

ABOUT THE ARTS

WARSAW/John Tagliabue

Poland Extends An Official Hand To Rebel Artists Once Held At Arm's Length

ONE LARGE, SOMBER canvas that the artist Edward Dwurnik calls "The Prison" depicts the bleak Warsaw jail block where Czarist officials once confined Polish rebels against Russian rule.

Another, by Mr. Dwurnik, called "The Way East," shows bodiless human heads, eerily suspended in a dark and menacing woods.

A third, by Jaroslaw Modzelewski, shows two idiotically grinning people stepping from what appears to be a tomb. The title, suggestive of theology and Communist jargon, reads, "The Irrepressible Resurrection From the Dead."

Some works are acerbic commentaries on Polish history and politics, others reflections on the state of the Polish soul. As a group they form part of a remarkable exhibition of Polish art from 1985 to the present that went on view in Warsaw in December and will continue until the end of this month, under the title "Radical Realism, Concrete Abstraction."

The title says little about the show's content, but the exhibition marks the first time the country's monumental National Museum has presented the youngest generation of angry Polish artists. There is a literal and a symbolic meaning to this, and it says something about recent changes in Poland that have challenged basic assumptions of this nation's art world.

In 1982, Poland's artists rebelled against the brutal imposition of martial law by Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski with a boycott of the official art world and a massive exodus from the official artists' union.

In that atmosphere of distrust some artists stopped showing their works. Others turned to the Roman Catholic Church, which opened its doors to sometimes shockingly unreligious works. Still others, challeng-

ing the Government to clamp down, frequented what came to be oppositional galleries that the Government permitted to function out of a kind of grudging tolerance. Six years have gone by, and now the state is putting this art in a museum.

When art enthusiasts here talk of the angry generation, they think of "Ta Grupa," which means "The Group." It comprises a band of six artists, two from Poznan in western Poland, the others from Warsaw, who found solace in 1982, while they were students at the Academy of Fine Arts, in a kind of club that channeled their anger into an art that is ironic, irreverent, nationalistic and mocking. Their art, inspired by West Germany's "Neue Wilde" movement, uses dramatic neo-expressionist forms and colors to vent their outrage.

But their energies spill beyond the bounds of painting. Until interest waned last year, they published a newspaper of critical reflection and ribald drawings, whose title translates roughly as "Ouch, Enough Now," and staged shocking plays in the Dadaist manner.

At the Cracow Avant-Garde Theater Festival last year, three of their number, in drag, portrayed a man, his wife and their newborn child. Laced with political texts from Lenin, Che Guevara and Hitler, it was interpreted as a farcical representation of Lenin and Krupskaya giving birth to the Bolshevik Revolution.

Sometimes they work alone. Pawel Kowalewski, for example, a 29-year-old Warsaw painter, captures nationalistic episodes, not in a way that might please the authorities but in the tradition of Poland's wartime resistance to the Nazi occupiers. One canvas portrays the last night in a Moscow prison of Gen. Leopold Okulicki, the commander of the pro-Western Home Army in World War II; the



The Polish painter Pawel Kowalewski, member of a dissident artist group, in his Warsaw apartment

Soviets said he died there, but pro-Western Poles say he was murdered.

Ryszard Grzyb, a 31-year-old Warsaw artist, paints bizarre animals with enormous genitals and lashing tongues, reflecting an expressionist nightmare of contemporary events. Mr. Modzelewski, 32, produces paintings that reflect in a dry, cerebral manner on Polish society, as in "Irrepressible Resurrection."

Sometimes, these artists work as a group, closing ranks artistically as a kind of defense against the incursion of a hostile system without. But the policy of cultural openness advocated by Mikhail S. Gorbachev has left its mark on Poland. The cultural bureaucracy is carving out ever larger preserves for artists of every stripe in the hope of seducing and enlisting the talents of creative young people. The

opening, and the relative freedom it confers, challenges for the first time basic assumptions of the protest generation, and Ta Grupa illustrates the changing situation.

But not everything has changed. Artists must still struggle with material shortages. Mr. Kowalewski paints in the cramped bedroom of a Warsaw apartment, piled with canvases and strewn with tubes of paint

and brushes. Nor does the Government's relative benevolence halt harassment from the conservative security apparatus, which still monitors and pursues artists it judges dissidents.

When the Group's artists displayed their works in a show organized in an abandoned Warsaw factory by Andrzej Bonarski, a magazine editor and art collector, its members were showered with computer-printed hate mail they suspect may have stemmed from security sources. "They said we were collaborating with the Jew Bonarski," Mr. Kowalewski said, "and that we were painting degenerate art."

Changing Times

But even in this grim world of police control the changes originating in Moscow are having an effect. "The police no longer know why they are questioning me," Mr. Kowalewski said. The changing times are changing the artists. Some appear to have adopted a composed and quieter, though no less incisive, means of reflecting on Polish society.

For others, the feeling is that Ta Grupa's art edges increasingly toward shouting, its raucousness toward posturing. Others are emerging who no longer wield their canvases as weapons. Such are the works of Marek Jaromski, a young Warsaw artist whose subtle playing with somber colors says a lot about the mood of Poland, but in a gentler voice. There are other artists, a generation behind Ta Grupa at the art academy, like the 29-year-old Zbigniew Dowgiallo, who experiment with large, brightly colored neo-romantic adventures.

Older painters like Tomasz Ciecierski, who once taught Ta Grupa's members at the Fine Arts Academy, have returned to their former style after an interlude of dark pondering. Mr. Ciecierski says his nature leaned always toward bright colors.

Increasingly, too, questions are raised about the links between politics and art, and sometimes they come from within Ta Grupa. In part it is simply a question of growing older, more reflective, less angry. "When we began, I was about 25, now I'm 31," Mr. Grzyb acknowledged. "The 30's are a natural watershed."

He defended the Group's struggle with politics in its art. "If politics enters your house, you have to do certain things to deal with it," he said. "But that does not mean I am an artist who preys on politics. As an artist, I have to ask the final questions, about man, about life, and death." □