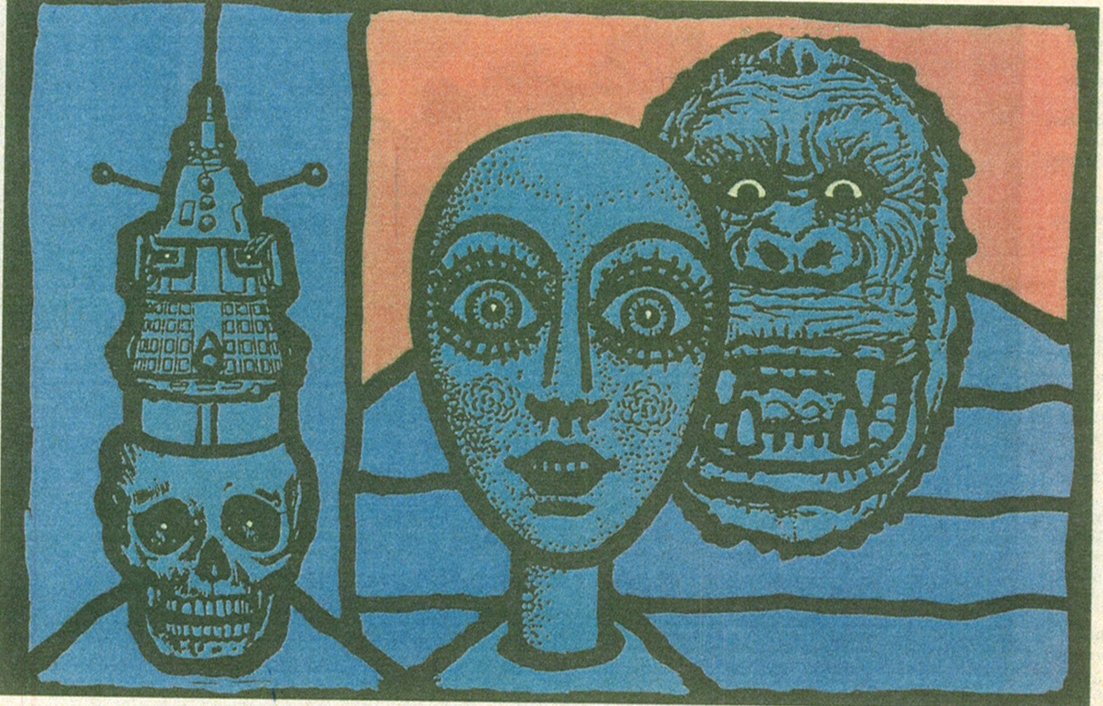
Pavel Brázda | *Susan Moore*

meets the nonagenarian

Czech artist whose work

is at last being celebrated

Out of dystopia



The Czech artist Pavel Brázda was just 13 when German troops occupied his country in 1939, and 22 when a coup d'état turned it into a communist state that remained under Soviet control for four decades. Banished from the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague on political grounds in 1949, and never a member of the Communist party or Union of Artists, Brázda was unable to pursue a career as an artist, exhibit his work or travel abroad. He was obliged to apprentice to a painter and decorator, and work as a stoker.

Such a fate might have broken or embittered the man. Not a bit, it would seem. In fact, it is tempting to say that he has thrived not so much on adversity as on a fierce independence.

Brázda continued to draw and paint at home, as did his wife Věra Nováková. The first time anyone outside their circle saw their work was after the Velvet Revolution in 1989, when artist friends of their daughter Kateřina included Brázda in a small exhibition, and a profile in a still illegal *samizdat* publication followed, as did a joint show with Věra in 1992. When the National Gallery in Prague unveiled Brázda's life's work in a major retrospective to mark his 80th birthday in 2006, he was hailed as something of a national hero.

Now an exhibition of his work is to open in the UK, celebrating his 90th year. On my visit to Brázda in Prague, he seems, however, as unperturbed by his recent recognition and acclaim as he was by his five decades of self-imposed artistic isolation. Ironically, he has enjoyed a luxury rarely accorded to his peers in the free world: he has worked as he pleased for over 60 years, free from critics, dealers or fellow artists.

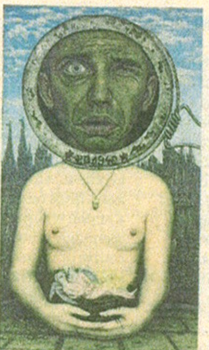
Nothing is as I had expected — not least the artist himself. When I walk through the door, there he stands, tall, lean and dapper in a salt-and-pepper suit and black polo neck. Even more striking than the still chiselled cheekbones is the keenness of expression and humour in his bright blue eyes, and his old-world courtesy. A shot of whisky rather than *slivovitz* is considerately proffered with our coffee as we sit down at the dining room table at 9.30am.

Clockwise from main picture: 'Xenia and King Kong Stare at a High-Tech Utopia' (2010); 'The Monster Waits, the Monster has Time' (1949); Pavel Brázda — Karel Cudlín

The room, indeed the whole apartment in its gracious early 20th-century villa, is another surprise: its paint may be faded but its furniture is antique Biedermeier, including the groaning bookshelves. All this belonged to his maternal grandmother Helena Kapková.

Helena was the sister of celebrated writer Karel Čapek and his artist brother Josef. Brázda's father was a prominent lawyer and politician in Brno, and both homes were meeting places for the intelligentsia. Brázda spent most of his life, he tells me, embarrassed by the privilege of his upbringing. Yet privilege and principle came at a price. Karel, a thorn in the side of the fascists, died of pneumonia before the Gestapo could arrest him; Josef was deported to Bergen-Belsen, dying there a week before liberation. Brázda's parents had their property confiscated, and both his father and step-grandfather were dispatched to labour camps.

"I was influenced not only by the leftist French avant-garde but also by the humanism of the Capek brothers," Brázda says. "My mother carried within



herself the cultural traditions of her family, and she acquainted me with that culture." He read Apollinaire, Huysmans and Nezval, as well as Freud, Jung and the philosophy of Klima.

Certainly two threads appear to link Brázda's remarkably diverse and idiosyncratic artistic output. One is its literary nature — at times it is pure narrative — and the other is its humanism. His work emerged out of the Dadaist Czech literary and artistic movement of Poétisme, which admired the products of modern technological civilisation while advocating the playful, the non-heroic and the fantastical. At 18, he founded his own art movement, "Hominism" — "art about the people and for the people", forging various styles of figurative magical realism. He is still working on an open-ended, largely autobiographical cycle "Human Comedy".

While Brázda anticipated Pop Art with the appropriation of advertising images and slogans in the likes of "Have You Forgotten to Shave?" of 1950, the minutely described magnifications of flesh and hair also encountered in these early works are straight out of James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, he tells me.

To survive the dystopian years bleakly recorded in his 1949 self-portrait "The Monster Waits, the Monster has Time" and the apocalyptic "Five Minutes Before the End of the World" (1945-53), it was necessary both to retreat into the symbolic worlds of European literature and to create his own. Even his motorcycle racers and astronauts, he explains, were "modern-day centaurs, part-man, part-machine, that were typical of this century and essentially created for it," Brázda says.

For these images of the 1950s, the artist developed a simplified style reliant on line and symbolic gesture, delightedly turning to the computer in 2007 — "the perfect instrument to make art of the people for the people". As he talks about this digital process — which begins by "playing with drawing until something happens", where figures are randomly drawn, cut out and meet by accident — his whole being is animated. I wonder if this abiding thrill in the act of creation is what has kept him so vital: that, and a clear conscience, and a life lived without compromise.

'Pavel Brázda is Here!', Library of Birmingham, June 1-July 1 libraryofbirmingham.com