



J. Dubuffet

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THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

J E A N D U B U F F E T

A Thesis Submitted To:

The Faculty of History Of Art + Design
and Complimentary Studies

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE

FACULTY OF FINE ART

DEPARTMENT OF PRINT MAKING

BY

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APRIL 1985

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JEAN DUBUFFET

In 1945, when Europe was finally freed from the Nazis, Paris was a ruined and very changed city. Many of its most talented writers and artists had fled the city from the occupation. Surrealism was now quite dead as Andre Breton and many of the Surrealists had, like many others, ran to New York. And the post-war French avant garde was dominated by those who had stayed behind during the years of occupation. One of the exemplary figures of post-war Paris was Alberto Giacometti. He had all but disowned his surrealist works, and was sculpting standing or walking figures, with gaunt frames and ravaged, knobbly skin, capturing a strong sense of solitude, which seemed to be the visual metaphor of the "existentialist man". Any work that was fighting against the values of France before the war and its landscapes of pleasure, could form the basis for a new consciousness. The starting point was a clotted lump of paint, out of this grew a form of abstract painting, "Tachisme" the French version of the abstract expressionism, in America. But also out of all this came one of the strongest and most prolific artists of the school of Paris, Jean Dubuffet.

Only a few months after the liberation of Paris from the Nazis, in October 1944, Jean Dubuffet held his first exhibition at the Galerie Rene Drouin. He was forty three, and past the age that many artists had uttered their brief messages. All of the work in this exhibition had been done since 1942, and it marked his third attempt to become a painter. To this day Dubuffet remains a strong opponent of cultural pretension.

HIS LIFE

Dubuffet was born of a middle-class family in Le Havre in 1901. He attended the Lycee of Le Havre until 1918 when he received his baccalaureate degree. He went to Paris to study painting at the Academie Julian. Butasteful, and he found the academic training distasteful, and after six months he withdrew from the Academie to paint and draw in his own studio. But he did not last long doing his own work either, in his own words :-

"After the Lycee, I studied painting for six or seven years, as well as many other subjects : Poetry, literature, avant-garde, arriere-garde, metaphysics, paleography, ethnography, foreign languages, ancient languages, as you can see, I was looking for the way. Well, it didn't work out, I had the impression that I was not adopting to my human condition : I was slipping around : the gears would not lock into place. After all these years of (half baked) studies, this accumulation of knowledge (which I forgot as I went along) and systems (which I was constantly changing) in the back of my mind". He also said "I look at the man sitting opposite me, tranquil, peaceful face, no problems, delighted to be alive. Happy to have a seat on the streetcar and to have new shoes. The condutor jokes with him. He answers without thinking, in exactly the right tone. Ah, that cannot be imitated, that tone. The woman next to him, tranquil , nice intelligent and laughing face. Happy to have earrings, her man out of hospital, he has a raise. Such faces full of picture sequence and personality,

full of animation , and at the same time profundity, complexity humanism. In the end I couldn't stand it any longer. I lay down my brushes and I went to work in a wine-shop and subsequently became a wine-dealer....." (1)

His time at the Academie Julien filled him with a repugnance for the social and cultural status of the artist , which was to last with him all through his life, to today. he determined to make himself a painter from scratch, in it's purist, most innocent sense without any regard for Museums, Galleries or Dealers. He put forward an art that could be practised by everyone, not requiring providential gifts or learned skills, an art flowing from life, not needing initiation into a craft open to few. And as the official art world was of no interest to him , neither could the wine business satisfy him for long. So once more Dubuffet launched himself into his own work and he began to search for a popular art form. His house on Rue Lhomond, where he lived with his second wife Lili, or Emilie Carlu from 1935, became a workshop, a theatre and a little carnival. He was adept at playing many musical instruments. But he would mainly play the accordion for his friends, and make life masks of their faces. The plaster he used in making these masks was the first time he was involved with tactile material. The plaster changed , grew hot, solidified and seemed to have an organic life of it's own . He also used his friends as models when he created a puppet show of carved wooden marionettes. Soon afterwards he began to paint again



MASKS 1935

quite spontaneously, mostly painting his wife Lili. But as he still doubted his talents, and his masks, puppets and paintings met with no success he once more returned to the wine business in 1937. This was interrupted by his conscription into the Army in 1939. But he was too undisciplined for the Army and was quickly demobilised, and in 1942 was occupied with painting again.

When Dubuffet left the wine business in 1942 to take up painting full time, he was neither an untrained artist nor without artistic culture. He had attended Art School and studied Art History. He had many friends from world of art and literature. In the 1920's in Paris he had been friendly with Max Jacob and the members of the Surrealist movements. He had spent a lot of time around the major museums of Europe, and studies of many of the Masters, as he was going to write a thesis on the visual motifs used by artists. His closest friends throughout the forties in Paris were the most celebrated literary talents of the time. They included Francis Ponge, Jean Paulhan, Henri Michaux, Georges Limbour, Ramond Quineau and others. Jean Fautrier an abstract painter highly esteemed by Paris intellectuals was a good friend. So that, by 1942, Dubuffet was far from uncontaminated by culture. So shedding his acquired ideas would not be easy. He had to be able to reach back to an earlier stage of childlike , innocence and amazement. He knew and admired

the work of Paul Klee who had taken a similar path into the elementary and formative beginnings of art.

DUBUFFET AND L'ART BRUT

Dubuffet's art and thoughts found proper direction when he rediscovered the art of the mentally ill. In 1923, Dubuffet was given a book written by Dr. Hanz Prinzhorn; "Bildneri der Geisteskranken" published in Berlin the year before.³ The book asserted that the art of the mentally ill were worthy of serious aesthetic consideration. The book caused a sensation on its publication, but Prinzhorn did not leave it at that, he drew a parallel between the works of art of asylum in-mates and those of children and of primitive cultures. It was his book that set Dubuffet off on his ever changing career as an artist. It contains many of the premises directing his activities. Prinzhorn spoke of man's natural stage as opposed to his cultural state or his primal unity with the universe which has been destroyed by artificial conventions and repressions of civilization. Prinzhorn put forward that unfettered basic animal and spiritual drives may lead the individual to psychic strength and harmony with the universe, instead of the neurosis, which is what happens in most cases when bound within the confines of western civilization. And the cultural inhibitions can stifle a universal creative urge, manifested by the art of the mentally ill.

Dubuffet put his views on Prinzhorn's book forward in his speech "Anti-cultural positions" of 1951. In this speech he put forward his points on rejecting certain premises

of western culture and his preference for the spiritual attitudes of primitive peoples. He drew distinctions between western and his primitive counterparts. That western man believes that he is very different from other elements of nature, such as the wind, trees and rivers.

Conversely, primitive man believes that he is of a very similar substance to the elements. That there exists a real continuity between man and nature, and that man is not a superior being but merely one being among many : that western man believes that the world exists in the shape that he thinks it, based on reason and logic. Primitive man, on the contrary, rejects logic and respects the states of delirium and madness. Dubuffet says he has -

"A great interest in madness. I am convinced that art has much to do with madness and aberrations".

That western culture is fond of analysis. Whereas Dubuffet distrusts analysis:-

"My inclination leads me when I want to see something really well, to regard it with its surroundings whole if there is a tree in the country I don't bring it to my laboratory to look at it under my microscope. Because I think the wind which blows through its leaves is necessary for knowledge of the tree and cannot be separated from it". :(4)

That painting is more effective still than the written word, particularly painting which seeks to capture the underground and primal stages of thought: the notions of beauty and ugliness are western concepts, unknown to

primitive peoples. Western man cannot agree on what is beautiful. It would be desirable to get rid of this notion and teach men that all objects may be sources "of fascination and illumination."

So Prinzhorn's book led Dubuffet to reject two of the most basic schema of western culture; the value of categorical thought and the notion of beauty. From 1945 onwards Dubuffet started to collect for the now massive collection of Art Brut (uncultured art), with the patronage of the members of the Compagnie de l'Art Brut, André Breton, Jean Paulhan, Charles Ratton, Henri Pierre Roche, and Michel Tapié. Dubuffet described the collection as consisting of -

"Works of all kinds - drawings, paintings, embroideries, modeled or sculpted figures, etc.- which present a spontaneous and strongly inventive character, as little indebted to customary art or cultural models as possible and of which the authors are obscure individuals, alien to the milieu of professional artists".

The works are not naive or surrealist works, both of which are offshoots of cultural art, but -

"Propositions of themselves unpredictable and wholly invented both in medium (materials, techniques) and in their inspiration. We require that the works considered .. correspond to a feverish impulse and not some episodic stimulus or caprice where exaltation plays little part." (5)

Although Dubuffet was striving for an art as pure and honest as that of the pieces in the Art Brut collection. He is not a creator of Art Brut himself. His experience and grasp of culture and its means of diffusion, together with the place assigned to him in the art world, if only because of the prices his work commands on the art market, distinguish him from the makers of Art Brut as he describes them. Nor has he ever claimed to have produced Art Brut. But there is still an amount of subversive energy in his

work and a defiance of the system of art production. Various Art Brut exhibitions were held in 1947 and 1951 in the basement of the Galerie Drouin, and in a small annexe to the Nouvelle Revue Francaise offices. The collection is housed today in the Chateau de Beaulieu in Lausanne.

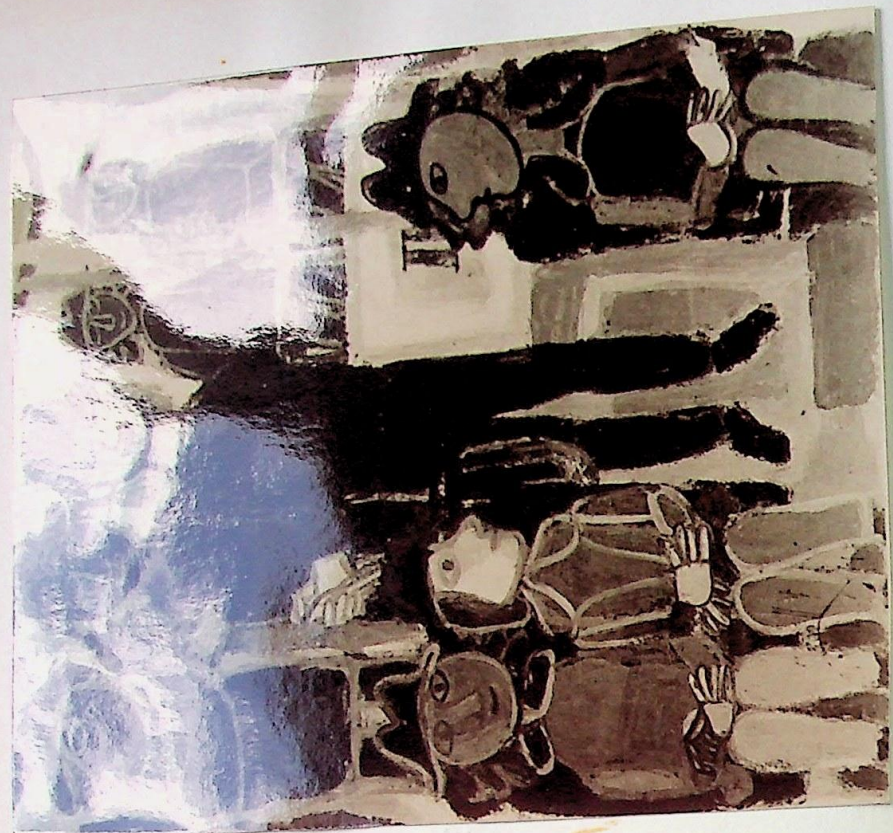
DUBUFFET : SURREALISM AND DADAISM

like the Dadaists and Surrealists, Dubuffet liked materials and pushed them to the limits of their visual possibilities. He specifically used old discarded materials. But the Surrealists and Dadaists cherished the use of heterogeneous materials for their own sake, whereas Dubuffet combined them into a new and denser unity. Another element he shares with Surrealism and Dadaism is his reliance on chance and his interest in automatism. But despite the fact that Dubuffet was personally close to any of the members of the Surrealist movement in the twenties, he never aligned himself with the movement. But certain parallels can be made. Dubuffet shared his belief with the Surrealists that categorical thought is an improvised aspect of the workings of the mind. The Surrealists thought that automatism would open the doors to the true processes of thought. Automatism was how Andre Breton defined -

"Surrealism, noun, masculine. Pure psychic automatism by which one proposes to expell either verbally, in writing or by any other vehicle, the real functioning of the mind" (6)

Dubuffet's subjective differed from the Surrealists in that the Surrealists sought an exceptional state of poetic surreality, most of which occurred at the verbal level, whereas Dubuffet sought neither surreality or so-called objectivity, but the visions and delusions of an ordinary self-conscious subjectivity. His desire to shock stodgy bourgeois society, his anti-war attitude, his "anti-cultural positions" differ from the previous challenges in expressionism, futurism, Dada and Surrealism in his individual stance, in his refusal to participate in group exhibitions. His work is expressionistic in that he cultivates deliberate vulgarity, or an excess amount of elements; there are exquisite things and qualities in his work, but he seems to take pains to put in too much of them. But, at that same time the very fact that his moves are deliberate puts an ironic distance between his excess and the vacuum of the primitive and disturbed. The Dadaist notion of subverting tradition is

well understood, but Dubuffet , an enormously gifted and ambitious artist attempts to apply it to practical ends. To make an art for the comfort of a shopkeeper or a blue collar worker.

THE WORK

METRO March 1943



COIN AND BREEDER Sept. 1943

In post-war Paris the predominant work was abstract. Hans Hartung (born Germany 1904) developed an informal abstract painting that he had tentatively breached in the early 1930's. His work was a reaction against the disciplined, severe, near-geometric abstraction of Mondrian and his followers. This seemed to suit the mood of the years after the end of the war. This work came to be called "L'art Informel" or 'Tachism' (after the french word for the brush mark). Its part takers included Pierre Soulages (born 1919), Wols (born 1913), and Charles de Stael (1914-55). It was clear now that abstract art was not limited in its vocabulary, and could be made to carry all kinds of meanings. But its practitioners seemed to be minor artists, occupying a small territory of their own, and not venturing far from it. (But) Dubuffet came out as an exception. Throughout his life he has moved from one transformation to another, showing total unconcern as to whether his picture could be called abstract or not. He began his first attempt to become a painter by painting the fields and houses in the countryside outside Paris. Occasionally the image was animated by little figures in a strange up tilted perspective. His subjects were awkward cows and milkmaids, or nude monstrous lady cyclists riding their odd contraptions straight at the spectator. He made many pictures of city life. This work, in the beginning, was reminiscent of the Fauves with startling juxtapositions of large discordant colour patches. His images of people on the metro are more like little in their stalls than human beings. He drew their heads and bodies crudely, like a child would draw, according to the simplest schema of frontal and profile view. He dismissed perspective from the start in favour of a more direct innocent presentation of space, depth being indicated by the crude method of overlapping. His figures look as if they are performing some strange



CHILDBIRTH March 1944

ritual , staring into space rigidly standing and stiffly seated.

Dubuffet painted a much more intimate painting in "Childbirth" of March 1944. This painting -

"Captures the naivete of votive pictures : it is like those thank offerings found in pilgrimage churches and presents a comparable aspect of ritual, of emotion recollected in tranquility " (7)

his work and vision are conceived in terms of the vision of the ordinary man, aspiring to the immediacy of the spoken word. The subjects are not noble, the pre-dominant subjects being the human figure, the landscape and the mundane object are the recurrent subjects of his life long activity. But despite the recurring theme, there are shifts of emphasis . The figure predominates in the mid and late forties, to be replaced by stones, tables, cows and landscapes in the fifties and early sixties. The "Hourloup" series had as its subject mainly man made subjects : coffee pots, bottles , beds, basins, scissors. Dubuffet's models being residual mental images, the same kind as those of untrained artists or the artists of Art Brut.

Dubuffet presented us with images of unaccustomed banality : crudeness, intending to jolt us out of our acquired aesthetic responses :

"When one has looked at painting of this kind one looks at everything around one with a new refreshed eye, and one learns to see the unaccustomed and amusing side of things. When I say amusing, I do not mean solely the funny side, but the grand, the moving and even the tragic aspects (of ordinary things)" (8)

Dubuffet shows a strong familiarity with his subject matter of his views of the streets of Paris. He shunned the grand boulevards, where Pissarro and Monet found inspiration, in favour of the narrow back streets and painted the old tenements of high tenements, peopled with depersonalized stick-figures, leaning out of their windows for a breath of air, or standing aimlessly in the streets. His figures are psychological foundlings , discovered on his own doorstep,



5 GRAND NU CHAR BONNEUX August 1944

belonging to everyone and no one. The real difference between these figures of Dubuffet's and similar figures in the art of children, primitives and the mentally disturbed is their absence of intention. It is known or suspected that the child, primitive and disturbed person have private understandings of their work. For example, the child sees a perfectly reasonable likeness of her mother in her drawing, while the disturbed person sees, perhaps, God in their drawing. In the case of the child, primitive or disturbed person, what is lacking is not intention, but style, which is considered a consistent way of making intentions manifest to an audience. So it is possible to feel a little supercilious, a little beside the point, in the enthusiasm for such productions.

One day in August 1944 in the Jardin des Plantes, Dubuffet found himself less impressed by the flowers than with the blocks of anthracite, basalt and graphaitee that he saw. To him, this dark monochromatic material was a life of its own. This inspired him to paint his first large nude the "Grand Nu Charbonneux", this extraordinary painting not only held premonitions of the "Corps des Dames", but with its clumsy, awkward stance, its gestures of exclamatory display, its cruel but loving outline, its naive emphasis on sex, it is one of the longest and boldest nudes in modern painting. So from these facades Dubuffet went on to look more closely at the monuments and walls themselves. His "Messages" (1945-46) are derived from the inscriptions on old, crumbling walls, the graffiti which have become so

popular since Dubuffet and Brassai called attention to them. Giacomo Balla had previously depicted the silent poignancy of wall scribbles in his "Bankrupt" of 1902, and Max Ernst anticipated some of Dubuffet's themes and techniques in his "Histoire Naturelle" of 1925. But where Balla communicated an aspect of human tragedy and pathos, and Ernsts "Frottage" have a dream like quality. Dubuffet's "Messages" are much more matter-of-fact in their statement. Dubuffet relies on the associations evoked in the mind and eye of the viewer.

In 1946 (at the age of forty-five) Dubuffet was still a victim of his educated sensibility. This can be seen in his paintings. Starting in 1943 he launched an attack on good taste. As an attack it was largely unsuccessful. Because of his paintings of 1934 - 44 are quite pleasing. Their appeal seems almost facile in comparison to the amount of notoreity his successive cycles of work unleashed. His aims were, as yet, incompatible with his personal instincts, so he resorted to materials. Using gravel, cement, swedish putty, sand, and at other times leaves, bark, banana peels, butterfly wings, which would impose their own natural hues. Elsewhere he worked with distemper glazes, emulsions, plastic paints, zinc oxide and resin varnishes. These "Materie" created their own chromatic mixtures and colour interactions. But despite these experiments, he was unsuccessful in his attack against good taste. He always had a highly developed colour sense, despite all his efforts to obliterate it. Prior to 1962 and his "Hourloup" series his colour is sensuous

and appealing. Direct in its expression, subtle in its variations, and largely unexpected, because of its dependence on unprecedented materials. But he was to attain a pathetic reality in his works, the reality of which derived from, not just the emotional pressure that guided the hand but also from the material density of the surface.

Dubuffet's initial approach to materials was founded on the idea that conventional techniques inspire conventional imagery, whereas materials not usually associated with art work, "inspire the mind to previously unseen adventures". Again, Dubuffet puts himself in the position of a maker of Art Brut in that Art Brut has a strong reliance on materials at hand, which can be literally anything. The schizophrenic artist similarly adopts any medium at hand in a compulsive need to project and create images. Among the objects at La Compagnie de l'Art Brut" the exhibition of Art Brut works collected by Dubuffet around Europe, includes leaves, volcanic stone, pumice, cement, sea shells, leather, string, bread, vegetable peels, coal and glass splinters. The tools used in making the works range from a spoon handle to a ball point pen (which Dubuffet too, was to use later), the supports include the wood paneling of a room, wrapping paper, blotting paper and fabrics.

The idea that any materials may be of use to the cause of popular art appealed to Dubuffet. Although his most common medium between 1943 and 1962 was oil paint, he transformed

it, creating emulsions, thickening it with sand and glue to an opaque and gritty paste, and consistently defiling it's tradition uses. At other times he even went so far as to use tar, gravel, lime, plaster, asphalt even mud. As Dubuffet says, Art, like life, is accident prone. All men are artists. The artist is an ordinary human being - therefore susceptible to the ups and downs of fortune implied by such :

"... the artist is harnessed to fortune; (art) is not a dance to be danced alone, but as a couple; fortune is the partner. It pulls one way, while the artist guides it as he can, but with flexibility, working to take advantage of the fortuitous as it presents itself, trying to mould it to his ends, never precluding a deviation from his original goals at any moment It is not exactly with just any fortune that the artist is involved, but with a particular kind of fortune indigenous to the material employed. The term fortune is inexact. Better to speak of the inclination and aspirations of the medium as it resists his hand" (9)

key to the interpretation of Dubuffet's work is his proclamation that ;

"My art is an attempt to bring all disparaged values into the limelight" (10)

It accounts for his subject use : the walls of old buildings, jazz musicians, drilling dentists, old tables, and stone rowery bums, and clarifies his opposition to classical

beauty and his interest in the values of barbarism in the art of the untrained, the psychopaths. It also explains the various techniques he employed.

In May 1946, Dubuffet had his second exhibition, entitled 'Mirolobus Macadam & Cie/Hautes Pates'; in the Galerie Bruin. The exhibition caused a great scandal. Dubuffet's use of cruel irony and crude materials shocked the public into slashing his works with knives. Nothing had so enraged the Paris art world in years. Dubuffet was correctly accused of anarchy. He could not have asked for a better reaction from the hated critics and dealers. But not all the critics were of like mind, some were perceptive enough to draw a parallel between Dubuffet's work and that of Alfred Jarry, the playwright, particularly his satire 'Ubu Rex! Jarry has provided Dubuffet with an important source for his imagery. And despite opposition from critics the show sold out in days.

In the "Hautes Pates" - Thick impastos - Dubuffet did not apply oil paint with a brush, instead he developed a paste in which he splashed, dug and scratched, he manually went beneath the surface. He prepared a hard, resistant substance made up of asphalt, tar and white lead, enriching the basic paste with cement, plaster, varnishes and glues as well as lime, sand, coal dust, pebbles, pieces of string, straw etc.

The "Hautes Pates" are a series of flattened two dimensional images of objects. The colour is largely limited to the colour of the unusual materials used. In the "Macadam" series

and the portraits of 1945-47 , some figures are incised into thick impasto, while others are built up on it. They are very shocking images. For as with his next series, a series of portraits and the "Corps des Dames" he has flattened his objects out with only the very essential features in place. They could be termed ugly, but that is if they are approached with the classical definition for 'beauty' or 'ugliness'. As discussed previously , these two terms do not exist for Dubuffet. He tries to create a link between the image he is creating, of people , and his materials , which represent nature. He never tried to capture the character of the portrait, even though he would find every wrinkle or hair fascinating :

"I have given to an insignificant details ... enormous and completely arbitrary importance, even to the point of making a legendary hero out of the hairs in the ear." (11)

But he would purposely depersonalize his sitters, being more interested in the common features shared by all men. In his great series of Portraits, first shown in October 1947 (35 drawings and 37 paintings), for his sitters he used any of his friends, the leading poets and writers of his generation , many of whom had already sat for his masks back in Rue Thomond, ten years earlier. If the face of the sitter was not around to compare with the portraits, they could seem completely random, arbitrary or excessive. But the features trace, with a meditated calm, after patient and detailed observation, Dubuffet's acute gift of penetration.



6 FLUTING ON THE HUMP 1947

Dubuffet's faces and figures were beginning to be so depersonalized that he was creating a series of types of men or women, according to the emotion they show, or appear to show. In 'Prospectus' Dubuffet says that "Art should always make us laugh a little and frighten us a little, but never bore us". And this was particularly apt for his small series of drawings and gouaches of dentists. These highly ironical images make us identify with the poor patient whose mouth is full of teeth and instruments and whose eyes are terrified at the approach of the dentist.

Dubuffet did a series of drawings in March 1947 on a trip to the Sahara. He travelled back and forth to the Sahara a number of times that year. Six pictures from his trips were exhibited in the "Portrait" exhibition of 1947. He learned Arabic to enable him to travel to isolated areas and converse with the people. The images ranged from some highly amusing paintings of Arabs on camels, to detailed examinations of foot patterns made in the Sahara sand. Some of these drawings were converted to large canvasses when he returned to Paris. In these paintings he has the figures on the characteristically upturned landscape.



7 MAN WITH A ROSE 1949

It is after this that Dubuffet begins to merge his figures into the surrounding landscape, giving a strange feeling of being one with the universe. This was to be developed in his series the "Paysages Grotesques" of 1949, and in later years in the landscapes, 'Texturologies', 'Topographies', and 'Phenomena'. The "Paysages Grotesques" are quite grotesque, they are images of countryside, drawn arbitrarily



9 TREE OF FLUIDS / CORPES DES DAMES

to a light, thin paste, applied over a darker ground so that the drawn line becomes darker. There is no organization or orientation to his renderings of trees, houses, people or other features. This series is a good example of Dubuffet's use of automatic drawing.

It was this year, 1949, that the first exhibition of "Art Brut" was held. It was in the Galerie Drouin. Dubuffet prepared the catalogue and contributed his important essay "L'Art Brut prepare aux art culturels". The exhibition included 200 pieces, paintings, carvings, terracotta, sculptures, drawings, manuscripts, embroideries, objects made from, flint, shells, cement, corks, bark, dolls heads and sheeps teeth. Aound half the objects were made by institutionalized persons and others by inspired craftsmen and artists living in isolation and out of contact with the professional art world.



8 THE STRAYED TRAVELER

January 1950

Although Dubuffet's next series are extremely bizzare and grotesque, they are, in comparison with his previous landscapes, more controlled. Coincidentally they were created at the same time as William de Koonings series of "women". Both series are as important as each other in the artists' development. Added to the similarity in theme there is also a stylistic resemblance particularly between Dubuffet's drawings of the "Corps des Dames" and de Koonings paintings, both dated 1950. De Kooning was working in New York and carrying on the European cubist tradition. He built on Picasso's concepts of space, structure, even imagery. Whereas Dubuffet was working in Paris, and broke almost entirely with western



10 TRIUMPH AND GLORY December 1950

printing writing.

Dubuffet discussed the apparent flaws in this series and said :-

"I am inclined to leave in my paintings, for example, the accidental blotches, clumsy blunders forms that are frankly wrong, anit-real, colours that are unwelcome inappropriate, all things that would probably seem insufferable to certain people. They even make me a little uneasy because, in many cases, they destroy the effect. But this uneasiness I voluntarily sustain, for it keeps the painters hand ever present in the painting and prevents the object from dominating and from things taking shape too clearly ." (12)

The women in the "Corps des Dames" series are cut off at the legs below the crotch, with minute and flattened heads which explode downwards to fill the canvas. The body with features depicted symbolically, they look like maps, the boundaries outlining the features, arms, breasts, vulva, buttock, thighs are only vaguely discernable, in the ridiculously flat, once more two-dimensional plane:-

"The objective of painting is to animate a surface which is by definition two dimensional and without depth. One does not enrich it in seeking effects of relief or trompe-l'oeil through shading; one denatures and adulterates it let us seek instead ingenious ways to flatten objects on the surface; and let the surface speak it's own language and not an artificial language of three dimensional space which is not proper

to it I feel the need to leave the surface visibly flat. My eyes like to rest on a surface which is very flat, particularly a rectangular surface. The objects represented will be transformed into pancakes as though flattened by a pressing iron ". (13)

Unlike other painters Dubuffet did his drawings after his paintings. Most painters would begin their visual research with drawings. Dubuffet would make important discoveries while engaged with tactile materials and then often bring these discoveries to a conclusion in drawings which in turn, could lead him on to other experiments. His drawings, lithographs and gouaches of the "Corps des Dames" are on the same theme with similar imagery but have separate identities resulting from the frenzy and quickened rhythm of the linear strokes. The hatched and jagged renderings on paper show a more definite hostility to the female body than seen in the paintings. But he showed a similar lack of compassion to the male body in his group of wild looking flattened out plaster works entitled "Chevaliers".

Throughout his working life, Dubuffet has alternated between two poles. This includes his use of materials, from using a thick heavy paste he would turn to a thin fluid medium or to pencils, opposite, or from dark to light, from joyful or tragic paintings, between figures and landscape, and while still occupied with painting and drawing the bodies of women and men, he examines the surface and structure of the earth. During the next decade when the human image is less central,



12 TABLE COVERED WITH NATURAL HISTORY SPECIMENS—Feb. 1951



13 LANDSCAPE WITH A PARTRIDGE - 1952

spacial depth and relief are constantly absent. One of the artists more frequent themes, the table, is conceived as a four legged, two dimensional shape. They are not the depicted illusion of a three dimensional reality, but tables as seen in the irrational mind's eye. Landscapes, an increasingly prevalent theme, are similarly tipped, flattened and fitted to the figures, the relationship of figure to ground is rarely one of surface to depth. In December 1950 he painted "The Geologist" (Illustrated.), a little man armed with a magnifying glass, walking over a barren crust of the earth, or perhaps on top of a cross-section of geological strata. The soil is seen head on while at the same time from the top, but some possibility of orientation is given by a narrow band of sky. But in later paintings such as the "Tableaux d'assemblages" of 1955-57 (Illustrated.) figure and reassembled, like a patchwork quilt. Sometimes the sky has more substance than the earth, which exists as a mentally animated void. By 1958 all spatial separations have disappeared and Dubuffet's mental landscape stretches from edge to edge, creating an uninterrupted unified pattern. Sometimes a few people or animals, roots, primitive implements or rock formations seems to appear. But since the scale is as ambiguous as the orientation, we may be presented with whole parts of terrestrial or lunar petrified continents studded with craters and dry riverbeds. Continuing on the work on the "Sols et Terrains", they become increasingly removed from real places and objects toward dreamscapes or as he says "Landscapes of the mind".

The indication of identifiable subjects or objects in the paintings



14 STONE WITH FIGURES - July 1952

before 1962 leads the viewer to project a figure-ground reading on these two dimensional surfaces. Through cultural habit, the viewer imagines a disparity between a three-dimensional subject and a two-dimensional depiction and injects illusions of relief or volume where none are intended. In this series of 1951-52 entitled "Landscaped Tables", landscapes of the mind Stones of Philosophy", despite the heavy impasto of the the paintings, in which the relief is sometimes highlighted by a glistening varnish, the titles indicate that these are metaphysical images. Dubuffet continues his series called Texturologies until 1959, upon which he started a series similar to the texturologies of Beards. This series, the Materiologies of the sixties and the texturologies are all related in spirit. All figurative subject matter is avoided, anecdote or narrative. But, unlike his contemporary painters, he did not paint abstractions. For the Texturologies are descriptive, not narrative views of the ground, seen from above.



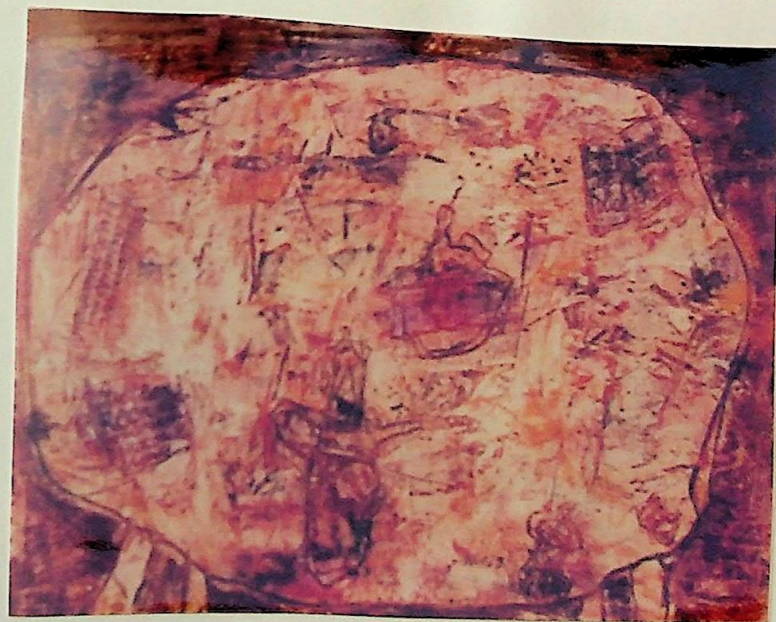
15 ECSTASY IN THE SKY 1952

A very important aspect of Dubuffet's work was his belief that it is against man's nature to stare at things so opposing the careful analysis of an object. The quick glance takes in a great deal more than a particular point of focus because it is aware of a world infinitely greater than the specific fragment. He also recognised the organic, internal mobility of nature. In the Texturologies, Dubuffet paints blurred peripheral areas that are usually ignored, though perceived unconsciously. They reject any centre of interest or other compositional devices. Instead of creating form he created formlessness. Painting surfaces which are both continuous and endless he evokes a vision



16 THE STRAY GOAT January 1953

Dubuffet has always had very inspiring names on his peeces, but te names of the Texturologies are particularly inspiring . They include : "Le Manteau de Terre", (The cloak of Earth), "Langage des Caves" (The voice of the caves), "Lit de Silence" (The Bed



17 STILL LIFE WITH PASSPORT 1953



18 THE EXTRAVAGANT ONE 1954



19 THE SPOTTED COW 1954

of infinity.

"These pictures provide me with peace" - he writes
"...great peace of rugs and naked and empty plains,
silently uninterrupted distances whose homogeneity and
continuity cannot be altered . I love homogeneous worlds
with neither landmarks nor boundaries, which are like the
sea, snowy mountains, deserts and steppes." (15)

Dubuffet began a massive series of lithographs, 324 in all, in 1958. Dealing with earth and wall surfaces, both of which have always captivated him. They describe land and sea, the vapours of the atmosphere, the sky with it's milky way and galaxies.

Dubuffet has always had very inspiring names on his pieces, but the names of the Texturologies are particularly inspiring . They include : "Le Manteau de Terre", (The cloak of Earth), "Langage des Caves" (The voice of the caves), "Lit de Silence" (The Bed of Silence), "La Physique du Sol" (The nature of the earth) Only Paul Klee showed comparable inventiveness and poetry in his titles, though Klee's were more whimsical.

Dubuffet first turned to the theme of the beard in May 1959 by his system of Assemblages d'Empreintes in Indian ink a development of the Texturology drawings. An exhibition of these thinly painted oils, the Beards , was opened at the Galerie Daniel Cordier in Paris in April 1960, entitled "As-tu cueilli la fleur de barbe ?" In shape the Beard series resembles the earlier Tables, but here everything has again become related to man. They are a series of frontal images, with a similar geological feeling inherent in a lot of his work. Some resemble



20 GOAT IN A BLACK MEADOW 1954

Botaniques" which was shown in an exhibition in May 1953, at Arthur Tooth and sons. Dubuffet pasted down the leaves in such a way that, although they form a landscape, their textures and patterns are sharply revealed and call attention to their



21 PROWLING DOG 1955

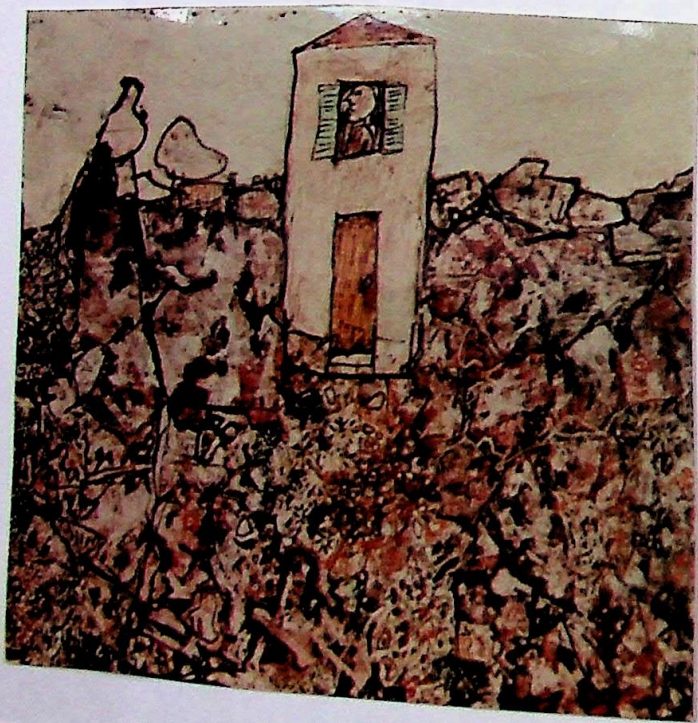
great rock formations or age old bolders. The beard is the ageless symbol of manhood, and many cultures worshipped bearded divinities such as the Greek earth Gods, or the first person of the Trinity. Dubuffet evokes the memory of these first archetypes.

Before Dubuffet even began the great paintings of the Beards, in August 1959, he began to explore vegetal substances, mounted directly on wooden panels. He used leaves of agave and artichoke, tobacco, camomile and the medlar tree, banana peels and orange rinds, calyces of flowers and fragments of various ferns, herbs, shrubs, trees, vines, flowers and fruits, forming a kind of mosaic. This series he called the "Elements Botaniques" which was shown in an exhibition in May 1960, at Arthur Tooth and sons. Dubuffet pasted down the leaves in such a way that, although they form a landscape, their textures and patterns are sharply revealed and call attention to their specific structure. But in essence his figures and landscapes grow from essentially the same frontal concept as do the Portraits, the Corps des Dames and the Beards.

Extending the Elements Botanique into three dimensions, Dubuffet created a series of successors in the "Little Statues of Precarious Life" of 1954. He gathered driftwood from the Mediterranean beaches after storms in Autumn of 1959, and found astonishing figurations among the flotsom. Perhaps art has always imitated nature. These figures resembled Dubuffet's work so much that he mounted them, sometimes just as they were, but sometimes he helped them along to create his image.



22 BLACK AND GOLD GARDEN 1955



23 THE LITTLE GARDENER 1955



24 RUN GRASS, JUMP PEBBLES 1956

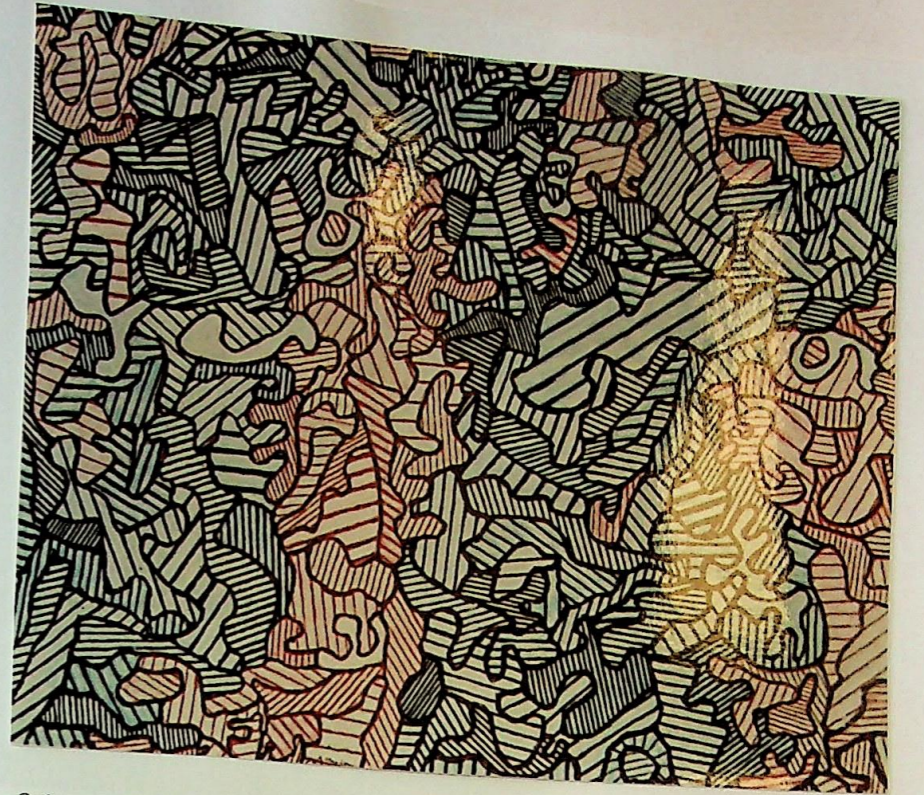


25 TOBACCO MAN WITH GOATEE 1959

It is a fascinating aspect of Dubuffet's development as an artist that he follows a great period of concentration in his work with its obverse, an expansion and enlargement. So his careful observation of the surfaces of matter led to, in 1961, broad panoramic views of city life. Again Dubuffet is making social commentary, portraying his fellow humans eating in restaurants, rushing through the streets, in department stores, in organically shaped little cars, looking like trapped animals. The texture, space and placement of figures have become much more sophisticated than his views of Paris and subway pictures of the early forties. His people, mostly without arms, are depicted, side view, with huge frontal eyes, prominent noses and quickly receding skulls, resemble reliefs in the Sumerian narrative of the fourth and early third Millennium. There is no clear spatial structure to these figures, some are upright, others on their side or upside down. This, jumbled panoramic effect of the city makes up a wild pattern. The inscriptions, drawn from and satyrising the signs on shop fronts, are plays on words, used for associative and formal reasons. These cityscapes seem to trace the human voyage through modern life.

Dubuffet's next series is one that still prevails today, in a similar form. This series called the "Hourloupe" was born of doodlings with a ballpoint pen. Conceived as proliferating mental imagery. The name "Hourloupe" was invented on the basis of its sound. The word continues to confuse even Frenchmen to today. For the French, the sounds "Hourloupe" :

"Suggests some wonderland or grotesque object or creature, while at the same time they evoke something resembling an



26 THE RICH FRUITS OF ERROR 1963

converted them into three dimensional forms. In the late 70's Dubuffet's series of these painted sculptures were called "Theatres of Memory". The Hourloupe cycle reflects the culmination of Dubuffet's pictorial ambitions. The form adopted



27 BLUE ELEMENT II 1967

and threatening with tragic overtones. Both are implied". (16)

A world parallel to our own is conceived in the Hourloupe series. They started off with Dubuffet drawing on paper, almost doodling, with a ballpoint pen, and later with markers. The uncontrolled impulses of the hand traces an interlocking live and within these graphisms, imprecise, fugitive and ambiguous figures appear. In the interlocking all kinds of objects form and dissolve as the eyes scan the surface. The result, for Dubuffet, is an awareness of the illusory character of the world. And to challenge the legitimacy of what we habitually accept as reality. At the beginning, the Hourloupe series only included drawings and paintings. But then Dubuffet wanted to give them better structure. So he converted them into three dimensional forms. In the late 70's Dubuffet's series of these painted sculptures were called "Theatres of Memory". The Hourloupe cycle reflects the culmination of Dubuffet's pictorial ambitions. The form adopted for the Hourloupe paintings, said Dubuffet in 1969 is :-

"That of an uninterrupted and resolutely uniform meandering script, (unifying all planes to the frontal plane, paying no heed to the particular space of the object described, neither its dimensions, nor its distance nor closeness) thereby abolishing all particularities, all categories (by which I mean the usual classifications adopted by our reflexive mind which makes distinctions between one notion and another : between the notion of chair, for example and that of tree, that of human figure, cloud, ground landscape, or anything else.) so that this consistently uniform script indifferently applied to all things (and it should be emphasised, not only visible



28 FISTON LA FILOCHE 1967



29 MUTE PERMUTE 1971

objects but invisible inventions of our thoughts, imagination or fantasy; mixed together without discrimination). will reduce them all to the lowest common denominator and substitute a continuous undifferentiated universe; it will thereby dissolve the categories which our mind habitually employs to decipher (better to say cipher) the facts and spectacles of the world. Herewith the circulation of the mind from one object to another, from one category to another, from one category to another will be liberated and its mobility greatly increased." (17).

This quote is very important to the understanding of Dubuffet's pictorial priorities. The elimination of the categories of rational thought translates pictorially into a suppression of differentiated planes, hierarchical composition, colour as value, and other traditional elements of the work of art in western culture. Dubuffet's process is the realist painter's process in reverse. Starting from an illusion, he invents a physical reality. So a painting of a coffee pot (Illustrated) a portrait is the depiction of a conceptualization of a friend (Illustrated). His deliberate attempt to confound the viewer gives these "Mental derivatives" a strong physical presence.

Dubuffet's work has lately reached monumental proportions with this large pointed sculptures like the "Milord la chamarre" (Milord of the fancy vest) on the Seagram Plaza in New York, or the "Groupe of four trees" on the Chase Manhattan Plaza in New York. The "Milord", a 24 ft. sculpture of polished steel petals painted with a wriggling network of thick black lines, stands beside one of the talismans of modern



30 THE RAG PICKER 1973

architecture the Seagram building.

Throughout his lone career as an artist, Jean Dubuffet has proved to be one of history's greatest innovators. He has proved to the world, by his example, that it is possible to believe the act of making art. While at the same time realising that art cannot replace religion. That no religion means no religion. Furthermore he understands that art is more important than taste, and that life is more important than art. If Jean Dubuffet can teach us anything it is that there is no neat conclusion, or true beginning, either. No matter how ambitious or intelligent every attempt at art or discourse properly ends only in rejoining an invisible, silent flow. This is comprehensible flow was made palpable by the great talent of Dubuffet.

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