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Washington’s Elite Gather at New Gallery, Ogle Solidarity Icon

By Indira A.R. Lakshmanan - Dec 12, 2011 6:01 AM GMT+0100

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The scene was classic Washington: diplomats trading gossip and business cards with journalists over hors d’oeuvres; a lawyer chatting up a lobbyist between sips of champagne.

Friday night’s art opening not far from the White House was the launch of a gallery whose founder is trying a new kind of matchmaking: introducing art that has shaped history in other countries to policy makers and collectors in the U.S. capital.



The very first "Solidarity" (1980) imprint by Jerzy Janiszewski. The work, signed by Lech Walesa and other Solidarity leaders, is at Charles Krause Reporting. Source: Charles Krause Reporting Fine Art via Bloomberg



"Altogether" (1980) by Jerzy Janiszewski, a collage made from the insides of cigarette packaging. Source: Charles Krause Reporting Fine Art via Bloomberg

Enlarge image

Charles Krause/Reporting Fine Art is the brainchild of a former foreign correspondent for PBS, [CBS News \(CBS\)](#) and the [Washington Post. \(WPO\)](#)

In two decades covering revolutions and uprisings around the world, Krause was struck by the role artists often played through work that critiqued or influenced social and political movements swirling around them.

At the center of Krause’s debut show is the arresting logo created in 1980 for Poland’s Solidarity movement, which was instrumental in bringing down the country’s communist regime.

The red-on-white script is unmistakable -- the letters of “Solidarnosc” pressed together like bodies forming an unbreakable human chain, holding aloft a Polish flag in a sign of peaceful defiance.

Behind the iconic image is Jerzy Janiszewski, 59, a Polish artist exhibiting for the first time in the U.S.

Potent Graffiti

In 1980, he was a 28-year-old graphic-arts graduate in Gdansk who sympathized with striking shipyard workers. He wanted to contribute an image to rally the movement, he recalled in an interview last week.

After thinking of the shipyard’s gate, he settled on graffiti that demonstrators had painted on walls and pulled out a single word: Solidarity.

“It suddenly struck me as obvious -- this was the word,”

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"France Soir" (1996) by Jerzy Janiszewski, at Charles Krause Reporting Fine Art. Source: Charles Krause Reporting Fine Art via Bloomberg

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"Trips" (2009) by Jerzy Janiszewski, a collage made from the Metro tickets the artist used to travel from home to work in Paris during his first years in exile. Source: Charles Krause Reporting Fine Art via Bloomberg

Enlarge image



"Small Thing" (1996) by Jerzy Janiszewski. The work is at Charles Krause Reporting Fine Art. Source: Charles Krause Reporting Fine Art via Bloomberg

Enlarge image



"Sequence1" (2008) by Jerzy Janiszewski. Janiszewski began incorporating scraps of paper from his everyday life into his art when he was forced to leave Poland in 1982 at the time Solidarity was banned. Source: Charles Krause Reporting Fine Arts via Bloomberg

Enlarge image



Jerzy Janiszewski, left, and Charles Krause hang Janiszewski's exhibit at Charles Krause Reporting Fine Art

Janiszewski said. "I wanted the people of the shipyard to be represented, so I made the letters like people with their arms linked."

For Krause, 64, the gallery fulfills a longtime dream to bring political art from other cultures to an influential audience in the U.S.

"I am focusing on art that I think is great in its own right. The fact that there is a social or political message adds another dimension," Krause said in an interview.

Civil Disobedience

Reproduced on posters, mugs, T-shirts and pins sold overseas to raise money for the anticommunist movement in Poland, the Solidarity image was adopted as a symbol of civil disobedience across Eastern Europe until the fall of [Soviet Union](#). It has been translated and adapted by opposition movements around the world, most recently in the Arab uprisings and by some Tea Party activists in the U.S. The typeface has come to signal political protest.

Imprints of the Polish Solidarity poster are in the collections of the Museum of [Modern Art in New York](#) and the Victoria and Albert Museum in [London](#).

Janiszewski's show includes one work that's not for sale: his original Solidarity screen print, signed by protest leaders including [Lech Walesa](#), later elected Poland's president.

There are also numbered original offset prints that Janiszewski buried in a friend's back yard for seven years when he was forced to flee [Poland](#) after martial law was imposed in December 1981.

Years later, Janiszewski returned to Poland and asked Walesa for a meeting to discuss copyright for the image, an unpleasant encounter in which Walesa angrily refused to acknowledge his authorship, he said. It ended in a legal battle, and the artist was eventually compensated.

Tactile Collages

Among the 29 works on display, most are not overtly political. They include tactile collages made from corners of cigarette box tops, metro tickets, postmarks and other scraps -- never-before-displayed mixed-media works that speak to years of exile and hardship in Paris.

They evoke the disorientation of life as a refugee in a new city and smoky nights among the Bohemians in Parisian jazz clubs. The works start at \$2,000.

"I think these artists deserve to be valued both in terms of art history and to have a greater value in terms of what collectors are willing to pay for it," said Krause, who grew up in a home of collectors. In 1960s [Detroit](#), his parents bought works by modernist sculptors Alberto Giacometti and Louise Nevelson. His graduation present was an Alexander Calder lithograph.

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Charles Krause Reporting Fine Art in Washington, at the gallery through Jan. 22, 2012. Photographer: Joan Belmar/Charles Krause Reporting Fine Art via Bloomberg

Complexities

While Krause realizes he may have an uphill battle persuading some of the importance of art with a political message at its core, he is hoping some collectors will recognize value on multiple levels.

Mark Kelner, a Washington-based Russian-art dealer who attended the opening, thinks Krause is on to something.

“The art itself is incredible, but the backstory is equally powerful,” Kelner said in an interview. “We see this in Eastern Europe, in totalitarian environments in Cuba and China, and the West knows very little about it. Charles is using his experience in journalism as a springboard to a larger definition of art.”

Todd Levin, director of Levin Art Group, New York- based art advisers, said for the venture to work, the art has to be visually equal to the message behind it. “Art and politics are strange bedfellows,” he said. When a work succeeds both politically and aesthetically, “you’ve got something really significant.”

“The Graphic and Fine Art of Jerzy Janiszewski: The Artist Whose Graphic Design Changed History” will be open for public viewing Dec. 17-18 from noon to 6 p.m., and through Jan. 29 by appointment. See <http://www.charleskrausereporting.com/> for details.

(Indira A.R. Lakshmanan is a writer for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are her own.)

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