

THE 
GRIFFIS ART CENTER

INTERNATIONAL ARTIST-in-RESIDENCE PROGRAM – MAISON des ARTISTES
NEW LONDON, CONNECTICUT USA

Svilen Manolov BLAZHEV

2006 International Artist-in-Residence
Bulgarian-American Creative Society
Sofia, Republic of Bulgaria



“Granite Street”

Date Acquired: 07/2006, Date Created: 07/2006
Framed Dimensions: unframed Picture Dimensions: 16 x 20”
Medium: Acrylic on Canvas

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Artist's Statement

Looking back at my artistic practice, which spans across twenty years, I have realized that my work is about taking risks and experimenting with traditional values. Over the years I have explored four distinct themes which keep overlapping and blurring their aesthetic boundaries.

Chronologically speaking, they fall into four periods.

In 1980-85 I developed a series of oil paintings called Yulelogs. This series singled out some key objects which mirror the collective memory and the shared past of the Bulgarian people through their material culture, ethnography, and folklore. I have used the pagan energy of the objects of our past and animated their symbolism in an interplay of signs, ornaments, and forms.

In 1985-1990 I moved to monumental compositions and paintings inspired by the tradition of the Byzantine art and the heritage of medieval Christianity. I introduced the human figure and picked up on typical details and formats by using various metal and aluminum sheets, applying sackcloth and plaster in vaulted and triptych frameworks.

In 1991-95 I tried to blend in one of the first two series driven by entirely artistic concepts. It was during this time when the age of the monumental art had come to a close following the major ideological and political changes across Europe and Bulgaria in particular. I focused on the small-scale format with the aim to establish a direct and appealing contact with the viewer. The close relationship between pagan and Christian symbols motivated me to collage patterns from handmade rugs and embroidered textiles which reinforce the colour scheme of my paintings.

In 1995 I tried to move beyond the visual narrative in art. I was increasingly interested in exploring painting as a visual sign. Thus, I experimented with applying hay, chaff, and compost to try to intensify the light coming from within the painting. The new series radiated with warm feelings of sun-dried brick walls and painted stucco. I have once again realized that scale and background matter. I am currently charting new dimensions, forms and territories which I believe will take my new findings across into the new millennium.

11. 11. 1999

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Svilen Blazhev's New Landscape - in Gallery Bulgari



Three years after having been invited in the Center for Arts (Griffis Art Center) in New London, Svilen Blazhev finally dares to show his pictorial impressions from America. It turns out this is the exhibit that took the longest preparation time on his side. The reasons for its postponement, or the hesitation of one of the brightest contemporary Bulgarian painters could be found in different directions, one of the main ones probably his having been faced with the contemporary art in The United States. The same direction that tried in the middle of last century to take away the palm of modernity from Paris and Europe, in other words – from the centers which formed consciously or not almost all Bulgarian painters at the end of the 19th and the whole 20th century.

Svilen Blazhev's contact or actually – clash with the art of America - is especially significant for him considering his age and his notable place in our national art – a result from a formed worldly philosophy and style. That style was shaped in the perceptive rationalization of the traditional cultural layers, left from civilizations long passed our lands; style that became their plastic business card, emblematic in the way many of our painters have interpreted and applied modernity in their art.

In the current exhibition in Gallery Bulgari, without deserting the aesthetic parameters of the pictorial expression which in some of his earlier canvases reminded sometimes of crumbled and layered with time strata as in medieval frescoes, and other times of tilled, trampled upon and dried out land surface, Svilen Blazhev offers to us his new pictorial vision for the landscape and for what happened there – in the Griffis Art Center in New London and later – back here, after rethinking what he had seen and lived.

Svilen Blazhev arrived in the United States like many other Bulgarian painters from his generation with knowledge of its art derived from reproductions, from galleries in Europe and sporadic exhibitions organized here in Bulgaria. Let us remember 1979 when the show "The Painter at Work in America" visited here. In a matter of a few months he not only visits, but has to make sense of what he saw in the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), the architectural spiral of Guggenheim filled with art, the private galleries on New York, the museums in Washington DC, the Museum of American Impressionists in Old Lime, close to New London.

His permanent residence in the United States is New London, the little town by the ocean where everyone who goes around without a car causes astonishment. The town is situated between New York City and Boston, between Yale and Harvard Universities, and is known as the capital of whale hunters, the home town of the playwright Eugene O'Neal, famous for the Winthrop Mill, the old cemetery, the sharp-peaked silhouettes of the stone cathedrals, with Griffis Art Center and its houses – the Sapphire House, the Gemfire Studio, and recently – the Sky Break House, named after the famous book of poems by Lyubomir Levchev. The town however is also known for



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its emerald green sea, the dark blue waters of the Thames, the fiery sunsets and the preserved nature, with the environment of friendliness, love and creative seclusion of the people of the arts who communicate there, outside of the separation of the ocean, the eras, the historical destiny of their own countries, outside of prejudices and politics.

Here the painter is left with the feeling of change. A change of place, of the sunrise and sunset, the light on the water, in nature, on the churches and houses, of the world and ideas – all fruit of puritanical modesty and simplicity that is hard to comprehend. Torn between the extremities of modern art and the reverie of nature that impressionists possess, Svilen Blazhev collects his interpretations of the hardest thing - what happens with the painter, who goes back to a classical genre – the landscape, while trying to recreate it in the media of modernity?

Actually New London and Griffis Art Center are just the starting point of the artist seeking answers – what happened in America? Because in reality something did happen there with Svilen Blazhev. He has become more concrete in the landscape, the dimensional plans in the composition are deeper, colors are brighter, and the pictorial combinations are often outside of his previously preferred monochromacy. We see before us definite landscapes that have been reinvented in their style.

His colleagues from America, upon arriving at the Partner of Art Griffis House for Bulgaria, Sharon House in the village of Colonel Serafimovo, probably also take away with them part of a change within, a change due to the Thracian magic and mysticism, to the still virgin nature and the hospitality and honesty of the local villages and their colleagues.

The visitors will be able to find out on their own, after seeing the landscapes of Svilen Blazhev shown in Gallery Bulgari, to what extent the painter has changed, and how he was influenced by the exchange program between the two centers – Griffis House, founded in 1989 by Sharon and Hughes Griffis, and Sharon House, founded in 1998 by Lyubomir Levchev and the Orpheus Foundation that has existed for a decade now.

Prof. Askinia Djurova, 2009



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We have approached the 21st C and without quite realizing this, we have stepped beyond its threshold. Dramatic changes have been occurring all around us. The technology which has infiltrated our daily life has transformed our nature and sensitivity and introduced new coding systems. Our language can no longer be lavish and extravagant and our thoughts have started galloping. But what about our images and paintings? Our paintings have also adopted this new velocity - the velocity of cultural signs.

Svilen Blaze's oeuvre vibrates with these global issues of the last two decades of 20th C and moreover, it resonates with the complexity of Bulgarian culture which, apart from registering these formal artistic phenomena, is rooted in the local social and political reality. In an attempt to define the intersection of the global and the local in Svilen Blaze's work I can briefly sum it up as follows:

- exploring a variety of styles when there is hardly any dominant style except for the personal one which has no formal attributes
- being stretched between the seduction of the pure form and the figurative style which is inevitable for the Bulgarian aesthetic at this time
- feeling the allure and the pressure of the non-conventional occurring and the need to express oneself in a complete and mature fine art format

In this context, Svilen BLAZHEV has emerged as an outstanding and eminent representative of contemporary Bulgarian fine art practice. He has achieved this status despite the fact that he was based in the 'far and away' land of the Bulgarian provincial town of Kyustendil. By adhering to his position in the periphery and enjoying a bohemian lifestyle, he didn't fall into the traps of the non-artistic yearnings, something so crucial for the survival of one's talent.

I could argue that Svilen BLAZHEV further develops the long-established visual tradition that spread across Bulgaria in an organic and idiosyncratic manner. Since times immemorial, the artists of Bulgaria have cherished and produced not only visual narratives, but also the visual sign language into which visual form functions both as the image-container and the synthesis of ideas. Yule-logs, the compositions of iconoclastic figures, the geometrical abstractions, all act as symbolic signs. These symbols will survive Svilen BLAZHEV and will speak volumes for his contribution to contemporary Bulgarian visual art and culture.

Initially, his Yule-logs produced a cultural shock - Bulgarian Painting practice didn't know such a way of extracting the essence of a shared tradition. The magic of ritual bread is revealed in a rich variety of colours where joy and grief alternate as they do in traditional folk song. The large-scale figurative compositions which succeeded the Yule-logs hold the memory of the Orthodox Christian church frescoes. Yet this concerns the overall ambience rather than their subject line or iconic imagery. It is very significant that Svilen BLAZHEV has interpreted this sacred tradition through relief form and metal-based collages, although as a modern extrovert artist, he has felt the need to live high on emotion and speed.

Passing through the periods of yule-logs and monumental compositions without ever turning his back to these trends, Svilen BLAZHEV has ventured into the realm of pure painting. I would suggest that the artistic challenge was no longer driven from outside, but was to be found within the artist himself - at the core of his individual sensitivity and mode of thinking.

What is this that makes me admire his works so much? When facing any of Svilen BLAZHEV's paintings I can rejoice and marvel at the vitality of the forms and signs. The line always appears in a new disguise of texture and color. The oil surface is uneven and rough as if windswept, always populated with unpredictable but lively organic figures. The colours-although highly refined by the aesthete Svilen BLAZHEV- seem to mind their own way by jumping out of the palette - daring, contrasting, and blending into one another.

What is also worth mentioning is that all the works have been photographed against the background of a typical Bulgarian setting. Set against the peeling stuccos and facades of old town houses and converted barns, stone



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stairways and wooden fences, these paintings act as their extension in time and space as if emerging from the same matter - organic simplicity, rough texture, and warm colours.

Svilen BLAZHEV has a strong and keen interest towards the painterly texture of 'patina'. One could fail to trace the origin of this interest, but I can argue that it is primarily fine art-related and it can stand up as a proof of his skills as a gifted painter with every one of his new works. The harmony of his works does not come from academic combination of the dictionary of colours, and neither is it based on scholarly symbolism. This is not a rich decorative harmony, and neither is it lost and washed away in monochromes. Svilen BLAZHEV's paintings live. They live and trigger a kaleidoscope of harmonies. His talent explodes with daring feelings. His painting gesture is convincingly strong and brave.

At the turn of the century Svilen BLAZHEV, an artist in his prime, is facing a moment of self-assessment. This mid-career solo exhibition at the National Fine Arts Gallery in Sofia aims to register this self-critical mode and to unlock the debates around the trajectories of Bulgarian contemporary art in the third millennium.

Prof. Dr. Ruzha Marinska, Director of National Fine Arts Gallery-Sofia