

Ondrej Coufal – Visionary Expressionist

If the characteristics of an “exceptional” artist are an inner calling coupled with the ability to create a body of work that is wholly unique and thus able to transport the viewer, then surely Ondřej Coufal would be placed in this category.

Born in the Czech Republic, self-taught, a child prodigy - early on Coufal was marked as an unusual talent. While many children draw and paint, few are like Coufal, with exhibitions since the age of 10 and sell-out shows commanding the attention of sophisticated collectors. As a teenager, Coufal had already leaped to showing in the U.S.

I first encountered the artist’s signature paintings during his American premier in 1997 at Anya Tish Gallery in Houston. He was a mere 18 and his art looked like nothing I had seen in a contemporary gallery.

Instead, Coufal’s phantasmagoric oil on panels, with their otherworldly color tones and expressively distorted figures, were similar to works in a nearby museum: Houston’s world famous Menil Collection’s extensive surrealism holdings. In particular, Coufal’s individualistic, visionary and intense painting suggested the disturbing, hypnotic art of Max Ernst.

In other aspects, Coufal evokes associations with the medieval world, specifically Gothic painting. Both Coufal and the artists of the 13th and 14th centuries share a penchant for depicting elongated figures against flattened, brilliantly hued backgrounds. Coufal’s non-natural way of “seeing” is very similar to late medieval expressionism and the Gothic artist’s perception of a precarious universe. Perhaps, the fragile and tenuous 1200s and 1300s were not unlike Coufal’s own late 20th century upbringing in the tumultuous Czech Republic in Eastern Europe.

What are the aims of Coufal? The artist has often spoken of his desire to capture the interior aspect of an individual in his painting. Indeed, human protagonists are the overriding subjects of these oil on panels, but not in a traditional or realistic sense. Painted in disturbing shades of blue or orange, they possess gigantic heads, attenuated limbs, and fingers that entwine like plant tendrils. Indeed Coufal's people are haunting and even disturbing; they often seem disembodied. These spectral figures are frequently joined by members of the animal kingdom. The artist's signature cats - large-headed, supernatural creatures with bulging eyes - threaten to metamorphose into terrifying monsters. All in all, Coufal's people and animals look like a strange family of aliens. Besides the aforementioned connections with surrealism and medieval art, there's an element of fanatic futurism here. Coufal's paintings suggest a mythic encounter with the residents of Roswell's Area 51.

The viewer's responds strongly to these strange images – we hover between fright and compulsion, like a satisfying horror story. If Coufal's people are monstrous, they also awaken our feelings, especially a tenderness and curiosity. Is this how we all look inside? There's also a layer of mystery and ambiguity here. Gender is often stripped away; in other cases, it is emphasized. In particular, Coufal's female figures relentlessly gaze at us like dazzling sphinxes, powerful, yet completely unknowable. His blue hued boys, vulnerable and flawed, are making a difficult journey towards manhood. They seem forever locked in a painful adolescence, perhaps stand-ins for the artist himself.

And there's no end to Coufal's fertile, idiosyncratic imagination. By startling us, he challenges the viewer to look more deeply, to open ourselves up to a world that can be alternately terrifying or intensely beautiful, to really feel and sense life's poignancy. There's no room for the mundane or the normal in these paintings.

In important ways, Coufal's art mirrors that of a *fin de siècle* master of the last century, Edward Munch. Although both artists couldn't be more different stylistically, their intent is oddly similar: both excel at capturing the essence of human life during times of high uncertainty, rendering psychologically charged inner spaces and fragile human interiors. Coufal shares with Munch this compelling expressionism, a beguiling dance between dream and nightmare. Like Munch 100 years earlier, the art seems not of our own time, but dropped from another era (whether past or future) and remains absolutely haunting and utterly unforgettable.

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