

I PAINT THE BUG RIVER

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Stanisław Baj, Rzeka Bug [Bug River], 2009, oil on canvas, 150×200 cm

Bug – a natural phenomenon, an element of flowing water, the natural boundary of the division of Earth in the physical, ethnic, cultural, political and national terms. The flow of the river is a symbol of change, passing of time, human existence and constant renewal. It has been an important communication route for centuries, bearing in mind the difficult land conditions. Hence, the banks of the river reveal various remnants of the presence of men who settled there, built settlements, temporary camps



Stanisław Baj, Rzeka Bug [Bug River], 2015, oil on canvas, 100×120 cm

while wandering along the river. The banks reveal archaeological finds from the most distant cultures.

The Bug River is a place of intermingling between the East and the West, and also between different religious denominations. The area around the river forms a unique cultural crossroad. This powerful element of water, uncontrollable, dramatic and peaceful at the same time, can be presented in art in a romantic, lyrical, symbolic and metaphysical way...

The water flowing in the Bug River has its unique and characteristic light and color, usually green-brown, different in different seasons of the year: intense in late autumn or in the evening – when it becomes almost ideally black. Even if the water is calm, the surface is always slightly moving, which means continuous movement. This delicate movement, vagueness, even blurring, of the forms reflected in the water forms a dreamlike reality, which in combination with the lush and vibrating structure of the bank vegetation provides excellent painting pretexts. The blurred surface contains mysterious dark ‘braids’ of reflections of various shapes, on the edges of which, especially the sharp ones, one can notice unusual emanations



Stanisław Baj, Rzeka Bug [Bug River], 2015, oil on canvas, 100×140 cm

of highly intensive light and unbelievable, delicate traces of dispersion of light. The unreal water structure is always vertical. It is an important inspiration for a painter working in oil technique – to repeat the rhythm of the water, but completely anew, with the suitable arrangement of paint on canvas, making use of its consistency, thickness, and texture. The oil technique is probably the only one that allows to achieve the effect of flowing water. But the vertical structure of the painted water surface is only part of the final result. The most important thing is to create an illusion or an impression of movement of water on the painted canvas. After many years of attempts, it turned out that this ‘flow’ is achieved by the opposite movement, i.e. a horizontal wrinkle on the water, sometimes just one line – a trace of disturbance of the water flow caused by an invisible obstacle, a branch.

The flowing vertical lines of soft structures – from deep, vast blackness to bright streaks of light, crossed by a horizontal line – create the image of flowing water in a painting, its painterly essence. The position of this line must be always fresh, firm, and one-off, without repetitions, the only one that is accurate, in the most suitable place within the composition, with one stroke of a flat brush. This is the most difficult moment when painting the flow of water because it is a combination of many factors. Apart from the physical predispositions of the painter’s hand, the perfect location and experience, it also requires concentration and focus. This is where



Stanisław Baj, Rzeka Bug [Bug River], 2015, oil on canvas, 170×110 cm

two opposing structures meet: vertical and horizontal. If the horizontal line is painted in the wrong place, even slightly, almost the entire surface of the painting needs to be painted from the beginning. This is sometimes achieved by oil painting technique, through painting for a longer period of time 'wet in wet'.

These actions are repeated many times until the right effect is achieved; sometimes they fail. Ultimately, when painting the flow of the Bug River, the point is to find the most concise, simple expression that would mean as much as possible, be a universal value, and a unique interpretation of the vision of nature. Inspirations from other authors such as masters of Chinese watercolor, masters of sign writing and the aura of Japanese woodcuts are also important.

I have known and carried the Bug River in me since I was a child. I have been trying to paint it for over twenty years. I started scrupulously, copying the view: the river meanders, the water, the reflections of thick bushes. This section of the river is the border between Poland and Belarus, the edge of the European Union and the Schengen area, and that is why, fortunately,



Stanisław Baj, Rzeka Bug [Bug River], 1998, oil on canvas, 80×100 cm

it is still wild and uncontrollable. I often leave my riverside studio and visit my 'Styx', at any time of the year, any time of the day, often at dawn or dusk, and that is when I like it most – when it is calm, swollen with mystery, serious, dangerous, timeless. The river probably does not know about my presence; it is indifferent to me; it is ruthless in its existence, and it is exactly the unbridledness that attracts me the most.

The river as flowing water, a natural phenomenon, performs many functions. Since ancient times, Bug, like many other rivers in the world, such as Ganges, Nile or Jordan, is also a symbolic, magical place, a space of religious worship. Near my studio in the village of Sławatycze, every year, on January 19th, a ceremonial blessing of the river, or the holiday of Jordan, *agiasma* or *wodooswiaszczenie* takes place. A colourful procession starts at the Orthodox church and moves towards the river, which at this time of the year is covered with thick ice. There is a cross-shaped ice hole cut in the ice, and the dark, living water resembles a negative. The two-metre ice cross is then placed in the central position. There is also an ice altar next to it. Above the ice hole in the shape of a cross, the ritual of the blessing of the water takes place, which is an extremely solemn ceremony and consists



Stanisław Baj, Rzeka Bug [Bug River], 2015, oil on canvas, 170×110 cm

of several symbolic elements: first a prayer, then the cross is immersed in the water three times, and the holy drops from the cross fall into the vessels; the priest, then, releases white pigeons as a sign of the Holy Spirit, the faithful wash their hands and faces in the ice-cold river water. The ice cross stands for days or even weeks, until the thaw and the ice floe on the river is set in motion. It happens that the cross, in a solid form, flows on the ice floe through the meanders of the River Bug.



The author during work on the Bug River, 2013 (photo: Marek Szymański)

Summary

This draft is a record of the aesthetic and creative experiences associated with the Bug River. The author, who is a painter himself, proves that the oil technique is unique in terms of the possibility of achieving the effect of flowing water. In the faint panes of the river, you can see unusual emanations of light and improbable, delicate traces of distraction of light. This unreal water structure of the Bug River is always vertical. For an oil painter, it is an important inspiration to reflect that rhythm of water in a suitable pattern of canvas paint, using its consistency, thickness, and texture.

Keywords: Bug River, oil painting, aquatic motifs, aesthetic experience