

Lavish: Gheorghe Fikl

Slag Gallery

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Strange worlds meet on the surfaces of Gheorghe Fikl's opulent paintings. The grand and awe-inspiring kingdom of Life, of animals and nature, is set against the luxurious backdrop of lavish objects and decadent settings. In Fikl's paintings two forms of bounty collide to produce a hybrid world in which glory, beauty, and elegance reign supreme.

Fikl's approach is starkly uniform. His compositions are almost always balanced, with a central elongated animal figure set against a symmetrical background. The central figure is lit dramatically, with a single source of light from above, as if taking center stage in a theatre production. Indeed, his works seem plucked directly from the theatre, with a complex drama unfolding in each painting. They are like sinister operas rendered in paint.

Fikl's predominantly red and black palette sets the tone for the dramas of passion that surely occupy his mind. His warm and dark paintings *must* be large. Their scale must make room not only for his strong brushwork, but for the imposing iconography – indeed for the theatre that plays out on them. There is something almost pagan in their primal, fleshy approach. They are iconic: centrally composed, with excessive details completely removed. Only the vague markers of opulence and reverence are lovingly rendered.

Take, for example, *Violet Bull*, in which a bull is shown sideways as if on a Minoan mural. Having inherited centuries of connotations and associations, the bull in this work plays off of its inherent symbolism: fecundity, masculine virility, bellicosity. The bull is not simply a bull; it is Taurus, it is a symbol so rich that it has been revered for centuries as a talisman of power and action. In both *Bull with Stage Curtain* and *Violet Bull*, these bovine creatures stand as if posing fully aware of their grandeur and the respect they command.

Like the bull, the other animals Fikl gravitates towards are each loaded with symbolism. Each animal carries a history of myth with it. The ram in *Sheep with Chandelier* stands as if posing for a biblical portrait, knowing its status as a sacrificial animal. The flock of sheep in *Herd and Chandelier* is almost audible. The only animals facing us directly rather than from the side, the sheep still maintain a linear figurative composition so important to Fikl. And of course, the dogs in *Bullterrier* and *Bullterrier with Drapes* are themselves domesticated protagonists. As dogs, they allow for a more intimate portrayal, shown close-up rather than full bodied, and on a smaller "pet-sized" scale. These two paintings are almost portraits in their intimacy.

But where *are* these animals? Why do they seem so somber? Fikl has placed them not in nature, but under chandeliers and in rotundas. They are set against heavy tapestry that references the very height of civilization and privilege, as well as the extravagance of theatre. It is as if Fikl has made them our surrogates, taking the place of humans in our own "habitats." In these paintings, the beauty and grace of the animal world are shown naturally deserving of our finest ornamentation, lavished in our domestic best. Yet it is an uneasy link, a conflation made too easily between the abundance of nature and monetary wealth. There is a darkness here that cannot be overstated.

Fikl has gone on to portray excess in an extreme way, painting the hanging carcasses of the animals he has depicted until now. These are unquestionably the harrowing remains of an animal butchered by man. There is nothing natural about a slab of meat on a hook. In *Altar* a skinned animal carcass is hung high above a flock of sheep in what appears to be a tall neo-classic hall. The title of this work clearly references Biblical associations, as well as pagan ones. Fikl perhaps asks for whom such a sacrifice would be? And perhaps he also slyly answers that it is for no one. Surely it is in vain, as the meat hangs high and with nobody to consume it except the frozen Greek human statues adorning the arch in the background.

Though they're painted so finely Francis Bacon would have been proud, these paintings serve a purpose that is ultimately beyond that of visual consumption. They unflinchingly point to the excess of humanity, to our almost absurd disjuncture with the animal kingdom. Fikl's work is, in the end, a call to assess and perhaps reject the desire for wealth and empire, despite the sublime beauty they bring.

-Chen Tamir