

BOOK REVIEWS

VICTOR BRAUNER, *Victor-Victorious: drawings, etchings, objects, events*, ed. Cristinel Popa (Bucharest: Vellant, 2019).

Victor Brauner (1903–1966) was a Jewish Romanian painter and sculptor who was part of the Avant-Garde movement of the 20th century. The present volume represents the product of the 2019 exhibition held by the DADA Gallery in Bucharest bearing the same title, which is only the third ever exhibition held in Romania dedicated to the works of Victor Brauner, organised by a private gallery. The publication under scrutiny brings together and reproduces an immense collection of original drawings, collages, etchings, lithographs and linocuts, as well as drawings published as illustrations in different publications of the time, showing the artist's evolution, influences and impact on the artistic and literary word of the 20th century.

The Romanian-English bilingual volume contains three parts, namely "Text", "Catalogue" and "Chronology". The first part offers an analytical and theoretical perspective on the works reproduced in the volume and it brings together a number of essays authored by specialists in their respective fields who had worked directly in the organisation of the gallery, who had previously conducted extended researches on the works of Victor Brauner.

Margaret Montagne, in "Victor Brauner and the 'Anti-Me'" offers an in-depth analysis of a series of drawings and explores the concepts of duality, opposition and the anti-me in the artist's works. Margaret Montagne's approach is hermeneutical, aiming to reveal the worlds beneath the surface of the drawings, the philosophical and psychological depths of Victor Brauner's art, in which the "anti-me" is derived from Rimbaud's "I am another" became "this Doctor Jekyll, this constantly present troubling twin brother. All those who knew Victor Brauner or understood the spirit of his texts find in this man a constant guilt which shows well the existence of a good conscience, which would dictate him 'The Law of the Father' but also another one, which would represent his bad tendencies (...) The latter is manifested by an animal profile with large fangs that made its debut in the portraits of the 1940s." This duality ends with *Signe* (Sign), which appears to finally synthesise the two and which accompanies the artist on his tombstone.

Erwin Kessler, "Picto-poetry as Corporate Networking Avant-Garde" identifies Victor Brauner's position within a larger, national and trans-national sphere of artistic and literary thought, movement, system of influences and collaborations. He constructs a solid social, biographical and historical contextualisation of the artistic environment from which the more

famous piece de resistance sprung – the single-issue cubo-constructivist magazine 75HP (1924), conceived by Victor Brauner and Ilarie Voronca (which today represents an absolute rarity and it often graces the cover of different publications that treat the Romanian Avant-Garde, as is the case of the present volume), which pleaded for the new art form announced as pictopoetry. Erwin Kessler thus conducts an engaging analysis on the manifest that represented the corner-stone of the magazine, *Aviograma* (The *Aviogram*), as well as its other manifest-like pages and illustrates its inter(trans?)national connections with other European Avant-Gardes – with examples from their Czech correspondences, as part of a larger idea-sharing European network.

Mădălina Lascu, in “Victor Brauner – The Romanian Exhibition Activity” tells Victor Brauner’s tale beginning with his childhood and presents the later more important exhibitions. The interesting part of Mădălina Lacu’s presentation is the case of the painting *Salome*, which was supposed to be exhibited in Brauner’s first exhibition (1924), but its historical trajectory was then uncertain. It would appear that “Although lost, *Salome* is known by a photograph [resurfaced and published in 1995 and reproduced in the present volume - A.N.], where we can see the extremely elongated and hardly sensual nude silhouette of the biblical character cast an oblong shadow against which Saint John the Baptist’s head is projected in an unconventional pose, along the left arm of *Salome*, thus it is unclear whether it is held in the girl’s hand or just stroked.” Mădălina Lascu goes on to present Victor Brauner’s evolution and impact on the Romanian Avant-Garde movement, emphasising the fact (and the importance of the fact) that he “always viewed himself as a pictopoet, (...) not only because he regularly inserted words in his paintings, he mixed poems with drawings, he inserted incantatory letters in his most important works, but mostly because his entire art is a long narrative of his artistic emotions.”

The texts written by Yvonne Hasan (“Notes on Victor Brauner, *Revue Roumaine* nr 3 – 1967” and “Proposal for Meridiane Publishing House”), an artist and art critic who studied under M. H. Maxy, are published in this volume for the first time and they represent the memo sent to the Meridiane Publishing House, left unanswered, and an essay on Victor Brauner initially published in 1967.

Dominique Rabourdin, in “Victor Brauner and the Surrealist activity in France”, makes a detailed chronological presentation of the artist’s activity within an international movement, while also pointing out that a social, cultural and historical contextualisation can be outlined based on each (more or less subtle) detail present in his work and biography – “The smallest piece of paper can be revealing: leaflets, magazines, invitations, posters, exhibition catalogues, games, ‘exquisite corpses’, manuscripts, letterheads, correspondence, telegrams, photographs.”

The machinations of Victor Brauner’s young, creative mind are addressed and illustrated by Florin Colonas in “Victor-Victorel, skillful minstrel”, in which he makes a narrative description of how Victor Brauner’s *Mandolin* (1922) came into the possession of his younger brother Harry (who later became an ethnomusicologist) and how “The mandolin, a true pictorial work decorated with a wealth of symbols that we will subsequently find in Victor-

Victorel's work, as the artist liked to call himself, contains elements of the alphabet of the Brainerian painting, which has been deciphered, for the time being, only partially. "

The first part of the volume offers the historical, social and cultural frame or background for the immense artistic corpus reproduced in the second part, "Catalogue", which displays a detailed chronological visual journey through the works of Victor Brauner that goes well beyond the extent of his life: posters, etchings, lithographs, collages, watercolour invitations, drawings, documents, objects, illustrated books, magazines, ending in posters of exhibitions from around the world to the present day. All of the artwork is reproduced in the volume in an astonishing image quality.

The final part of the volume is constructed for documentary purposes and it represents a detailed chronology of the exhibitions and of the magazine and book illustrations, accompanied by reproductions of his works in this sense, from posters to book covers.

Extensive studies have been conducted on the works of Victor Brauner as part of the Romanian or European Avant-Garde movement. However, the volume *Victor-Victorious: drawings, etchings, objects, events* is much more than merely an almost 450-page exhibition catalogue. Due to the fact that many of these works are either inaccessible or difficult to access by the general public, as they are part of private collections, the volume offers insights into the vast works of Victor Brauner, brought together into a single publication which can in the future prove to be a highly useful tool in the research in the humanities..

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