

Bruno Bobak

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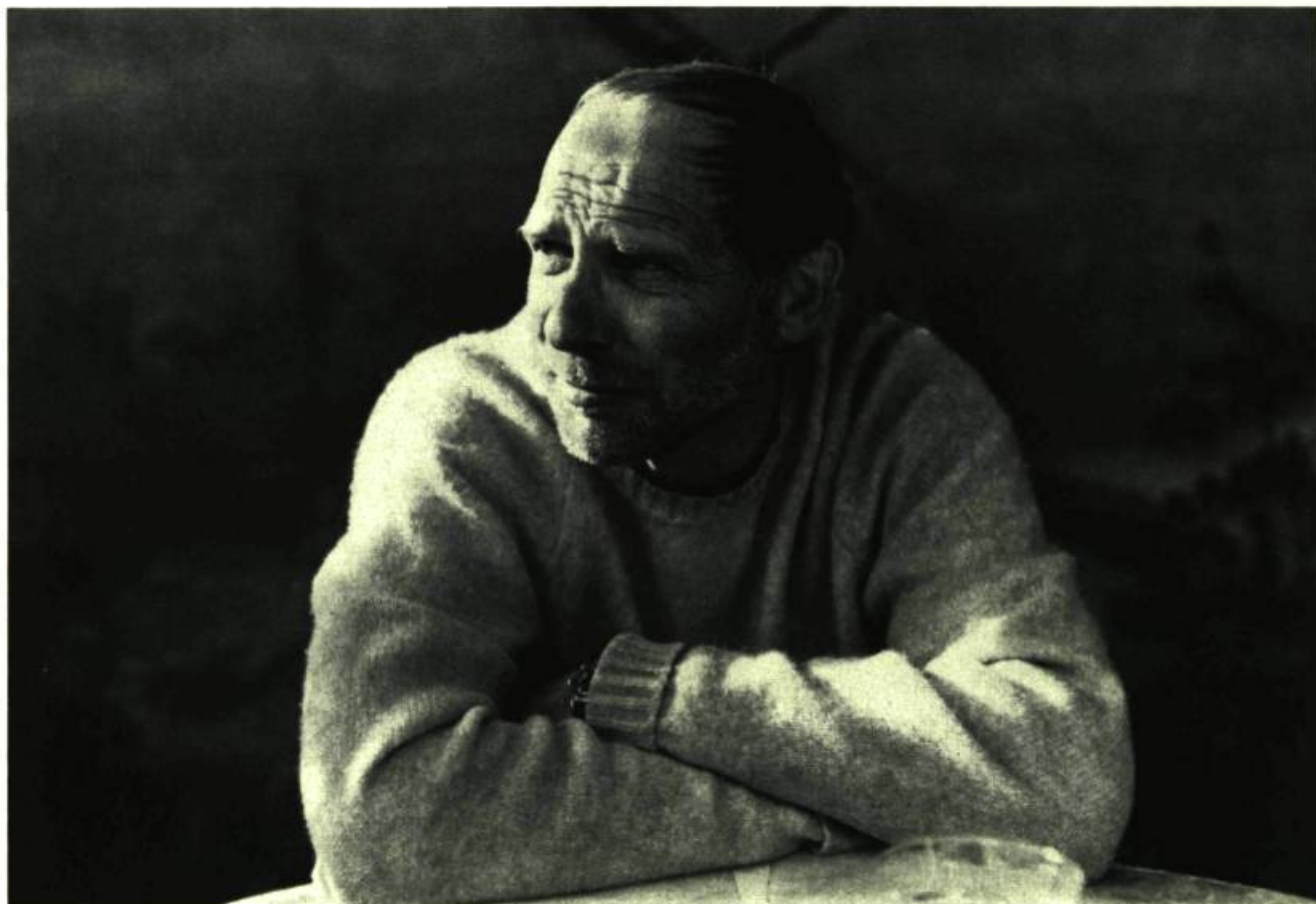
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BRUNO BOBAK, who has been resident artist at the University of New Brunswick since 1960, was born in Poland in 1923 but has lived in Canada since infancy. He studied art in Toronto at the Central Technical School and later with Arthur Lismer; in London at the Central School of Arts and Crafts and at the City of Guilds Art School. During the war he served with the Canadian Army in Europe as an official war artist, returning to Canada to work as a designer for the Government Exhibition Commission in Ottawa and then to teach at the Vancouver School of Art. In 1957 he visited Europe again under a Canadian Government Overseas Senior Fellowship.

Bruno Bobak has shown in group and solo exhibitions in Canada and in many other countries of the world between 1956 and the present and he is represented in public collections in Canada, England and Norway and in many private collections.



BRUNO BOBAK

by Luke Rombout

Many of us, spectators, writers, curators and dealers, are rather absorbed in the 'here and now' of the art developments — we find it difficult, indeed sometimes impossible, to keep up with the plastics, mirrors, sounds and lights; elements which make the contemporary art scene an exciting and vibrating one, in every sense. To stay with the turbulence of modern art is a demanding and often hurried task and there seems little time to allow us to pause and look behind. If and when we do, we may well see, in sharper focus, the work of some very good painters who stand outside the mainstream of what is happening today.

The lyrical and unashamedly romantic vision of Bruno Bobak is a visual expression which appears little appreciated, in Canada that is, and hardly taken serious. It seems almost absurd that one must take a somewhat defensive stance to write about an artist who knows his craft well, who is making something visual about our

1. *Bruno Bobak.*
Photographie de John Frazer

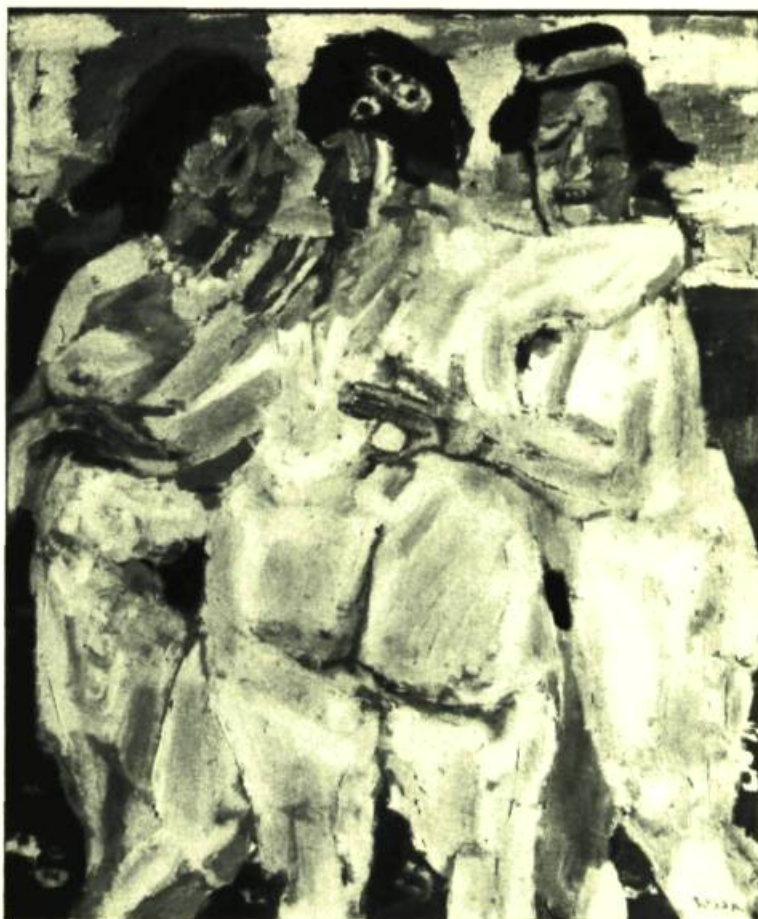
2. *Les grâces. 1964. Huile sur toile. 48" x 40" (122 x 101,6 cm)*

3. *Personnage réfléchissant. 1961-66. Huile sur toile. 38" x 60" (96,6 x 152,5 cm).*

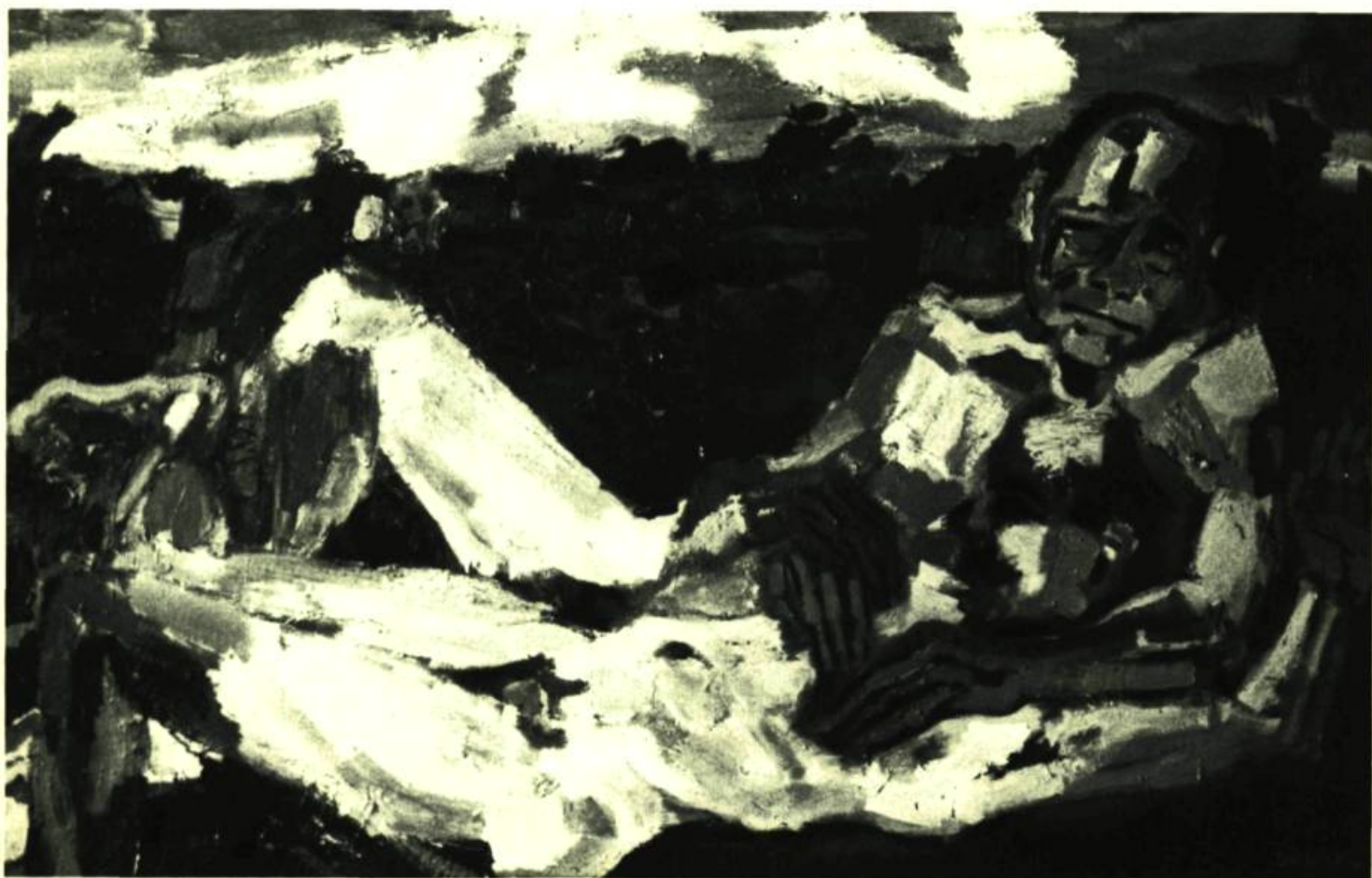
society in a meaningful manner, whose perception of that society is acute, and whose integrity as an artist is unquestionable. In the face of potent developments in contemporary art, almost all of which were contrary to his own form of expression, he never wavered from his direction or point of view. In my opinion, his tenacity, the being faithful to himself kind of thing, is reflected through forceful means in his paintings.

'Expression' too, is, of course, the key to his work. Distortion and exaggeration, the emotive quality in his use of colour, are all too familiar elements of expressionist painting. In that sense, expressionism is old hat, or, as I noted in London recently, the mention of Kokoschka anathema.

What Bobak chooses to do with the expressionist style or manner is another matter. His view on life is complicated and intensely felt: he relates mostly personal experiences which are subsequently registered in moods ranging from depressive and oppressive to the enchanting and charming — in between lie, often, the sly and the *sensuous*. The former quality now provides his work with a deep, graphic kind of bite, and I say 'now', because his earlier interest in the landscape has gradually shifted to that of the figure. This comes, coincidentally but perhaps not insignificantly, at a time when the figure, especially in Canada, is again emerging as respectable subject matter in painting. Bobak's figure painting lies distinctly and for a large part, in the existentialist sphere — individuals alone, groping for their own meaning. Although he views man (or woman) with compassion, and reflects it so, his paintings are free from message or theatrical response. His compassion, which may be too strong a word, is aligned with a perception which lies more in the realm of the analytical — of clear seeing — than it is imbued with sentiment.



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His oeuvre, though bound stylistically by characteristics such as his use of colour, which is exuberant, or his manner of painting, executed with a forceful, luscious kind of brushwork, points to a romantic inclination. That is to say, his work with the figure encompasses the qualities of loneliness and despair, but also, in quite another vein, the way in which he celebrates lovers in a landscape or a child holding flowers. Because of the autobiographical content of his paintings (extending from the lovers to the suicide sequence) we see mirrored in these canvases a fixed image of the artist himself. His visual vocabulary describes eloquently the kind of man he is — or wants to be. He sees himself with a kind of abjection and when he portrays himself as a lover, his paintings are not without a hint of cynicism.

The compositional elements in his paintings are kept formal and uncluttered. I was rather amazed to discover that one of Bobak's favorite painters is Antoine Watteau (similarly, and with some surprise too, I learned from Ian Baxter that he was, and perhaps still is, considerably influenced by the work of Morandi) from whose paintings he has taken fundamental designs. Although the nature of Bobak's paintings suggest that he works quickly and directly, it takes him, in fact, months to complete a

canvas — slowly building up layer after layer of paint. In the process he often completely reworks or redesigns the figurative parts. He is a strong graphic artist, in drawing and in woodcuts, the latter of which places him most closely to the German expressionist school. Few artists are working in the woodcut medium in Canada, but of those who do, Bobak has few, if any, equals. Often working in large dimensions, he carves with precision an intensely individualized graphic image; an image which, in the figurative, often takes on a sculptural quality. His draughtmanship is all-knowing, both in his paintings and his graphic work, and the handling of the figure always positive, drawn with economy of line and gesture. Again, the 'thereness' of his figures often suggest a three-dimensional quality.

It appears that much continues to be made of the regionalism in painting in the Maritimes. In my opinion, only a weak case for this point of view can be presented and in Bobak's case it would simply be absurd to assume that he paints what he paints because he lives in New Brunswick. He is convinced of his course, whether he paints in London, England, Mallorca, or Greece, places where he has worked within the last few years. He travels widely, and he has had successful exhibitions in England and Scandinavia. He feels that the quietness of Fredericton is conducive to his work, that he can paint there with few interruptions and little fuss. To Canadians looking upon the Maritimes from the outside, life here appears to them exsanguinate — though, for one, the work of Bobak may suggest otherwise.

4. *Etreinte*. 1966. Huile sur toile. 30" x 40" (76,25 x 101,6 cm).

5. *Hommage à Heinz Fischer*. Huile sur toile. 40" x 70" (101,6 x 177,85 cm). Collection Dalhousie University.

6. *Jalousie*. 1965-66. Huile sur toile. 40" x 60" (101,6 x 152,5 cm).