



Zbyněk Sekal, *Shrine with Limb*, 1987, *Shrine with Hole*, undated
Private collection, photo: Johannes Stoll / Belvedere, Vienna, © Bildrecht Vienna 2020

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Belvedere 21

Arsenalstraße 1
1030 Vienna

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ZBYNĚK SEKAL

28 August 2020 – 6 January 2021

Critical thinker, analytical observer, poet of the material: The multifaceted work of Zbyněk Sekal (Prague 1923 – Vienna 1998) can be read from many perspectives. Sekal's almost minimalist works bear witness to a life marked by isolation, imprisonment, and exile. Roughly seventy of his objects are now on view at the Belvedere 21.

Artistic director and CEO Stella Rollig notes: *"The Belvedere pays tribute to one of the Czech avant-garde's most prominent artists with an in-depth look at his work. Sekal's examination of confinement, loneliness, and isolation seems more topical than ever, especially in today's atmosphere of crisis-related upheaval."*

Sekal's artistic work reflects the biography of a fugitive and seeker whose experiences gave rise to an artistic philosophy and a particularly productive strategy. Influenced by Far Eastern philosophy and Surrealist tradition, Sekal created works that speak to personal experience and that pay homage to the individual across all religions and cultures. His body of work encompasses early paintings, material pictures, and sculptures in bronze, stone, plaster, and wood.

Even as a student in the 1940s and 1950s, Zbyněk Sekal proved to be a critical thinker. His desire for freedom permeated both his artistic work and his commitment to activism – and inasmuch, he paid for it: Between 1941 and 1945, he spent a total of three and a half years in the Prague-Pankrác prison and the concentration camps of Theresienstadt and Mauthausen. After the end of the Second World War, his political convictions cost him his degree at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague. During these years, the Surrealist art movement and Marxist philosophy were significant starting points

for his work. The human figure plays a decisive role in his work, although in time the figure almost completely dissolves into abstract, material structures. The compositions of both Sekal's "head" pictures and his early constructivist sculptures hint at the human face or torso, which can be attributed to the waning influence of Modernism in Czech art.

In the 1960s, Zbyněk Sekal's interest shifted progressively toward the architectonics of sculpture. His material pictures dovetail with the ZERO Art movement from that period, an art form known for rearranging found materials and placing them into a new formal and thematic context. Sekal used the analytical process as a creative principle: the artist not only instinctively followed the deconstruction of natural forms, he very consciously processed central aspects of human existence. Inspired by the literary work of Franz Kafka, Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, and Martin Heidegger's phenomenology, he designed sculptural towers rich in formal and thematic contrasts. From the observation of his own life, an artistic program emerged that mirrored his inner conflicts.

After emigrating from Prague in 1969, which initially took him to Berlin, Zbyněk Sekal arrived in Vienna in 1970. There Sekal successfully began to build on the achievements of the Prague years. In Vienna, he expanded his material and structural pictures into spatially nested lattice cubes. He transformed his personal experiences of despair in the Mauthausen concentration camp into flat labyrinths made from copper wires. In the 1980s, these were followed by three-dimensional structures – the shrines (Czech: *schránky*). These cubes of thin wooden slats, which form a scaffolding around smaller objects or ensembles of objects, bear witness to the artist's critical interest in human systems of order and the search for personal freedom within these systems; in so doing, Sekal elevated the theme of confinement to an artistic principle. The examination of the concept of freedom is turned into a question of human existence at large.

The exhibition at the Belvedere 21 features 73 works that illustrate the artist's intellectual orientation as a critical thinker, analytical observer, and "poet of the material." His objects are testimonies of permanent change, the transformation of our world, its materials, and forms. Sekal's work shows the individual, often in a seemingly labyrinthine world, where people are in danger of alienation.

"Zbyněk Sekal's works highlight the fragility of the individual; his anthropomorphic creations embody human identity and the consciousness of freedom during the Cold War," says curator Harald Krejci.

BIOGRAPHY

- 1923 Zbyněk Sekal is born 12 July in Prague.
- 1934–45 During his studies, becomes involved in leftist organizations such as the National Movement of Working Youth (Národní hnutí pracující mládeže). Arrested for distributing anti-Nazi leaflets and detained in the Prague-Pankrác prison and the concentration camps of Theresienstadt and Mauthausen until the end of the war. Prior to arrest, he maintains contacts with young writers who, in 1943, found the Surrealist group "Spořilovští surrealisté."
- 1945–50 Studies painting at the Academy of Arts, Architecture & Design in Prague (Vysoká škola uměleckoprůmyslová, a.k.a. UMPRUM). First trip to Paris 1947, where he attends the International Surrealism exhibition. He is fascinated by Jean Dubuffet's work. Discontinues his studies following events of 1948 in Czechoslovakia.
- 1951–53 Works as a commercial artist and editor in a publishing house for political literature. Friendship with the philosopher Ivan Dubský; keeps a personal diary of his own philosophical contemplations.
- 1953–58 Moves to Bratislava. Translates from German texts by Franz Kafka, Georg Büchner, Günter Grass, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Karl Marx. In 1957 co-founds the artists' association Skupina Máj 57. The first exhibition is held in the Prague Municipal House on 31 May 1957.
- 1958–61 Returns to Prague. Travels to Moscow, St. Petersburg, Warsaw, and Gdansk.
- 1961–68 Participates in international symposia: ceramics symposium in Gmunden (1964, 1965), sculpture symposium St. Margarethen (1966), sculpture symposium Vyšné Ružbachy (1967). In 1968 the Soviet occupation finally forces him to emigrate.
- 1969–70 DAAD scholarship in Berlin. Designs a wall in the David Hansemann House in Dusseldorf.
- 1970 In September, relocates to Vienna, where he will remain until his death.
- 1971 Solo exhibitions at the Galerie im Griechenbeisl in Vienna and the Galerie Maerz in Linz, participation in the group exhibition "Imago" at Schloss Lengsfeld near Krems.
- 1972–74 Assistant lecturer at the Stuttgart State Academy of Art and Design.
- 1974 Joins the Vienna Secession.
- 1977–79 Interior decoration of the Guthirtenkirche in Lustenau. Solo exhibitions in the Neue Galerie Graz, the Museum Bochum, and the Museum of the 20th Century in Vienna.
- 1980–81 Scholarship, Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.
- 1984 Prize of the City of Vienna for sculpture.
- 1989 One-month journey through Japan.
- 1997 Retrospective exhibition in the Prague City Gallery.
- 1998 24 February Zbyněk Sekal dies in Vienna.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Exhibition title	Zbyněk Sekal
Curator	Harald Krejci
Works	73
Dates	August 28, 2020 to January 6, 2021
Location	Belvedere 21 Arsenalstraße 1, 1030 Wien
Opening hours	Tuesday to Sunday 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Late night hours: Thursday and Friday until 9 p.m. Mondays, open on holidays only
Tickets	Regular 9 € Discounted 7 € Annual pass Belvedere 39 € Children and youth up to 19 free
Web	belvedere.at facebook.com/belvedere21 twitter.com/belvedere21 instagram.com/belvedere21wien #ZbyněkSekal

The exhibition at the Belvedere 21 is part of a Belvedere research project on the cultural landscape of Central Europe in the 1960s and 1970s.

The press release and high-resolution press photos are available for download at belvedere.at/en/press.