

INTERVIEW
Genevieve Holmes (1977)

In one of the old Bohemian haunts of Paris, at the foot of Montmartre, is a complex of artists ateliers called the Villa des Arts at 15, rue Hégésippe-Moreau (17). Here, in the past, lived a group of famous painters, including Cezanne, Renoir, Signac and Dufy. Today, most of the habitants are still painters, and among them lives George Csato. The main room of the studio apartment where he works and lives, with his wife, Diana, and his Siamese cat, Jupiter de la Marjolaine, is a strange and intriguing den. On one side of the enormous height of window is spread the delightfull clutter of his profession squeezed paint, palettes, rags, brushes, etc. On the other side, the entire length of the room is covered with row upon row of empty whisky bottles - mostly dead Ballantine and VAT 69' jugs. "I adore them" he says, with a flashing smile. "They're so pretty. I even keep the tops," and he points to a huge Ali Baba pot heaped high with metal bottle caps. His canvases are hung all over the walls, and hundreds more are stored in the narrow wooden loggia overhead. In this room, the majority of the paintings are in shades of grey, but in all the other rooms, interchangeable panels make a rainbow of coloured stripes and pools, the patterns of which can be re-arranged, like a kaleidoscope, at any time, which he does. We asked Csato about himself.

As an expatriate, many people must ask you why you chose to come to Paris.?

GC : I came to Paris after this last war. I was born in Hungary and had great difficulties getting out. When I did, I had a choice to go either to Paris or to London. London, where my older brother lived, was the place where I would have received the warmest welcome, because my brother was a great friend of the late Alexander Korda, the movie man, and I would have been immediately given a job in decorating and designing for the movies. Instead, I came to Paris, believing in the idea that was fashionable up until 20 years ago, that Paris was the big centre of art. But it was a romantic idea; art is everywhere. Now there's no more isolation. I just made a jump. Many years later I went to teach for a short time in Canada, neither in Montreal nor Toronto, but in the middle of the Prairies, and there I found that my students had all the latest art books that I couldn't buy in Paris. They were far more up to date than we were. To simplify things, France had a reputation around 1900 for the beautiful light and the sky, which inspired the old Impressionist painters. Many American, Canadian and English artists came to France at that time for this very reason. But now it's no longer necessary to have good light and sky. We don't sit outside and do landscapes; we sit in a studio and invent something - painting by night sometimes. France is a very difficult country for the creative artist. I've lived all around the world, including Russia, and Paris is the most difficult city in which to live because it is a tense, nervous place. The image of the centre of art has been stolen by New York and Los Angeles, even by San Paulo and London. Your wife is British; you like England; and visit there often.

Now that you have freedom of choice, why do you remain in Paris?

GC: I feel at home immediately in England, but the reason I don't live there is that while I never get bored in Paris, I get bored in England. And the cause for this boredom is that everyone is so nice and civilised. I never get bored here in Paris because all the time I get angry and have to defend myself. I've found that this is very inspiring. The inspiration comes from the sensation of being permanently uneasy, on the defence all the time. Not very pleasant I admit, but they make you into some kind of masochist! I'm conditioned now to never having peace of mind. You can't get lazy here. I'm at retiring age now, but how can you relax when you never know who's going to jump on you next ?

Inspiring, you say, but doesn't a life of constant pressure also have a debilitating effect on the artistic nature?

GC : The life of an artist is in away very infantile and very selfish. In my own case, I have no regular income, no job as such. I depend on the people who buy my pictures. I can get up at 10 in the morning or not at all. I can go away whenever I can afford to, and drop dead any time I like without creating a stir. But for all these privileges, I have to pay; and the pay is insecurity - Financial and otherwise. Insecurity can either be drain or a challenge, depending on the personality. If it's a challenge to me it's because it keeps me alert and interested. In my profession, as long as you still have interest and inspiration, you don't feel the tug of age. The last time I went to America in 1957 I was afraid, because I knew that Americans considered anyone over 40 as half-dead already ! But I never felt younger than in America because I was surrounded by interest. No-one asked my age; they just looked at my work, and that counted. If I'd had any other profession, it would not have been that way. Then too, the external worries can never overcome the terrible internal worries of the working artist. He lives in a closed world - a marvellous escapism. When I paint abstracts I worry about the relationship between a grey, a black, a red and an orange. It's not at all mathematical; it's very emotional. When I painted portraits, I felt the same emotion over trying for a likeness; now it's over trying for the right proportion. Working with harmony versus disharmony can be very exciting. Has art always had that appeal for you?

When and why did you first decide to become a painter?

GC : At first, just to annoy my parents, who were very anti-art. They wanted me to be a genius businessman so they put me into a business-college. I was very good at it in my youth, obsessed with making money. At school I made foreign exchange deals, I even cheated; but suddenly I lost interest. And I've been painting 50 years now. I made the first break when my parents told me I'd never get a penny from them if I chose art. We were living in Vienna at the time and I ran away to Berlin. I had a very interesting time there. I paid for my studies by working as an escort, as a nude model in my own art school class, as a poster painter, fashion designer, and decorator. In 1930 there were very few art galleries, no scholarships and scarcely any collectors, so to be a painter was completely crazy, unless you had money or became a portrait painter.

In what way did those hardships restrict your style?

GC : I was a realist painter to begin with because in Berlin 1932 abstract art was very, very rare. I had great teachers. Among them were Lionel Feininger and Paul Klee, whose smallest pictures now go for \$100,000 - \$300,000. Klee was a marvellous man, one of the great painters of our century. Now, I still do portraits, I can still draw, because our education was a classical one. I believe that even abstract painters should be able to draw. Some hold up Cezanne as an excuse, saying he was a genius and yet he couldn't draw. It's true; if you look at some of his early nudes you'll see they are very ill-drawn, and Cezanne knew it himself. When his mother died, he was running around the streets of Aix like crazy to find a painter who could draw her face. The painter he found said "But you are a painter."? "Yes," said Cezanne pitifully, "but I can't draw." That's a very touching story, but Cezanne must remain the exception. Fortunately, in my time art education was very much centred around academic drawing and formal discipline. We did three hours portrait, three hours nude, three hours still-life and so on, but from Klee I also managed to get in some lessons on abstract composition, even in those days. And then the war came and disrupted everything.

How did the coming of the war affect your artistic progress?

GC: Well, it marked my gradual move from realist to abstract art. Like many others, I had a terrible war. I was in the army and taken prisoner in Russia, but I was treated very well because I painted - the Russians have great respect for painters - and because I spoke a little Russian. I was there 18 months and came back with the Russians to my own country. I had learnt Russian in Prague - the Czech language has a similar base- where I lived after I left Berlin. I left

Berlin because I'm Jewish; when Hitler came I went to Prague for five years until Hitler came again and I had to leave Prague for the next place. Prague was a marvellous city then because all the culture of Berlin came pouring in, chased out by the approach of Hitler. To make my living I worked for newspapers and became a very well-known cartoonist. I made drawings of all the most famous people of the era. I met all the musicians, writers, philosophers, such as Rachmaninov, Stravinsky, Casals, Einstein, the Duke of Windsor and Bertrand Russell. To deal with the work, I developed a method of lightning sketches by which I could capture a likeness in three minutes. I'm still interested in the human face. I have portraits upstairs that I've done of people like Schweitzer, Colette, Braque, Isak Dinesen and Somerset Maugham. But after the war, I tried to paint the sufferings we went through and I found out that with realism you just cannot communicate horror. People don't believe you. They can hardly believe a photograph of horror when they see it. I was also trying to replace the tension and the horror by harmony, and this harmony I could only find in abstract art. So it was then that I entered a stage of "purity". This quality of harmony in abstract painting is an interesting subject.

Can you explain your conception of it?

GC: Balance. Complete balance (of shapes, colours, rhythm) which is still disturbed enough to move you. It's a contradiction - harmony and yet disturbance. This is because full harmony for us in Europe (not for Eastern art) is symmetry,

but that's boring. The moment you upset the symmetry you have to counter balance it. So harmony is a game; a flirtation to upset symmetry. Yes, successful harmony is a disturbed symmetry.

How does this harmony in art relate to the harmony in music?

GC: Firstly, I am a modern, non-representative painter. Secondly, I love music and was brought up with music. But of the kind of music that is related to my painting, I must confess that I dislike it. I know what these musicians are trying to say. It makes me nervous and disturbs me. Take Schoenberg, who is so well-known in America. At the time I was born, he had already produced the first 12-tone music, which was the most advanced music, breaking the idea of melody and the pleasing succession of notes. It was a tremendous breakthrough, equivalent to that of abstract painting - which stopped imitating things. That was over 60 years ago, and it's something I still can't take, because in music I'm still very reactionary. I want my clean old Beethoven and Bach. Even Bartok, I know what he wants and it doesn't help me. Which brings me back to the basic theme of communication. When people say to me "I don't understand your picture. Explain to me what it means, I say "with pleasure, if you like it, but if it doesn't move you in some way there's no hope of communication." I sometimes have the same idiotic reaction to the music of Schoenberg and Webern as some of my clients when faced with modern art - "every child can do it" That's because it doesn't click into a logic which is already there. It's something else; it gets away from convention. It's strange that an abstract painter should be disturbed by Schoenberg's music because what we're trying to express is basically the same thing.

What was the general condition of art like in the years immediately following the war?

GC: The real boom in painting, all over the world, started in 1948 when the Americans invaded the artworld. I was already in Paris. You could have bought a picture for \$300 that today would fetch \$100,000. When American-Canadian friends of mine came over, I pushed them to buy, because I knew the market, but they had no confidence, and 10 years later they had to pay the huge new prices, but they still made a profit. In those days, talent was there, alive, on the streets. Picasso prices were very modest before the war. Everything started after the war. And the sadness then was that the great profits made went not to the artists but to the dealers. That seems to be the oldest, most unjust and most insoluble of problems in the art market.

But if a piece appreciates in price over hundreds of years, how can it be avoided?

GC: Exactly. The creator is in his grave. He never got the millions. He painted his picture and got his \$100. So who made all this money ? But today, at least we could improve the ironical taxing system. Something very pleasant happened the other day. A young American painter from Los Angeles who sold his pictures for \$200 suddenly became very famous and his prices went up 10 times. Immediately the Income Tax and so on came after him, but he said to them "Are you crazy? I never got more. Tax the people who made the profit." And he pushed for years to get through the law. Finally he won the case, which concerns all painters living in the U.S.A. meaning that any painter whose pictures are re-sold above \$1,000 gets an interest of 5% between the price he sold at originally and the price it fetches later. That's something. It's a pity that cases like his don't attract the public eye more.

Why do people take no interest in this aspect of art?

GC: The reason is that most people look on pictures like the stock exchange. I remember I helped a Canadian friend of mine buy a very fine Braque. He gave a reception one day and many people asked him "What's this?" to which he replied "A still-life." "And who by?" "Braque." "Never heard of him." And the person would walk away without another glance. So I said to him "Throw another party, and when they ask you "What does this represent?" just give them Picasso's reply to the same question - "A million dollars". It worked. People started to admire it. You see, people do have some imagination! Instead of the still life, they saw a million dollars in notes. That's very exciting... But it's not what art is all about.

Csato poured himself another glass of red wine, and took me on a tour, to show me, through his multi-coloured canvases, what art is all about.

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