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***Theo Wujcik: Cantos* Brings to Life Epic Literary Work**

A series by the late, prominent Ybor City artist features larger-than-life paintings inspired by Dante's Inferno

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. (March 29, 2019) – One of Tampa Bay's best-known artists, Theo Wujcik (1936-2014), spent a decade creating a series drawn from the dark and profound literary classic, Dante's *Inferno*. Now, those extraordinary paintings are the theme for *Theo Wujcik: Cantos*, a special exhibition organized by the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg and inspired by two works in its collection.

Gates of Hell (1987) and *Canto II* (1997) are centered around *Inferno*, the first part of the epic poem *Divine Comedy* by Italian poet Dante Alighieri (1265–1321). The painting *Gates of Hell* was acquired by the MFA in 2017, but has never been publicly shown at a museum in the Tampa Bay area until now. Other art institutions that own Wujcik's work include the Art Institute of Chicago; Detroit Institute of Arts; Museum of Modern Art, NY; National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

The exhibition is on view April 13 through June 2, 2019.

Addressing select cantos from the poem, the 10 paintings on view—many of them epically scaled— range from 1987–1997, and showcase Wujcik's literal and symbolic interpretation of the captivating journey of Dante through Hell, guided by the ancient Roman poet Virgil. Many artists have been inspired by the moral drama of Dante's *Inferno*, including English poet and painter William Blake (1757–1827) and French illustrator Gustave Doré (1832–1883). In the late 1950s, American painter and graphic artist Robert Rauschenberg (1925–2008) created a contemporary response to *Inferno*, which is what inspired Wujcik to begin his own approach to the literary piece.

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The exhibition is as much of a celebration of Wujcik's works of art as it is homage to the man himself. Quiet visionary by day and dancing punk rock clubster by night, Wujcik's talents and persona were synonymous with Tampa's Ybor City. He spent over 40 years in Tampa as an artist, collaborator, teacher, mentor and influencer, becoming iconic in the city's art and music scene. He studied lithography in Los Angeles and New Mexico before working as a Master Printer at the University of South Florida's renowned Graphicstudio. There, he worked with artists and lifelong friends Rauschenberg, Ed Ruscha (b. 1937), James Rosenquist (1933–2017) and Richard Anuszkiewicz (b. 1930). Wujcik also taught at USF from 1970 to 1993.

His aesthetic was inspired by what he saw in Ybor City, the multi-layered fliers and posters stuck on telephone phones and buildings throughout the neighborhood in which he lived and worked. Wujcik, typically partying in metallic cowboy boots, immersed himself with the people and punk music of the Ybor scene, and the pulse of the community became an integral part of his life as an innovative artist. He loved to experiment with dimensionality with textures and layering, as evident in the newspaper and paper towel collage elements seen in the large-scale works of art in the exhibition. Visitors will also see Wujcik's signature "wire fence" motif, inspired by the industrial landscape of Ybor City.

Wujcik's widow and keeper of his estate, Susan Johnson, worked with the MFA to bring a personal touch to the exhibition. Visitors can view selections from the artist's journal and his detailed notes on experimenting with media, such as his process of combining drawing and painting using polymer emulsion and charcoal, resulting in *Canto II* (1997).

In addition to the two paintings in the MFA collection, the remaining paintings are on loan from public and corporate institutions as well as private lenders.

"We are honored to present this focused exhibition celebrating an important aspect of Theo Wujcik's powerful portfolio," said Kristen A. Shepherd, Executive Director of the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg. "We hope this exhibition will introduce his work to a new audience who will learn about and appreciate his impact on the arts in this region and beyond."



Image Credit:

Theo Wujcik (American, 1936–2014), *Gates of Hell*, 1987, Acrylic and collage on canvas, Gift of Susan Johnson in honor of Katherine Pill

Theo Wujcik: Cantos Scheduled Public Programs

[ICU/Catherine Wheel \(Tampa\) Reunion Concert](#)

Saturday, April 20, 6-9:30 p.m.

The original members of the local favorite band "ICU/the Catherine Wheel (Tampa)" will play together for the first time in almost 25 years! The young five-piece cut their teeth during the 80s in Tampa Bay's underground music clubs, such as the long-defunct Impulse and Masquerade in Ybor City, St. Pete's Channel Zero at Club Detroit and Gulfport's Swamp Club.

Featuring Jonathan Harrison, Gerald Hammill, Martin Conner, and Doug Prescott, they will be joined on keyboards by good friend Mark Warren, a member of Mod-L Citizen, back-in-the-day contemporaries of ICU.

The group will play post-punk and new wave music and focus on their original material from 1987 to 1991, halcyon days for both the band and Wujcik, who would often be seen in the same Ybor City club or after party. In fact, during one of the group's performances, Wujcik painted on stage in the background!

\$15 for MFA members

\$20 Non-members

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[“Theo’s Inferno” Dance Party Fundraiser](#)

Friday, May 17, 7-10 p.m. (galleries close at 8 p.m.)

The MFA’s Marly Room will transform into 1980s Ybor City to celebrate Theo Wujcik’s popular dance parties with a fundraiser hosted by the MFA’s support group, The Contemporaries. DJ Gabe Echazabal will play Wujcik’s favorites music from that era—punk and new wave—as guests enjoy libations, Ybor City-themed food and decor replicating Wujcik’s awe-inspiring motifs.

\$30 for members of The Contemporaries

\$45 for non-members of The Contemporaries

VIP – \$60 each (Includes early entry to the exhibition at 6:30 p.m. and a private gallery talk by Wujcik’s widow, Susan Johnson of the Theo Wujcik Estate and MFA Curator of Contemporary Art Katherine Pill.)

All proceeds benefit contemporary programming at the Museum of Fine Arts.

[Author Book Reading & Discussion with Paul Wilborn – *Cigar City: Tales from a 1980s Creative Ghetto*](#)

Thursday, May 23, 6:30-7:30 p.m. (Free with Admission)

Author Paul Wilborn will read excerpts of his new book, *Cigar City: Tales from a 1980s Creative Ghetto*, a rollicking, fictionalized account of Ybor City’s artistic past. Wilborn is considered one of the biggest influencers in Tampa Bay’s creative arts scene. With hundreds of cultural projects under his belt since his start as a journalist for the *Tampa Tribune*, Wilborn is currently the Executive Director at the Palladium Theatre at St. Petersburg College.

ABOUT THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA

The MFA at 255 Beach Drive NE has a world-class collection, with works by Monet, Morisot, Rodin, O’Keeffe, Willem de Kooning, and many other great artists. Also displayed are ancient Greek and Roman, Egyptian, Asian, African, pre-Columbian, and Native American art. Selections from the photography collection, one of the largest and finest in the Southeast, are on view in a gallery dedicated solely to the medium. Kristen A. Shepherd is the Executive Director.

Hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday, until 8 p.m. on Thursday, and noon-5 p.m. Sunday. Regular admission is \$20 for adults; \$15 for those 65 and older, Florida educators, college students, and active duty military; and \$10 for students 7 and older. Children under 7 and Museum members are admitted free. Groups of 10 or more adults pay only \$14 per person and children \$4 each with prior reservations. Also, admission is only \$10 after 5 p.m. on Thursday. The MFA Café is open from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday. For more information, please call 727-896-2667 or visit mfastpete.org.

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