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Reviews

Dimitar Manev: Macedonian Odyssey

February 15 - March 25, 2002

Tues-Fri: 10:30-4:30 PM;

Sat 11-5:00 PM;

or by appointment

Collins Fine Art

222 West Superior

Chicago, Illinois 60610

Tel: 312/ 943-9880

<http://www.collinsfineart.com>

"Bulls! Bulls!" That was the first response when eight-year-old Maria de Sautuola looked up at the ceilings of the caves at Altamira, Spain, in 1879. She had accompanied her father to explore the passages, and the child's visceral awe, in a sense, bridged the certain, vital bond the painters there, 15,000 years ago, had felt with the beasts who shared their world. And

there were not just bulls: bison, goats, birds... and more. From paleolithic art, through the Minoan, and the Middle East, the Orient, even to modern Spain, horn and hoof, the watchful eye, supple sinews and the grace of animal presence has given birth to visual offerings. "Macedonian Odyssey," fifteen paintings by Macedonian artist, Dimitar Manev, at Collins Fine Art, Chicago, until March 25, 2002, builds upon that empathy which man extends toward beast.

At the opening, the artist noted his particular fascination with bulls: their evident solidity, their suppleness of muscle -- the purely formal harmonies of form. Manev's art emerges as analysis of form: schematic composition, planar color, and paper *applique* -- all define contours; contours form arrangements of color zones; and orchestrated rhythms subtly insinuate motion. These complement and counterpoint an underlying, primal sketching-out of line, much of which is retained in the final work. There is little evidence of introspection, of presuming to command animal essence or immediate intents, bestial excitement... or projected emotion.

Manev works without preliminary sketches, an approach he chose following his early works as a student. In the 1970s, Dimitar Manev professed his admiration for Vassily Kandinsky -- as well as for Pablo Picasso -- and art critic, Lilijana Nedelkovska, noted in that work his "exciting colorist 'improvisations' where every move, every rhythm of the color embodies the passion, the pleasure in painting." In Manev's art during the first half of the 1980s, that critic discerned a move toward linear construction, a recourse to thick layering of paint, and the artist's exploitation of Cubist collage, but she concluded that the painter's cows, calves and goats



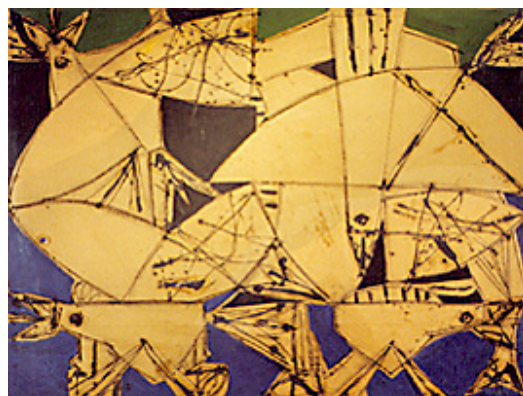
Bull in Colors, 2001

Oil on paper/canvas

39 1/2"x51 1/2"

© Dimitar Manev 2002

are here to speak about the good, the tame side of man, about "man with good traits who is freed from great expectations," such as the man mentioned by Nietzsche in his work: *Human, All Too Human*, opposing him to the human being, "who is struck and experiences as in a drama the loss of pathetic, metaphysical dimensions of existence."



Blue Field, 2002

Oil on paper/canvas

43"x65"

© Dimitar Manev 2002

An earlier Yugoslav reference, *Likova Enciklopedija Jugoslavije*, had characterized Manev's art as 'associative expressionist.' Since his 1993 Skopje exhibition, *Nova Makedonija*, his artistic idiom has veered to a more taut and crisper line, and nonetheless maintained elements of this artist's earlier work. Reviewer, Lilijana Nedelkovska, has noted that, most recently, the earlier benignancy of Manev's animals has turned more fierce: his beasts reflect far less "the tame side of man," (the artist's hope) and more a brute defense and guardedness -- a wildness coming to the fore. This later turn arose just at a time Manev began to draw inspiration from artists such as Jackson Pollock and the Armenian-born painter, Arshile Gorky.

Although Manev acknowledges affinities with Synthetic Cubism, many of these newer works tend toward Precisionism: the compositions

have a precise, tense use of line, and a conspicuously coordinated rhythm among their predominant visual elements. Manev's deployment of line is effective. A string may waver and curl in the wind, but a taut piano wire or rod flexed in readiness offers a distinctly different confrontation. Interestingly,

while American Precisionists such as Charles Demuth and Charles Sheeler focused on urban themes, Manev's art is drawn to a celebration of the animal. And, unlike Precisionist art, the paintings at Collins Fine Art abandon the vestiges of shading or any suggestion of space. Where painted pattern, mottling, or the distinct texture and coloration of applied paper overlays are manifest, they heighten a sense of decorative muralism about the images -- arrestingly emphasizing their decided flatness.

Bull in Colors (39 1/2"x51 1/2":2001) stands out by its greater brightness of hue and a wider range in palette than employed in the other paintings here. The major form of the bull is gathered from seven larger, prominent blocks of color. While a light yellow dominates these, variety emerges from contours of red and yellow ochres. There is a challenge in the animal's stance, an impression strengthened by a cow which stands behind it. In this work, the wide, deliberate placement of color divisions underscores its two-dimensional, linear conception. The mottled, gold ochre contour, right of center and in segments above it, forms a focal counterfoil to the bull's head and to the aggressive yellow piece at right, and it still more insistently highlights the schematic approach of the artist. In *Brown Bull* (41"x65":2002), the animal even seems prepared to charge a similar, compositional device rendered in a mottled deep brown. *Brown Bull* frames its subject with black sectionings about that painting's outer edges, creating what seems more a matrix than a background. In each painting of this show, however, the color or paper *applique* is intuitively -- strategically -- arrayed within lines of composition. A logic of palette stands in tension against a logic of drawing.

Indeed, many of Manev's canvases reveal a coherent and coordinated arrangement of larger color zones; or else a purposeful choice to distribute specific color contours, pieces, to accentuate a jigsaw puzzle analysis of subject. Where several of the canvases exhibit a clustering of 'maverick' puzzle-pieces, the artist's instincts underscore the dissections and augmentations of the painting's subject. In *Bulls & Goat* (43"x51 1/2":2002) seven green contour fills array throughout the canvas like punctuation in a poem.

All this plays upon a wise insight. Modern viewers are prone to accept -- and readily dismiss -- naturalistic configurations of what they see. And, conversely, in earlier Modernist art, an all too free flight into 'pure' abstraction has too often relieved the viewer of content, leading painting into what has become merely a decorator's *faux finis*, no matter what the intents of the artist. Dimitar Manev's distillation to line and contour, his appreciation of a conscious decorum in the deployment of color mass, all provoke questioning and a visceral consideration of his interpretations. In a strict sense, the

paintings do not portray bulls, nor birds, nor goats. A viewer can neither know the artist's heart and mind during the creative act, nor rationalize his results, but the gallery visitor is drawn to feel each image, and to add his own response. Such works bring into relief a subjective, intuitive sense of animal form, stance, attitude -- visual signatures, open to individual interpretation.

Upon consideration (after a painting's immediate effect), one can dissect accepted turns of technique. In *Green Bull* (62"x57":2001), an enclosed, flesh-colored focus at right draws the viewer's eye, while black elements gather toward the bottom of Manev's canvas. Similarly, *In the Field* (40"x52 1/2":2001) distributes green elements about that work's periphery, leaving but the top edge in yellow. And in *Green & Black* (36"x44":2002), one notes the black and white in mid-zone, while green contours draw in the painting's boundaries. In such works, colors obey an intuitive sense of 'gravity,' much like liquids which separate according to their varying weight. In Manev's canvases here, they frequently cohere as a subtle framing of focus. Elsewhere, in a work such as *Orange & Black* (36"x44":2002), white contour separates and clarifies the essential, visual anchors, and a resonance of mass echoes from light to darker hues.

Among the paintings in Manev's "Macedonian Odyssey," there are some features akin to Pollock's spontaneous, but directed assaults on the canvas. In several paintings, a drip and splatter technique does appear, but it is a contributing gesture. *Bird, Blue & Red* (57"x62 1/2":2002) utilizes Pollock-like isolated brushstrokes in its mid-panel contours, while *Birds in Flight* (35"x43":2002) exhibits a splatter hand -- red 'dripped' line -- in its tan elements. These works are more abstracted, and show a uniform array of color elements. Here, these are assimilated as a repertoire, rather than as a feature in itself: art goes on to speak in what before were newly-fashioned innovations. A newer voice builds on its precedents.



Goat With Birds, 2002
Oil on paper/canvas
33 1/2"x35 1/2"
© Dimitar Manev 2002

There are paintings in this show where figurative reference and composition take a freer, more speculative twist; where the delight in color, a balance of parts, and an awareness of the painting as an object -- a flight of artistic fancy, rather than a discourse on interpreted sight -- are allowed free reign. *Goat with Birds* (33 1/2"x35 1/2":2002) uses brown paper *applique* in defining major contours, and it emerges as a fantasia upon a creature indiscriminate in appetites -- both in food and in play. Here, the forms of goat and frenetic birds



Brown Bull, 2002
Oil on paper/canvas
41"x65"
© Dimitar Manev 2002

in flight merge and interplay, suggest chimerical recombinations and afterimages: a lascivious spirit with an entourage. *Blue Field* (43"x65":2002) is equally spontaneous and creates an impression of a poised *mobile* pressed into planar space.

Dimitar Manev prefers to work in mixed media, believing it offers more visual variety. Various, and at times, exotic papers -- colored, textured, often handmade and even with inclusions of chips and shavings -- enter the images as bounded contours, counterfoils to non-adjacent elements; as allusions to hide, fur, and feather. In *Bull, Bird & Cow* (51"x 63 1/2":2001), shavings and chips are embedded within the light, creamy handcast paper as effective central elements for the image. In kindred

works, portions of image are mottled, or worked toward a similar effect (as in *Brown Bull* (2002)). In a number of works, these are used to accent and distinguish larger focal contours which echo in an almost concertina effect. This is particularly effective in *Brown Bull* (2002), *Orange and Black* (2002), and *Bull in Colors* (2001). In works of this nature, there is always a danger of the media predominating, but here, media and vision collaborate.

In most of "Macedonian Odyssey," a natural, earthen palette, subdued to the dynamicism of the composition, predominates. The rich ochres, umbers, yellows and reds, although an oil medium, nonetheless evoke archaic, natural dyes; a fact which lends a spirit of Minoan fresco, Amerind pottery, or ancient terracotta. Together with a vigorous, 'tightly-strung' arrangement of composition, a decorative and formal balance pervades the work: here is an enduring, primal homage to the beast in modern idiom. It lingers even in a piece like *Le Blanc et le Noir* (34"x44":2001), where the bull is rendered solely in black and white.

"Macedonian Odyssey" further offers portraits of the artist's daughters: *Zoritz*a (35"x27":2001) and *Nihna* (35 1/2"x28":2001). Of the work in this exhibition, these most closely approach established Synthetic Cubism, and that may arise out of the constraints of portraiture itself. The gallery's statement quotes the artist from his 1985 solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Skopje, Macedonia: "...everything so far has been invented. I only watch and react by painting spontaneously.... I have only intuition and this is the way I react." The gallery curators here summarize, noting: "...a mentality, which, freed from the pathos of great declarations and expectations, looks for and finds the meaning and sense of one's personal engagement in the artistic process."

Bulls. Bulls, goats and birds. Manev's canvases capture the patterns and massing of muscle, the power and positions by which we recognize bull from bison, cow from bull, even particular individuals from one another, while acknowledging their shared nature: not by individual coats or marks, but through experience matched against an elusive, flexible template of rememberings, mental images and sight. Dimitar Manev's art contributes a modern expression to that perceptual template. In this collection there is sound instinct, sound analysis: a very fine body of work. These paintings invite close attention, linger in memory, and offer sincere pleasure. "Macedonian Odyssey," fifteen paintings by Macedonian artist, Dimitar Manev, will be on exhibit at Collins Fine Art, Chicago, until March 25, 2002.

Dimitar Manev was born in Stip, Macedonia, in 1948, and was graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade in 1975. He has exhibited in Yugoslavia, Bosnia, Croatia, Slovenia, Germany, France, Italy, England, Hungary, Poland and Bulgaria. "Macedonian Odyssey" is his first North American show. A catalogue, *Dimitar Manev*, with English commentary by Lilijana Nedelkowska, was published by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Skopje, Macedonia, in March 2001. Manev was also profiled in *Likova Enciklopedija Jugoslavije*, Vol. K-R, (Miroslav Kleza:Zagreb:1987).

--G. Jurek Polanski

Jurek Polanski has previously written and art edited for *Strong Coffee* in Chicago. He's also well known and respected among the Chicago museums and galleries. Jurek is currently a Visual Arts Correspondent for ArtScope.net.

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