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MANHATTAN LOS ANGELES

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Bernard Buffet

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Two admissions are needed to make the case for Bernard Buffet, a painter so long considered minor that his work is—or was—unredeemable even in the realm of camp taste: First, one must accept that painting is a serious vehicle for artistic expression; second, one must admit that anything sufficiently seen eventually comes to sit normatively in the eye.

My 1950s triangulated between New York, Chicago, and Paris, so I will remember Buffet as a central figure amid a group of artists called *Misérabilistes*—the now-forgotten Francis Gruber being the other once well-regarded painter of the crew.

The spiky, eviscerated figures in Buffet's *La plage* (The Beach), 1956, are exemplary. A number of thin figures in scant bathing attire inhabit the seaside landscape, at least ten of whom appear to possess Buffet's own gaunt body. (The work joins thirteen others in this survey-style show.) These reedy men—each evocative of the rebuked body of Christ—express the then-fashionable “existential world” of Jean-Paul Sartre, a sensibility informed by the privations of World War II, France's own complicity in those horrors, and that country's defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, which dragged us into the fruitless Vietnam conflict. *La plage* is but one of many such beach scenes by the artist, which range from depictions of chilly Breton expanses (as here) to an explosive Saint-Tropez at the time when Brigitte Bardot was the world-recognized symbol of the town's notoriety.



Bernard Buffet,
La plage, 1956, oil on
canvas, 44 7/8 × 76 3/4".

Nineteen fifty-six is the grand date, not only as that of *La plage* but of the twenty-eighth Venice Biennale, for which Alberto Giacometti specifically created the toweringly thin suite of bronzes called “The Women of Venice.” Yes, for an instant, Buffet's name was credibly linked with that of Giacometti. No chuckling, please.

The second painting of consequence in this show was *Nature morte avec poulet* (Still Life with Chicken), 1957. A sober monotone study in sallow gray depicting a taut, butchered bird, the work yet again recalls the rigors imposed on the French during the German occupation, even as the more colorfully humane imagery of Chaim Soutine's numerous still lifes with poultry of the '20s also come to mind. Though violently different from one another (and painted decades apart), the still lifes of both Buffet and Soutine suggest starvation.

The somewhat self-congratulatory posturing of Buffet at this moment coincided with changes in his personal life, the gossipy details of which have long informed the reception of his work. In 1958, Buffet

concluded a romantic relationship with the famed fashion mogul Pierre Bergé, leaving this powerhouse for Annabel Schwob de Lur, the Saint-Germain-des-Prés trendsetter. Buffet and Schwob would marry the same year, while Bergé himself went off with Yves Saint Laurent, then the newly acclaimed designer of the House of Dior.

To be sure, it is easy to sniff at tabloid gossip—our checkout counter reading. Thankfully, Buffet's flood of work from 1957 to 1999, the year of his suicide, is now being leached of its Kardashiana and is stylistically interesting once more. In fact, we now look at his work the way we regard the paintings of Georges Mathieu—as embodying the period's pretensions to French armorial grandeur. While Mathieu adapted gestural action painting to a theatrical reenactment of French medieval and renaissance battles, Buffet likewise made work deep-dyed in the same royalist fantasy. *Misérabilisme*, it seems, was a period style mirroring the haughty posturing of Charles de Gaulle's Fifth Republic. Hence, the Buffets we long condescended to—when seen often enough—are here granted pardon, given another chance, and feel more authentic than we had admitted for a long, long time. As Coco Chanel once memorably said (as quoted by Christian Dior himself in his still-readable autobiography of 1957): “*Couture* creates beautiful things which become ugly; while art creates ugly things which become beautiful.”

—Robert Pincus-Witten