

The painting sensations of François Baron-Renouard

Expressed in his works now on exhibition
at Dallas, Texas

Recorded by ALEXANDER WATT



1. Above left. *Le lac ébloui.*

2. Above right. *Eveil.*

3. Left. *Peinture.*

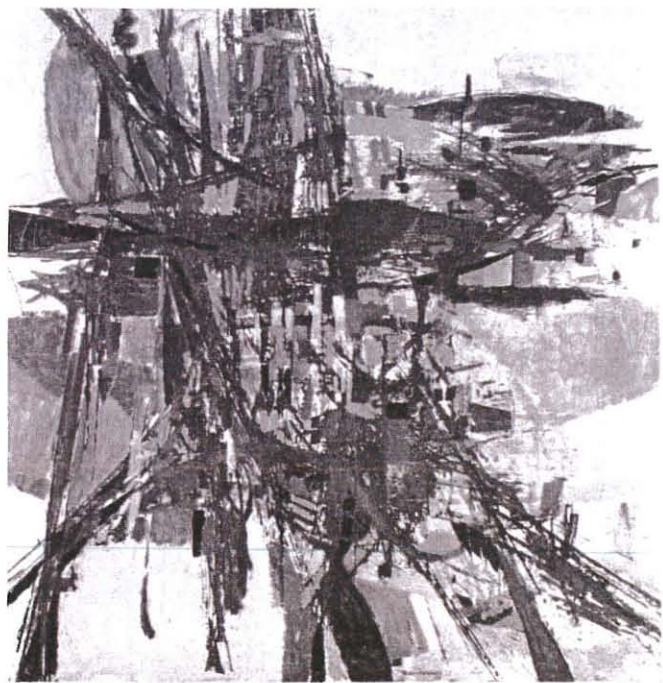
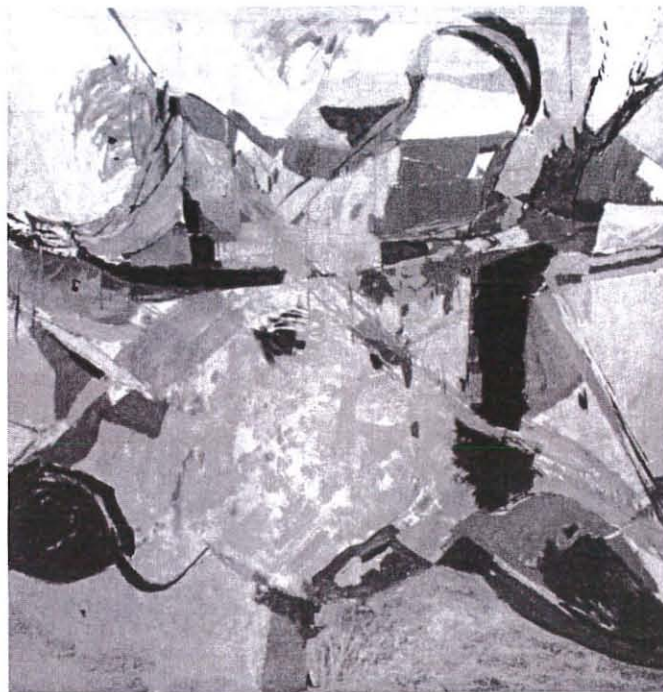
IN the short period of six years in the life and work of an artist such as François Baron-Renouard (b. 19 April, 1918, youngest son of painter Paul Renouard) much can happen, be changed, be revisualised. On the occasion of the exhibition held at the Valley House Gallery, Texas, in 1960, held in conjunction with the work of Calmettes, Civet and Venard, I wrote the preface to the exhibition on these four 'Funambulist' artists. I said at that time: 'Art is a sign of the times; and it is no exaggeration to find a correlation between what certain statesmen and certain artists are attempting to do in the turbulent world in which we live today. The former are seeking desperately to find a formula for maintaining balance of power politics and to prevent the extremists from upsetting the applecart, while a few of the latter, the younger talented artists, are acting (often unconsciously) as intermediaries by adopting a middle-of-the-path stand twixt the creative efforts of the abstract painters on the one hand and the realist painters on the other. These Funambulist painters, while remaining fundamentally figurative in expression, take into account the revolutionary manifestations that have contributed to the art of painting since the beginning of the century. As one of them explained to me, "we cannot paint today as did Courbet. Today we must be able to exalt colour, as did the Fauves, construct like Cubists; and profit from the liberty of expression of the abstract painters with regard to the subject".'

Another Funambulist artist-friend said of his own idiom: 'I purposely leave one guessing and thinking. If, and when, I paint too realistically, then I find that all the poetry of nature disappears. The real struggle is to find the balance, the happy medium, between the real and the unreal and one can't even start to interpret nature until freed from the obsession of reality . . . There is no hard-and-fast rule by which one can, on the one hand, sum up precisely the real and, on the other hand, the unreal. It is a question of integrating the freedom of plastic expression of abstract art and of allaying it, as far as possible, with the basic requirements of a freely transposed reality'.

When conversing with Baron-Renouard some time ago I noted that the clarity of his imaginative vision was one of his leading qualities. His colour compositions may sometimes appear 'flat', but closer inspection reveals a depth which he has achieved by a carefully calculated superimposition of tonal values and a technique of scraping and painting in reverse, as in engraving, which contributes conspicuously to the plastic quality of his canvases. This is especially apparent in his works now on Exhibition at the Valley House Gallery in Dallas, Texas.

Baron-Renouard takes nature, or the external world, as the principal source of his inspiration and, in a purely subjective manner, aims at fixing all the sensations experienced on contact with the external world in his painting. These sensations, recorded from memory, are carefully screened by his inner self and purified before reappearing in the form of a work of art. Indeed, it can be said of Baron-Renouard that he is the typical painter of this tendency. In 1960, when he went for the first time to Japan he returned with the spirit of the beauty of that country deeply engraved in his heart. Since then, attempting to recreate these sensations, he came to notice through his canvas, *Hommage à Hiroshige*, a work which clearly revealed his philosophy, his embodiment of art.

Despite what may be termed his Abstract Imaginary Naturalism, Baron-Renouard is not the least concerned with reproducing its external form but only seeks in it the source of his inspiration. In his painting of contemporary style, woven in abstract language, he gives no visual description of nature but transmits his own poetic feeling, using symbolically complex and delicate colours. There is in him a strange magic which



4. *Baie de Hong Kong*. Private collection, Zürich.

5. *Lumière à ville franche*. Private collection, London.



6. *Composition en bleu et brun*. Photo: Roland Essen, Paris.



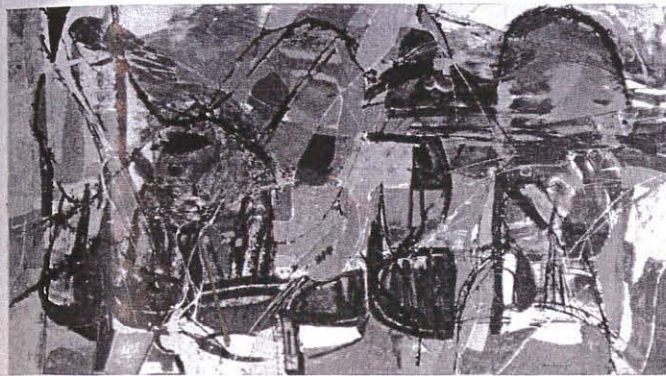
7. *Réalité intérieure*. Private collection, Dallas.



8. *Composition en brun*.



9. *Feu d'artifice.*



10. *Hommage à Hiroshige.* National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo.

makes the slightest emotion perceptible. All these things demonstrate the acute receptivity fundamental in his work, also his artistic individuality which is of exceptionally delicate texture.

In conversation quite recently with the artist in his Paris studio on the Left Bank he remarked that 'the intimate sensibility of an artist's expression on canvas depends on the painter's technique, which in turn is governed by matters of transparency, opacity, and, what we term, in French "le glacis" and the "frottis". Unknowledgeable, yet willing-to-learn art amateurs, sometimes ask me what do I paint . . . and how do I paint a picture? Many of them are astonished when I tell them that I use sand-paper on the canvas after the actual impregnation of oil painting. Once the canvas is dry and the first layers of painting appear, then I polish them, so to speak. This way I can obtain the transparency of one colour atop another. For example, a dark blue first and then an overlay of green. Once the pigment is dry I obtain a transparency from the green over the blue which produces a blue-green satisfactory quality of limpidity'.

'I see now that your vision and general approach to art is becoming increasingly abstract', I remarked. Baron-Renouard answered by saying: 'The spiritual quality and the philosophy of a person is abstract. The appearance of nature, however, is not abstract. To put on canvas the warmth of the sun is one thing, but in itself it remains something which is distinctively abstract. Look at it this way; a hill or a beach are quite concrete when you see them, but one or two years later, when their image has been absorbed by the individual mind, they are no longer concrete, they are sublimated, they have become abstract in appearance.'

'Does this mean', I asked Baron-Renouard, 'that you avoid what we would term the anecdote, from your point of view of your subject matter?' In his reply the artist indicated that the anecdote is the unhappy approach to the subject itself.

After a long discussion on the merits of Cézanne (as the father of contemporary art) Baron-Renouard had this to say: 'Cézanne had his own prismatic view of what was a mountain, such as Le Mont Saint-Victoire, of what was an apple, etc. He was in search of the discomposition of light, hence I regard him as being a "Laboratory painter".'

I told Baron-Renouard that I had had the good fortune to know Mondrian when he was living in Montparnasse. 'Which of the two', I asked him, 'do you consider to be of the greater importance from the point of view of the influence they separately exercised on the art of today?' He replied that whereas Cézanne was a born naturalist, Mondrian was just the opposite, with his fixed ideas of geometric expression on canvas. 'Which of the two, then, do you consider to be of the greatest importance?' 'That is a difficult question to answer', he replied. 'It is like in cooking . . . The delicate question of adding too little or too much salt and pepper to the dish. I must admit that I have need of seeing and appreciating the work of Cézanne, his limpidity of expression and the gentle approach to his vision of nature. At the same time I feel the need of Mondrian's harder, geometric and more sober vision.'

I finally remarked to Baron-Renouard that both Cézanne and Mondrian had, and still do have, a very profound influence on the younger generation of contemporary artists; even more perhaps than does Picasso, one of the most brilliant draughtsmen of this century, despite the fact that he and Derain, for example, derived their inspiration of form from Negro Art.

Finally, as far as the art of Baron-Renouard is concerned, I quote Hegel: 'Only when it has attained its appropriate freedom is fine art really art. It cannot fulfil its highest function until it has established itself in the same sphere with religion and philosophy and has become simply one of the ways of expressing or presenting consciousness the divine, the deepest interests of man, the most comprehensive spiritual truths. This characteristic art shares with philosophy and religion but there is a difference: that art expresses even what is highest by sensuous form and so brings it nearer to natural appearances to our senses and feelings.'

Artistic events in the career of François Baron-Renouard include the following: Special Exhibitions at Galerie Lebar, Paris (1949), Valley House Gallery, Dallas (1957), Galerie de Poche, Paris (1960), Musée de l'Athénée, Geneva (1962), Sociétaire du Salon d'Automne, Salon de Mai, Salon Nika (Tokyo), Salon d'Art Sacré, Canada (1963), Salon d'Art Sacré, Paris (1952), Valley House Gallery, Texas (1966-67), Projet Mosaïque, Le Mans (1967), Tokyo (1965). Group Exhibitions at Biennale de Menton (1953-55-57-64-66), 'Recontre d'Octobre', Musée des Beaux-Arts, Nantes (1954), 'Artistes d'aujourd'hui evolution', Musée Mun.d'Art Moderne, Paris (1955), Galerie Charpentier, Paris (1957), Musée Cantini, Marseille (1957), Leicester Galleries, London (1961), Pomeroy Galleries, San Francisco and Santa Barbara Museum, California (1961), Galerie Houston-Brown and Galerie Domec, Paris (1964). Awards include the Prix de Venice (1948) and Prix de Menton (1957), etc., designed the stained glass window for the Chapelle de Velaine-en-Haye, Metz. Private collections: France, North Africa, England, United States, Italy, Switzerland, Japan. Museums include Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris and Tokyo, Musée de Rennes and a number of museums in America.