

What Lies Beneath

PAINTING AND THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF INVISIBILITY

Jane Neal



ARCHAEOLOGY IS NOT AS far from contemporary art as it might first seem. Concerned with the recovery and examination of material evidence and human artifacts, the discipline has recently ceased to be confined to the long dead past, with “creative” archaeologists such as Dr. Christine Finn examining the “remains” of Silicon Valley or filmmaker Peter Brosnan seeking to unearth Cecil B. DeMille’s gargantuan film set built in 1923 for *The Ten Commandments* (1956). If archaeology is about exposing the hidden, then painting is the ideal ground for its application. The medium involves the building up of strata: the textured layering of personal and collective memories; interplaying with fiction; intertwining real and virtual. The “hidden” is contained in the visible, the forgotten often resurrected through the process of painting. Sometimes artists like to play with invisibility using paint to create emotional as well as physical contexts. The issue of the unseen is particularly resonant for several young painters working today: Ali Banisadr, Marius Bercea, Zsolt Bodoni, Daniel Pitín and Kon Trubkovich. These artists share experiences of growing up in a place where they were not entirely free, and where issues of visibility and invisibility were more than abstract intellectual or artistic notions. At times, they were crucial to survival. Furthermore, for their older colleagues — Zdeněk Beran, Erik Bulatov, Victor Ciato, Y.Z. Kami and Istvan Nadler — invisibility has an extra dimension. Unlike their younger counterparts, many of whom are enjoying or are in the process of acquiring worldwide visibility, a large number of older artists were hidden from view simply by virtue of being born in the wrong place at the

wrong time. Some of them, such as Bulatov or Kami, relocated to the West, which brought fresh challenges, but also opportunities; but for artists who remained under strict regimes, becoming visible was risky. How could an artist from Romania working in abstraction during the ’60s and ’70s — a time when only socialist realist art was acceptable to the state — hope to receive attention within his own country, let alone the backing necessary to achieving visibility outside? This text considers artists committed to painting as a means of addressing the significance of both the visible and invisible — in art and the world at large — as part of a process of excavation and discovery.

For the Iranian-born, New York-based painter Ali Banisadr, seeing and non-seeing are connected to motion and the imaginings of the mind. As someone who straddles two distinct cultures, it is unsurprising that his work reflects fragments of very different artistic traditions. Unlike many of his contemporaries who conform to traditional Western painting conventions, Banisadr refutes the idea that painting needs a central focus; he believes that every part of the painting matters. He also tries to capture non-static elements, translating sound into something visual.

When the artist is free to give himself over to his mind, a “shamanic” experience can occur, one that psychologists refer to as entering the “collective unconscious.” It is a deep and liberating process, but what happens to artists who are censored or pressured by particular political regimes? Might they learn to take refuge in this process? Or are they prevented from entering it, in which case they have effectively been “buried” by the state.

When Russian-born, New York-based artist Kon Trubkovich questioned Eric Bulatov on this subject, the resulting dialogue was revealing and unexpected. Trubkovich asked Bulatov about the changes in his work after the USSR fell apart. Bulatov said that under the Soviet Regime he wasn’t in the business of trying to subvert propaganda in order to express something personal. Instead, he wanted to say something impersonal. He was attempting to show, completely objectively, that this official language was false. He wasn’t trying to reveal a hidden, inherent personal relationship, but rather the nature of the system. In terms of the interrupted broadcast of ideology, Bulatov commented that as one ideology ended, another immediately took its place — the ideology of the marketplace. The new ideology had no less thematic potential than the former Soviet one.

This realization was already understood by many artists in the East. Reacting to Trubkovich’s assumption that it was impossible to be a real artist in the Soviet system, Bulatov argued that despite the state of anonymity and invisibility, he and his peers still strived to show their work. Even before the Iron Curtain fell, some of them found visibility in the West through occasionally selling work to Western collectors. Ironically, Bulatov’s artistic recognition originated in the West, not in Russia.

Understandably, artists who experienced a loss of liberty will have something to say on the subject. Yet there has been relatively little movement in the West to “recover” a balance between Western postmodernist and Eastern post-communist art represented in museums and the international art market. Apparently several museums are making it their policy to widen their collections, seeking out works made by artists in Eastern Europe during the communist period, and indeed, several older-generation artists working under communism have become hot property in art-market terms — though few command the kind of prices their Western counterparts enjoy.

In a conversation with Romanian abstract painter Victor Ciato, curator and gallery owner Mihai Pop highlighted some of the overlooked difficulties of working under communism. Pop asked Ciato if his work was hidden or less visible during communism and if the distance from the West affected his practice. Ciato answered that it wasn’t so much a case of hiding his work as being separated from it through distractions: “I suffered a lot during communism: I had to go to the army every week, even though I was a civilian; and we all had to go to political information sessions. My wife and I were forced into attending the party’s evening university. Communism as a

VICTOR CIATO, *Untitled (from the “Moment 0” series), 1968.*

Watercolor on paper, 32 x 45 cm. Markus Seidl Collection, Vienna. Courtesy Plan B, Cluj/Berlin.

Opposite: KON TRUBKOVICH, *Put My Guns in the Ground, 2012.* Oil on linen, 183 x 142 cm. Courtesy Marianne Boesky, New York.



doctrine wasn't the reason for my suffering; all that wasted time was! All those idiotic requests... It was physically disturbing, it was mentally disturbing."

According to Czech artist Zdeněk Beran, the situation in Prague, though frustrating, provoked artists in a particular direction as a means of protest. In conversation with the young Czech painter Daniel Pitín, Beran explained that he came to Prague in the dark years of socialist realism. He enrolled at the academy, and together with several of his colleagues quickly realized all the official doctrines were lies. They therefore started to address the situation. They found a solution in expressive tendencies, which they cultivated because they felt there was truth in this gesture. They also arranged several group shows. One of the first was at the studio of Jiří Valenta, where "The First Confrontation" took place. When the professors heard about this, they let the students know they supported them. Yet the situation was uneasy. The artists were free to exhibit abstract work, but the Party was against their art because it expressed existential feelings without any direct connection to the ideology of socialist realism. Journalists wrote in the Red Right newspaper that socialist realism should be

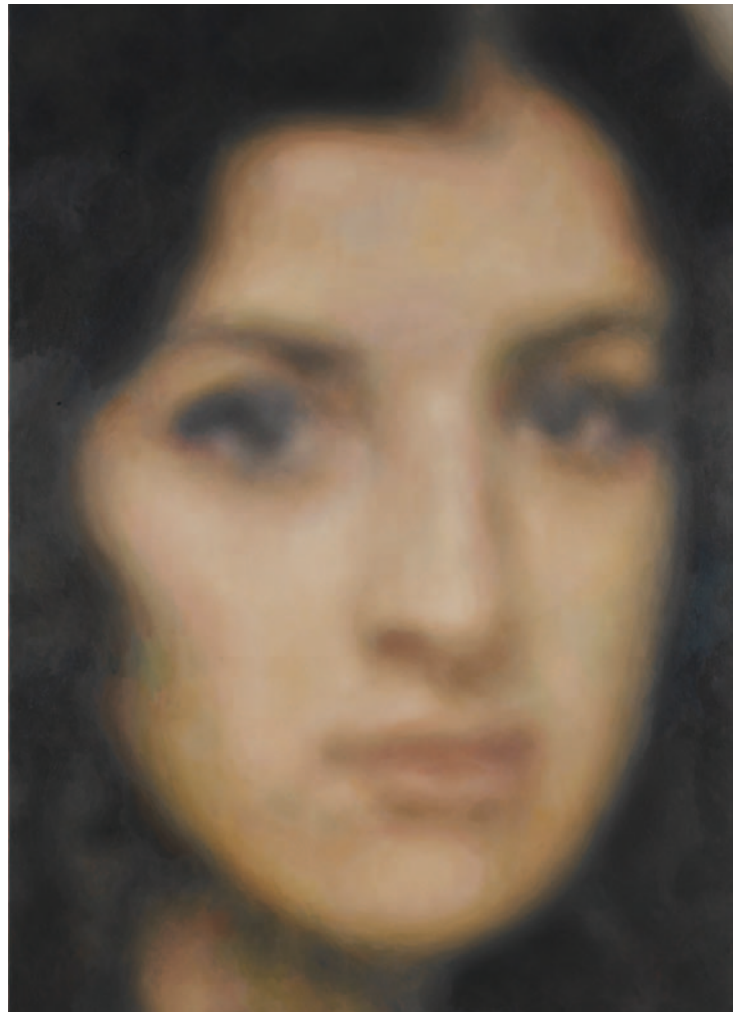
executed in a light, fresh manner; they were doing the opposite.

If abstraction wasn't liked by the Party in Prague, the derision expressed towards it in Romania was sneering. Ciato recounted that: the person in charge of exhibitions and acquisitions at the Union of Artists in Bucharest in 1972 invited him and others to exhibit on the theme of industrial landscape. Ciato responded by making white objects with reflections. The person in charge of the exhibition didn't know how to deal with this response and was too frightened to call this "non state-recognized art form" painting, so they were exhibited as "design objects for lighting."

Though the true nature of Ciato's work was "hidden," like Beran, he managed to find a way to exhibit. Unfortunately though, the work wasn't properly evaluated or understood; it was "disguised," and the meaning was buried beneath the surface. Yet for some artists, such as the Budapest-based painter Istvan Nadler, constraint brought focus and inspiration. Born in 1938 in the midst of global war and crisis, Nadler experienced the restrictive nature of tyranny but used these external disciplinary forces as a means of creating an inner discipline. Nevertheless, although he "escaped" into his own mind, he

still witnessed his country's struggle and the deprivation of freedom. He was 18 when the Hungarian uprising of 1956 occurred; it was to be another 33 years before communism ended.

The young Budapest-based painter Zolt Bodoni grew up as an ethnic Hungarian in Transylvania under Ceausescu's dictatorship, which was particularly hostile towards non-Romanian minorities. Although he was too young to practice as an artist during this period, his awareness of the effect of recent and older history have had a significant impact on his work. Bodoni's practice is based on an analysis of the past. He draws from documents, art history and music. Functioning as a kind of archaeology, his work becomes a way to understand and then a process of recreation, forging a new view from the present. His latest works, though painterly, are conceptually driven by the computer-age notion of "hacking." Like a virus, Bodoni enters old and more recent masterpieces by using the original image as a source and then thwarting and re-presenting it so that it comes to possess an entirely different meaning. Bodoni likens his activity to a kind of performance, as classical musicians re-visit musical scores and thus bring new interpretations to an existent



piece. Yet his activity is also exemplary of the modern condition of our age of relativity when no one way seems certain and no truth is absolute; everything is open to deconstruction and evaluation.

This brings us again to art's relationship with archaeological science. The young Romanian artist Marius Bercea argues that painting is a constant process of research. However partial and subjective, it describes events and ideas, abstract emotions that are essential responses. Bercea also points out that artists themselves can bring about social change, and that the revolutionary work of certain artists, such as Bonnard's theorizing of light and color, changed the face of art forever. Yet Bercea doesn't want to be so scientific as to diminish the magical qualities of art. He still professes a belief in "the mystery of painting."

Pitín's work has been described as depicting a world that is vanishing, "a last grasp on memory." He doesn't think of memory as something invariable; it reminds him of a film set, constantly regrouping as a result of everyday impulses and perceptions that keep on creating new spaces and situations. This process of disappearance from memory is a constant stream, which he attempts to stop

and hold in his paintings by capturing that which is invisible but nonetheless felt.

When Ali Banisadr and Y.Z. Kami discussed notions of invisibility in painting, they found they shared common ground. Both artists originate from Iran and both now live in New York. Both artists share a concern with motion and the movement of the imagination, and both have a fascination for Velázquez and Goya, Persian architecture and miniatures as well as Islamic Geometry and Fayum paintings of the 2nd and 3rd centuries. Also telling in terms of their practice is a twin love of Sufi poetry. Poetry is seen as a means of expressing the deepest levels of human emotion. Unlike prose it follows a precise format, which means the writer has to conform to certain constraints. Yet these enforced parameters can result in the writer searching deep inside himself in order to fulfill the imposed restrictions. In this way it corresponds to what Banisadr and Kami articulate when expressing their studio experience by saying that good studio time results in going to a place while working where you can disappear.

This is essentially what makes the act of painting so special. It transcends time, reality and fiction. One work can bring together a scene from the past, from the imagina-

tion, from the present. It could be regarded as a portal that allows the viewer to move through time. Bercea explains: "There are always layers, and the consequences of living and working during a regime governed by totalitarian political absurdity or under very severe religious norms could be seen as reducing the visibility of the creative developers. Nevertheless, it is part of a recurring historical cycle. The 20th century has created many such opaque curtains. What lies behind them is disillusion and endurance, but also artists; always." ■

Jane Neal is a curator and writer based in Oxford and London.

FROM LEFT: ZDENEK BERAN, *Torzo paintings II*, 1999. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 278 x 200 cm. Courtesy the artist; Y.Z. KAMI, *Untitled*, 2010. Oil on linen, 251 x 173 cm. © Y.Z. Kami. Courtesy Gagolian New York/Los Beverly Hills/London/Paris/Rome/Athens/Geneva/Hong Kong. Photo: Robert McKeever. **OPPOSITE,** from left, clockwise: ZSOLT BODONI, *Tito's Uniform*, 2010. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 110 x 70 cm. Courtesy Ana Cristea, New York; DANIEL PITÍN, *The Guest*, 2010. Oil, acrylic on canvas, 155 x 210 cm. Courtesy Charim Galerie, Vienna; SANDSTORM, 2012. Video installation 1:50 mins. Courtesy hunt kastner, Prague.