

JOHN EATON

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

By Guy Robert

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TRANSLATED FROM FRENCH

It was at the beginning of the 80s when, in a Montreal gallery, I first saw the works of John Eaton. I was instantly taken by the elegance of the drawings and the intense fluidity of the compositions. Later, upon seeing his works from time to time at Minigal, I became convinced that it would be interesting to meet the artist and write an article about him: and here it is.

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 to drive me to his country refuge.

The gallery is by far one of the most stimulating in the Ottawa-Hull region, owing 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.

ARTISTIC TRAINING WITH AN ITALIAN TOUCH

On the bumpy ride from the gallery to the farm, I take the opportunity to get to know the artist better. We are meeting for the first time, after all. He's a fascinating personality, voluble, with a sharp intelligence and refined sensitivity. A highly cultivated man, he gave me the impression of being more concerned with originality and piquancy, than with a display of knowledge or anecdotes. From time to time, I would note certain paradoxes or contrasting thoughts, which only added texture to the natural charm of his personality.

This charm can turn to nonchalance or wry humour, which undoubtedly serves the artist well in dealing with the public, such as during openings or receptions, - at least as long as his sensibility is assaulted by foolishness or vulgarity, which can provoke a brutal or icy retort, cutting as sharp as a scalpel.

Born in Ottawa in 1942, John Eaton is the son of an economist and civil servant of Acadian heritage, and an American from California, drawn early to the intellectual life, and even more to a pursuit of worldliness. From the age of fifteen to twenty-one, John studied at the posh High Mowing School in

New Hampshire, with its European atmosphere where he develops his creativity surrounded by a variety of visual expression: drawing, dance, poetry, music, theatre, painting...

The young man leaves the school set on becoming an artist, convinced that a successful life depends on balancing passion and emotions, drawing inspiration from the heart to feed the great artistic adventure in sensuality and imagination.

In order to prepare for his dream career, as much as for the kind of life he would like to lead, John manages to organize a trip to Europe. His first sojourn is in Italy, where he learns the art of sculpting in marble, and from this, somewhat austere apprenticeship, he moves to painting and drawing. He continues his European peregrinations in Greece, Yugoslavia and Switzerland. Returning to Italy, he settles on the Adriatic coast, in the country residence of a painter friend, and later spends time living with local fishermen in the ports that dot the Italian coastline.

The European saga ends pleasantly enough with a short stay in Fiesole, north of Florence, where the artist soaks in the atmosphere that inspired the Italian Renaissance. Returning to America via New York, John soon feels ill at ease in the shallow and continuous tumult of urban living, and decides to live life on his own, very different, terms.

OF CERTAIN FAMILIAR PARADOXES

In 1968, he purchases a recently abandoned farm in Quebec, near Rupert, where he lives to this day, ensconced "provisionally" since twenty years among the antique furniture left by the previous owners. His paintings are all over the house, hanging on the walls or piled up, adding to the intriguing atmosphere of this place. The house has served as the artist's studio for a long time, but a few years ago, he has built himself a separate atelier, white and spacious, with windows projecting onto the property, and particularly onto the stable and enclosure which houses a magnificent black horse, companion and confidante of the artist.

As we look through the paintings and documents, an old white cat keeps us company in the house, adding his own vocalisations to our conversation, sounds I have never before heard uttered by this kind of an animal. The painter explains that he lives alone and isolated, and that he speaks to the cat constantly, and the animal responds. He speaks as much to the horse, to which he is deeply attached, as others would to their plants, their books, or their ghosts.

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 hark at a familiar past, for which he still holds a certain resentment; the humour and irony seemed to hide a profound vulnerability; and the volubility he displays in front of his works seems to be an attempt to at once reveal and mask some intimate secret.

TAPPING INTO THAT FABULOUS INTUITION

Without pretending to unlock the secret to John Eaton's art, having viewed and savoured some one hundred of his works, I must say that their elegance and sensuality are an invitation to a further exploration of his talent.

Much further: first, we begin to see, emerging from the turbulent swirl of colours, clouds, 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 allows him to reproduce, stylize and transform with ease; he prefers to allow his inspiration to take the creative reins, the artist's hand attentively following its promptings.

His figures seem born of some 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



where 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 sensuality of another order, born of the collective unconscious, which the artist has tapped intuitively, incorporating it into his visual lyricism. His works evoke the thinking and aesthetic of Jacques Maritain, Malraux, or Beaudelaire, Focillon or Dufrenoy, names I have not heard spoken of in a long time.

John Eaton's art is about the unpredictable and the paradoxical. Located somewhere between Lascaux frescoes and Dante's visions, his works combine the sensuality of the material and the ecstasy of thought, extracting from Nature the essence necessary for the creation of an original mythology born in the wake of Italian renaissance with marked the artist's creative training. We feel as if we were standing before works inspired by abstract Lyricism, only to be reminded of drawings from the pages of Leonardo di Vinci's sketchbook.

Faces emerge from turbulent skies, galloping horses burst from clouds, human forms couple and dissipate in an enigmatic landscape. Tenderness and violence, dreams and anguish, plenitude and alienation, all entangled, as in life, or in myth.

How original is John Eaton? - Proudly so, yet with enough modesty to sketch the outlines of *Homage to Turner*, and with the sense to absorb the lessons of William Blake, Daumier, Greco and Goya. Never assuming to have invented the art of painting, he approaches it with the passion of a Great Master, as a "cosa mentale", - creature born of the spirit, leading to the exploration of profound visions, across canvases exploding with swirling skies, from which emerge the enigmatic "messengers" from the magical realm of the artist's imagination.

Untitled, mixed media, 28x36"