

EDUARD BIGAS

Drawings and paintings 1995 – 2019



Born in Palafrugell, Spain, and now based in Berlin, artist Eduard Bigas experiments obsessively. A retrospective of his work appeared at the end of 2019, with texts accompanying each stage of his varied career. There is no digital version of the book itself, but the texts – written to illuminate his work and convey the sense of urgency, fear and hope which comes across so clearly in his drawings and paintings – are reproduced below:

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Text by Tom Pugh (www.tompughwriter.com)

Cover Image: “Diptych” 2017 Oil on canvas

INTRODUCTION

“In my soul, I am a surrealist” – Eduard Bigas

The artist Eduard Bigas wears his heart on his sleeve. He speaks passionately, gesturing often, feelings and ideas in constant competition. His studio, in an old factory in the north of Berlin, provides a disorientating contrast; this is a controlled environment, floors swept, paints in military order, brushes cleaned, dried and stored according to size. Bigas experiments obsessively. The walls are covered with home-made colour charts,

detailed notes beneath each swatch with reminders of how he achieved the recorded effects. He works in oils, ink, pastels, acrylic, wax crayon and pencil – often at the same time – in a relentless quest to render and reveal even the strangest corners of his unique imagination. Bigas does not expect or want us to understand his work; he is hoping to meet us on a more visceral level.

“I want the viewer to question everything, to feel uneasy, to believe, when she looks at my work, that she has it in her to change completely. I still think I am improving. I still feel challenged by the demands of my imagination. I move forwards by trying to surprise myself, by trying not to repeat myself.”

It is this attitude which makes it obligatory to think of Bigas’s career to date in terms of a journey. *Drawings and Paintings* presents a selection of works produced over 25 years in six countries – Spain, Australia, America, Britain, Japan and Germany. It charts a journey through space and time but also (and more importantly) into the centre of a unique imagination. When we look at a Bigas drawing or painting made in London or Berlin, the true subject is never the place itself, but always another, longed for space beyond conventional reality, glimpsed by the artist in the weft and warp of our shared reality.

Bigas’s journey begins in the town of Palafrugell in Girona, Spain. Born in 1969, he showed talent early. At nursery school, he was known for marching up to the board with sticks of coloured chalk clutched in his hands: “I was the kind of child who found drawing easier than talking. For me, even in those days, it was never just about making. It was about making something happen – a way of going on an adventure.”

(pictures): photo of self, Palafrugell 1994; Nen 1983 21x30cm Charcoal pencil on paper; Marina 1984 24x30cm Soft Pastel on cardboard.

Nen and Marina, made when Bigas was 14 and 15 years old respectively, reveal both his talent as a draftsman and a precocious sensitivity to time and place.

Like the majority of his peers, Bigas left school at 16. During the day, he helped out at his uncle's painting and decorating firm. In his free time, he developed his craft and simultaneously attempted to check the enthusiasm of his family: "They were always telling me, 'you're an artist!' In my heart, I agreed but I still didn't feel ready to show my work."

Bigas reacted with alarm when he discovered that his father and uncle had secretly appropriated, framed and entered some of his drawings in a local group exhibition. It was Autumn 1988, the first time his work was ever shown publicly. Despite his misgivings, the work was well reviewed. People began to show an interest and he was soon invited to participate in further exhibitions, eventually attracting the attention of a group of older artists.

"Josep Martinell, Modest Cuixart, Floreal, Tano Pisano, Rodolfo Candelaria. They supported and encouraged me. And then they told me I had to leave if I wanted to realise my ambitions."

Bigas spent time in Sydney and New York, then lived in London for ten years before settling in Berlin in 2012. Whereas his earliest work is steeped in the traditions of Spanish painting, the series of drawings he produced as he moved from city to city reveal an extraordinary awareness of place. For Bigas, the essence of every city in which he has lived and worked is captured in a particular combination of colours: "Sydney is a deep blue mixed with red, New York is yellow, black and green. And Berlin is orange."

Over time and across these cities, one sees the artist growing more confident and decisive. His work develops in depth and tone. The compositions become more harmonious and the line more dynamic, imbued with its own internal logic and agency. More and more, the drawings begin to incorporate a central theme of his mature work – the disconnect between the conventions we collectively observe in our shared environment and the hidden and indescribable strangenesses of our interior worlds.

As early as 2007, Bigas was invited to stage major solo exhibitions in the UK and his native Spain (at Funcació Cuixart in Barcelona and the Brick Lane Gallery in London). Perhaps the most decisive moment in his career to date, however, came in 2012 when he made the decision to move to Berlin. The city was familiar territory; in 2010 he had accepted a four-week residency at the Friedrichswerderscher Cemetery. Further projects near the German capital (at former Bauhaus buildings in Bernau and Dessau) led to a solo show at the Galerie Kuchling in Berlin (Der Geist des Orte, 2014).

Bigas has subsequently exhibited (or will exhibit) in Berlin (Galerie Kuchling - 2017, 2019), Spain (Museo del Suro – Girona, 2015), Italy (Vineta Pavillion Nr. 1 – Venice, 2017), Hamburg (MOM Art Space, "Sequences #2 Hamburg", Hamburg – 2019) and Taiwan (Asir Art Museum – 2020). His growing reputation is deserved. Inspired by an unwavering faith in the fundamental generosity of his medium – and an admirably stubborn willingness to take risks – his work stands out for its unique aesthetic, technical virtuosity, and emotional honesty.

“Many of my paintings are strange. I want them to be enigmatic. Impossible but possible. Different. Beautiful even when there is sadness. I’ve produced paintings and drawings which people have loved. On occasion I’ve been encouraged to keep repeating myself but found I couldn’t. I follow developments in art, of course, but I’m not interested in being provocative or fashionable. Sexy is too easy. Beautiful is the true challenge.”

PALAFRUGELL (1995 - 2001)

Having won local acclaim in his early twenties, Bigas looked for a permanent studio in his hometown and was soon offered space in an abandoned house. It was a stroke of good fortune in more ways than one. Still filled with the possessions of the two elderly women who had lived there previously, the house provided Bigas with a way into the spaces that exist between remembering and forgetting; spaces which have since become a lifelong preoccupation.

“I was still so young. At work in their home, I felt that these two women must have lived in a different world. There were crucifixes on every wall, letters dating back to the civil war, pictures of Franco on the stamps and stories inside of which penances they’d variously been given at confession.”

As Bigas read these letters, he could not decide whether he was invading the privacy of these two women or bearing witness to the fact that they had lived at all. Many of his most successful works from this period bear witness to the fact that this is a question whose complexities are impenetrable to reason and can only ever be attempted in the heart.

The young artist found a second source of inspiration in his work as a painter and decorator. Collages such as *Homenatge a Joan Ponç* and *Crucifixió* (both 2001), include old scraps of brocade and wallpaper stripped from houses – items once chosen with love and care, and now regarded as unacceptably old fashioned. Bigas himself describes these works as playful, though it feels a serious form of play. At their best, they display a kind of inspired serendipity – a developing aesthetic glimpsed in his response to objects which could not be more suggestive of place and time. The works also introduce the precise style of drawing for which Bigas has subsequently become so well known. Often anatomical in appearance, the designs are nonetheless works of pure imagination, a sleight of hand to convince us that we are peering beneath the surface, penetrating to the heart of something vital – but something which turns out to have no foundation in reality.

Already, an emerging set of preoccupations is identifiable. The memories that live on in objects. The human face. An interest in what has been lost, what lies beneath and what lies beyond. A photo of the artist himself appears in “El Predicador”, one of the most overtly ‘Spanish’ works in this collection. Bigas shows his back to ‘The Preacher’, which in turn holds him at arm’s length. It is an image of separation, carrying with it the unmistakable sense of an artist grappling with the weight of his cultural heritage –almost as if he had already accepted this as the price of his departure into new spaces – both figurative and literal.

“Traditionally, Spanish paintings are dark, they thrive on drama. I already have more than enough drama in my head. To move forward in my work, I needed something different, a place of light and lightness, where the priority for people was enjoying life.”

2000 SYDNEY and NEW YORK

“I’d never felt so excited. There was so much I wanted to tell” – Eduard Bigas

According to conventional wisdom, the most powerful aspect of a work of art is its capacity for silence – a quality which is emphatically absent from the drawings Bigas produced in Sydney and New York. Instead of glacial silence, he confronts the viewer with a literal cascade of words, almost as if an interior dam had burst.

“Sydney opened my eyes to the world. For the first time in my life it was just me and my drawings. I tried to take everything in – to express what I was feeling in my work. It was an enormous technical challenge.”

The endless stream of words which dominate the background of many of his drawings from this period were an attempt by Bigas to capture his emotions, “a way of encouraging my feelings to rise to the surface, to set them before my eyes clearly enough that I could find new and better ways of expressing them.”

Bigas credits this year of his life – and Sydney in particular – with unlocking something deep inside him: “Every place has its own nature. As a city, Sydney places so much emphasis on enjoying life. I drew so happily there.”

The quality of Bigas’s draftsmanship is beyond dispute. The year he spent in Sydney and New York taught him how to make his impressions and feelings tangible in his work – via the heart rather than the brain. His representations of the two cities, shown here side by side, also allow the viewer to appreciate his rapidly developing sensitivity to place, which goes on to play such a crucial role in the evolution of his unique aesthetic.

2002 – 2011 LONDON

“You want to paint? First you must cut out your tongue, give up your right to express yourself with anything but your brush.” – Henri Matisse

Tongues feature repeatedly in the work Bigas produced during ten years in London. Sydney and New York had had their attractions but were ultimately too far from home: “Sydney showed me that I could not return to Palafrugell, but I need to be in Europe with the Mediterranean not too far away.”

London seemed like the perfect choice – close to home and still a global city that would provide the young artist with an opportunity to establish himself. If recognition came more slowly than expected, it was because he had failed to reckon with the quality and quantity of the competition: “The art world in London is hard. There are so many artists, so many competing voices. Of course, I was intimidated and tried to overcome this through my work.”

Above all through representations of the human face in profile – the speaking likeness with its protruding tongue. Moving images which perfectly capture the artist’s need to find his voice.

Bigas focussed on a limited number of motifs in London – in addition to the human face, there are numerous birds in his work from this period (eloquent symbol of both freedom and captivity) and evidence of a growing interest in Asian art – while his means of representing them grew increasingly varied. Even the small selection of works collected here show how eagerly he experimented with different styles, palettes and media. Recalling the interest he displayed in automatic writing in Sydney, *Life on Mars* and *The Death of Pinocchio* both started as formless stains made with ink on canvas: “I watched the stains, I started manipulating them. A figure appeared and developed in an unexpected way. Being an artist is about having faith in the independent nature of the medium. Then, as now, I always try to express the human face and figure in new ways.”

Each experiment was an attempt by the artist to establish control, to explore the limits of his determination to keep going in such an unforgivingly competitive environment. The levels of professionalism required to succeed in the London art world caused Bigas to

focus anew on technique. He also credits the city with helping him embrace his native independence.

"I'm too stubborn to fit into big groups. For a long time, I thought of this as a weakness. London taught me to see it as a strength."

2012 – present BERLIN

Bigas found success in London, exhibiting his work and attracting loyal collectors, but after ten years in the city he felt the need for a fresh start, both as an artist and as a person. Offered a four-week residency at an abandoned mausoleum in Berlin in 2010, he jumped at the chance: "Spending four weeks alone in a cemetery is not everyone's idea of a good time, but it was where I rediscovered my strength in drawing and painting."

At the mausoleum, Bigas produced a collection of drawings he continues to regard as among the most intimate and personal of his career (*Self Portrait, The Draughtsman's Hand* and *The Chair*, all 2010). The experience also ignited a love affair with Berlin itself. Bigas returned two years' later and settled permanently in the city, where he finally found the space, stability and confidence to question his own notions (internalised years earlier) of what it means to be an artist - as craftsman, risk-taker, and master of reinvention.

"For a long time, my main language had been drawing. Now there were new ideas I wanted to express in paint. Ideas which demanded more space. The city itself helped. I found the freedom in Berlin I needed to challenge myself again."

Deliberately, Bigas set out in multiple – at first glance irreconcilable – artistic directions. In his major works of this period he succeeds in bringing these together in a single destination which manages to be at once unexpected and logical.

Raum 4, from 2013, feels like a pivotal work in this context. An oil, acrylic and ink painting on canvas (100x80cm), it makes startlingly effective use of Bigas's now familiar drawing style within an overall composition which presciently looks forward to his later

work. The different elements combine to create a heightened tension between competing notions of 'dream' and 'reality'. The artist is not interested in capturing dreams as people remember them – blurred, crumbling to pieces at the first attempt to grasp them. Nor are his paintings a conscious attempt to construct a dreamscape. Instead, Bigas is attempting something more ambitious – to produce a still taken directly from the dream state, capturing the moment at which we make sense of life on a level which defies rational analysis.

In parallel with this series of fully resolved large-scale compositions in oil, Bigas also produced an extraordinary sequence of drawings during this period. The majority of these were composed during two residencies near the German capital (both at former Bauhaus buildings, one in Bernau and one in Dessau) and exhibited at his 2014 show *Der Geist des Orte* at the Galerie Kuchling. Once again, the human face and figure feature prominently, but rendered with new levels of depth, complexity and (social) awareness. These works betray a rare confidence – of an artist who has mastered his craft sufficiently to create works that live and speak independently of their creator.

SEQUENCES

Beginning in 2016, Bigas's preoccupation with the limits of art and life – that strange realm where one ends and the other begins – led him to experiment with a series of grand, multi-canvas compositions.

These works, including *Triptych Sequences*, *Sequences*, and *Continuous Present*, only rarely feature recognisable figurative elements (though they are always preoccupied with the human form, the curve of an arm or shoulder, at times open and welcoming, at times reserved and wary). Instead, he is actively exploring the exact point at which emotion (or 'dream') blurs objective engagement with reality (or 'life').

Composed of an unspecified number of 60x60cm canvases – some painted in a uniform colour, some displaying a voyeur's glimpse of gorgeous colour that might equally be landscape or dreamscape, *Sequences* is a work which challenges the limits we collectively place on art and the demands we collectively make of the 'artist'. Through

the deliberate creation of a potentially infinite number of works contained within a single work, Bigas upends the basic concept of a 'sequence' and simultaneously draws the viewer into his own uncertainty as to when (or even if) a painting can ever definitively be described as finished.

The three canvases which make up *Continuous Present* enjoy a far more intimate relationship with one another. Bigas draws on a lifetime's dedication to all aspects of his craft to combine graphite pencil, crayon and wax oil crayon on a background of oils. The strong sense of movement he creates, across all three canvases, has an ambiguous quality; sometimes the various elements appear to be moving upward with energy and optimism. Sometimes they settle downward, disentangling and seeking space to reflect.

The background of *Continuous Present* has a similar texture to fine-grained wood, suffused with warm light. On the left of the central canvas, a controlled explosion of colour draws the eye. On the right, two shapes – abstract but suggestive of the human form – seem drawn together despite tangible trepidation, suggestive of the contradictory sensations one feels in the moment before a first kiss.

Continuous Present is superficially calm, the elements held in check by the artist's craft. In fact, the tension between 'dream' and 'reality' is almost unbearable – above all in the 'kiss' but also in the play of movement between all three canvases. Each element possesses its own, separate strength. It is easy to imagine them rebelling, shattering the fragile surface tension, engineering their own destruction in a bid for greater power. It is the tension between what we want and what we have, and our fear that even this does not truly belong to us. It lies at the heart of Bigas's work and drives his restless determination to keep experimenting.

TIME TRANSFIGURED

A single life is too short to fathom the mysteries of line and paint. The way ahead is obscured. The destination can never be reached. With luck, however, Eduard Bigas believes that glimpses can be won through hard-work, experimentation and faith.

These are virtues generally associated with patience and yet he is undeniably an artist in a hurry. The works in his most recent solo exhibition (*Time and the Others*), created following a residency in Tokyo during Summer 2018, reveal an artist in the grip of creative fever – once again travelling simultaneously in multiple artistic directions. In his own words, “I still feel challenged by the demands of my imagination. I have ideas that are bigger than me. I have to find ways to express them. When I don’t know where to go, I push myself to go everywhere.”

Going everywhere, Bigas moves with urgency. Yet deliberately. The artist’s trademark ingredients are all present: a delicate handling of light and tone, exquisite draughtsmanship, attention to colour and line, a strong sense of movement and feel for organic form. Compared to the talkative drawings inspired by the beaches of Sydney there is also a quietude to his latest works – a sense of obsessions held in check by the prospect of finally arriving, of outside noise reduced to an absolute minimum in the hope of hearing an answer.

His recent geometrical compositions suggest an ongoing engagement with the question of limits – of when and why it might be wise to ‘close’ a painting. Many of the works in this exhibition include the word ‘time’ in their titles. In this instance, ‘time’ feels like a gentle form of misdirection, a distraction from the nagging sense that these works – both the geometric (the closed circle) and the organic (the infinite line) – are really about space. About how much space an artist needs to form his questions in line and colour and hear the echo of an answer well up in the depths of a canvas.