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Dr. János Szász // First major retrospective

Temporary exhibition

22.07.2022.-27.09.2022.

We are proud to announce the first major retrospective of dr. János Szász (1925-2005), on show at the Kepes Institute in Eger, Hungary.

The exhibited 150 images give, for the first time, an overview of all the artistical periods and styles of the artist, starting in 1958 and finishing in 1980, when his failing eyesight forced Szász to hang up the camera.

Following a Master's in law and not being allowed to practice it due to political reasons meant that Szász had to find a new vocation. Pursuing his passion for graphic design, he became a signwriter and later was accepted to study photography.

He began photographing as an artistic vocation at age 32, founding the Mecsek Photography Club in Pécs in 1957, the most relevant Hungarian photography circle outside of Budapest, sending his images to photography salons around the world, taking part in exhibitions from Sao Paolo to Johannesburg.

In the bitterly cold winter of 1958/59, he took some photographs of people in a blizzard. This early abstraction



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do not feature much in the Estate, and all of his self-portraits show a figure in a distorted mirror, hiding. Furthermore, "...on nearly all of his photographs showing humans, the figure is all alone." – commented art historian Colin Finlay at his London exhibition.

In 1959 Szász becomes the photographer for the Pécs architectural office, documenting the construction of Hungary's first Socialist-style residential area to house the newly opened uranium mine of the city. It is a twist of fate that he was forced to transcend his personal hate of the regime and was thus, for his whole professional career, tasked in finding beauty or eternity in the buildings which marked the advancement of the system he so loathed.

In 1963, however, he received a commission to photograph the quickly disappearing folk architecture of Hungary, resulting in the 1976 tome "In the footsteps of our folk architecture", a seminal work documenting the various folk architectural styles and solutions throughout Hungary "at the last minute", before modern architecture erased them forever. The book won several awards, including the "Beautiful Book" award at the Leipzig Book Fair.

During his trips around his hometown and all around Hungary, he kept his eyes open for a great image, a horse cart from a window, a human going through a landscape, shadows on sand. His solitariness crept into his photography. "In all of his images, the human figure is alone" – commented art historian Colin Finlay on Szász's approach.

"Just as in the images he made on a commission, also in his private, artistic endeavours he set out abstraction as a goal, yet without eliminating the traces of humans, objects or landscape. His images are shattered splinters of reality: at times you see dancing couples who are dissolved in dark and light specks of colour, only to find each other in the next embrace; at times children throw shadows at the basketball court so long that it seems as if it were giants jostling for the ball."



He was stylised by an unwavering focus on composition, great mastery of technique, thus arriving at perfectly lit, composed and pin-sharp negatives. These were, however, only the starting point: it was in the darkroom that his images were born. "Photography is a one-man show" – he would comment, stating his view that a true photographer prints their prints themselves. For him the darkroom was the place of true creation, his 3 sq-meter bathroom that he converted into a darkroom. He spent a lot of his time in this solitary confinement.

The limited resources – like with many of his Central and Eastern European contemporaries – only drove him towards further innovation, towards finding alternative means of solving things. His life motto became – something he repeated everywhere – "Never give up!". He smuggled in chemicals from the West and invented his own special mixture, a volatile compound that he could only work with for a few minutes, after which he had to mix again. He applied this compound with paintbrush, or a sponge – sometimes under running water. Pressing a print would be undertaken between two plyboards he sat on whilst working on the next one. Once dried, he would often accentuate or eliminate white or black tones by applying paint on the surface of the photograph.

The darkroom was just as important as the careful click of the button and no two images of him are the same. This relentless approach had its downside as the long hours in the darkroom spent over prints took a toll: by the age of 55 Szász had cataract and glaucoma, and minus 18 dioptré glasses. He was forced to hang up his beloved camera after only two decades of work.

"the body of work Szász created from the late 1950s through the 1970s, epitomizes the artistic vision and innovation of photographers active in Hungary at that time. Featuring boldly graphic abstractions primarily drawn from Hungarian life and landscape, Szász's images communicate through a universal vernacular. Working in the tradition of Hungarian greats such



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white contrast printing."

(Wall Street International Magazine, 2013. ///
<https://wsimag.com/art/6015-janos-szasz>)

Following his death, and freed by the limitation of being perceived as someone who started off in the amateur scene (his staunch use of his "dr." didn't help much in this regard) , the works of Szász garnered a lot of attention abroad. "Szász took on a strange, inverted journey" said Károly Kincses, of his posthumous fame, first being embraced by the market abroad, which led to his ongoing re-evaluation in Hungary.

He has been exhibited in institutions, private galleries and the world's leading art fairs (Armory Show Paris Photo, AIPAD Photography Show, Classic Photographs LA), and has successfully appeared on several leading auction houses in Germany, the UK and France, becoming the most internationally exposed and most expensive Hungarian photographer of his generation.

The Neo-avantgarde photography of the late Sixties and Seventies of Central and Eastern Europe have been processed, and they have brought the attention of the West to the fact that there was similar innovative work going on behind the Iron Curtain as well.

The generation of Szász, starting their careers in the Fifties somehow fell through the cracks and has not been properly processed by either institution, or by the market. Still, the example of Szász shows how further focus is necessary on artists of Central-Eastern Europe, and his first major retrospective (set to travel to further institutions in the region), is also a call for the further exploration of similar artistic oeuvres in the whole region.

The retrospective is on until 27 September at the Kepes Institute, Eger.

The curator of the show is Károly Kincses.

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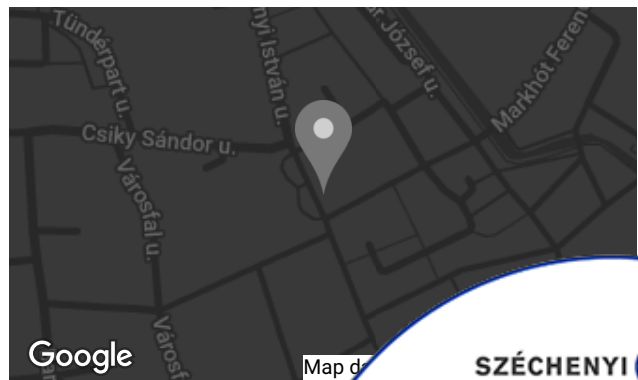
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