

## **In the Forest**

**By John Berger**

The visitor to this exhibition finds her or himself as much in a forest as in an art gallery. Corners of a forest. A dark forest of the northern hemisphere.

In fact, he is looking at some large oil paintings and engravings by the Czech painter Rostislav Kunovsky. In previous periods of his life, Kunovsky - a man in his mid-40s - has painted electric light bulbs, and angels. Now he paints wolves, wild boar and deer. In his images, as in life, these wild animals appear briefly, disappear, appear again.

One can talk about the natural camouflage of animals when they are in their natural habitat, but what Kunovsky plays with - especially in the larger canvasses - is something else. Light in the forest moves and changes as much as any animal. The animals are sometimes quieter than the trees. There is moss on boulders softer than any animal's fur. Surfaces can sometimes be dry in a forest, but beneath every surface - animal, vegetable and mineral - there are liquids. As we face these canvasses searching for the animals, a second or third time, we sense that it is with these ambiguities rather than purely optical ones as in camouflage - that the painter is playing.

Kunovsky is of course a figurative painter. Despite his subject matter, he has little to do with Fauvism! The way he draws suggests that he works surrounded, not by the history of art, but by trees. Yet he is a highly sophisticated artist and a master craftsman.

When most of us think of a forest, we think of many trees growing close together. Or we think of a complex ecosystem involving rain, climate, photosynthesis, CO<sub>2</sub>, etc. For certain animals, however, the forest is comparable to a family: the trunks are brothers, the roots maternal, the leaves sisters. And it is this kinship that these mysterious works by Kunovsky capture.

How? It has a lot to do with his touch - with the way his brush touches the canvas, or his burin the plate. This touch is unusually sensitive to the family likenesses between bark and tangled fur, between roots and feet, between eyes and wood-scars, between antlers and branches.

Until now in the history of European art untamable animals have usually been depicted and presented from the hunter's point of view. Here we see the opposite, we see where the hunted hide and have their wellbeing. We

see them standing firm, we see them as subjects of the weather (sunlight or snowflakes), we see them growing old, we watch their eyes, wherein there is no reflection of us! And all this without a trace of sentimentality or easy pathos; the emotion is that of wonder in face of the unknown. And it is hard to know whether this wonder is the wolves' or our own.

In the Natural History Museum of Berlin is an odd exhibit that dates from the 1811 century. It is the trunk of an oak tree - about half a meter in diameter - from which protrude a real pair of deer's antlers. The experts' explanation is that a deer once died at the foot of a tree when it was a sapling, and that the tree then slowly grew round the stag's head, until only the antlers emerged.

In the case of Kunovskys unexpected art, an explanation for a somewhat similar phenomenon is harder to find. We have to refer to terms like genius, trance, seeing-in-the-dark vision.

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## **A painting of an electric light bulb (PHOTOCOPIES de JOHN BERGER)**

1996 - Edition : Bloomsbury ( G.B.);  
1998 - Pantheon ( USA );  
1999 - Les éditions de l'Olivier ( Paris )

ROSTIA invited me to his studio. It's the first time in his life he has had a studio. A few years ago he used to paint, when it was sunny, in the shell of a ruined outhouse somewhere in the north of the capital. The new studio, allotted to him by the city of Paris, is in Chatenay Malabry. He was born in Prague in 1954.

I first met Rostia in the early eighties when he was selling crêpes at night on the Boulevard. St Michel. He spoke French with an accent like the River Danube. And he looked like a man who had just come out of a conscript army in which he had served quite a while. Glad to be free. Single. Not an officer, not even a corporal. A bit lost in civilian life. In fact he was never in the Czech or any other army. But the long struggle of growing up, surviving, refusing, emigration, had been for Rostia like being in the army. Manoeuvre after manoeuvre. And during that time all he had dreamt was to be on leave - which meant painting furiously on whatever he could lay his hands.

His pictures were rubbishy, a bit subversive and memorable because of their awkwardness. Rubbishy in that they were badly presented and painted with whatever was at hand. Subversive in that, as you went on looking at their abstract confetti of colours, you suddenly spotted a dog or a grinning kid hidden within them. And awkward in that they assumed no manners that they didn't have. They were just themselves, like the handle of a hammer painted red so it doesn't get lost.

I liked their hooligan company and his. We used to drink beer together, pushing our caps to the back of our heads and sticking out our legs as if wearing dungarees. When we could find the right words in translation we told one another jokes.

In those days, women didn't treat Rostia as well as he deserved. They pictured him as a kind of bear on a circus poster. And he didn't make things better because, like many men who spend years in the army, he tended to be a bit paranoiac. Sometimes it was difficult to guess what he was going on about.

Drinking our beer together we never once mentioned Hegel or Lukacs or Paul Klee or Dvofilk. We took a lot for granted and I knew that, if we should get into a fight in one of the bars, I could count on him. His bear size and his uncannily observant eye would help.

Once, walking back over the bridges, each with an arm round the other's shoulder, we reminisced about the wooden doorways of Prague, with doors as large as lorries. And for a moment the Seine became the Vltava for us both.

When I arrived at the studio in Chatenay Malabry, Rostia's daughter, Andrea, was in her cot about to go to sleep. She's almost two. Rostia no longer sells crêpes but works part-time drawing plans in an architect's office. He and Laurence sleep on the loggia overlooking the studio space, and we ate at the table beside their bed.

He wanted me to look at his recent paintings. He went down to the studio floor and stapled the unstretched canvases, one after another, on to the wall. When there was a large one, Laurence helped him, and as I watched from above, I saw her, small, nimble, balancing like a trick cyclist beside the circus bear.

The pictures were no longer hooligan. They were still awkward, but they were absolutely sure of themselves. The subject was always the same. Metal lampshades hanging on their flexes with electric light bulbs. But on each canvas the arena of their light was a different but vast landscape. A landscape where? Not mid-European, not French, not Celtic. Just a stretch of land somewhere on the surface of the earth, lit by two, three, or four bulbs, illuminating together like a family. The more I looked, the more surely I knew they were remarkable, and the more pensive I became. Sometimes I read in a newspaper that I am (or was) one of the most influential writers about art in the English language. Yet I know nobody in the art trade in Paris or anywhere else. Nobody.

Neither I nor Rostia would get past any art expert's first secretary. And, if by any chance we did, if we actually met a dealer, he'd look at us as if we were out of some village circus. I knew the canvases I was looking at deserved to be framed, exhibited, sold, and hung in houses. And yet there was nothing I could do about it.

Rostia interrupted my thoughts: What's up? You don't like the dark one?

Let's drink to Andrea! I said, but I couldn't get rid of a nagging frustration. I wanted to see those furiously painted canvases out in the world, relying on their own authority.

We started talking about mixing colours - Rostia uses both oil and tempera - and how much cheaper it is than buying tubes. He held up a tin of cadmium yellow. Then he opened a bottle of linseed oil and he handed it to me as if he expected me to take a swig. Did he know what the effect would be?

I sniffed it and I forgot my frustrations. I was twelve years old again. I was with my first box of oil paints and my first palette the size of a school exercise book. I was handling the tubes with their exotic, distant names. Indian Red. Naples Yellow. Burnt Umber. Raw Sienna. And the mysteriously named Flake White - suggesting snowflakes in a blizzard.

The smell of that oil (the same oil with which one softens putty when putting in a window pane) took me back half a century to a promise. The promise of painting and painting, the promise of doing it every day of your life, and thinking about nothing else until you are dead!

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## **THE BOOKS, THE PIANOS AND THE CITIES...**

I spent much of my childhood in second-hand bookstores. There one could find many old books, from all over the world, and of every period, with wonderful illustrations that carried me far away.

The texts and printed images became like hills which I enjoyed touching with my fingers as I turned the pages.

Then I hid under the counter of the bookstore with all the treasures I had carefully arranged for my mother to come to pay for.

These books from my childhood, stacked against each other, and passionately loved, are what I find in my paintings.

This multitude of old books in a chaotic bookstore. Often they were slightly damaged, and bore the traces of all the fingers and hands that had touched them.

They also contained stories which took me far away to worlds so distant and close in which I lost myself.... Promises of adventure.

The piano is a beast, said Piotr Anderszewski when I took him to see my exhibition in which a few of those strange creatures were hanging.

He was not mistaken.

The large pianos came into my painting after a long period in which I devoted myself to wild animals - letting their horns, hooves, fur and angs, protrude from my canvasses.

And I like it that we can still feel flesh and veins present in the large bodies of the pianos (...)

**Rostislav Kunovsky**

(translated from the French by Yves and John Berger)