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LEISURE & ARTS

A Hungarian Draws the Line on True Art

By THOMAS F. O'BOYLE

Castle Schaumburg, West Germany

He calls himself Batuz. And the world according to Batuz is a divided place. During his life he has been scarred by the division between East and West. Now Batuz draws divisions in his paintings – and seeks to overcome them in real life.

Batuz was born in Hungary 55 years ago. In 1945, when the Soviets occupied Budapest, he escaped to the West, only to spend his next four years in several refugee camps. He emigrated with his family to Argentina in 1949.

There, while recuperating from a serious heart ailment, he began to paint. The alienation, the division, the pain that he felt welled up from within him in the form of a line on every canvas. No mere line separating darkness from light but a chasm, a gulf, a division so palpable that it leaps off the canvas and grabs you by the throat.

"Always these forces, the forms crashing together. Always the separation because I was suffering very much," he says. "My painting helps me make sense out of my life. It helps me tie together my experience in the East with my life in the West."

Today, Batuz calls himself "one of the 10 living painters who matter." Critics tend to agree. His works hang in more than 30 major galleries throughout America, Canada, South America, Japan and Europe – some 600 paintings in all during a career that spans three decades and three continents. Yet it is the constant presence of that jagged line that gives power to a Batuz work.

In 1979, Batuz moved from paint to a new medium, paper. The line was still there. But the innovative use of paper pulp, burlap and earth-derived dyes adds more dimension and more power to the division. In works such as his giant "Omen 2," which hangs here in this 700-year-old castle situated amid the rolling hills of Germany's Westerwald forest, the canvas seems to have a life of its own.

"It simply exists," Dieter Ronte, director of the Museum Moderner Kunst in Vienna, wrote in a review of the earlier "Omen," housed at Batuz's home in Walton, New York. "The first time I saw it I knew it was an important painting but I did not know why. . . . The picture exceeds the scope of ordinary viewing. 'Omen' is completely absorbing. You are involved in a drama, a drama of thousands of years of human existence."

Like his painting, Batuz, too, is completely absorbing. Art is his way of confronting the pain within him. Yet conversation is for him another form of confrontation. Not in a truculent way, but rather, as a "full-court press" type of personality. The same passion that he brings to the canvas emerges in his relationships with people. He assaults you – in a way that makes it impossible to remain undecided about Batuz. That, he says, is his intent. He is at once spontaneous and thoughtful – a man whose salt-and-pepper beard, stout and stubby body and thick forearms lend him a sea captain's appearance.

And like an old sea captain, he enjoys telling stories: about his children, his work, his relationships with other artists, his life as a periodic stranger in strange lands. "I should write a book, shouldn't I?" he says with a youthful grin. A five-minute visit with Batuz can easily stretch into five hours.

Batuz

He can also be persistent, and laughs at the phone call he received in 1975 from Joseph Hirshhorn, the late art patron and founder of the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington. "Nobody knew me then," he recalls. But he insisted that if Mr. Hirshhorn wanted to see his work, then he should visit him and not vice versa. Finally, after Batuz offered to send a few slides, Mr. Hirshhorn relented and agreed to come to his studio.

The artist has been on a rocket ever since. But his career entered a new phase two years ago when a number of well-heeled friends, including Mr. Hirshhorn's widow, Olga, got together and formed the Batuz Foundation in West Germany. The foundation secured the rights to Castle Schaumburg and established a site here for a public gallery of his works. Batuz lives at the castle in the summer months. Then, in winter, he returns to his home at Walton in the Catskills. (He emigrated again, this time to America, in 1973.)

Several German corporations, among them Bayer AG, have been particularly generous in their support. A few sponsors have even donated labor: Sitting out on his veranda, Batuz passes out snapshots of Mrs. Hirshhorn stooping over to clean the castle floor.

Yet, even though he has gained fame and critical accolades, Batuz remains at heart an outsider who holds disdain for anything that is generally accepted by the masses. When his first one-man show sold out in Buenos Aires in 1963, he pronounced: "It cannot be so good when people like it so much."

Though his paintings fetch from $20,000 to $40,000 apiece, Batuz remains uncomfortable with the commercialization of art. He broke all commercial ties to galleries in 1969. And he limits the sale of his works to three or four a year – enough, he says, to support his work and four children but not enough for him to become wealthy.

"Art," he says in his thickly accented English, "should not be sold like apples, cars and bananas."

Batuz may draw imaginative barriers but in real life he is seeking to tear them down. In this endeavor, the Batuz Foundation plays a key role. For the last two summers the castle has served as a meeting place for artists from South America and Eastern Europe. Among those in attendance this year were Czech painter Ales Vesely, whose works are banned in his home country; Hungarian novelist Miklos Meszoely, Argentine poet Enrique Molina and French writer Michel Butor. This year, seven painters donated one work each to help pay the travel expenses for the two dozen artists who attended the meeting.

Having lived in both South America and Eastern Europe, Batuz says there is a great cultural affinity between them. But they have little knowledge of one another. The meetings, he hopes, will provide a forum for understanding.

"It's a society, a town, a polis," he says, "only the neighbors are living 10,000 miles apart. But mentally and spiritually they are living close."

For Batuz, always the restless emigrant, there can be no higher goal.

Mr. O'Boyle is the Bonn correspondent of The Wall Street Journal/Europe.

An American Who Transmuted English Poetry

By WILLIAM PHILLIPS

The publication of the first volume of T.S. Eliot's long awaited letters (edited by Valerie Eliot; Faber, 618 pages, £25) is one of the major literary events of our time. Aside from their literary importance, they give us a more intimate view of one of the dominant literary figures of the century, whose work changed the direction of modern poetry and critical thinking.

My own generation was brought into the ethos of modernism by the work of Eliot. I remember while still at college the excitement of being introduced to the new and scarcely known ideas of the great modernist. Subsequent movements, such as the New Criticism, and the shift from romanticism and impressionist criticism to a more austere sensibility, were due largely to Eliot's influence.

More recently there's been a turn in some liberated circles against Eliot's traditionalism and the classic quality of his works. He'd always been known as a conservative, for as early as 1928, Eliot stated in the Preface to "For Lancelot Andrews" that "his general point of view may be described as classicist in literature, royalist in politics, and Anglo-Catholic in religion." (He did add the qualification "that the first term is completely vague, and easily lends itself to claptrap . . . the second term is at present without definition, and easily leads itself to what is almost worse than clap-trap, I mean temperate conservatism; the third term does not rest with me to define.") In the past, however, Eliot's conservatism wasn't used to question his literary stature.

The letters, which run from 1898, when Eliot was 10 years old, to 1922, when he was 34 years old, divide roughly between personal ones to his family, mostly to his mother and friends, and those having to do with literary affairs. The former are interesting mainly for what they tell us about his academic and literary plans, his hesitations and ultimately his decision against becoming a professor of philosophy, and for his resolve to make his way as a writer in England. They are also full of references to his frequent illnesses and his almost constant exhaustion, and the chronic – and undiagnosed – illnesses of his first wife, Vivien. Also, what appeared to be a nervous breakdown by Eliot is mentioned briefly in the more personal letters.

The letters also reveal a sureness of taste and judgment, remarkable for so young a critic, which he did not hesitate to express even when it was negative. Thus he recognized the talents of James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Andre Gide, Paul Valery, D.H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, before they were acclaimed. He also did not mute his criticism of such contemporaries as John Middleton Murray, Katherine Mansfield, and Richard Aldington; and his letters indicate that he did not admire Robert Frost who was being widely praised at the time. He understood the strengths and weaknesses of George Santayana, who had been one of his teachers at Harvard. While he thought Pound was one of the few important contemporary writers, Eliot was quite forthright in telling him he did not like some of his poems.

Eliot's criticism, however, while sharply defined was rarely malicious or crude. In fact, no matter what he was writing about, nor how informally, one of the distinctions of his style was its stately prose: exact, tightly knit, fastidious, and, despite its complexity, highly controlled. Indeed, this is one of the qualities that led Pound to call Eliot the "possum," by which he apparently was referring to his restraint, his caution and his measured opinions. It is perhaps also one of the reasons why the letters contain no psychological confessions, no baring of his inner life. In this respect, his letters, which after all to some extent were acts of personal expression, nevertheless exemplified – like all his writing – his often stated idea that writing does not express one's personality: It transmutes it.

In dealing with Eliot's letters – and with his writings as a whole – one cannot avoid the question of his alleged anti-Semitism. Recently, for example, there has been some protest at the effort to set up an Eliot memorial on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of his birth, a project supported by such distinguished British Jews as Sir Isaiah Berlin and Lord Goodman. One has to agree with their position, for whatever suggestions of anti-Semitism might be found in Eliot's essays or poems, they surely are few, and they date back to a time early in his life. The only remark that was truly objectionable appeared a long time ago in "After Strange Gods," and to my knowledge has never been reprinted. The letters contain some references to Jews, as when he speaks of that strange character, Maxwell Bodenheim, and his inability to make his way in the London scene. But these remarks are almost kindly and solicitous. Besides, many of the letters are affectionately addressed to Jewish friends. In any event, if a principle is to be invoked, it is that Eliot's seminal contributions to Western literature far outweigh a small number of throwaway remarks.

Though there are no sensational revelations, and little new light on Eliot's poetry or criticism, the letters do tell us some things about Eliot's personal and professional life we might otherwise not have known, and they round out our sense of the total person.

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