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Images on the Move: Circulations and Transfers in film

Martin Simon, Andrew Lambirth and Jane
Stevenson, *Edward Burra*

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REFERENCES

Martin Simon, Andrew Lambirth and Jane Stevenson, *Edward Burra* (Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2011), 176 p, ISBN 978-1-84822-090-4

- 1 The first full-scale monograph on Edward Burra (1905-1975) accompanied an exhibition of Burra's paintings and drawings at Pallant House Gallery. The authors include Simon Martin, head of Curatorial Services at Pallant House Gallery, curator of the exhibition, and Jane Stevenson and Andrew Lambirth as other contributors. Far from the restrained abstraction of modernism, Burra went for men's foibles and eccentricities (he was not afraid of coming out as a gay personality and as a painter of drag queens and tarts) but also for men's darker sides, which caught his interest during the Spanish Civil War and World War II. His better-known themes and subjects include Parisian music halls and cabarets, the low life in dockside bars or Harlem nightclubs. His influences range from painters of Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity) — such as Otto Dix and Georg Grosz —, to Surrealism, Parisian dance revues, and macabre Renaissance engravings. His favorite medium was watercolor which he handled thickly as if it were egg-tempera or fresco, using spit as liquid — or so he said. This choice of medium was partly due to his fragile health which forced him to be seated as he painted. Remarkably, he managed to paint with his disabled arthritic hand. Art therefore was both an escape and a release, a “mind-altering stimulant” (10).
- 2 Jane Stevenson, a biographer of Burra, draws her source material from letters and therefore, Chapter 1 takes on a personal turn. As Burra was partly disabled, he adopted the posture of an onlooker, an observer of life. His letters show he combined patrician confidence — as testified by his penchant for witty and caustic observation — and deliberate rejection of the late Victorian class-conscious, conservative, rightwing

values of his parents who came from the English upper-class milieu. The chapter is packed with gossipy details about Burra's coterie and acquaintances (none of whose members became painters but took other artistic directions), about how they interacted and helped one another for work opportunities. The only painter Burra drew close to — although he did not think much of his work, fond of him as he was — was Paul Nash in the 1920s and 1930s. Nash introduced him to other painters' groups such as those of his foundation, Unit One, but Burra did not seek their company, although the works of contemporary figurative artists did not leave him indifferent. His painting subjects evolved, from the clientele of various nightclubs, to stage designs for ballet performances, landscape and the natural world, and ultimately to his interests in spooks and spirits of the place.

- 3 The next three chapters are written by Simon Martin. Burra sought to escape from his hometown, Rye, Sussex, and travelled to more stimulating and exotic locations (France, Spain, Mexico, New York) despite his health problems. He certainly belonged to the post-war figurative strand of painting, and was close to Tubism (coined by Louis Vauxcelles in 1911). More specifically, he was fascinated with the disreputable side of society — a form of escapism from his upper-middle class upbringing — and had eyes for the cheap glamour of tarts and showgirls, the seedy Parisian underworld, male transvestites and lesbians in dockside bars and shady ports, the multicultural colorful crowds of Harlem nightlife — all of which were inspired by his trips to France or the United States in 1933 and 1934, in the midst of the Harlem Renaissance. The meeting of gay men was a fashionable subject in the 1920s-1930s with artists such as Fernand Léger, Paul Cadmus, Jean Cocteau, Charles Demuth and Glyn Philpot. In the wealth of details of Burra's urban scenes, one can also spot the influence of jazz music, cinema, the dissolute atmosphere of French literature and William Roberts's paintings. Some scenes allude to the then vogueish eighteenth-century conversation pieces. These group portraits were revisited and updated in such a way that formal respectability was replaced by innuendo-laden humorous squalid details. They are steeped in visual *double entendre*, with direct allusions at times, such as in the Hogarthian title "Marriage à la mode". Burra also experimented with floating, tilted or flattened perspective, and with the cubist fashioning of space.
- 4 The lengthy Chapter 3 focuses on the macabre as a dominant theme of Burra's painting from 1930 onwards, be it through subtle hints of impending threat or outright depictions of ghoulish monsters or skeletons. Burra's fragile physical health made him acutely aware of his own mortality. The choice of subjects, his experimentation with *collage* and fascination for machine parts led him to be associated with surrealism but he shrank away from such labeling. Nevertheless, his scenes are replete with grotesque hybrid creatures, part bird, part insects, part vegetal, part human. His dancing skeletons, corpses and "gallows humour" (82) recall James Ensor and Félicien Rops and were also influenced by late medieval or Renaissance prints, such as Hans Holbein the Younger's. Burra was just as affected by what he had witnessed during the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, when he visited Spain in 1933 and 1935-36, and also responded intensely to the baroque religious paintings and Flemish paintings in the Prado, such as those by Hieronymus Bosch and Pieter Brueghel the Elder. Although his religious beliefs remain unclear, his paintings show preferably violent Biblical scenes.
- 5 In the subsequent decades, he sought solace in landscape painting and joined the NeoRomantics (Graham Sutherland, John Piper, John Craxton, John Minton). In Ireland,

he depicted narrative urban and rural scenes in which he inserted shadowy figures. Following his trip to Mexico in 1937, where he had seen Posada's prints, he represented deathlike figures, dummies, straw men, puppets, manikins, and endowed inanimate objects with eerie presence and power. The books he owned show an interest in the occult and esotericism. He relished in shady otherworldly material, both gothic and depraved, uncanny and louche. In this chapter, Simon Martin provides substantial factual information, but the chronological narrative unfortunately makes for a piecemeal chapter.

- 6 Chapter 4 reveals how Burra reveled in all sorts of performances and stage entertainment, and was drawn to high and low culture alike: ballet, cabaret, film, strip bar, jazz, music hall, Opera Theater, pantomime, children's matinees... Burra drew on stage for inspiration and depicted leading figures from the theatrical world of the 1920s and 1930s, but also designed sets and scenery. His commissions for backcloth and costume designs made him play an important part in the English ballet scene, and this was helped by his close friendship with the ballet dancer William Chappell. His preparatory designs for costumes are notable because of the way they convey individualities, and the sets he created evoke areas as different as a Glasgow tenement, a Spanish town or streets of Harlem, showing his great range of talents. This chapter gives detailed information on Burra's commissions, but the line of thought is once again more descriptive than synthetic. Moreover, one may regret the links between the sets and his paintings are minimally analyzed. The author merely mentions how the designs took up his personal leitmotifs and style.
- 7 Chapter 5, written by Andrew Lambirth, focuses on Burra's little-known and undervalued landscape painting, which accounts for a fourth of his entire output. From 1959 onwards, he indeed withdrew into a tighter group of friends and family, and his work was the closer to his own roots as he aged. He lived in a large secluded Victorian house overlooking the Rye and then moved in 1953 to Chapel House, with a view over Romney Marsh, but he did not limit his art to these natural surroundings. As opposed to his formerly cluttered compositions, the vast expanses of countryside are bare, remote and surprisingly depopulated. With high viewpoints and wide angles, his pictures show nostalgia and innate sympathy with the Sussex countryside. He never drew on the spot and took photographs, but merely recollected details and made up his compositions. The originality of form and content prevents him from being fitted into any category. Although his landscape has less of a caustic feel, naturally, one can still find edges of amusement and a wicked relish in vulgarity, as when he depicts cabbage fields, given that a cabbage was a nineteenth-century term for vagina. Some of his later paintings evoke the spoliation of the countryside and others are haunted by odd ghostly figures, as spirits of the land.
- 8 What has remained of Burra's *oeuvre* are mainly the stylish, satirical, grim, and ghoulish scenes. This book presents him as more than the painter of the seedy underworld of urban life he is known to be, and contributes to reasserting other strengths of Burra's repertoire. The introduction is followed by a biographical chronology, and useful appendices on Burra's works are included at the end of the book. Unfortunately, as often in catalogues with chapters by different authors, one can find repetitions (as regards the influences and biographical information mainly) and a lack of continuity and structure between the chapters. Nonetheless, the high-quality and numerous reproductions, the many photos documenting his life, and the fact this

book sheds light on aspects of Burra's life that have hitherto been neglected (such as ballet and opera designs and late landscapes) make it a welcome addition to the scholarship and reappraisal of the artist, and help revive interest in his eccentric and unsettling artistic production.

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Keywords: Jazz Age, Surrealism, Neue Sachlichkeit, Parisian music halls, Unit One, Harlem Renaissance, Spanish Civil War, Sussex, Tubism, stage design, opera theater, landscape painting, nightclubs, prostitution, transvestites, Harlem, macabre, skeletons, conversation pieces

Mots-clés: Les années folles, surréalisme, Neue Sachlichkeit, cabarets parisiens, Unit One, Harlem Renaissance, guerre civile espagnole, Sussex, Tubisme, décor de théâtre, ballet-opéra, peinture de paysage, boîtes de nuit, prostitution, travestis, Harlem, macabre, squelettes, portraits de groupe

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