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«Live and see». Interview with Erik Bulatov

by Damien Sausset

How did this painting titled Train – Train come into being, what is the subject? And why this format?
I don't really know how to answer that. It's both a landscape and at the same time a sort of unreal space. If you started with the landscape, then you'd have to say that the landscape isn't real. It comes from my memory. On the other hand, the rails, the tracks, these are real, just like the horizon. That would make it a picture with a landscape and a train going across the horizon. It is this movement that matters. One can say that there are two formats in this painting. Both are based on a plastic idea: that of non-concordance. The first is the format defined by letters organizing a central square. Then there is the landscape itself, which has a horizontal format. The tension between the two generates a certain dynamic that contributes to the effect of the painting.

This powerful juxtaposition of two formats seems to refer directly to the concept of space that could be found among the Suprematists. Was this intentional?
As is common nowadays, there are two starting points, two themes that are very present: Suprematism, which is always present in my memory, and reality. However, the reference to Suprematism has become also somewhat of a fashion in looking at Russian artists. For me, Suprematism obviously has something to do with the beginnings. As I see it, there are three essential factors involved in my painting: space, surface and light. It's very important to understand that there are at least two kinds of light. There is the light of the landscape and that of the words, both radically different in their natures. The nature of the light of the letters should be seen as a provocation. An analysis of the light might lead one at first to believe that the letters are lit by the same light source. But if you look closely, you will see that the white and black letters have another tonality, another intensity. In fact, the light for the letters comes out of our own space, the space of the spectator. They have their own light. You might think that the letters are black because they're in the shadow part of the landscape; but in fact, they just happen to be black. And so there's a light – that of the landscape – which is transcribed in the painting through shadows, hues and colors. Then there's the one that comes from us, from our space, illuminating the letters. And if we pursue the analysis, there's a third light that emerges from the painting itself, at the exact point where the rails merge with the horizon. This last light – which comes from the painting, from behind it, and goes through it, following the tracks, sliding across the words to land in our space, the space of the spectator – is somewhat in opposition to the light of the sun imagined for the landscape.

So there are three paintings in one. The landscape, the letters and the confrontation of the two. The one often seems to contradict the other. The words give the impression that the landscape behind them is only a pictorial representation. They destroy the illusion of reality. Conversely, the landscape shows to what extent the letters, the words, are merely constructs, things to do with culture. And so the light is essential because it effects the montage and makes it particularly strident.
Yes, that's right. It's also important to see that it's a painting that's almost destroyed. The letters explode the painting. But the painting saves itself because we can't see the two words at the same time: the white one and the black one. The contrast between the black and the white is so strong that, if we concentrate on one of them, the other automatically drops out of our field of vision, our attention.

Your works have often been termed political simply because they used the very signs of Soviet society, an essentially political space. I don't think that your paintings really denounce a state of affairs. Most of all, they're about a relationship to the world.
That's true. I've often been called a political artist, especially during the Soviet period. That's difficult. In fact, if you look at my works as political works, you'll notice that my ideas don't seem to be very clear. There's no concrete statement, no precise orientation. My pictures aren't built to carry a political message. I try to find the image of the contemporary materiality and mentality, and this mentality is obviously political. The problem was this discrepancy between the mentality of Soviet citizens and the social space in which they existed.

And so your pictures denounce the fact that the world presents itself to us as a fiction.
I'd like to get back to the reason why I use words. Let's take this last painting. The painting has to work, it has to produce an emotional effect without using a subject, an explanation, or a commentary. The visual message has to be powerful and legible. Even the word, even before it has a visual impact, is a form. I use the word as an extreme literary situation in order to transform it into a visual situation.

The word indicates and transforms an absence. The train's not there!
Yes, if I draw a train, the spectators are going to try to recognize the qualities of the object. I could draw a Russian train, or a French train, with all the historical, social meanings that go with it. But if I write train – the word – it's as if I put the spectator on a train, any train, just the idea of a train. The spectator goes into the movement of the object and the word.

In a way, that's just the opposite of the pictorial intentions of American Pop Art, which you mentioned as being one of your first influences. Do you think that your painting was a tough and wry response to American Pop Art?
The most important thing for me in American Pop Art was the fact that the artists were not ashamed of themselves. Unlike the Russians, they had no complexes. During the Soviet period, the whole society seemed wrong. We had the impression that the art, the culture and even the true Russian language had been left in the past. The artists who offered an alternative to the official art, instead of being themselves, tried to appear as ideal artists who were able to revive these deficiencies. This ideal artist could not be touched by the social Soviet reality, with its lies and propaganda. American Pop

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Art was my ally. It showed me that you have to be yourself and speak your own language here and now.

Let's get back to your works. There are three kinds of subjects. The most recent ones are the pictures associating a landscape (occasionally urban or reduced to a few clouds) with words, as here. In other cases, more rarely, there are only words. Finally, you create plain landscapes more and more often, devoid of signs or words. What is the function of the landscape in that case?
I want to encompass all of these fields. There are two poles; one is the word and the other is the landscape, the almost-reality. The landscape materializes the problem of space, while the word synthesizes it. As for space, you can decide to treat this problem without the help of the words; that is, directly with the landscape, and that's even better. They're like self-portraits; I walk around in these landscapes, in these constructs of the mind. I need them. It is my presence in this space that is the painting. I always have to go through this landscape, this background space. That's me in the field, on the path, on the train. The pleasure is not in touching objects, but in passing between these objects and beyond the horizon. The words that I use in my pictures are just poetic concepts. The train is a poetic concept. The landscape, that's the concrete problem, the real one, while the word touches on a more general problem. The landscape is the concrete problem of reality. The word touches on more general questions.

What major developments have there been in terms of composition or subject matter since the paintings of the 1970s and early 1980s, the ones that made you famous?
The idea that I have always worked on is the horizon, which becomes larger and larger with time. First, it was the political horizon, then probably a more social horizon. Now the horizon seems to be existential. My credo is still live and see. Nevertheless, life changes and I work with the material that it gives me. The subject matter evolves, and so do the motifs.

Does the use of paint or color pencil correspond to different problems?
It creates different kinds of space. When I work with oils, this immediately demands my full strength. It forces me to build up the foreground from the start, and fill in the background later. I work from the front to the back. With color pencils, it's the opposite; you start with the depth of the picture and end up in the foreground.

That means another relationship to reality.
Of course. With pencils, reality is both more exact and more unreal. It has something of dreams or memory about it. Pencils permit a great transparency that lets light emerge. Working with pencils also means working with the memory, letting yourself be carried by it. Painting doesn't allow that; at least not in the same way.

How do you explain the fact that Russia took so long to recognize you as a great artist?
I think that, during the Soviet period, the people who decided what was or wasn't important never accepted my work. My position in Russian art is complicated. On the one hand, I was among the non-official artists, which is why the official critics never really took interest in me. You could divide these critics into left and right wings. Those on the left, that is the closest to official art, hated me and were convinced that what I was doing had nothing to do with art. For them, my work had to do with wanting to create scandals and attract attention outside of the art world. On the other hand, I had a special status among the non-official artists as well. Politically, what I was doing seemed incomprehensible. In fact, no one accepted what I was doing. Now the situation has changed, even if the people who didn't accept these works still don't accept them. The nice thing today is that there are a lot of young people who understand what I do, unlike the artists of my generation.

I was surprised to see only one work on the wall of your studio in Moscow: a reproduction of the Mona Lisa. How come?
This work played an important part in my life. In my opinion, it's the first painting without painting. Summarizing, I'd say that painting is above all a balancing of masses and colors. In a portrait, for example, each painter is going to be concerned with elements like the costume, hair, or background with a view to harmonizing the colors. And so, he uses all the possibilities at his disposal. Unlike with other portraits, when you try to remember the Mona Lisa, nothing really stands out. You're incapable of telling the colors, of clearly identifying the background, of knowing the exact shade of the hair. It's all brown: the face, the hair, the costume, the drapery, and even the background, even if it's more blue-green than the rest of the picture. Knowing Leonardo's technical ability, it had to be deliberate, thought out. He didn't stress the local colors, the ones that differentiate the face from the drapery or the background. He even avoided them. He just didn't need them. The Mona Lisa is primarily about the construction of space. In my opinion, this picture is not a portrait, and not even a painting. The subject of the picture is an image becoming alive. It's a work whose subject is the border between the sphere of life and the sphere of art. No one was closer to this border than Leonardo was at that particular time. There are more ordinary portraits in his work. If you look at a work like the Annunciation, you can see clearly how well he mastered the tricks of traditional painting. Not in the Mona Lisa. Portraiture becomes more abstract here, more conditional. He does without balanced masses of color – the very source of the constructive power of painting. Usually, the color balance requires a distance between the painting and the spectator. But in order to let the spectator into his painting, Leonardo did without this balance. That's one of the triumphs of this picture. Analysing the Mona Lisa's face is a mistake, therefore, since it has none of the characteristic signs of portraiture. Which explains her expression. She's going to try to smile. Just then, there's an amazing indecisiveness. She doesn't smile. It's the instant just before, when the smile begins, but it could just as well go somewhere else than this famous smile. We are in time, a time of uncertainty. The entire painting works on this effect. It abolishes painting. It's very important that the horizon of the image is placed at the level of the eyes. As far as I know, it's the only instance of this kind in the history of art. The result is that we are looking from below. Usually, the horizon is set lower in portraits, indicating that the sitter sees the landscape differently than we do, from a different vantage point, since he is higher. Our horizons are different. In the Mona Lisa, Leonardo constructed a horizon that works simultaneously for the Mona Lisa and for us. It's a sort of pictorial weapon. The second sign

is this left eye placed closer to us than the right one. It looks at us. It's at the intersection of the horizon and the vertical line that defines the centre of the painting. That's why our vision leads us directly to the space behind the head. And this is the area with the only color in the picture, giving us the impression that the Mona Lisa's head is standing out from the landscape, projecting into our space and emerging from the painting. We are confronted with a double movement: the emerging head and the smile in the making.

Is that an exemplar for you?
Yes, it's a lesson for me. I saw it in Moscow during its tour in the early 1970s. This spatial construction showed the possibility of creating a picture without painting. After seeing it, I couldn't stop thinking about this possibility. It helped me develop my approach to painting.

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Born in Romorantin (France) in 1967, he studied Art History at the Sorbonne and the Ecole du Louvre. From 1992 to 1994 he was a trainee curator at the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Since 1996 he has established himself as an art critic and journalist through regular contributions to periodicals such as Artpress, Connaissance des Arts, Le Monde 2. He has published books devoted to the art of the past (Turner, Van Eyck, Anglo-Chinese garden architecture) and contemporary art (guide de l'art contemporain, Les performances de Bernar Venet, Claude Levêque, etc.). He has also curated a number of exhibitions in France and China.