



Photo: Pawel Bajerski

Trompe- l'oeil at the Chopin Festival

BY YANUSZ GILEWICZ

Without a doubt the 7th International Chopin & Friends Festival, held in New York City in November 2005, was a great success! Year after year, the festival proves the importance of this type of event – not only in Polish cultural circles but in American circles as well. The festival presents many Polish artists, and the events are often introduced in both Polish and English, but a wide range of nations and ethnicities are represented among the artists and in the audiences.

When I was invited to participate in this festival, I felt quite privileged and happy. Here was an opportunity to present my artwork to a large and varied group of people; to have a direct dialogue with viewers and to see my own work through the eyes of others. I would appear in the company of internationally renowned musicians, such as Mana Tokuno and others, in such visually spectacular spaces as the Polish Consulate on Madison Avenue and the Kosciuszko Foundation House on 65th Street.

My installation, *3-D Koi Fish Pond*, consisted of a 5-by-7-foot panel painting surrounded by 13 marble tiles, scattered flowers and leaves. The installation depicts a tiled pool with Japanese koi fish, lily pads and other objects. The painting – the main part of the installation – was executed and subsequently viewed on the floor. I wore special 3-D glasses while executing the painting; the same glasses were offered to viewers of the installation. Many people were surprised by the idea of using special glasses to view an art work, but they quickly discovered the difference between viewing the painting with the glasses and without them. When wearing the glasses, the viewer's attention is suddenly awakened, hidden objects in the pond start to appear, and a curiosity to see more is awakened. Also, through this direct contact with the viewer I was able to learn more about my art and myself.

This feedback inspired me to create a new piece which I hope to present in next year's festival. Art is a way of communication, and the spirit of communion between viewer and artist is the most important aspect of the creative process.

I would like to share with the readers of this magazine some of my earlier experiences with *trompe l'oeil*; they reveal certain aspects of the creative process and illustrate the unpredictable responses that paintings of this type can evoke.

The art of illusion (*trompe l'oeil*) is a convincing 3-dimensional effect created by means of perspective drawing and skillful use of the contrast between object and shadow. This technique plays on the senses and tricks the perceiver into entering bodily into the image – or so it seems. For a moment one has been led to experience what has actually been painted as if it were reality, thereby creating a magical sense of illusion.

My first experience with *trompe l'oeil* happened quite accidentally. I was in my cousin's house for a family gathering, and I learned that my uncle Stephan had a birthday coming. I wanted to give him a very nice and special gift, because he is a very generous man with a great sense of humor. He had to leave town unexpectedly to deal with some emergency, and I used the occasion of his absence to paint his image upon the wall. I painted him in the kitchen, sitting at the table and drinking coffee. His right hand was supporting his jaw, echoing the pose of Rodin's famous sculpture *The Thinker*. He was wearing a tee-shirt that depicted the American flag (I was living in Poland at that time and desperately wanted to visit the United States) and a Rolex watch. When he came home he fell in love with this painting right away. After some time passed he called me with this story. "Since you painted me on the wall, my friends have been coming to my house

and greeting me twice: once in the kitchen, and once again where I really am." I asked what he meant. "I mean that they confuse your painting of me with reality." I thought that was just fantastic, and realized that my journey as an artist into the world of illusion had begun. In my subsequent career some of the *trompe l'oeil* paintings that I have executed have astonished me with their illusive power to become real for the observer. The stories of these works are quite amusing.

Once I was hired by a bar in Soho to create an imitation of marble – that is, to turn a piece of wood visually into marble. Wishing to go beyond mere imitation, I introduced some veins of gold into the marble, a phenomenon that does not exist in nature. After the bar had been operating for a while, I noticed that nobody was figuring out that the marble was fake. That disappointed me; a deception that is never recognized by the victim is boring. Then an idea came to me: I would add a box of matches at the end of the marble bar. This was the end closest to the exit, and I thought that a patron of the bar might think of them as just waiting to be picked up by him on his way out of the bar.

I isolated a small area, removed the top coats of varnish, and painted a beautiful old-fashioned box of matches, including a nice shadow that seemed to be cast by the matchbox on the surface of the bar. I added the name of the establishment to the matchbox, using very ornate lettering. The effect was remarkably three-dimensional. I then covered the box and its shadow with many coats of varnish. I was delighted to find that the layers of varnish magnified the matchbox and made it look even more realistic than before. I was very pleased with the result, and when the bar reopened I took a seat next to the painted matchbox. I wanted to see for myself how well it worked; would it actually have the power to deceive anybody? The events that followed exceeded my expectations. Again and again I witnessed guys who, as they left the bar, swept a hand toward the painted matchbox intending to scoop it up. They were instantly disoriented and confused when it turned out that the thing they were trying to grab wasn't really there! For me it was a dramatic demonstration of the power in my artwork. I beamed with pleasure as I shook hands with them, thanking them for "making my day". They all took it as good fun (nobody got mad), and they probably believed me to be the owner of the bar.

I have always been fascinated with the concept of invisibility. The best of *trompe l'oeil* paintings in my opinion are those which deceive the eye so well that they are actually taken for reality. You can be looking at something without feeling the slightest suspicion that what you are seeing might not be the real thing, and then ... surprise! Sometimes the illusion is so powerful that you have to touch the painting several times before knowing what to make of your own visual perceptions. I once received a commission to paint a fish pond on an apartment floor. I loved the concept of visually creating a pool of water with swimming fish on a wooden floor! The challenge was to convince a person entering the room for the first time that they were seeing real water. My first thought was that sandstone blocks would make a nice setting for

water. I realized that creating the visual texture of sandstone on a wood panel floor would make my project far more difficult, but all the more interesting for precisely that reason. The union of these three textured elements (water: glossy and reflective; sandstone: porous and matte; and the natural wood of the flooring) was exactly the challenge I was looking for.

A critical part of this project was to establish the depth of the pond. The fact that this fish pond would be in a 13th floor apartment gives you some indication of the range of possibilities! I decided that the illusion of one foot of water would make the scene more credible. (A mere 90 gallons of water wouldn't intrude too much on the people living a floor below...) I also had to study the behavior of fish very carefully; there is a subtle moment when a fish seems to be neither still nor moving. I used phosphorescent paints to create a realistic spatial scale; the various sizes of the fish were suggested by painting background groups of underwater dwellings. To stretch the illusion of the depth, I painted water lilies to define the surface of the pond; some of the pads held glistening drops of water. The final element in the composition was to create an illusion of concentric circles formed by a pebble that had fallen into the pond a moment earlier. This made my pond look even more alive and natural. The surrounding sand blocks were treated with subtle cracks; the building, after all, was more than a hundred years old. To bring more of the riot of nature into the scene, in the northern part of the pond I painted green moss growing within the cracks in the stone. The whole painting was then covered with layers of varnish – high gloss for water, semi-gloss for the greenery, and matte for the stones. This protected the painting and made it completely walkable.

My client was unmistakably surprised and delighted, but the real treat for me came on the day of the house-warming party. I witnessed several people who, as they walked toward the pond, deliberately stepped over the area of water so as not to get their feet wet. Even when I told them that it was all right to step on it, they still felt a little uneasy. Some of the guests could not believe that the sandstone was painted. Even while touching the painted surface, they still insisted that this stone texture could not possibly be nothing but paint and varnish applied to a wooden surface.

Nothing could have made me feel better than this. The deceptiveness of this fish pond presented me with yet another challenge when I tried to document my work for the sake of publicity. I photographed the pond and made a post card, but many prospective clients who saw the card did not fully understand that I was a painter – they thought I was a guy who builds small fish ponds in people's apartments! A woman who owns a chic bar in Tribeca complained to her husband, "Hey, Frankie, are you crazy? Why the hell would I want to have water splashing in my living room?" This made me redo my postcard: I added an insert that gave "before and after" views of the floor, to show that it was actually painted. Even to this day I am not always certain that people know what they are actually looking at. But I am convinced that seeing is believing, so ... let it be seen!