

Painting and Politics

Charlotta Kotík

The exhibition *Abstract Expressionism Behind the Iron Curtain*, a brainchild of Dr. Joana Grevers of the Joana Grevers Foundation in Munich and Bucharest, introduces works created in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1950s and '60s that greatly diverge from the doctrine of Socialist Realism, then the reigning art style in that part of the world. The artists' efforts to pursue individual rather than collective vision, and not to be silenced by the cacophony of dictatorial voices, were brave attempts to assert creative and personal freedom.

Although growing from vastly different circumstances than the work created slightly earlier in the United States, paintings from behind the Iron Curtain nevertheless display the hallmarks of Action Painting or Abstract Expressionism in their impulsive gestures—frantic encounters of lines and colors often overflowing the confines of the pictorial field—in the spattering and dripping of colors, and in a distinct spontaneity. Some of the sociopolitical factors of that era must be highlighted in order to appreciate the works on view.

The cataclysm of World War II left Europe in shambles. The Allied victory over Nazi Germany was officially declared with the German surrender on May 8, 1945 while the war in Asia continued; its end was marked by one of the most catastrophic deeds in modern warfare—the use, in August 1945, of the atomic bomb.

With armed conflict officially over on all fronts, the nations began to rebuild their material infrastructure and lay foundations for the economic, cultural and political future. Europe's historical cultural heritage and former hegemony was tainted by its inability to lessen the carnage of the war and thus was greatly diminished. The war-strengthened economy of the United States began to exert its influence not only on the material recovery of Europe but on its intellectual environment as well. While the Allied powers seemed to be united in the midst of a struggle for survival and during the brief period of victorious euphoria, that unity began to unravel. The profound distrust among the Allies, ever-present during the war but suppressed due to common cause, came into the open, and the cracks in former alliances became manifest in rhetoric and deeds.

The tragic decision to use the atomic bomb fueled an already existing mistrust and led to poisoning of the postwar atmosphere with suspicion and fear. The former allies were turning into adversaries, as if to comply with the simplistic dictum that to prove one's own power, one needs an enemy.

With its populations and territory ravaged by war, the Soviet Union began slow and painful reconstruction. All ends and means had to be explored and absolute consolidation of power in the hands of Joseph Vissarionovich Stalin began to fully exert its influence on the small democracies of Central and Eastern Europe that were ceded to him in the last months of the war during the Yalta and Potsdam Conferences.

In response to Soviet expansionism, Western allies formulated the Cold War doctrine in 1947 to contain and to challenge Soviet power. With that declaration of hostility, the Soviet Union exerted stronger pressure on the nations in its sphere of influence. During the winter of 1947-48, with the Communist takeover in Czechoslovakia, the abdication of King Michael in Romania, and the strengthening of Communist party rule in Yugoslavia, the stage was set for the absolute consolidation of power in the one party system. Communist parties in the Russian satellite states were now under the complete control of the Communist Party's central Politburo in Moscow. The overwhelming power of the byzantine state apparatus regulated every aspect of economy and culture, with no liberty left for independent intellectual and artistic development.

The postwar economic boom in the United States accorded the artists a vastly different experience.

By nature, the majority of artists are anti-status quo, and in the United States the highly individual platform of Abstract Expressionism began to assert itself as the dominant style. Antithetical to the collective spirit that was partially detectable during the Depression era and the war effort, Abstract Expressionism put all the emphasis on the inner need of the individual artist. While the American political structure was not directly vested in support for the arts, the overall cultural policy was not of prime interest to the existing power establishment. This was in a sharp contrast to the Soviet dominated part of the world.

In the totalitarian Soviet regime, where everything was organized and overseen by the government, cultural production was yet another area that needed to fall in line with official ideology. In the visual arts, it was the strict adherence to Socialist Realism, a figurative style easily understandable by the masses and thus a useful tool in state propaganda.

The dictum of the economy made it almost impossible for artists in communist countries to break free. In most countries of the Eastern bloc private property was non-existent, thus there were no commercial galleries or alternative places that could carry individual artists' work. The state and municipal galleries were funded by Ministries of Culture that firmly controlled exhibition policies. Concentration on the individuality of the artists or their inner needs was considered at best bourgeois remains of the past, and at worst subversive and therefore criminal activity. Since there was no freedom to assemble without official permission, to organize an exhibition in one's studio was also deemed subversive and therefore

dangerous. The artists' means of support were in various applied art fields, for the lucky ones, and in all other possible types of employment that might have been available.

Although the situation differed slightly from country to country, it was the prevailing air of state-imposed ideology that was uniformly stifling. It took a great deal of courage and deep conviction to depart from the prescribed mannerism and to begin to express oneself in a mode independent of the almost surreal depictions of happy workers and farm hands listening in awe to the political speeches of great leaders or celebrating with exalted merriment the victories of Socialism over Capitalism.

With severe restrictions on the flow of information, as well as on personal travel, connecting with the art world beyond the Iron Curtain was curtailed. The atmosphere of anti-West propaganda was at its highest in the early 1950s. With Stalin's death in 1953 the tone began to change, exposing deep fissures in the Eastern bloc—fissures that were to accord a certain amount of freedom to artists and the population as a whole.

Historical circumstances were partially responsible for the degree of independence the individual countries were able to carve out for themselves. Poland, where the relationship with Russia, and later the Soviet Union, has always been particularly fraught, seemed to be singularly prepared to assert a degree of independence. The *International Conference of Twentieth Century Music* in Warsaw in 1954, fully devoted to atonal compositions, was followed by the *Arsenal* exhibition of young painters in 1955. This exhibition featured examples of paintings freed from strict realism and pointed toward independent pictorial practices.¹

The undertones of pre-war expressionism and abstract geometric tendencies could be discerned in the work of young artists in Poland, one of whom was Tadeusz Kantor, who was soon to become internationally recognized. Born in 1915 in Galicia,² Kantor began his quest for a purely personal journey early on, while he traveled to Paris in 1947. Shortly after the war, Paris was still recognized by many European intellectuals as a wellspring of ideas. The opportunity to travel there, and to follow the left-wing weekly, *La Lettre Française*, when available, provided a degree of information. French *Art Informel*, represented by artists such as Jean Fautrier and Georges Mathieu, was studied by younger Eastern Europeans extensively and exerted a great degree of influence.

Kantor created works of abstracted shapes and moved into full non-objectivity in many paintings of the late 1950s, such as *Composition* (1958). Here the energetic impulsive gestures result in encounters of colors and lines, building a complex structure of interwoven elements. The surface of the work seems to be almost frenzied in its desire to fill the canvas and possibly to reach beyond the picture plane. In the center of the piece there appears to be a vortex from which the energy radiates into surrounding space as if propelled by an invisible explosion. True to his ever-inquiring mind and boundless energy, Kantor soon

began exploring the possibilities of assemblage that spilled into installations, happenings, performances and stage design. In 1965 he spent seven months in the United States, reflected in his canvas, *Chelsea*, which references a sojourn in New York City. He also traveled extensively in both Western and Central Europe and exerted a great degree of influence on other artists, such as young painters and performance artists in Prague.

While the situation in Poland was culturally less restricted, Czechoslovakia was more under the domination of Soviet dictum. Czech artist Jan Kotík, born in Turnov in 1916, began to move from the stylized depiction of figures and interiors of the 1940s into a more nonrepresentational style during the 1950s. Kotík's composition, *Calligraphy* (1961), bespeaks the artist's preoccupation with the Asian art of calligraphy, especially Chinese. Inquisitive by nature, Kotík strove to learn much about the various philosophical systems as well as about art of the world's cultures. An occasional writer, critic, and admirer of books, he was fascinated by the magical shapes of Eastern calligraphies. He translated them into numerous compositions in which the white gestural lines and specks of white contrast with uniform black backgrounds. Kotík's participation in the *First World Conference of Situationists* in Alba in 1956 established a friendship with Asger Jorn of the CoBrA group that brought him into contact with the art world's developments.

It is important to note that exhibitions such as *Modern Art in the United States*, which traveled in Europe during 1955-56, and *The New American Painting*, which toured Europe in 1958-59—both organized by the International Council of the Museum of Modern Art—were at least partially intended as instruments of political Cold War propaganda by raising issues of artistic freedom. They were, however, essential sources of knowledge for the artists and general public in the information-deprived environment of the Eastern bloc.³ Whatever the intentions of the organizers, these projects brought eagerly anticipated news to truly isolated places. Visits by critics such as Pierre Restany from Paris and Dore Ashton from New York were equally important. They offered connections and feedback that encouraged artists to continue working under dire circumstances.

As noted above, not all countries were equally repressive. Under the presidency of Josip Broz Tito, a highly decorated general and leader of the Partisans, Yugoslavia was able to assert a degree of independence from Moscow. That certainly affected the artistic opportunities of Edo Murtić, born in 1921 in Croatia. As with most of the young artists and intellectuals in prewar Europe, he was influenced by socialist ideas and during World War II joined resistance and liberation forces. After the war, Murtić was able to travel not only in Europe, where he encountered *Art Informel* and *Taschism* in France, but also, in 1951, to Canada and the United States, where he saw Abstract Expressionism first hand well before it was recognized as a dominant postwar artistic tendency.

The rectangles of color floating through the pictorial plane of Murtić's *White Background* (1959), as if in an unceasing entering and exiting of the painting, exude the feeling of persistent gentle movement. There is a striving for balance, as the segment of the bottom left black rectangle has a counterpoint in the corresponding shape in the upper right. The white background that gives the painting its title is also a strong compositional structural element as it frames and thus accentuates the floating forms. There is an atmospheric quality to this work, corresponding to Murtić's love of the Istrian coast and the magic of its ever-changing light. Always attracted to coastal imagery, Murtić created a very special brand of lyrical abstraction often endowed with discernible references to the natural elements.

Slovenian Andrej Jemec, born in 1934,⁴ also grew up in a world less restricted by Communist ideology. After his studies in Ljubljana in the 1950s, he was awarded a Preseren Foundation grant to travel and to study in both Paris and London in the early 1960s. His painting, *In the Forest* (1960), is an excellent example of work that could be approached either as a highly abstracted reflection of reality or a total abstraction. The predominant elements of the composition are wide intersecting bands of jagged black lines. They seem to provide structural underpinning to an otherwise chaotic composition, certainly suggestive of trees in the primeval forest felled by the cataclysm of a storm. The dramatic intensity of the overall composition is underscored by the source of light that emanates from the depth at the very center of the painting, either to illuminate the drama of the composition itself or to emphasize the almost post and lintel quality within the work.

Devoted primarily to abstraction, Romul Nuțiu, born in 1932 in Romania, began to experiment with a new technique in the late 1960s. Calling it an "aquatic experience," he poured water and industrial car paint into shallow vats. Those substances cannot really mix, but they created a residue of paint on the canvases suspended into the liquid containers. The artist then used a large wooden bar to direct the shapes of the paint's imprints. This physical interaction and its influence on the results of the imprints on canvas was the artist's individual expansion of the idea of Action Painting. He later collaged the canvas segments onto large relief-like compositions such as *Dynamic* (1967), which hover between the two-dimensionality of painting and the objectness of sculpture. In this way Nuțiu created a unique style very much his own.

Although works in the present exhibitions are not numerous, they represent the wide spectrum of divergent tendencies that are generally associated with Abstract Expressionism. Ranging from works where the energetic brushstrokes leave indelible marks of entangled lines and streaks of color, to works where there seems to be a striving for balance and the accent is on the defined areas of colors, there is a richness of ideas and forms. These artists, whose work might have been stifled by the political forces that required the subjugation of the individual to the dictum of societal needs, proved that the quest for artistic freedom irrepressibly growing within the artist's self can overcome external pressure, however forcefully it might be imposed.

¹ The 1959 exhibition, *Contemporary French Painting*, organized by Jean Cassou, and one-person exhibitions of works by Emilio Vedova in 1959 and Henry Moore in 1960 in Warsaw offered other connections to the world of art beyond the Iron Curtain.

² Prior to World War I, Galicia was part of Austria-Hungary. It was partitioned after the war, when a large part of it was integrated into Poland.

³ Michael Kimmelman, "Revisiting the Revisionists: The Modern and its Critics, and the Cold War," in *The Museum of Modern Art at Mid Century/ Art Home and Abroad*, in the series *Studies in Modern Art for MoMA*, distributed by Harry N. Abrams (New York, 2005), pp. 38-55, gives a succinct overview of the issues involved. The exhibitions referred to are *50 Ans d' Art Modern aux Etats-Unis: Collections du Musée d'Art Moderne de New York*, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris (1955), which comprised selections from the museum's collections. It traveled to the Tate Gallery, London, in 1956 and later the paintings, sculpture and prints traveled to Zurich, Barcelona, Frankfurt, The Hague, Vienna and Belgrade, the only city in Eastern Europe that hosted the exhibition. In 1959 another exhibition, *The New American Painting*, organized by the International Program of the Museum of Modern Art and the Arts Council of Great Britain, took place at the Tate and later traveled extensively in Europe. Belgrade was the only city in the Communist bloc to host the exhibition.

⁴ Both Edo Murtić and Andrej Jemec were born into the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, which was created in 1918 as a merger of the State of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs with the Kingdom of Serbia. In November 1945 the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was established, but was broken up into individual republics during 1990-92, following the fall of Communism in the rest of Eastern Europe.

