

Condensing Pleasures

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT CZECH PHOTOGRAPHER
JAN SAUDEK? EVERYTHING AND NOTHING IT SEEMS.
A LOVEABLE ROGUE. A VICTIM OF CIRCUMSTANCE.
A BORN SURVIVOR. SAUDEK WANTS US TO THINK
THAT HE'S ALL OF THESE THINGS AND MORE - IT'S
ALL PART OF HIS CULTIVATION OF THE MYSTIQUE
THAT HAS BEEN A FEATURE OF HIS TURBULENT
CAREER OVER SEVERAL DECADES.

MAYBE HE IS ALL OF THESE THINGS, OR MAYBE HE'S
NONE.

THE ART AND LIFE OF JAN SAUDEK

IMAGES | JAN SAUDEK WORDS | IAN MCKAY

JAN SAUDEK

At times it can seem that there are a multitude of Saudeks all vying for their position, and at others he's invisible; Jan is simply not there. How many Saudeks are there? I ask him. And he's quick to reply: 'Too many! Though he's happy that the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs now considers him an important ambassador for the country, 'the problem with me is I'm bad actor', he points out, and there's a sense that his position will always remain somewhat ambiguous - the eternal outsider. He prefers the term 'underground' however, for it is more appropriate to someone who has never been officially recognised by the art establishment in his own country, and clearly it rankles. But is he an intellectual? 'No! Jan Saudek is a primitive!'

WOW IN HIS seventies he claims he has no need of publicity, and no need to court favour too; though he's clearly one of the Czech Republic's best exports, he remains - to borrow a well known phrase - a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma. Trying to understand the meaning of Jan Saudek requires that you research him like an archaeologist on a dig, picking away at the layers of evidence with a trowel; attempting to separate the myth from the rumour, the truth from the fiction; the apparently bald lies from the conditional half-truths - all of which are delicately layered and, of course, all part of the game. The life of Jan Saudek reads like a work of Franz Kafka, but what does it all mean? Is Jan Saudek Misunderstood? 'Good question,' he responds, 'I'm misunderstood, absolutely! People think they know me but they just consider me as "that dude who shoots fat women". I make pictures of everything, but the market dictates how I'm seen - it requires special types of ladies... It's bad luck, I guess, but it's better to be recognised as a weirdo than not to be recognised at all'.

For the outsider Saudek is not easy to pin down in terms of his whereabouts either - he perpetually comes across as the man that wasn't there - like Orson Wells in *The Third Man*, glimpsed in the shadows more than in flesh - and eventually you come to wonder whether he exists at all. It sounds odd, I know, but it's not far from the truth. As he once told his biographer, Daniela Mrázková, he's been accused of being an agent for the FBI and the CIA, and of residing in numerous cities around Europe when all along he was in Prague. Most alarmingly for him, even his death has been announced, only for him to pop up in Prague a few days later. When the Ministry of Culture in the old communist Czechoslovakia was once approached by the Swiss to allow Saudek to attend a panel in Fribourg, in true



Jakub, Dated 1888

©Jan Saudek. Courtesy Sotheby's Amsterdam

Kafkaesque fashion, they were told simply and politely that *he didn't exist*. More mystique? More Saudek spin? Maybe. Who knows? In the end you always return to the same point; the only thing you have to go on are the photographs, because everything else is a mere rumour, but the photographs are true because they actually exist... *Don't they?*

Well yes, and no. Even in his photographs Saudek is dissembling and playing with truths. Take his titles for a start. In so many of his prints he handwrites the titles and the dates around their margin like an archivist, backdating them often to the mid-to-late-1800s in an apparently playful deceit. A print from the negative for *On the Road* (made in 1964) can appear dated as 1879, or 1886, dependent upon... well... who knows? In other images, his trademark hand colouring and tableauxesque antique scenarios are cunningly arranged to present us with the non-time of history-made-present. These images are obviously not daguerreotypes nor *carte-de-visite*, though there's a sense that they would have liked to have been - in

another life. The deceit creates distance and asks us to willingly suspend our disbelief while the photographer gets on with his chosen business of, well, photographing what in any other form is very often the scandalous. In some images the full theatre of absurd cruelty is played out with a Sadistic passion that would not be out of place in a film by Pasolini, but Saudek gets away with it because it is rendered as antique and thus removed from 'reality' just that little bit further.

So, what *do* we know about his life, if it is all such a deceit? Well, what we can be fairly sure of is that most of Saudek's family on his father's side died in Theresienstadt concentration camp while Jan and his twin brother, Karel, did their best to survive in a work camp on the Polish border. What remained of his family after the war returned to Prague, where Saudek himself began working for a printer. The real impetus to take up photography, however, came after his military service when, in 1963, he saw the exhibition catalogue to Edward Steichen's seminal photography exhibition *Family of Man*, shown at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955. It was an epiphany like moment for Saudek, who felt driven to create a single body of work committed to the expression of the universality of human emotions - something he has been pursuing ever since in one way or another. In the late 60s, he traveled to the USA where he was further encouraged to continue photography by the curator Hugh Edwards, but it was not until he returned to Prague that circumstances conspired to force him to work in a cellar, between those richly textured walls that recur so frequently in his later work.

Here opinion begins to differ on what it was that led Saudek to work in the cellar in the first place. The *official* story is that his clandestine studio practice was largely essential to avoid the attention of the secret police, hell-bent on exposing him as a pornographer, a homosexual, of having sex with minors even - and of course, an enemy of the state! The other version is less colourful though equally unfortunate; that on return from the USA he came back to a broken marriage and children that didn't recognise him, a life in ruins and hard toil in a factory ahead. Whatever truth gets privileged over the other, it is generally accepted that both versions are more or less correct. In fact he sums it up thus: 'For a very long time in Czechoslovakia, we lived in sort of prison behind that huge wall that was the Iron Curtain - we weren't allowed to be free. But there's also another wall inside many of us, and in me especially. The prison of my

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The Choreograph, Dated 1901 ©Jan Saudek. Courtesy Taschen

anxieties, my fears, and taboos'. It's a striking feature of so many tales about Saudek from this time, how they concern the advanced state of paranoia that his experiences had brought him to, helped on by what he consistently frames as the envy of other artists and photographers and the wrath of public opinion. These were ugly times, clearly, though they gave rise to those keynote themes of *innocence, betrayal and personal freedom* that are today so celebrated in his work.

It was around this time (the mid 1970s) that the German-born photographer, Gisèle Freund, gave him a Rolleiflex ('the one she used to photograph Eva Perón', he boasts) and he still uses it to this day, but this is no mere sentimentalism. For many Czech photographers of a certain age, great value is placed upon equipment and materials following the austere years of communism, simply because it was once so scarce. I relate a story to him about my contact with the Czech photographer Pavel Stecha, who during the lead up to the Velvet Revolution would send me prints in exchange for a roll

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of 120 or some photographic paper. Smiling, Saudek trades memories: 'In the early-70s I exchanged my prints with a lot of foreigners for photographic material. Especially with Phil Condax from Eastman Co. Those were the days!' The cameras on which those prints were shot are still highly valued by Saudek too, and still used. 'I work with an old Pentacon Six, but times they are slowly changing. I'm trying with a Canon EOS5D

these days'. In the 1980s he shot a great deal on a professional Polaroid camera he tells me, 'but it's all history now'.

Saudek's first camera had been a Kodak Baby Brownie (given to him in 1949) though he learnt how to use a real medium format camera ten years later when his wife bought him a Czech-made Meopta Flexaret, with its sharp lens and ever-reliable shutter. On the box brownie was composed his first picture (now lost) but it led him to be labeled as utterly kitsch by a visitor to the family home - a criticism that he took to heart and that nearly prompted him to give up photography after just one picture! *Kitsch* is a label that still rankles, but when I make the same accusation today he is philosophical: '*Kitsch* is the right word. I can take it'. He is clearly aware that this is the cross he has always had to bear from his babe in arms portrait, *Life*, that was so easily parodied by poster-shop snappers in the early-eighties (it's still his most popular image) to the gauche water-colouring of his own prints from the 1970s and 80s, in which he himself so often appears.

JAN SAUDEK



The Choreograph, Dated 1901 ©Jan Saudek. Courtesy Taschen

And there you have it: *in which he himself so often appears* - the key to unlocking the meaning of Saudek is to look upon his work as primarily autobiographical. Saudek's photography is autobiographical in a way that few photographers are today autobiographical, creating a sense of aura around himself and most notably his sexuality, his passion and his desire. But that's not to ignore the fact that his photographs are also, in many ways, a direct result of life's horrors too. Make no mistake about that. During the war - and immediately after it too - Saudek saw violence and atrocity first hand. In the concentration camp as a child he saw atrocity and, he claims, later too when Czech's strung up 'the innocent' and murdered them in acts of revenge. 'In 1943', he says, 'I saw my dearly-loved father beaten on the street by Czech guys for the Star of David that he was made to wear, and I'll never forget it. Of course I was beaten many times, too - but it's

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horrible to see how your father is slapped and kicked, innocent and weak, vulnerable and unable to fight back'. It is partly for this reason that Saudek has not been as politically active as some artists in a country renowned for the activism of its cultural elite. 'When the communist regime fell', he reminds me,

'the people on Prague's Wenceslaw Square came out in force, but some decades ago those same folks swore their fidelity to Stalin, and in 1942 they raised their arms in the Nazi salute'.

During the course of our conversation, I increasingly feel that, when you look at the photographs Saudek has produced over the years, there's invariably a sense that he is running headlong and fiercely towards physical affection and sexual gratification, and that it's as though he is trying to blot out the memories of those depths to which human beings can sometimes descend. He certainly wouldn't be the first artist to connect sex and death in their work, and he's certainly not the only person to attempt to assuage trauma with physical affection - Picasso did both we are told. When I suggest this might be the case, he thinks for a moment and then, as if to confess: 'I think

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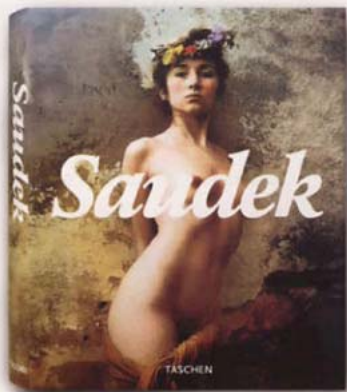


Hey Joe Place, 30 years later 1989 ©Jan Saudek. Courtesy Sotheby's Amsterdam

that it's physical love that attracts me... but you're right... sexual intercourse can remind you strongly of death'. He is alarmingly frank, but with the interview nearing its close, I press him further, aware that he has explicitly addressed violence in his work on many occasions. Is there anything that he

just wouldn't shoot? I ask him, figuring that I might get to probe the darkness of his psyche, but his reply is now measured and honest; 'Anything that shows the loss of human dignity', he says. 'I could not shoot that'. It's a reply that should perhaps stand as his epitaph one day, preventing him from being as misunderstood in death as he has been in life - and, of course, he is now reaching that age when interviewers have already begun asking him how he would like to be remembered. Instead I try a different route, aware that he is a keen gardener now. When he must go, would he prefer it to be behind the camera or in his garden? 'If I die', he says, 'on a bench in the garden would be the best place to leave this beautiful world, don't you think so?' ●

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New York New York, Dated 1889
©Jan Saudek. Courtesy Sotheby's Amsterdam



Servant maid gets a letter, Dated 1891
©Jan Saudek. Courtesy Sotheby's Amsterdam



Dawn, Dated 1888
©Jan Saudek. Courtesy Sotheby's Amsterdam

Works by Jan Saudek are showing ever stronger results in the international art market. Sotheby's sale demonstrated there is a growing demand for his unique images.

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- Lot 208, *Servant maid gets a letter*
Estimate: €1.500-2.000 Sold: €2.400
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- Lot 216, *Jakub*
Estimate: €2-3.000 Sold: €3.840
- Lot 205, *Dawn*
Estimate: €1.500-2.000 Sold: €1.080