

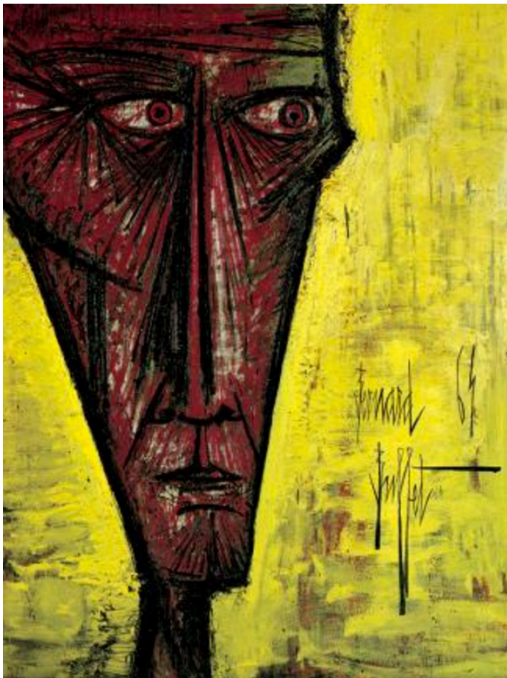
Art in America

NEWS & FEATURES EXHIBITIONS MAGAZINE NEWSLETTER SUBSCRIBE Q

MAGAZINE APR. 28, 2017

A Beckoning Angst

By Brooks Adams



Bernard Buffet (1928–1999) was once seen as the quintessential young French postwar figurative painter. He was known for his spiky signature and his instantly identifiable graphic, black-lined style. His gaunt figures in sparse rooms, his empty cityscapes, sappy clowns, and strangely androgynous bullfighters enthralled me when I was fourteen years old and discovered them in the late 1960s. What happened to this "millionaire painter of misery," and what took Paris so long to mount a Buffet retrospective?

The answer is that Buffet's work is a thorn in the side of the French art establishment. They just can't forgive themselves for having endorsed him so wholeheartedly beginning in the late 1940s. They can't get over the fact that he became so rich and famous, and that the quantity of his output was so unrelenting (an estimated eight to ten thousand paintings) all through the decades when his was an international household name. André Malraux, the minister of cultural affairs from 1958 to 1969, is said to have detested Buffet's work and favored abstraction. Tinged with dread populism, the work of BB, as his Goth signature would have it, became a French luxury brand with myriad down-market spinoffs (particularly the endless clown prints) that the French would rather forget.

All that changed with the serious, and sobering "Bernard Buffet: Retrospective," mounted this past fall by Dominique Gagneux, chief curator of the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris. The surprise of the survey, the first in Paris of its kind since 1958, was its steady intensification as Buffet's career moved along its morbid visual trajectory. Under the deft oversight of Gagneux (who is as fluent with abstraction as she is with figurative art, having done an excellent Serge Poliakoff survey at the museum in 2013), Buffet's work is seen to evolve and even improve, as it becomes ever more painterly and more psychologically claustrophobic. From the early, wanly colored and obsessively linear interiors, still lifes, and Biblical scenes, several with surprisingly out-there, homoerotic overtones, to the last, frenzied finger-painted *vanitas* paintings of the series "La Mort" (Death, 1998–99), depicting skeletons in fancy dress and with their organs intact, the oeuvre startles, repulses, and fascinates in a whole new way, because no one took the trouble to rigorously organize and edit it before Gagneux did.

Buffet's life is a cautionary tale, recounted at some length and with evident relish by the British journalist and social historian Nicholas Foulkes in the 2016 biography *Bernard Buffet: The Invention of the Modern Mega-Artist*.² Foulkes, who has also written a book on great parties of the twentieth century, is no art writer, and he harps rather too often on the celebrity-artist paradigm of Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst, but his basic point is well taken: in the pre-internet age, BB was *that* famous. Foulkes cites Andy Warhol's interview with Benjamin H.D. Buchloh in 1985, in which the artist provocatively stated: "The French do really have one good painter, I mean, my favorite artist would be the last big artist in Paris. What's his name? . . . The last famous painter, Buffet."³ What Foulkes doesn't discuss is that all through the 1950s Warhol would have been looking closely at Buffet's bold, graphic style and circus iconography as he devised his own illustrational manner and deadpan, clownish persona.

As Gagneux points out in her catalogue essay, Buffet's wild success at the age of nineteen was part of a larger postwar search in France for young figureheads to revive the nation's vanquished spirits—specifically, new childlike geniuses and, even better, new French child prodigies. The sloe-eyed, adolescent Buffet, who had walked through blackouts in wartime Paris to get to his nighttime drawing class in the Place des Vosges and been admitted to the École des Beaux-Arts at the age of fifteen, was perfect fodder. His thin men and ungainly women with small breasts and waist-free torsos caught the mood and reflected the realities of privation in postwar Europe. Traditional subjects like the Passion of Christ (which Buffet treated in a 1951 canvas of that title) were given a new "from hunger" twist, and were swiftly heralded by the adherents of existentialism and *misérabilisme*, not to mention the French Communist Party and the Catholic Church.

Yet his precocious success was not unquestioned. By the mid-'50s, Buffet was mockingly referred to as "the Minou Drouet of the paintbrush" (by one Romi, or Robert Miquel, journalist, collector, and specialist in erotica)⁴—Drouet being an eight-year-old Shirley Temple-like poet, extensively televised around 1955-56, whose productions were later judged to be faked by someone else.

Roland Barthes wrote a brilliant essay about the phenomenon, "Literature According to Minou Drouet," republished in *Mythologies* (1957). In a biting review in *Arts* magazine in February 1959, Barthes said of Buffet's Paris show of New York subjects, all glacial, deserted skyscrapers: "The implicit moral of this new Greuze is that one is decidedly happier in Belleville than in Manhattan."

With his partner of eight years, a slightly younger literary aspirant named Pierre Bergé, Buffet lived and worked during the '50s in a farmhouse in rural Nansé in Haute-Provence. But by the end of the decade the couple were fully enjoying the fruits of success, having moved into the Château d'Arc outside Aix-en-Provence, acquired a Rolls Royce or two, and posed as the subjects of lifestyle articles in *Paris Match*. Buffet early on was lionized by famous writers, among them Louis Aragon, Georges Simenon, and Jean Cocteau, all of whom wrote catalogue essays for him. (In 1957 BB did marvelous drypoint illustrations, replete with his trademark "bundle of thorns" calligraphy, for Cocteau's play *La Voix humaine*.) Buffet was packaged by *The New York Times Magazine* (in 1958) under the rubric "The Fabulous Young Five" with Yves Saint Laurent, Brigitte Bardot, Roger Vadim, and Françoise Sagan (who wrote *Bonjour Tristesse* at eighteen). When Bergé left Buffet for Saint Laurent in 1958, many art world alliances had to recalibrate. Almost simultaneously, Buffet teamed up in Saint-Tropez with a gorgeous ex-girlfriend of Sagan's, Annabel Schwob (perhaps a distant relation of Lucy Schwob, aka Claude Cahun), who became his second wife and muse. (A first marriage to the artist Agnès Nanquette ended after about a year.) BB and Annabel's *mondain* existence really took off, as did their weird reclusive lifestyle, with many periods of acute alcoholism for both of them. Buffet committed suicide at seventy-one by suffocating himself with a plastic bag emblazoned with the BB initials; he had developed Parkinson's disease and could no longer paint.

The homoerotic work in the first part of the show was a real standout; you began to think Buffet could have been a great gay artist. *Two Men in a Room* (1947), the 1948 winner of the Prix de la Critique (sponsored by Galerie Saint-Placide in Paris), looks to be a bald depiction of a postwar hookup. One scrawny youth is seated nude in a spindly chair, while another figure, bare-chested and still wearing his beret, lowers his shorts, exposing his pubic hair. The still life on the table is impoverished, the hanging light fixture antiquated and without pictorial context; bareness is all. The support comprises sewn-together sheets, roughly worked with white brushstrokes and sgraffito. The separation of the figures, their twisted, solipsistic isolation from one another (or is it a single self-portrait repeated?), is all part of the existentialist come-hither. You feel Buffet's postwar avatars are almost too starved, and too anorectic, to get it up.

An early climax of the Paris show was the room devoted to the series of three big, panoramic paintings from 1954 titled "Horror of War." These looked sensational together, depicting crowds of nude people being slaughtered, hanged, and decapitated. All three horizontal canvases have low horizons; two are ablaze with fiery orange-and-pink sunsets. I particularly liked *Horror of War: The Hanged*, with its imagery of grimacing nude men suspended in a grove of bare winter trees (a nod to a well-known print by Jacques Callot) and what looks to be a Provençal

townscape in the distance. Echoes of Francisco Goya, Jacques-Louis David, and Henri "Le Douanier" Rousseau abound (particularly in the motif of an avenging nude woman on high in *The Angel of War*). But I also felt a new mood of monumental titillation afoot, a kind of lurid '50s sensationalism, prophetic of what in the '90s would come to infuse the work of the Young British Artists—in particular Dinos and Jake Chapman's sculptural re-creations of Goya's "The Disasters of War."

When does the false feeling begin to seep into Buffet's pictures? I felt it most strongly in the room devoted to circus themes, where suddenly my heart sank. There is an air of stentorian hawking in these pictures of 1955 that may be endemic to the iconography of the circus. *Tête de Clown*, all thin-lipped resignation undercut by perky primary colors, became perhaps his most popular and often-reproduced image, and it should be understood as a self-portrait of sorts. (In the show, a black-and-white video of Buffet applying his own clown makeup suggests a more performative zeal; he really is taking on the role of the martyred clown.) But the best painting in this room was *The Rhinoceros*. The cage has an obsessive, vertical linearity, and the surrounding amphitheater is empty, emphasizing the existential isolation of the animal within.

Self-portraiture played a strange and all-pervasive role in the show, inflecting all the early genre scenes and cropping up in most of the later literary subjects. Two self-portraits from 1954 and '55, showing him in a sleeveless undershirt and a dark work shirt, respectively, depict Buffet as skinny-armed yet barrel-chested, with a distinctive coiffure of forward-combed spit curls and a disconcerting, grimacing mouth. The sardonic motif of bared teeth, present in his work since the late '40s, becomes the painter's trademark of disgust. It also has an animal ferocity that should not be discounted. Likewise, the graphic crow's feet at the outer corners of the eyes almost resemble animated starfish, and become Kabuki-esque signifiers of anguish.

Animal and human, insect and amphibian all begin to interface, and slowly merge, as Buffet struggles to maintain his bearings in his painted universe. He begins to create in series. Starting in 1957, on the first Thursday of every February, a Buffet exhibition would open at Galerie David et Garnier (or, from '68, Galerie Maurice Garnier) on the Right Bank's Avenue Matignon, an *haut bourgeois* quarter hardly frequented by avant-garde artists at the time. In 1960 the show was "The Birds," each example an odd pairing of gigantic avians and nude females lying spread-eagled in tilled Provençal fields. Here, the paint handling has become much heavier: repetitively scored marks enliven the high-relief surface. In *The Birds: Birth of Day*, a colossal red bird's beak is aimed directly at the woman's detailed pudendum, while two even bigger birds watch. By 1964 and "The Flayed," the artist's face is rendered as pulsating blood and muscle, like that of a sci-fi zombie, and those crow's feet have become fierce diagonal lines of force. In *Head of a Flayed One Seen from the Back* (1964), the skull is reduced to a bulging red globe, undercut with black brushwork, while the cervical spine stands erect with sharply feathered black lines projecting outward. You can almost feel Buffet taking on contemporary, crusty postwar French abstraction, like that of Jean-Paul Riopelle.

In the '70s and '80s series selected by Gagneux, Buffet emerged as a kind of cartoony pompier. He produced enormous history paintings for his annual show, and in '74 became a member of the impossibly snobbish and fustian Académie des Beaux-Arts. "Dante's Inferno" (1976) depicts many of his Parisian friends as damned in hell. "Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea" (1989) shows a histrionic Captain Nemo on a Victorian-style *Nautilus*. These series looked big, bad, intentionally regressive, and fun in an awful kind of way. In the catalogue, Gagneux mentions a connection to Bad Painting (without citing examples), and by this time, Peter Saul's and Martial Raysse's works were all part of the conversation.

When did the current Bernard Buffet revival start? According to Fabrice Hergott, director of the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, it began as early as 1991 during informal talks with Martin Kippenberger, in which the German artist said that he wished for nothing more than "to be the Bernard Buffet of his time."⁵ Hergott also cites Charline von Heyl, who more than ten years ago stated that Buffet's work was a source of "constant inspiration."⁶ In the catalogue Hergott reproduces a photo of Buffet that von Heyl sent him and that she keeps up in her studio. Buffet is shown in 1958, at a gala for the Union des Artistes signing a huge self-portrait, attended by clowns, in a circus ring.

In 2002, then Centre Pompidou curator Alison M. Gingeras included a selection of Buffet's early work in "Cher Peintre . . . : Figurative Paintings Since Late Picabia" (a show that I praised in these pages in March 2003), and took a lot of flak for it from critic Philippe Dagen in *Le Monde*. (Dagen also panned Gagneux's Buffet retrospective.) Gingeras is still reliving these battles in her essay for Gagneux's catalogue.

For "La Force de l'art" at the Grand Palais in 2006, the critic Éric Troncy built a whole room around Buffet's huge salon machines "The Clown Musicians" (1991) and paired them with soft-focus, soft-core porn photos by David Hamilton (another kitsch master who committed suicide). In 2006 there was a Buffet retrospective at the Gemeentemuseum in the Hague, that world-class repository of Mondrian; in 2008, another at the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt; and in 2014–15, a survey at the Heydar Aliyev Center (designed by Zaha Hadid) in Baku, Azerbaijan. In "Francis Picabia: Our Heads Are Round so Our Thoughts Can Change Direction" at New York's Museum of Modern Art this year, works of the '30s by the "postmodern" Picabia brought to mind Buffet's later clown and skeleton imagery. Picabia's *Spanish Revolution* (1937), an image of a costumed Spanish woman standing between a male and a female skeleton, made me think of Buffet's series "The Bullfight" (1966), in which Annabel plays every bullfighter's role. Picabia's *Fratellini Clown* (1937-38) looked to be one of many sources for Buffet's rather tepid *Tête de Clown*. But while Buffet's clown denotes a melancholic type, Picabia's "Fratellini" suggests a forbidding portrait of a historical person, one member of a venerable clown dynasty that reaches as far as Federico Fellini's movie *The Clowns* (1970), in which "Fratellini" descendants appear. Picabia's work was included in Jean Clair's exhaustive survey of clown imagery "The Great Parade: Portrait of the Artist as Clown" at the Grand Palais in 2004; Buffet's Pop clown, arguably more famous, was not.

After years of omission, suddenly, a lot of Buffet's artistic legacy and his *beau monde* milieu looks fascinating. You can watch endless black-and-white videos of Annabel doing her cabaret act circa 1970 on YouTube. You can ponder what became of the *Life of Christ*, first shown in 1962 (and not included in the Paris show), which he painted for the chapel of the Château d'Arc and later donated to the Vatican's Museum of Modern Art. (I can swear that my wife Lisa Liebmann and I marveled at these works on our Roman honeymoon in 1993.) Such works of latter-day ecclesiastical French art even have their own American fan club: that would be the Minnesota and North Dakota Chapter of the Patrons of the Arts in the Vatican Museums, which recently raised tens of thousand of euros to pay for the restoration of BB's *Nativity* and *St. Veronica*.

You can wonder whether France will ever have its own Bernard Buffet Museum; Japan already has two. The Collection Fonds de Dotation Bernard Buffet, the major lender to Gagneux's show, was founded in 2009 by BB's dealer, Maurice Garnier, and his wife, Ida, to establish a core collection for such a museum. The foundation appears to be an active collecting entity: in 2013 they bought back BB's early masterpiece *Two Men in a Room* for 323,986 euros. That's peanuts, by today's standards. The best of BB—and I would include works not just from the '50s but also from the '80s and '90s—has a lot to tell us about the changing fortunes of postwar French and contemporary art.

"Bernard Buffet: Retrospective" was on view at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Oct. 14, 2016–Mar. 5, 2017. *"Bernard Buffet: An Intimate Portrait"* was at the Musée de Montmartre et Jardins Renoir, Paris, Oct. 18, 2016–Mar. 5, 2017.

CURRENTLY ON VIEW "Bernard Buffet: Paintings from 1956 to 1999," at Venus Over Manhattan, New York, through May 27.

BROOKS ADAMS is a contributing editor to *A.i.A.*