



Bernard Buffet: The Invention of the Modern Mega-artist

Nicholas Foulkes

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It is said that asphyxiation brings on a state of hallucinatory intoxication... in which case the 71-year-old artist who lay in his sprawling Provencal villa died happy. In the early afternoon of Monday October 4 1999, wracked with Parkinson's disease, and unable to paint after breaking his wrist, Bernard Buffet calmly placed a plastic bag over his head, taped it tight around his neck and patiently waited the few minutes it took for death to arrive.

Bernard Buffet was the first artist of the television and the jet age. As the first of the so-called Fabulous Five (Francoise Sagan, Roger Vadim, Brigitte Bardot and Yves Saint Laurent) he was a leader of the cultural revolution that seemed to forge a new France from the shattered remains of a discredited and demoralized country. While still in his twenties he had a Rolls Royce, a chateau, an island, high society at his feet and a glittering future ahead. Yet his extraordinary fall from grace was engineered by the very establishment that created him. Once hailed as a genius he was later shunned as a joke. Today, almost 70 years after he first shot to fame as a 20 year old prodigy hailed as a successor to Picasso, critical opinion remains sharply divided on the reputation of a controversial painter.

Rich in incident Buffet's remarkable story is played out against the backdrop of the beau monde of the 1950s and 1960s in locations as diverse as St Tropez, Tokyo, Paris, Dallas, St Petersburg and New York, before coming to its miserable conclusion alone in his studio.

With the cooperation of the Buffet estate, this is the first in-depth biography of the artist to be published in English, and Foulkes has secured unique interviews and access to the Buffet legacy. Buffet's story is an allegory for the corrosive commercial investment value of art markets today. His paintings are currently rocketing in value as he is rediscovered.

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