

Programm zur Ausstellung

Führungen

So, 12.3., 9.4., 14.5., 11.6., 9.7., 13.8., 14–15 Uhr (auf Deutsch),
Kosten: Eintritt + CHF 5

Kuratorinnenführung

Mit Géraldine Meyer: Mi, 16.8., 18.30–19.30 Uhr (auf Deutsch),
Kosten: Eintritt + CHF 5

Rendez-vous am Mittag. Kurzführung

Mit Géraldine Meyer: Di, 14.3., 12.30–13 Uhr (auf Deutsch),
Kosten: Eintritt

Existenzialismus – Pariser Jetset – Hollywood:

Filmprogramm im neuen kino Basel im Mai

→ kunstmuseumbasel.ch → neueskinobasel.ch





Playlist zur Ausstellung auf Spotify

→ [Bernard Buffet. Playlist zur Ausstellung im Kunstmuseum Basel 2023](#)

Curator of the Im Obersteg Foundation: Géraldine Meyer

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kunstmuseum basel

Bernard Buffet

Existentialist and Popular Artist

February 18–September 3, 2023

The tristesse of postwar Paris

In his lifetime, Bernard Buffet (1928–1999) was lionized as the “painter of existentialism,” only to fade into obscurity after his years of greatest success in the postwar period. His art wrestled with the grim aspects of life: death, hunger, and loathing are central themes in his austere still lifes, portraits of emaciated and pallid figures, and gray seascapes devoid of human characters. Aiming to show the tristesse of postwar Paris, he developed an unmistakable personal approach to figurative painting.

For Buffet’s generation—he was born to a family of modest means in Paris in 1928—the Second World War was a defining experience. He was too young to serve in the army, but the hardships and dejection of the war years shaped his ideas about his own country. The generation before Buffet’s—with artists like Pablo Picasso and Robert Delaunay—had been drawn to Paris as the city of light and flourishing culture; Buffet, by contrast, associated it with deserted streets, oppressive fear, and a precarious existence.

The subculture of existentialism

In postwar Paris, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Simone de Beauvoir were the most prominent voices of philosophical existentialism. Filling established concepts like “freedom,” “responsibility,” and “decision” with new meaning, they led a revolution in philosophy. Yet existentialism was not confined to philosophical debates. It was a key set of ideas that inspired the postwar generation of Parisians and spawned a kind of lifestyle: in the cafés, bookstores, and playhouses on the Left Bank of the river Seine, writers, visual artists, musicians, and actors created an existentialist subculture that still defines how we imagine the Quartier Latin of the time.

One of these young creative minds was Buffet, and he deftly honed his image: thanks to skillful marketing, a compelling public persona, and his collaborations with influential gallery owners, art dealers, and critics, he soon made a splash. The up-and-coming art critic Pierre Descargues proclaimed that Buffet's work represented the future of painting; the collectors Roger Dutilleul and Maurice Girardin anointed him as the new Picasso of the postwar era. Buffet was all of twenty years old when the gallery owner Emanuel David offered him an exclusive contract.

The yellow press reported extensively on Buffet's life and career, and his homes were featured in stories lavishly illustrated with photographs. The artist's private life met with no less public interest than his output. From 1950 until 1958, Buffet lived with his partner Pierre Bergé, who had a keen appreciation for the finer pleasures in life. Introducing the painter to the world of fashion and luxury, he drummed up even more media attention.

Buffet's work caught the eyes of American art lovers as well, especially in Hollywood: In 1949, the movie director Jean Negulesco bought twenty-one of the French artist's paintings and used some of them as props in his films. Negulesco also sold the works to friends including Alfred Hitchcock, Lauren Bacall, and Humphrey Bogart.

The young artist's growing international success soon made him a very wealthy man. In the media, he consistently portrayed himself as a hardworking, reclusive, and slightly eccentric painter. Meanwhile, he bought several homes, a yacht, and a Rolls-Royce. Still in his early twenties, the "painter of existentialism" was a celebrated pop-star artist and, with Brigitte Bardot, Françoise Sagan, Roger Vadim, Yves Saint Laurent, and others, a member of France's high society.

The worst artist of all times?

Buffet, that is to say, catered to different sets of expectations, an adroitness that initially contributed to his success. But the boom around him soon fizzled. His works were now dismissed as kitsch and vacuous, and the artist was branded a "pseudo-existentialist" and even reviled as "the worst artist of all times." One critic opined: "everything tastes of advertising, everything is just a publicity production." The artist who painted misery while posing for the camera in front of his palatial properties was no longer taken seriously.

Buffet produced countless paintings in very little time. By replicating the same subjects, sometimes hundreds of times, and always painting in the same immediately recognizable style, he seemed to betray a routine that had gone cold. The appearance of emotional detachment from his work fueled increasing doubts concerning the authenticity of his creative expression. Art lovers and collectors felt that they had been hoodwinked, and Buffet's paintings disappeared into storage.

The lightness of the nascent entertainment industry

His flat style, which verges on the cartoonish, the high contrasts, and the memorable signature are reminiscent of contemporary commercial graphic art. The large formats and the staging of the objects he depicts resemble theatrical décors and movie posters. Indeed, the entertainment industry eagerly picked up on Buffet's compositional

inventions: his works appeared on the title pages of illustrated magazines, on record covers, stamps, and book jackets. Buffet's lines, which look like scratches gouged into the surfaces of his works and, in contouring the bodies of his figures, make them seem inert, frail, and pathetic, became a trademark feature, an apt expression of the gloom of the postwar years.

In this way, Buffet's works seem to combine the gravitas of existentialist thinking with the lightness of the nascent entertainment industry. This blend irritated contemporaries. After the war, critics worked under a virtual obligation to judge art by criteria of authenticity and the maxims of existentialism. Buffet failed these standards. His art was disparaged as commercial and unserious.

In today's perspective, we can consider his output with fresh eyes and discern a distinctive quality in the conjunction of existential subjects with a formulaic and stereotyped painting style: Buffet was one of the first popular artists who captured the attention of large public audiences thanks to the brand recognition of his work and cultivated his public image as a pop-star artist.

Warhol's favorite painter

Little wonder, then, that Andy Warhol of all people—born, like Buffet, in 1928—singled out his French colleague as his favorite painter and the "last great artist of Paris." Yet the accolade also underscores that Paris had lost its cultural hegemony to New York, a shift heralded by the breakout success of Pop art at the 1964 Venice Biennale.

Buffet's strategies of image production and the circulation and marketing of his art anticipated those later employed by the Pop artists. His art repeatedly blurred the boundaries between high and popular culture. In Paris, the birthplace of the avant-garde and existentialist philosophy, he was not taken seriously for decades and cast in a negative light, perhaps unfairly: familiarity with existentialist thought can help us understand Buffet's pictures, but they deserve to be seen as more than mere illustrations of ideas. Rather, his paintings and his public appearances bear witness to a fast-paced subculture in which the confessional register and convention, glamour and pop have entered into a peculiar coexistence.