

William S. Burroughs & Brion Gysin: Interview

Port of Entry, Paris 1960



Brion Gysin died of a heart attack on Sunday morning, July 19, 1986. He has the only man I have ever respected. I have admired many others, esteemed and valued others, but respected only him. His presence was regal without a trace of pretension. He was at all times impeccable.

Who was Brion Gysin? The only authentic heir to Hassan-I-Sabbah, the Old Man of the Mountain? Certainly that. Through his painting I caught glimpses of the garden that the Old Man showed to his Assassins. The Garden cannot be faked. And Brion was incapable of fakery. He was Master of the Djoun forces, the Little People, who will never serve a faker or a coward.

Brion was suffering from emphysema and lung cancer. He knew he had only a few weeks to live. I was preparing to go to Paris when Brion died. I have this last glimpse through a letter from my friend Rosine Buhler, written in her own English.

"Brion asked to wear his Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres medallion in a very elegant way and we started dinner with a wonderful Chinese soup. Brion finds the wine slightly rapeux to tease Francois de Palaminy, who has spent and concentrated to find a non-altered wine which is not so east even in Paris. After occurs a dreamlike talk about having a large house by the sea in August, the shadowed room where all is burning hot outside. Brion said he knew he would sleep well and was really happy of that good day. He wanted no help to lift himself up from his green armchair, and went to his room. I was watching his tall, straight way to walk, his secure path... only kings and wild people have this way."

I don't think I had ever seen painting until I saw the painting of Brion Gysin. Here is a transcript of a tape we recorded while talking in front of some of his pictures during the time we both lived in the old Beat Hotel at 9 rue Git-le-Coeur in paris back in 1960, when I discovered I could really get into these paintings.

Brion Gysin: How do you get into these paintings?

William Burroughs: Usually I get in by a port of entry, as I call it. It is often a face through whose eyes the picture opens into a landscape and I go literally right through that eye into that landscape. Sometimes it is rather like an archway...Any number of little details or a special spot of color makes the port of entry and then the entire picture will suddenly

become a three-dimensional frieze in a plaster or jade or some other precious material. This picture in front of me is in four sections. The remarkable thing is the way in which the sections, when hung a few inches apart, seem literally to pull together. The substance of the paintings seems to bridge the gap. Something is going streaming right across the void. Surely this is the first painting ever to be painted on the void itself. You can literally see the pull of one canvas on the other. Now you suddenly get all sorts of things here. Beautiful jungle landscape. And then always bicycles. The whole bicycle world...scooters. All sorts of faces...monkey faces... typical withered monkey faces. Very arche-typical in this world. And you do get the whole worlds. Suddenly you get a whole violet world or a whole gray world which flashes all over the picture. The worlds are, as it were, illuminated by each individual color...worlds made of that color. You think of them as the red world and then the blue world.

For example, I was taking a color walk around Paris the other day...doing something I picked up from your pictures in which the colors shoot out all through the canvas like they do in the street. I was walking town the boulevard when I suddenly felt this cool wind on a warm day and when I looked out all through the canvas like they do in the street. I was walking down the boulevard when I looked out I was seeing all the blues in the street in front of me, blue on a foulard...blue on a young workman's ass...his blue jeans...a girl's blue sweater...blue neon...the sky...all the blues. When I looked again I saw nothing but all the reds of traffic lights...car lights...a café sign...a man's nose. Your paintings make me see the streets of Paris in a different way. And then there are all the deserts and the Mayan masks and the fantastic aerial architecture of your bridges and catwalks and Ferris wheels.

BG: You mentioned once that you can't see all of these at the same time.

WB: No, This is the first real space-timing painting in which there's a presentation of what is actually going on in front of the painter and the viewer in a space -time sense, both through the forms and through the color because the color makes the shifting forms. And then this is related to actual time-sequence. I knew of no other example of the way in which time is represented here. I can't see all of these different levels at once because it is as if they existed independently only. In their time-sequence. Here is space-time painting. You can see way deep into al sorts of landscapes for instance, and then you flash back to what appears on the surface...The substance of the painting exists with a double motion in and out. When you see one layer of the picture then you suddenly see it all. The eye which I am using as a port of entry jerks me abruptly into a landscape I never saw before. It is a sort of toy world and one that is somehow alarming, populated with mechanical insects attacking each other and men in armor from other planets. Or they may be simply modern welders with bridges in the background.

BG: Yes, people have objected.

WB: I don't see why they should. It's a substance. Why, that's like jumping up from your microscope and screaming: "I won't look at that any more! They're squirming around down there just carrying on so nasty!". Now I regard you, Brion, as being in my own line of work. Being strictly an experimenter, I say: Science, pure Science? All of us are pure scientists exploring different levels of fact, and if we turn up something nasty, we're not

to blame. Just because someone finds a real nasty-looking microbe, is he going to stop because some idiot comes and says: " Pornographer! I must say that my whole family was nauseated by the sight of your slides! You and your filthy pictures.." Now when they see things in your pictures that are obscene from their point of view, they don't dare say so. You painters can be as nasty and dirty as you like and people don't see it as quickly or they simply don't dare say so because it would be too much of a raw reflection on themselves. "I'm seeing that in there, so there's something dirty and nasty in me." Oh, here are a lot of people on fire...streaming with gasoline on fire across the whole picture...people running and the upper corner of picture seems to fold back and over them. Why, it's the grasshopper world. Crystals. The Arab world. An Arab market. And there's my aunt encased in her electric motor car covered with veils. She's caught in a glob of something or under a bowl. A laboratory with instrument panels, and up above, there is what looks like a city...a very strange drifting city that wheels up as this is happening. I see all sorts of faces...eyes opening into doors and windows...hundreds of them in the most amazing juxtapositions.

From some you can get into others and from others you cannot get anywhere and so on. Extremely intricate. There are some fish-men swimming down here looking as though they were made of waste-baskets from the waist down. There are great flaring movements across the whole canvas...and then they turn into tubes...pulsing tubes. Some sort of energy is conducted through these tubes that run through the whole canvas which has become completely three-dimensional. You could look at all this for months and see something new all the time. Each time I look at this picture I see something I never saw before in the whole world. Sometimes you see familiar landmarks but it is as if whole constellations changed each time...like street corner here you recognize the landmarks but there are always new people to change the whole scene. It is inexplicable.

Now there are all sorts of green men here made of that substance, like shit from a cirrhotic liver. There are faces and there are cells in which people live in little pools of the stuff. The whole canvas is suddenly totally clear and accurate...a fantastic world of faces that are part house and all of it frozen ver in a strange gelatinous pink substance...frozen hell there in that substance. The substance is moving all the time...shivering moving changing. You can see the canvas become self-sufficient by a switch of the image.

Everything can and does become something else. I can hardly remember what that thing there was a minute ago. Oh yes, that was a head but now it has become a house flat of the ground. And this is a pink hill. When you relate to it, you can switch it back on. There is a very distinct little physiologial shock when you switch it back to the former image...every time you switch it back and forth. Now there is a point at which you can see both images simultaneously. It becomes rather uncomfortable. It becomes rather uncomfortable. It gives you this tremendous feeling of vertigo, as though you had to breathe through your cock and you can only get it up to where the air is if you have a hard-on. Precarious position which is somehow related to the fear of falling from a great height. A basic fear of suffocation and loss of support both being contained therein. That gives this picture a most disconcerting aura, to say the least.

Sometimes this seems to be pulsing with light and at other times it is all made out of stone... porous stone perhaps... an indeterminate substance between stone and flesh, like coral. Then you get that strange vegetable substance, as if these people I see in there were plants growing out of these tubes you have running through all the canvas, very strange! Just for a moment there I caught an absolutely clear photographic picture of Gregory Corso. It has gone now but I feel sure it is really there and will come back again. It is queer how these photographic shocks of yours flash in and out. It is one of the most remarkable phenomena I have ever witnessed in my practice...in all my practice. These strangely familiar faces are all growing together bound up by vines and tendrils...monkey faces. At one point a very mean ravished seventeenth- century face with a ruff around his neck standing outside some sort of native hut.

BG: Doesn't that look like some kind of writing?

WB: It does. I can read it. "Wings tack quietly...Vines crying...not crying...kiss...noisy pissing Tex...Gysin not sin was not crying...Fix Gysin...Brion..."

BG: What I read is different: "My dear very yours...not crying..."

WB: It looks like letters here too, but they're harder to make out. I read: "Creeps..." Looking at these paintings or yours is often like focusing an optical instrument. I find that it takes about twenty seconds to focus at all. The viewer has to learn how to flicker back and forth between a telescopic and a microscopic point of view while his attention is centered on some small beautiful scene which may be no bigger than your index fingernail at one moment, and then your attention is suddenly jerked back to a clear long-range view of the picture or its all-over pattern. What you actually see at any given moment becomes only a part of a visual operation which includes an infinite series of images. This leads you along a certain path like a row or series of patterns...a series of neural patterns which already exist in the human brain.

<http://www.pwf.cz/en/archives/interviews/453.html>
accessed 30 September 2010