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STANISŁAW IGNACY WITKIEWICZ (1885–1939): Drawings from the 1930s

February 7 – April 22, 2006

Ubu Gallery is pleased to announce “**STANISŁAW IGNACY WITKIEWICZ (1885–1939): Drawings from the 1930s,**” an exhibition of over sixty rare works by the Polish painter, photographer, writer and theorist. Witkiewicz, also known as Witkacy, was a central figure among the Polish intellectual elite and is considered to be one of the most creative and acute minds of interwar Europe. In all aspects of his life’s work, he championed the individual creative spirit and defended it against the mechanized world, which he believed was alienating humanity from the true structure of the universe, in his terms the “Mystery of Existence.” His metaphysical philosophies about the human condition are expressed with immediacy in his drawings of grotesque, half-human creatures in phantasmagoric landscapes. While the artist’s proto-modern, psychological, photographic portraits (a small selection of which also will be on view) are arguably his best-known visual works, Witkiewicz’s drawings offer unique insight into the eccentricities of this tortured and brilliant artist.

Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz was born in Warsaw and in 1890 moved with his family to Zakopane, where his father would become well known as the creator of the “Zakopane Style” of handicrafts and architecture. Early on, Witkiewicz showed signs of genius—playing piano, painting and drawing at the age of six and reading scientific and philosophical works in various languages at the age of seven. He wrote his first critical essays, “On Dualism” and “Schopenhauer’s Philosophy and His Relations to His Predecessors,” in 1902 at the age of 17. After obtaining his school certificate in Lwów, he traveled throughout Europe for several years, returning to Poland to study at the Academy of Fine Arts in Kraków. He remained at the Academy for only one year before returning to Zakopane, where he painted his series of romantic landscapes entitled *Early Spring*. Over the course of the next few years, he traveled to France several times, becoming particularly inspired by the Synthetism of Paul Gauguin while studying with Władysław Slewinski in Brittany. Witkiewicz also grew interested in the grotesques of 19th century artists Francisco de Goya and Aubrey Beardsley. The dark, parodying tone in his depictions of sinister women in supernatural settings appears in both the works from his first solo exhibition (held in Kraków in 1913) and his novel from this period, *The 622 Demises of Bung, or the Demonic Woman*.

In 1914, devastated by the suicide of his fiancée, Witkiewicz traveled to Australia as a means of escaping himself and his thoughts of taking his own life. As a member of a scientific expedition organized by the famous anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski, Witkiewicz documented the journey with photographs and drawings. Upon returning home from the expedition, he enlisted in the Russian Tsarist Army and served in World War I. After the War, he studied philosophy in St. Petersburg and traveled in Russia for several years, before returning to Zakopane in 1918 where he would help to found the Formist movement. His approach differed from that of other Formists, as Witkiewicz believed that “pure form” was not fully abstract and possessed symbolism that embodied the restlessness and multiplicity of the human spirit. As a wounded officer, he had begun using narcotics. He came to believe that the controlled use of drugs (ranging from mescaline, peyote and cocaine to caffeine and alcohol) liberated him and opened windows into the psychology of his subject matter. He meticulously recorded on his works each of the substances that he used while creating them. In the fantastical drawings at Ubu, these notations appear next to his signature like obscure scientific equations. When Witkiewicz opened the “S.I. Witkiewicz-Portrait Company” in 1924 in order to support himself, he continued this controlled drug experiment as a means of gaining access to the “masks” that revealed and concealed his subjects’ inner tensions. These intimate portraits (labeled type “C” among his “categories” of portraits lettered A, B, C, D and E) were reserved for family members and friends, and were generally not for sale. The artist also explored the complex inner workings of his own psyche in a peculiar series of photographs that document his facial grimaces—attempts at capturing his own evasive masks.

Throughout the 1930s, Witkiewicz continued to make commissioned portraits and to write articles about philosophy and theater. He composed his fourth novel entitled *The Only Way Out* while touring Poland as a lecturer on aesthetics. Plagued with bouts of depression, he became obsessed with the idea of suicide. In September 1939, when Witkiewicz learned that Russian troops were invading Poland from the East (having already fled from the German troops that were advancing from the West), he killed himself by slitting his wrists.

Gallery hours are 11:00 AM – 6:00 PM, Tuesday through Saturday. Ubu Gallery is located at 416 East 59th Street between First Avenue and Sutton Place.

For further information or for visuals, please contact Miriam Kienle or Susan Braeuer at (212) 753 4444 or at info@ubugallery.com.