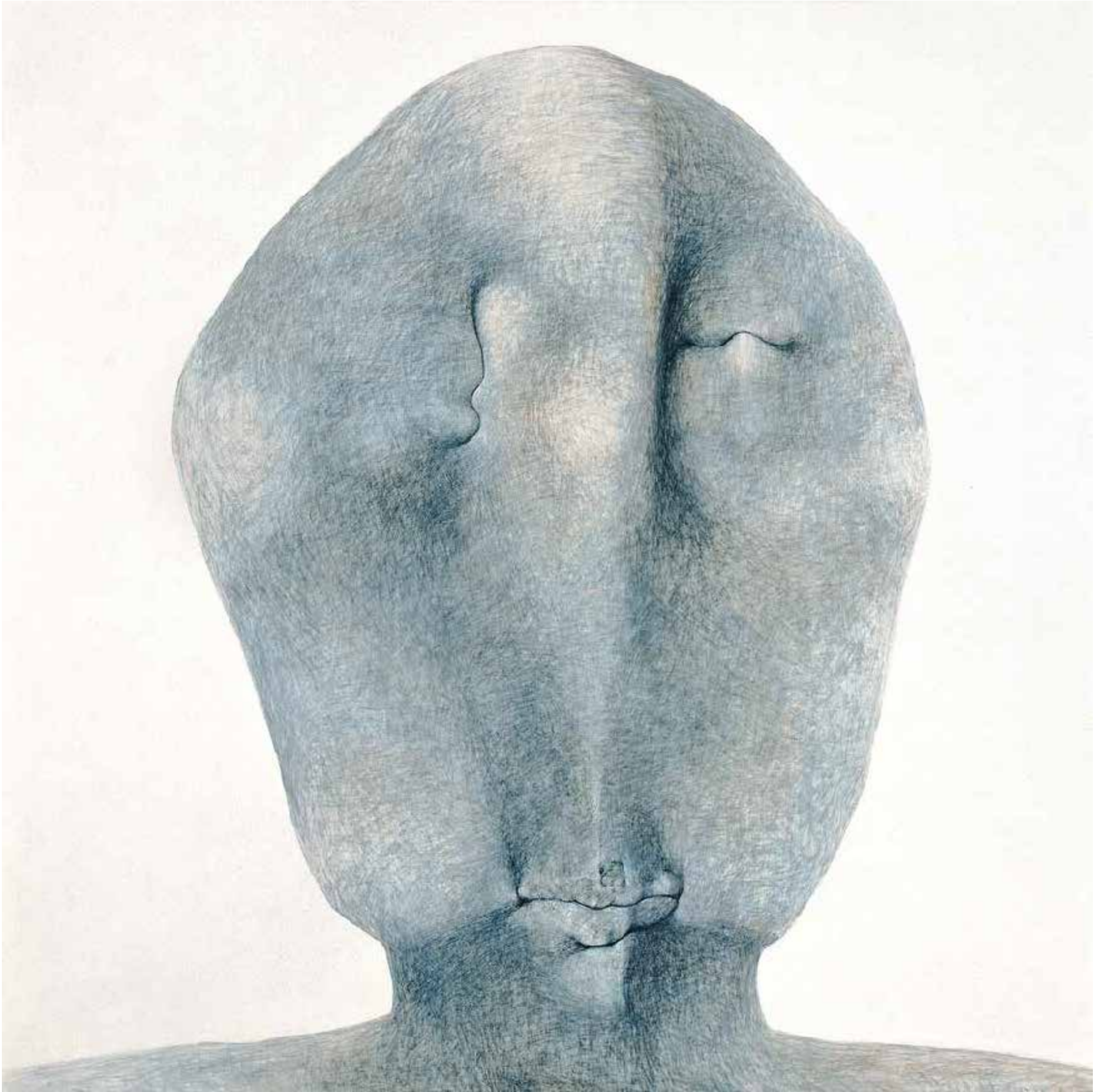
The drawing technique allowed the artist to become even more focused on his search for form, which he had already been working on for at least a decade. "For decades – as he writes in an e-mail to Dmochowski – I have been struggling to build a form, which has probably gone unnoticed by anyone but me."<sup>35</sup> I believe Beksiński has a point, because to most viewers and critics, the crucial and overpowering aspect is the visionariness of the presentation, and perhaps the artistry in the context of his realistic technique.

"The form" – what did that highly technical term mean to Beksiński? I asked him many times – in response, he pleaded lack of skill to coin definitions, and diverted my attention towards the structure of a clearly expressive musical, symphonic work. He was most specific about it in another e-mail to Piotr Dmochowski:

"By form, I mean mainly the shape of what I am building and the way this shape differs from the actually perceived shape, as well as the degree to which it becomes my quasi-graphological 'handwriting', or the character of lines and curves, and some specific stereotypes, or if you prefer – tricks (I can even see them in Mahler). In my paintings, I attempt to be a pseudo-sculptor in a pseudo-space (because in fact it is not an attempt to depict actual space – the light and perspective, which is quite obvious). In all of this, there is

34 Zdzisław Beksiński, *Dziennik* of 11.03.1996. HMS Archives.

35 Letter to Piotr Dmochowski of 16.09.2004. Piotr Dmochowski, *Korespondencja pomiędzy Zdzisławem Beksińskim a Piotrem Dmochowskim*, vol. 3: *Lata 2004–2005...*, op. cit., 258–259.



*PX*, 1994, 98 x 98 cm





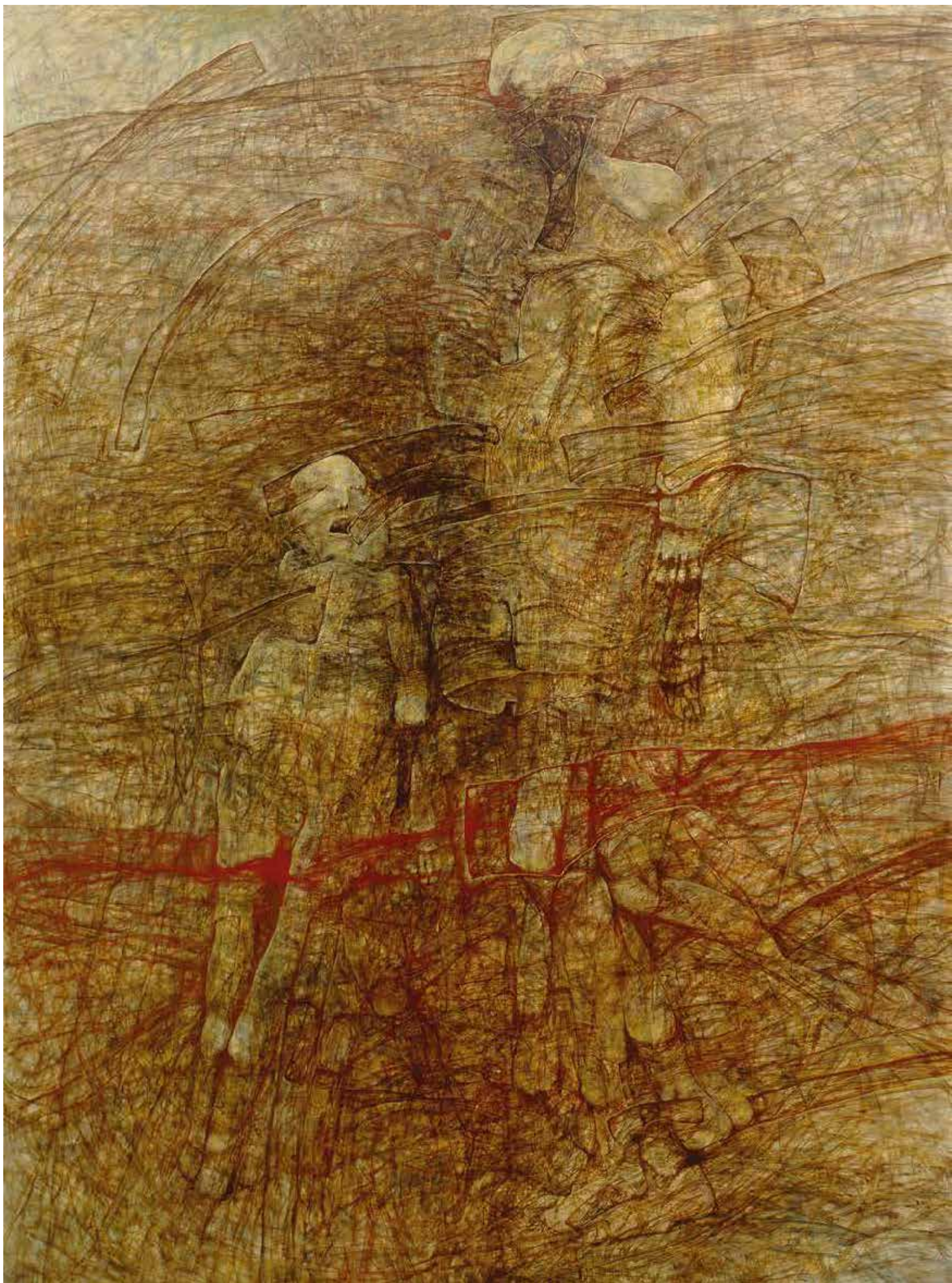
IV, 1994, 98 x 98 cm



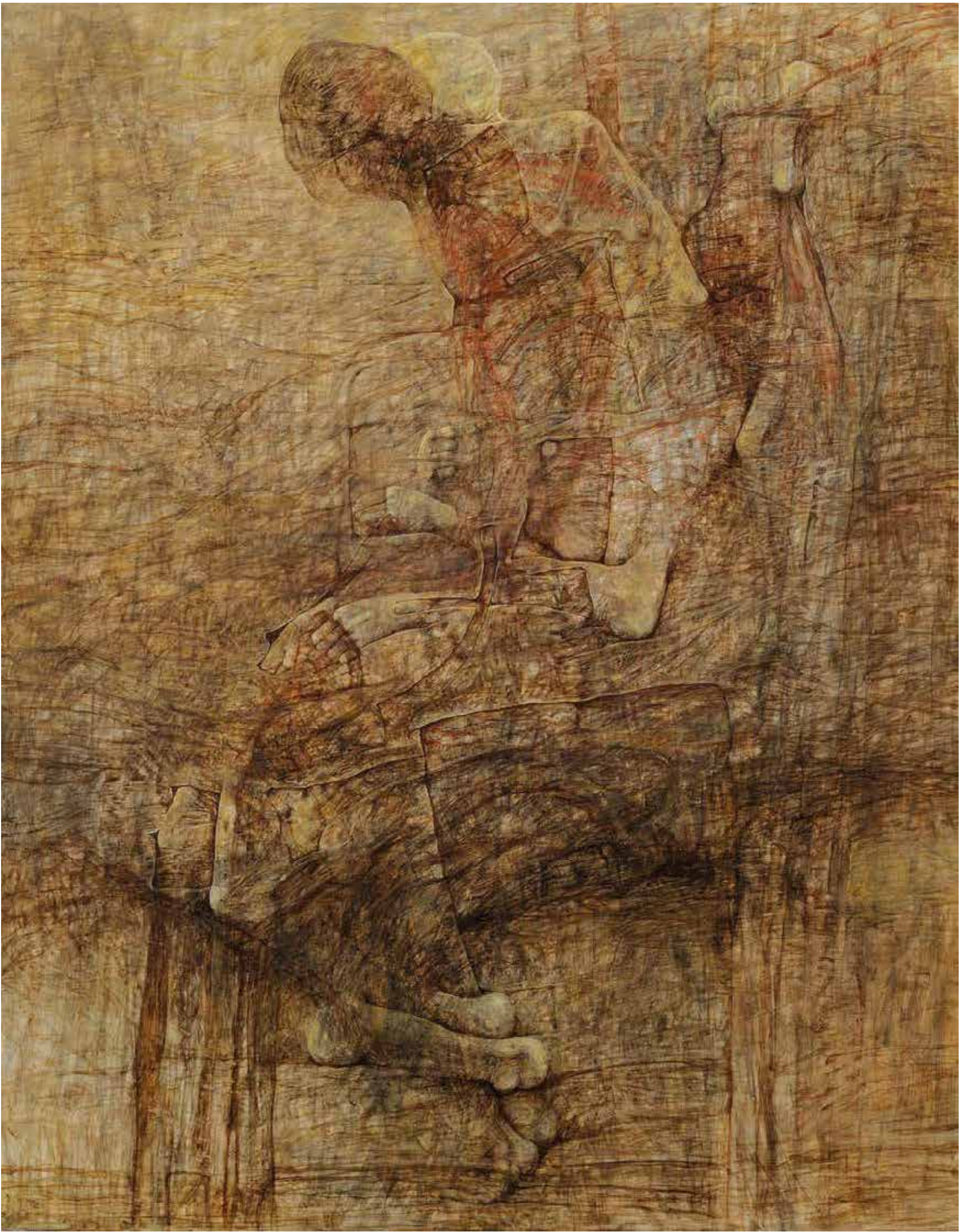
XXX, ca. 1995, 132 x 98 cm



XXX, ca. 1995, 132 x 98 cm



Z4, 1996, 132 x 98 cm



T1, 1996, 92 x 73 cm



A.S., 1997, 98 x 132 cm (detail)



AŞ, 1997, 98 x 132 cm



X2, 2000, 132 x 98 cm





*ZL, 2001, 98 x 98 cm*



V9, 2002, 98 x 98 cm



RŽ, 2002, 132 x 98 cm

