John Eaton and His Fabulous Messengers (John Eaton et ses Fabuleux Messagers)

By Guy Robert

JOHN EATON

TAPING INTO THAT FABULOUS INTUITION

While he talks to the animals in their own language – just like the amiable Konrad Lorenz in his unforgettable He Speaks with Mammals, Birds and Fishes – John Eaton speaks an elegant and sophisticated English, is fluent in Italian, but not so in French, which is surprising, considering that he has lived in Quebec for over twenty years. He covers up this deficiency with a child-like innocent smile, which is an endearing aspect of his vivacious and good-humoured demeanour.

Observing and listening to him, during the trip to the farm as well as while visiting the house, his studio, or the stables, I had the impression of participating in an intimate theatrical performance; the attitude and remarks subtly hinting at anti-bourgeois sentiments of the artist seemed to harp at a familiar past, for which he still holds a certain resentment; the humour and irony seemed to ride a profound vulnerability; and the volatility he displays in front of his works seems to be an attempt to at once reveal and mask some intimate secret.

NEW ENGLAND SUMMER

The horse is the focal point, the nebulous image of the Centaur rises before us.

The artist returns to the theme of a fable over and over, the sacred and luminous Fable, which instinctively defies casual description, which is hinted upon in the deepest, recesses of creative ethos. It’s the allegorical cavalcade reminiscent of David-Herbert Lawrence, (as in St-Mawr), their sentiments of the artist seemed to hark at a further exploration of his talent.

Many further: first, we begin to see, emerging from the turbulent swirl of colours, outlines of faces, fragments of human and animal forms, as if from some primordial chaos, from a genetic pool of the beginning of time.

The instant impression is one of ephemeral apparitions, of transitory transformations, as well as of a certain rite of passage, which isn’t so much one of appearances as of esoteric evocations. John Eaton doesn’t rely on models (“I never use them: they are too distracting, disturbing...” he explains), which his talents allow him to reproduce, stylize and transform with ease; he prefers to allow his inspiration to take the creative reins, the artist’s hand attently following its promptings.

His figures seem born of deep unconscious, or perhaps arise from his rich cultural fodder, or are born still from some mysterious alchemy of the senses? Standing in front of some of his works, one feels the cold breeze of prehistoric caves, - I’m thinking specifically of the Lascaux or those of Altamira, permeated with the spirit, places resembling sanctuaries where sacred rituals take place. In other works, be it on paper or canvas, one is witness to the dialogue between man and beast as they merge together or split apart; and

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John Eaton lives on a farm, north of Gatineau Park, close to the village of Rupert. The landscape is hilly, dotted with rivers and small lakes, but marred by surrounding architecture, most of it mediocre, and scarred by a grid of roads and paths leading this way and that. Courteous and pleasant, the artist suggests we meet in Ottawa, at Galerie L’Autre Équivoque, from where he’ll drive me to his country refuge. The gallery is by far one of the most stimulating in the Ottawa-Hull region, mainly to the excellent work of its director Pierre-Luc Saint-Laurent and the diversity of his “stable”, which draws some of my attention away from the dozen or so works by John Eaton that are presented to me. The latter assures me kind-heartedly that I will see many more at his studio, and will have all the time to inspect them at leisure.

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