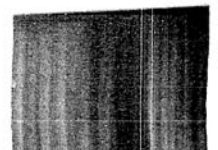
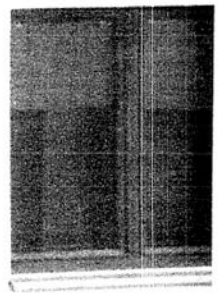
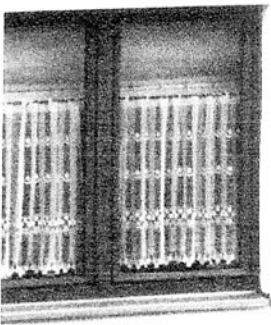
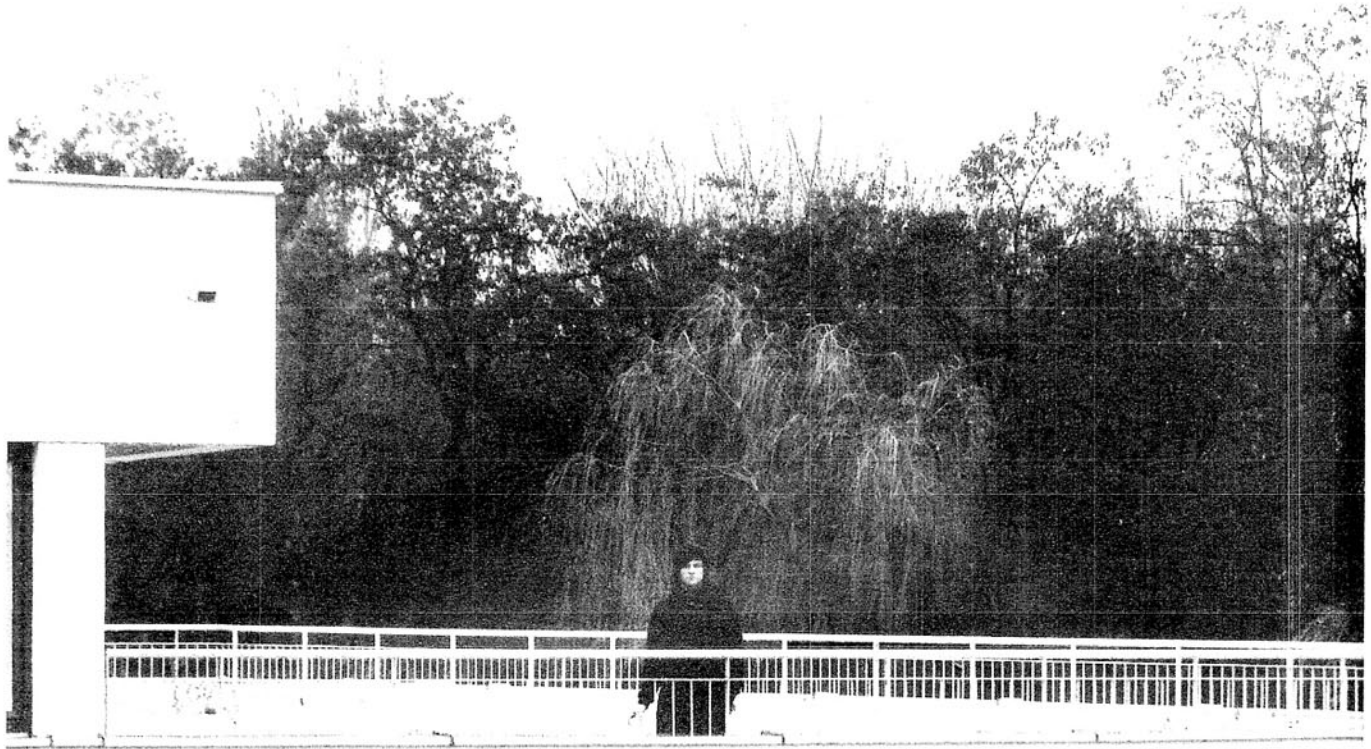


FANTASTIC
MAN



THE POLISH PAINTER

Mr. SASNAL



AND HIS COSMOPOLITAN LIFE ON THE OUT-
SKIRTS OF CRACOW...

Mr. WILHELM SASNAL was interviewed by SUSIE RUSHTON
and photographed by MICHAEL MANN

Wilhelm Sasnal

He's a star of the contemporary art world, he models in fashion ads and his canvases command huge prices at auction. And yet WILHELM SASNAL, the 35-year-old painting sensation, is happiest when he's in his small studio in a drab suburb of Cracow, Poland. Everything he needs is there: his family, his SLAYER albums and, most importantly, GOOGLE image search, the inspiration for many of his fabulous paintings.

I(!) meet WILHELM SASNAL on a Saturday night in the bar of a bland business hotel in Cracow. When he arrives, twenty minutes late, everybody's watching European football on four big screens, a scenario which doesn't fulfil my preconception of Cracow as hotbed of politicised Polish intelligentsia who debate the issues of the day over chops and vodka, so we head out into the frigid night, across the massive medieval Rynek Główny square, to a darker, unsignposted bar where students drink bad red wine out of water glasses. The first thing you notice about SASNAL is a long, dark, thatch of hair that makes him look like a teen metal fan.

Actually, he's a 35-year-old married father of one who happens to love SLAYER and beneath the aforementioned black hair, as many a charmed art journalist has noted, SASNAL is very good-looking. He's not that tall, okay, but he has that brooding air that people expect from painters. His spoken English is halting and heavily inflected, his Polish inflection dragging out vowels to lugubrious effect. That suits the serious tone

of his conversation, which tends towards intense, revealing dialogue rather than sardonic chit-chat or name dropping. Mention the international art party-scene and he scowls. London and Berlin are, in his view, "too competitive". You can't imagine him hanging out at gallery openings in Manhattan with a JULIAN SCHNABEL or a JEFF KOONS. SASNAL prefers Poland, cold and consumed by its unhappy history as it is. His home country inspires him, "Not by direct events—but by emotions and reactions. You are part of it. Poland is special because when you drive through the country you are aware of the history, you see the monuments like AUSCHWITZ and you cannot be indifferent. You have to be aware."

But why stay if you can afford to move? He's successful enough (and rich enough) to move to more comfortable climes. He has made long visits to Texas, Paris and San Francisco—but always returns home. He's usually holed up in his small, bare studio. Here, he is prolific. He paints quickly. He works in a 30-square-metre unfurnished

apartment opposite his home on the fringes of Cracow, but before that, for nine years, he painted in an unheated underground garage in Tarnów, the provincial town where he grew up. After he got really successful—he was the breakout talent at the Art Basel fair in 2002—the collectors landed their private jets at the tiny Cracow airport and went to *him*. "They wanted to know what was behind the works."

If painting is, to use that vulgar term, hot—consider the star-status of contemporaries like PETER DOIG, ELIZABETH PEYTON and MARLENE DUMAS—SASNAL is one of the hottest. Art critics describe him as working in the tradition of northern European postmodernist painters⁽²⁾. They compare him to SIGMAR POLKE, GERHARD RICHTER, LUC TUYMANS.

One of SASNAL's best-known paintings is a black-and-white portrait of the pop star PEACHES. A fag hangs out her mouth in a

dissolute kind of way. Included in the *THE TRIUMPH OF PAINTING*, held at the SAATCHI GALLERY back in 2005, you can tell it's been copied from a photograph—the painter has even left white borders at the edge of the canvas to remind us of that. Last year the two best pictures in *THE PAINTING OF MODERN LIFE* at the HAYWARD GALLERY were SASNAL's petrol stations, one in daylight, one at night, both deserted of cars. Here, as in his other paintings, his lovely economical brushstrokes keep you looking for the rest of the story.

On Sunday morning I visit him at his studio, a bare apartment across the courtyard from the penthouse apartment he shares with his wife ANKA and eight-year-old son. Several medium-sized pictures hang on the wall: one that shows him and his family in the bathroom, another of the inside of his own skull, and his eye socket. Many larger canvases lean against one wall. Their subjects range from a reproduction of a cover of an album by the wistful Texan musician DANIEL JOHNSTON to a greyscale image of his grandparents' tomb. Abandoning the carefully graphic style of work from around 2001-02, the brush strokes of these new paintings have broadened and become rough and insistent.

"Anything and everything can be a painting," SASNAL says of his subjects. "There are so many different possibilities. There are no rules, basically."

But if you have to try and describe his work, the best way seems to be that they are 'images of images', chosen seemingly by free association and always viewed subjectively. Earlier in his career this approach got him called a 'pop' artist, but he thinks that's not true any more. (And we should note here that he is also an accomplished video artist



The astonishing crooner Mr. ROY ORBISON, painted by SASNAL. (courtesy of SADIE COLES HQ)

(3), often making passers-by the unwitting stars in his films. "Sometimes they don't even know I'm filming them. I sit in the car, for instance. Or I ask my wife to stand in front of me and I pretend I'm filming her.") His work is rarely abstract. "All my paintings are based on real, or realistic, motifs."

These motifs are the pop-culture flotsam he finds on GOOGLE image search, grainy photos he takes on his cell phone, political propaganda, reconstructions of film stills and personal recollections—and the style of his painting can range just as widely as his subject matter.

In 2006 SASNAL expanded his oeuvre to include face-painting, this time executed in the name of fashion: alongside drummer MEG WHITE, he modelled in the MARC JACOBS campaign, his face blacked out with the ink he uses for cartoon work (of which more later).

"I didn't really know who MARC JACOBS was," claims SASNAL, whose modelling potential had been identified by campaign photographer JUERGEN TELLER(4). His dirty-looking face in those glossy ads had a curious resonance among fellow Poles. "At that time there was this big discussion in France about how, since our country joined the EU, Polish plumbers were taking jobs from the French," he says, "and so the 'Polish plumber' became a synonym for these labour invaders. And a friend of mine said I looked like a Polish plumber in these pictures. Which is such a brilliant idea." Still, he wasn't so subversive that he didn't keep the expensive coat he wears in the ads. "I like it a lot. I wear it sometimes. It's a bit too elegant for me."

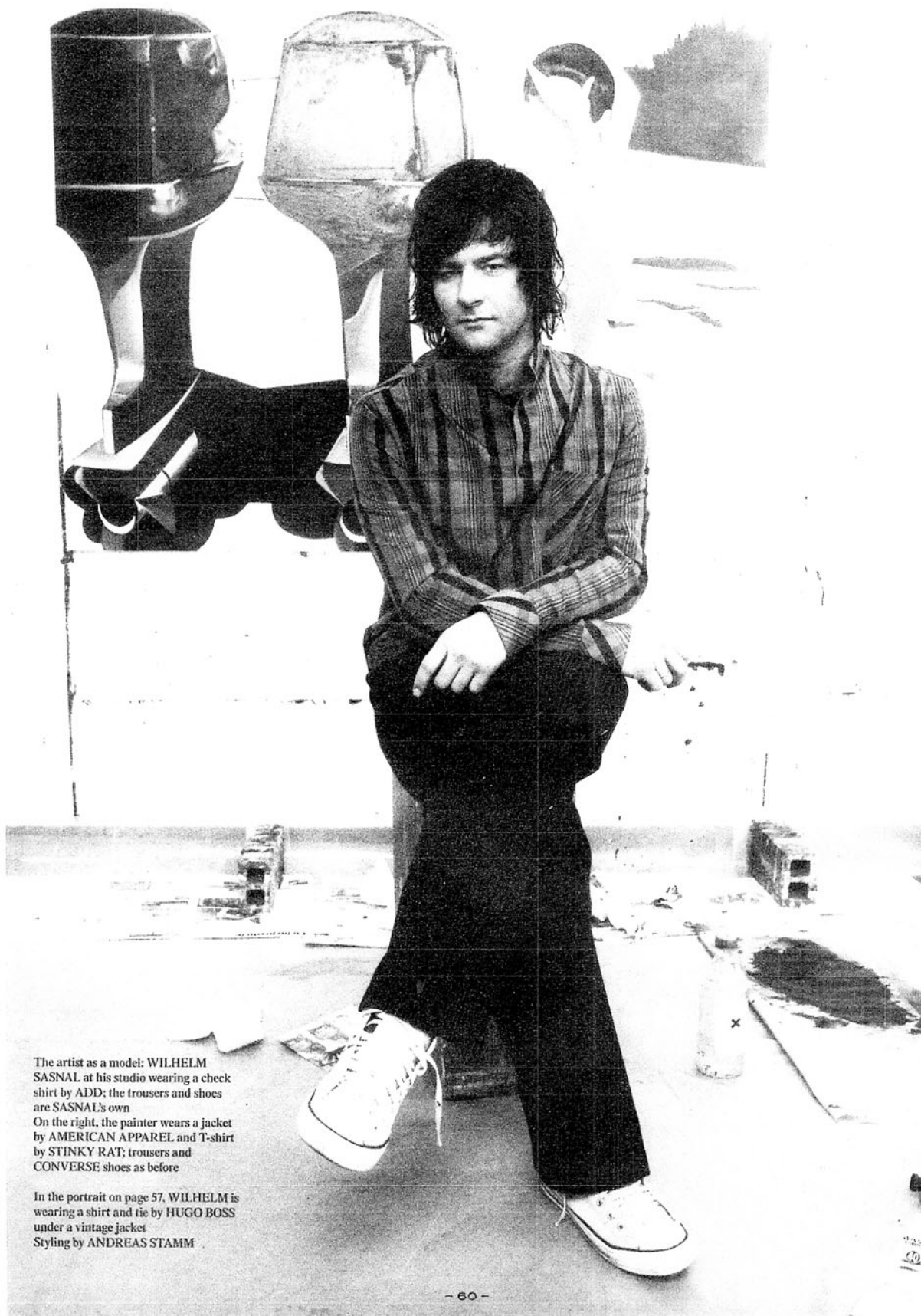
Today he's wearing a DANIEL JOHNSTON T-shirt, jeans, sneakers, no socks. How does he feel about his own appearance? "I'd like to be slimmer," he admits, "but I don't mind ageing. I like to find the silver hairs." His long hair is a recent development, and grown for a simple reason. "I wanted to be cool," he says, with pleasant honesty. "You know, I think the way one looks, it should always be on the edge. So people can't tell whether you're an artist or a music fan." It is a delicious Polish word that SASNAL uses to describe his philosophy of grooming: 'Zapuszczony'. "It means one who is clean, but doesn't have time to shave or have a haircut. Is there an English translation of this word?" Low maintenance? SASNAL screws up his eyes in thought. "It means natural. But not in a totally positive way. A bit negative. I'm not that neat."

So SASNAL likes having cool hair but he is quite uncomfortable with the knowledge that his paintings are so very fashionable—and expensive.

In May 2007, one of his works, called

"Our reality is flooded with images, but people still paint. That's perverse."

MR. SASNAL



The artist as a model: WILHELM SASNAL at his studio wearing a check shirt by ADD; the trousers and shoes are SASNAL's own

On the right, the painter wears a jacket by AMERICAN APPAREL and T-shirt by STINKY RAT; trousers and CONVERSE shoes as before

In the portrait on page 57, WILHELM is wearing a shirt and tie by HUGO BOSS under a vintage jacket
Styling by ANDREAS STAMM



MR. SASNAL

“The paintings are relatively expensive, yes.”



The artist appeared with a blackened face in the MARC JACOBS ad campaign for spring/summer 2006, photographed by JUERGEN TELLER

AIRPLANES, was sold at a CHRISTIE'S auction. The canvas, three metres wide and one-and-a-half metres high, showed a bright blue sky filled with shadowy bombers, puffs of smoke hanging over their tails. The winning bid was \$396,000.

“The paintings are relatively expensive, yes,” he says. “And I think I have a problem with the fact that people trade with paintings.” You mean the secondary market? “Yeah. The hedge-funders.”

In the 90s the long-predicted death of painting appeared to be at hand. Long regarded as the ‘royal’ medium, it was looking less sexy than installation or performance art. But in the 21st century, contemporary painting—as an item easily handled and displayed—started generating hype again, both in the media and in the art market.

We are sitting cross-legged on the bare concrete floor. The view out of the window is of treetops, his home opposite. “I like the view,” he says. “You could be anywhere.” There are big pots packed with brushes on the floor, and boxes of oil paints. A few CDs (SLAYER, JESUS LIZARD, THE MELVINS, IAN BROWN). A packet of pretzels. A radiator that doesn't quite manage to take the bite out of the Polish winter chill. And that's it.

“I don't have a problem with the fact that painting is fashionable at the moment, but I do have a problem with the fact that I produce nice, unique objects that can be hung on the wall. And that that's the reason why people want to own them. For me, painting is a mental fact. Once it's painted, it's happened.”

So you don't care what happens to these, I ask, waving at the pictures lined up behind us. “No, I do. Very much. But I don't like the fact that the paintings are bills. Money bills. I think I have a problem with the fact that people trade with paintings as they do with money.”

What is it that you do like about painting? “What I find interesting is that it's so old-school. Our reality is flooded with images, but people still paint. That's perverse. And you can still make a revolution within it, you can play with what it means. The history of painting, the relationship between painting and photography.”

The teenaged SASNAL started painting after the idle doodling of his favourite record covers became a compulsion: “I wasn't into art before that. I was very average.” He was born in 1972 in the small city of Tarnów, in the southeast of Poland. His mother was an accountant and his father an engineer; for reasons he can only guess at, he lived with his grandmother for most of his childhood while his mother and father lived in an apartment on the other side of town. He remains

extremely close to his family today. In fact, he thinks he calls home too much. “I know I have a problem with it. I speak to them once a day. But when I lived in Tarnów there were visits and calls every couple of hours.” Though Poland was under a Soviet-sponsored communist regime until the first free elections in 1989, SASNAL says he personally has only happy memories of his youth.

“I remember these big blocks of flats, lit by the sun. That's the impression of my childhood. But we did have a lack of what you might call fancy goods—like certain foods, sweets, clothes. It wasn't poverty but I remember it was hard to buy meat and I remember that a banana was something very special. I could spend thirty minutes eating a banana, very slowly, so I could taste every bit of it.”

SASNAL was seventeen when Poland became the first Eastern European country to abandon communism in 1989. He studied architecture at a technical college. “But I got into music, all these old metal bands, and I was re-drawing the record sleeves. That was how I realised I had these skills, that it was quite easy for me to make a nice drawing.” He discovered metal legends BAUHAUS, “but didn't know anything about the original BAUHAUS, the art movement, so through that I found out about Cubism. That's how it started.” Music still inspires him now. “What I like about that culture is that it affects so many people,” he says.

After two years of studying architecture, SASNAL quit and went to the Cracow Academy of Fine Arts where he spent five years living in a “terrible” former army barracks that served as student accommodation—and painting, continuously. “I didn't need any encouragement from the professors.” Before he even graduated, SASNAL's work was attracting the interest of a high-profile Polish gallery, the FOKSAL GALLERY FOUNDATION in Warsaw. That gallery would go on to take his work to the Art Basel fair in 2002—exposure that effectively launched his career.

It was only fortune that, just as his work found international recognition, he and his wife-to-be, ANKA, discovered they were to be parents. SASNAL recorded the events of those transformative years in a cartoon strip that was serialised in PRZEKRÓJ, a weekly news magazine. Called EVERYDAY LIFE IN POLAND 1999-2001⁽⁵⁾, SASNAL narrated to readers the real events of his life soon after leaving the Academy, including holidays, his search for a job, earliest exhibitions and the birth of his first child. And, both in that cartoon strip and today, in his speech, it is ANKA who is a constant presence. I don't get to meet her, but he says they look similar.



SASNAL enjoys depicting his wife ANKA and himself in his paintings (courtesy of SADIE COLES HQ)

"People think we're brother and sister."

From his studio where we talk, SASNAL has a free view of his rooftop apartment across the courtyard. At one moment we look across, we see the shaded outline of his son CASPER at the window, at another moment, his wife.

The couple had started dating at just 17. "I rode up to her on my bike and asked her if I could walk with her. I was so desperate." He remembers, "I'd known who she was for two years at that point, but she didn't know me—that was quite disappointing. But it was love at first sight."

People are often amazed by the longevity of their relationship. "I know it's very rare, to meet so young," he had told me the previous night, as we ate a dinner and drank vodka in a restaurant on Cracow's main square, the Rynek. "And it is romantic."

The key to their romantic bliss is freedom, he says. And having what is, if largely in theory rather than practice, an open relationship.

"We feel free, even though we are married. I know many couples where dating—or even kissing—another person would be enough to split. I believe that we have built up such a relationship that if anything happens, nothing would destroy it. I know that I can always go back, and she does too." Despite this understanding—which he emphasises is equally desired by both—does he ever feel jealousy? "Yes, sometimes. But never enough to quarrel."

The painting on the far wall is a copy of a photograph taken on his cell phone. It shows himself and his family, naked in the bathroom. Is there any subject he considers too private to paint? "Not too private—but too evident. Too obvious. Like, a dead body. Pornography. I've done a second comic book, actually, which is waiting to be released. It is very private. Very, very private." What's in it? "Things about me and ANKA. There's a bit in it where I say, 'I don't understand what she wants from me,' and she was pissed off when she read that. I think this comic book is like me standing, naked, in the middle of the street. If I publish it, I will be vulnerable." The original version is in Polish, but, despite his fear of exposure, he is also considering an English version. "I'm wondering if it's translatable. There's a lot of Polish context, Polish history."

If there's a subject that occupies his febrile imagination as much as music, family and his art, it's his country. When he leaves Poland, he says he only misses the cheese (he's a vegetarian). But he admits he would also miss the political debate with friends and peers. In June he and his family marched to support minorities in Poland seeking improved human rights. "I think the last two years young Polish people have become more political. It was the young people who went to vote against the party that ruled before," he says, referring to the defeat of the Law and Justice Party in October.

But art and politics should be kept separate, he says. "If I have the opportunity, as a citizen, to give my point of view, I will speak. But I don't talk about liberty or freedom as an artist but as a citizen."

Outside the sky is darkening. Three or four times a week, SASNAL comes to the studio four hours a day to paint, working quickly and often finishing one painting in a single sitting. At around 4pm during the week he drives his grey CITROËN PICASSO mini van to pick up CASPER from the English school he attends. In the evenings, he says,

he often edits films on his computer, working in his apartment. Or he goes biking, in the dark city streets, with another friend who is an artist. We leave his studio and step out into the corridor. "Mmm. Smell that!" he says. "Cabbage⁽⁶⁾ and cutlets. That's Polish dinner."

As he waves me off, before turning back to his 'everyday life', painting, apartment, family, I think about something he'd said the previous evening as we drank vodka shots and the restaurant played JAMES BOND theme tunes on a loop. Since the beginning, collectors and gallerists have asked if they could visit him at his studio. He has usually agreed. I was interested to know why he thought they wanted to see him at work, and why he, an artist so mistrustful of the contemporary art scene and all its distractions, welcomed their visits?

He understood what they were hoping to find, he told me. "You cannot detach the image of the artist from his work. So people want to know what's *behind* the works. Sometimes, when I knew a musician's album, but had never seen the band live, I didn't like them after I'd seen them at a gig. And then I would stop listening to the music. I think it's the same with art. Because, if it's just empty there, if it's *just a canvas*, that's a problem. And I understand it's important for people to know about the meaning of paintings. But I also don't want to say too much about the works because if you say what the association is, it's too obvious. But seeing my studio, here, is important background information for people."

Visiting him here also helps me to understand why, although thousands of Poles choose to emigrate from their country every year, SASNAL sticks around. "It would be very easy to leave," he says. "I think the nationalists and the priests should leave. Although the issues, the problems and the obstacles here all make me angry, the anger can be productive. Bad emotions can be creative. And—I still like it here."

(1) SUSIE RUSHTON is a graduate of Central Saint Martins, London. She writes for THE INDEPENDENT.
(2) Art critic ROBERTA SMITH in THE NEW YORK TIMES suggested that SASNAL "seems locked in some kind of pictorial post-traumatic stress syndrome."

(3) With his video art, SASNAL won THE VINCENT VAN GOGH BIENNIAL AWARD FOR CONTEMPORARY ART 2006 (a.k.a. THE VINCENT). He promptly donated the prize money, 50,000 euros, to charity.

(4) JURGEN TELLER is married to art dealer SADIE COLES, who happens to be WILHELM SASNAL's

gallerist in London. SASNAL's most recent show at SADIE COLES HQ opened in October 2006.

(5) SASNAL's first comic book was called ZYCIE CODZIENNE W POLSCE or EVERYDAY LIFE IN POLAND and tells the story of two years in the life of the artist and his wife ANKA. The book was considered "the first truly realistic work on the generation of people born in the 70s" by the Polish press.

(6) For Polish cabbage soup: soak dried peas overnight, boil sauerkraut and spare ribs, add lots of chopped cabbage, salt and pepper, and cook until peas are done. Add lots of garlic powder. Lovely.