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Erik Bulatov

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Those who have set foot in Erik Bulatov's studio in Moscow will never forget their first impression. A photograph from 1984 vividly brings that moment home to me again. The artist moves between his monumental works like a discreet sceneshifter. The things stacked here are not idylls. The red party slogans and emblems he lays over the masterfully painted landscape, sky, and street paintings glow too garishly—unlike the monotony of everyday life outside his studio door at the time, where the golden promise of the Soviet star illuminating five continents had long since yielded to a stifling, gray bureaucracy. Advertising, attractive shops, cafés, and other meeting places were largely lacking, and small groups of people only formed in front of the occasional kiosk, patiently waiting in line for a glass of kefir or for vanilla ice cream.

Erik Bulatov was born in Sverdlovsk, today's Yekaterinburg, in 1933 as the son of an engineer and grew up in Moscow. His school days at the secondary art school there, and later in the painting department of Moscow's Surikov Art Institute, coincided with an era of political stagnation. Though he escaped the Stalinist Great Terror, the same party-compliant artists continued to teach at the schools. It is no surprise that after graduating in 1959, Bulatov did not pursue an official painting career but instead sought his livelihood as an illustrator of children's books. At the same time, he painted himself across the history of styles and genres, and in doing so—strengthened by his years of study with the painter Robert Falk and accompanied by friends such as the graphic artist Vladimir Favorsky and later the poet Vsevolod Nekrasov—acquired striking artistic virtuosity. After his early landscapes, portraits, still lifes, and seemingly orphic spatial and color studies, in the late 1970s he turned to everyday Soviet life and from then on used his canvases as fields for testing on which he let various levels of reality and forms of expression—language and painting—collide, for example, by using political slogans that ran across the pictorial surface to cause the illusionistic space to only flash through in fragments behind the rigid grid of letters. Or vice versa, by intensifying the illusionistic depth with short poetic texts. Bulatov allegedly had the bright idea for this way of painting during a stay at a health spa by the sea, where a red horizontal pole blocked his view.

Traveling, exploring new horizons, is one of our basic needs. *Red Horizon* (1971/72, fig. ##) illustrates how confined the radius was at that time. Bulatov now painted a bar in the form of a red ribbon with gold stripes—the ribbon of the Order of Lenin—above the horizon line between the sea and the sky. The ribbon emphasizes the two-dimensional material reality of the pictorial surface and prevents our gaze from wandering into the distance. What Bulatov is

showing the viewer is an existential relationship of tension: the longing for foresight and freedom of movement in an ideologically confined reality. *Two Landscapes on a Red Banner Background* (1972–74, fig. ##) points in a similar direction, a painting with two landscapes that he painted over a red pictorial ground like two overlapping souvenir photos. The scenes with strollers and bathers come across as precariously happy on the heavy, wrinkled banner fabric. A gust of wind would suffice to blow the pictures away. In Bulatov's paintings, the visual and movement axes always supply important clues as well. This is the case, for instance, in *Krasikov Street* (1977, fig. ##), where he placed a monumental Lenin poster in the middle of the painting between a road and a sidewalk. People stream heedlessly past it.

With his lean build and his beard, Bulatov looks like a medieval icon painter or a fearless mountaineer. In his home country he moved within the bounds of an ideological minefield with his paintings. At the time, the young Soviet curator Viktor Misiano once respectfully referred to him in a conversation as the leading moral figure of his generation. Each of his works accurately described the deviation from the official artistic canon that was only just possible. Yet Bulatov did not make use of bold models. Rather, he focused on motifs that caused the ambivalence and the fragility of the political system to become visible. Thus the portrait of Leonid Brezhnev (1977) features a highly decorated and at the same time alarmingly pale party secretary who is incapable of developing any power beneath the bombastic party symbols. In retrospect, the portrait of Mikhail Gorbachev, *Revolution–Perestroika* (1988, fig. ##), painted ten years later, seems visionary. A wide staircase that leads up to a statue of Lenin dominates the center of the composition. The terms revolution and perestroika constitute the upper and lower frame, while Mikhail Gorbachev slides into the picture from the right at a slightly lower angle in front of two microphones. But is it really Gorbachev? The prominent port-wine stain on his head is missing. It could be one or the other KGB director who climbed the political ladder as a party protégé.

Let us flash back to the beginnings of Bulatov's creative work. On the occasion of his first solo exhibition in the West, he made the following comment about Socialist Realism: "For us, language has dual meaning: on the one hand, it is the language of power, on the other hand the language of our everyday life. . . . We have to build on this discrepancy."¹ And he explains: "I can only see, recognize, anything in this relentless, flowing current through art."² Bulatov assigns the crucial role in this process of consciousness to light, which causes social reality to become visible and at once transcends it. In doing so, he places himself in the tradition of icon painters and the Suprematists. At the same time, he allows us to experience space with heightened awareness, as if we were perceiving it through the windshield of a moving vehicle: "We are afraid in the car, because our movement through the world is essentially nothing other than movement toward death."³ Bulatov uses alternating scenarios to demonstrate that living environments are relative; that behind each one we stride through,

¹ Erik Bulatov: Moskau, exh. cat. Kunsthalle Zürich et al. (Zurich: Parkett, 1988), 42–43.

² Ibid., 28.

³ Ibid., 32.

another one opens. And in doing so, he undermines the totalitarian, global aspirations of the Communist Party: "Our responsibility, and that of our generation, consists in showing that this world, which is depicted as so unwavering, immobile, and eternal, is not everything, neither endless nor boundless. On the contrary: there is also something beyond the boundary. And here, the existence of the world is actually spurious, ephemeral, and not true. Real being is beyond the boundaries. That is also why the space beyond the painting is so important for me: it is precisely this that is true being for me."⁴ Bulatov painted his most controversial works in Moscow without the opportunity of ever exhibiting them. Any attempt—the most well known was the Bulldozer exhibition in 1974—lasted only several hours. And after the opening up of the Soviet Union, Bulatov had to wait longer than other artists for export permits. A solo exhibition at the Kunsthalle Zürich in 1988, which then toured through various European and American cities, gave him his first break. In 1989 he painted the wake-up call "perestroika" in uppercase letters in a blood-red sky (fig. ##). He had two hands hold the letters T and R, wedged into one another like a hammer and sickle, upward and thus created a central axis, above which the slogan is inserted from a distance and removed again by means of perspectival foreshortening. Where does this "modification" lead? Into a liberal future or back into the past? More than twenty-five years later, we still cannot answer that question. And in view of the newly awakened Russian nationalism and the unrestrained centralism, we soberly note: with its raised flag, Bulatov's *Liberté* (1989/90, fig. ##), which he painted after his first trip to France as a tribute to Eugène Delacroix, is nowhere near the finish.

⁴ Ibid., 41.