

Bojidar Bonchev

Across the lands of present-day Bulgaria, the craft of ceramics has existed for thousands of years. Already, in Neolithic settlements, archaeologists have discovered vessels and idols of shapes that inspire admiration even today. For centuries, throughout changing epochs, the Bulgarian has remained connected to this material.

In Bojidar Bonchev's case, we see a continuation of this line and, simultaneously, a presence in the twenty-first century. From the very beginning, when he first appeared on the Bulgarian art scene, he attracted attention with his mastery of technique, refined taste and new thinking. In the 1990s, he gained recognition for his own artistic style with the cycles 'Towers' and 'Temples'. These were large-format sculptures, sometimes with metal elements, bizarre in appearance and rich in decoration. Always executed in the vertical, they, like animate beings, joined our space. It is no coincidence that they usually ended with small feet. The variations are innumerable: the artist plays with the visual, makes parodies, deploys irony. Traditions, cultures, peoples, the East and the West, the low and the elevated—as in a true postmodernist—all live organically in his mind.

A particular motif in Bojidar Bonchev's oeuvre is the vase, to which he imparts his own original interpretation. Not devoid of the possibility of practical application, they are so distinct in form, so saturated with semantic layers of subtext, that they can, quite conceptually, take their place among traditional ceramics of this type. Over the years, the artist has created the widest range of variations on this theme. In some, the focus is on the decoration of the body of the vessel, laid on an unusual foundation that provokes associations. And we follow in astonishment his strokes of genius, decipher the drawings, enjoy the picturesque harmonies. In others, he dares to offer an entirely strange geometric of the vase, with an economical decor, but with an elaborate sculptural addition. In fact, he creates art objects, armed with the entire palette of artistic means—ceramics, painting, sculpture.

Bojidar Bonchev met the turn of the century with new ideas and new achievements. He began with the series, 'Faces'. He chose the flat form, while treating it purely pictorially. It is remarkable how naturally he harmonises different and even contradictory visual techniques—motifs of mechanical drawing with ornamental decoration, free spills of coloured splotches with geometric forms.

'The Large Heads', which the artist exhibited at the beginning of 2002, became a true event in contemporary Bulgarian art. Here, his combinatorics reached an absolute peak, his talent demonstrated maturity and, for researchers of his oeuvre,

a vast field for analysis was opened up. The massive heads, many times the natural size, are laid on foundations; each time different, and variedly refined in shape and colour. In the interpretation of these heads, Bojidar Bonchev seems to be competing with himself in the ingenuity of motifs and techniques. He goes naturally beyond bounds and taboos, beyond established norms and laws. In these improvisations, he is completely liberated. He relates some kinds of parables of his own. He has absorbed so much of the modern age, but has discovered himself in this abundance.

His 'Recyclables'—small relief panels, which I perceive as a bow to his favourite profession—ceramics—occupy a particular place in his oeuvre. In these original ceramic collages, composed mostly of pieces of broken vessels, Bonchev, true to himself, provokes contradictions to clash, but achieves an artistic spectacle, homogeneous in impact.

The temptation of the large form is probably valid for every artist. Bojidar Bonchev does not avoid it either, no matter how difficult it may be to realise such ideas in ceramic materials. He is the creator of a series of figures, many of them wall-mounted sculptures, exceeding human height. He entitled them 'Creatures'. Most are monochrome, in a dark colour scheme: original, contemporary idols in which ancient images are revealed, but with a premonition of future transfiguration.

The series of black heads, entitled 'Helmets', is remarkable. In them, the artist has completely abandoned colour and line. He has adopted one form and one foundation. But from that point on, he gives free rein to his imagination. Eyes may be angularly popping out or disappearing behind lowered eyelashes. Ears can be altered in the most bizarre way, while the lips may become a harmonica or blossom like a rose. Not to mention the hair: tufty cloudlets or clustered building elements.

Bojidar Bonchev is truly liberated in his reactions. The tumultuous events of the mid-1990s stimulated him into making a series of cups with heads painted on them, in which the voice of the crowds of the Sofia streets seemed to resonate. Let us also recall his 'Porcelain Teeth', in which political journalism was given such original expression.

At one of his recent exhibitions, the artist displayed plates of impressive size. He had programmatically left some of them without decoration, while, on others, he had collaged so many elements.

Lately, Bojidar Bonchev has presented artworks in which a tendency towards minimalism can be detected. Conceptually, the most prominent are those on the theme of 'Circle'. Faced with them, we do not perceive the sterilely drawn, most perfect geometric shape, but the warmth of a pulsating, vibrant figurativeness wafting towards us.

Writing these lines and searching for the right words to express the unique charm of Bojidar Bonchev's creations, I focus on the word 'beauty'. I find it in the artist's gesture itself—exquisiteness in the purity of line, harmony of colours, polyphony of images.

They write and philosophise about Bulgarian Postmodernism. I am not sure we understand it well. Postmodernism is not simply eclecticism, a mixing of forms from different epochs. Postmodernism is the overcoming of purely stylistic characteristics. It is an opportunity to think about matters from another perspective: to be free to combine them in your own way, to see them in unfamiliar projections and thus to reach and suggest new messages. I am convinced that Bojidar Bonchev is one authentic Bulgarian Postmodernist.

Ruzha Marinska

Dr Ruzha Marinska, art historian and art critic. Assistant Professor at the National Academy of Arts and New Bulgarian University. Director of the National Art Gallery in Sofia (1995–2002). Author of works on Bulgarian Modernism, monographs and dozens of articles on art history and theory, and studies of Bulgarian artists. Curator of art exhibitions and international projects. ruja_marinska@yahoo.com