

Bull's Eye: Jean Dubuffet's Anticultural Vision

By Wendy Gittler | June 9, 2016



Jean Dubuffet, *La galante poursuite (The Gallant Pursuit)*, 1953. Oil on masonite, 38-1/4 x 51-1/4 inches. Private Collection. Photograph by Kent Pell / © 2016 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

In Acquavella Galleries' panoramic view of Jean Dubuffet's mindscape we are in familiar territory, immersed in sand, oil emulsion, butterfly wings, tobacco leaves, tar and gold. Dubuffet used terms like "Anticultural" and "Art Brut" to characterize his vision, in homage to an underground world where the "sap is richer" and where art is dedicated to madness. Dubuffet believed children, the uneducated and the naive are able to immediately "hit the bull's-eye" and arrive at something visionary in their art making. The detritus and random objects of urban streets represented a diminishing horizon, for him, between high and low art. Acquavella's knock-out exhibition of judiciously selected works from the 1940s through the early 1960s illuminates the philosophical roots of his pictorial language.

Dubuffet's vision blossomed in the wake of the Second World War, times of despair, daring and survival. He was keenly aware of the changed philosophic climate that had occurred after the Great War with its polarization between the classical tradition and what the Nazis would call "Degenerate Art." With the advent of WWII the realization of the innate brutality and barbarism in the human psyche affirmed aspects of Freudian thought. Though Dubuffet spoke against the Western tradition with its penchant for classical harmony, order and rationalism, paradoxically he was well versed in European culture.

The Second World War brought out in him a fierce stance against the acquiescence of the French during the German occupation. Having been a puppeteer and mask maker, he later created paintings of gestural configurations of human frailty and vulnerability in a series of portraits. The protagonists of these paintings openly expose the raw emotions of the post-war period. These portraits are non-portraits in disdain of mimesis and verisimilitude. To him, they were "cooked and preserved in memory."



(L): Jean Dubuffet. *Joë Bousquet in Bed*, 1947. Oil emulsion in water on canvas, 57-5/8 x 44-7/8 inches. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund (R): Jean Dubuffet, *Façades d'immeubles/Apartment Houses*, Paris, 1946. Oil with sand and charcoal on canvas, 44-7/8 x 57-3/8 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York © 2016 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

Joë Bousquet in Bed (1947), a portrait of the elusive poet disabled in World War One, has the writer almost embalmed in black sheets scribbled with white cuneiform-like script. Dubuffet melds figure and ground into a singular unity, roping his protagonists within a shallow space. He eschews Western perspectival space, possibly as a remembrance of his journey to the Algerian Sahara in the late 1940s. It was a revelation for him to observe non-Western societies that are linked and inseparable from the earth.

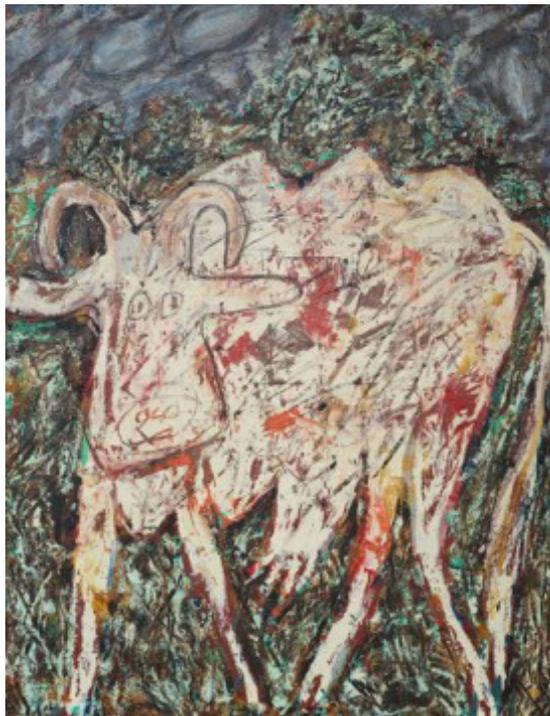
In *Will to Power* 1946, he parodies the Nazi appropriation of the Nietzschean superman as a glob of flesh, hair, a dangling genital and teeth which could be a counterpart to the later de Kooning “Women” series [1952-53]. Dubuffet’s paintings *Corps de Dame*, *Esplanade de Peau* and *Beautiful Woman with Heavy Breasts*, (both 1950), portray flattened pieces of protoplasm, scratched and etched with markings for their orifices and dangling cylinders for arms. They are laid out for inspection as a source of the early beginnings of life immersed in the oil and gravel of the ground. In 1954, in a similar mode to his women, Dubuffet depicted cows splayed in a grassy field. He said that he felt no hierarchies between humans, cows, earth, wind, and water, all of them belonging to the living universe. His world-view was a dismissal of all “Greekeries,” he stated.

In *Façades d'immeubles*, (1946), his personages begin to exit from their Parisian domiciles like small animals out of a cave. This painting links the end of the war with an “hommage” to the burial of his literary mentor, Max Jacob, who died in the internment camp of Drancy. The landscapes with and without personages of the later ‘40s and early ‘50s clearly reflect his North African odyssey and his observation of the way forms in the desert come in and out of focus as they merge with the surrounding space. In *Our Old Land*, (1951), a segment of earth tangled with crevices and vegetation takes a dominant position and becomes the prime protagonist, whereas in *The Gallant Pursuit*, (1953), two small creatures enact an amorous dialogue dwarfed by the enclosing land. The influence of Paul Klee is evident in these images, especially in the way Dubuffet integrates visual signs of the human, animal and vegetable spheres.

Dubuffet took a strong countercultural position by withdrawing from the “call to order” and the return to old values of France during the two world war years. He was by no means a naïf or unrelated to the European cultural tradition though he championed the irrational, the instinctual and the “anticultural.” He had the French love of

“matière” and was a consummate craftsman who mastered the art of preservation for his new materials. He had a vast knowledge of art history including the newly discovered cave paintings, ancient Egyptian and Sumerian art, Picasso and particularly Klee as well as his contemporaries Soutine, Bacon and Fautrier. His countercultural friends belonged to literary circles and Dubuffet had an interest in languages, having learned Arabic for his North African journey. He was also a musician and later became involved with Jazz.

His cerebral nature, however, affirmed the visceral reality of organic matter, and instinctual life. He thus intertwined a universe of ideas and physical substances. He considered his personages and “earthscapes” a fictive world of the mind. Consumer culture was not part of his pictorial vocabulary. Dubuffet came to maturity in a time torn asunder by two world wars and a growing knowledge of the non-Western world that gave him a different understanding than ours of comedy, tragedy and the ironic.



Jean Dubuffet, *Vache la belle muflée/Cow with the Beautiful Muzzle*, 1954. Oil on canvas, 45-5/8 x 35 inches. Private Collection. Photograph by Kent Pell / © 2016 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris