

# World of Art



## Central and Eastern European Art Since 1950

Thames  
& Hudson

Maja and Reuben Fowkes

acts, as in *Seven Days to Create the World* (1982). The ethos of their generation could be felt in the pursuit of an apolitical libertarian freedom within the private sphere, combined with a deep cynicism about the ability of art to transform society.

In January 1983 six painting graduates from the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw mounted their first show, entitled 'A Forest, a Mountain and over the Mountain a Cloud', at the Dziekanka Studio in the university dormitory. They transformed the exhibition space into an ominous environment in which expressionistic, grotesque and wildly colouristic canvases were illuminated by a single floodlight and accompanied by the noise of deafening music. Taking on the common mantle of Gruppa, the artists were drawn together in revolt against the artistic and political climate, feeling a particular affinity for the art of Andrzej Wróblewski and discovering contemporary parallels in his experience of socialist realism in the 1950s. Ryszard Grzyb painted on cardboard images of riots and battles with fantastic creatures, as well as erotic and scatological scenes, as in *Duel with Asparagus* (1985). Paweł Kowalewski addressed politically sensitive issues around history and religion, while Jarosław Modzelewski made figurative compositions of everyday activities with surrealist distortions, such as *Sower and Reaper* (1986). Włodzimierz Pawlak depicted emotionally twisted and chaotic scenes, and Marek Sobczyk's colourful canvas *Gandzia* (1981) portrayed communist leader General Jaruzelski with a torpedo in his mouth, while Ryszard Woźniak painted in accentuated tones a *Three-headed Executor* (1982). Together they published the samizdat *Oh it's Fine Already* with provocative, obscene and absurd texts and drawings.

The revived interest in painting in Central and Eastern Europe at the beginning of the decade denoted a departure from the neo-avant-garde preference for non-traditional media, while at the same time articulating a turn away from high-minded post-conceptual, analytical and reductive approaches to the canvas in order to free the artistic imagination from all self-imposed constraints. The hybridity of new painterly styles that ranged from neo-expressionism to hyper-realism reflected the postmodern predilection for the quotation and re-encoding of art historical sources, where subversion was combined with a sophisticated appreciation of the art of the past. In Yugoslavia, the centres of the new painting were Zagreb, Ljubljana and the Slovenian coastal town of Kopar, where in 1981 an exhibition of the 'new image' in Italian and Yugoslav painting was held. Slovenians Andraž Šalamun, Tugo Šušnik and Metka Krašovec, as well as Croatian artists Igor Rončević and Đuro Seder, were among the representatives of the new painterly tendency, while



73 Ryszard Grzyb, *Duel with Asparagus*, 1985.

in Serbia the postmodernist trend surfaced in the work of the group Alterimago and in the spatial interventions of Milovan DeStil Marković.

In his 1982 lecture 'Who's the victim? Who's the perpetrator? What is to be done?', the artist Ákos Birkás raised the issue of the systematic state policy of intimidation of the neo-avant-garde in Hungary, while the instructive answer to his third question was for artists to turn to 'new painting'. Indeed, the preponderance of former neo-avant-garde artists in the new wave of Hungarian painting of the eighties was acknowledged by art historian Lóránd Hegyi, organizer of four 'New Sensibility' exhibitions from 1981 to 1987, who saw it as a characteristic element in the development of Hungarian art. This was also visible in the selection of Imre Bak, Birkás, Károly Kelemen and István Nádler to represent Hungary at the Venice Biennial of 1986, which marked the ascendancy of aesthetic over ideological criteria, with new painting reinserting