

## ION BITZAN'S DESIRE

Kristine Stiles

Throughout history biblical poetry has provided the source for visual works of art, ocular meditations on oracular metaphysics that consummate wordless spaces.<sup>1</sup> The silent languages of Ion Bitzan's aggregate works, *The Song of Songs* and *The Cabinet*, crave penetration. To enter this visual commentary of obscure signs and secret codes, the cleft in its hermeneutic system must be glimpsed. Bitzan's body of images, his images of bodies, desire.

This appetite is, however, uncommon. His urge is a presence intimate and grand, embodied and esoteric, a hunger that begins with one body and reaches for continents. For the body that he depicts is also an image of land, a figure that incarnates soil to be plowed, a being engineered as a map then mapped as a book to be read, mute oration narrating a tale of ache, which is truly about need. Necessity manifested in drawings of texts and landscapes, landscapes as bodies always bodies - enraptured bodies with intertwined limbs and genitalia that when seen are damned and, paradoxically, when unseen incarnate the ecstasies of Eden.

Between this seeing and unseen are twin passions: things and thoughts. Naming and imagining are the lovers of the splendid objects Bitzan installs as the material cosmology of Solomon's tent: pairs of fine shoes, a bed, mirror and stones, the luster of Shulamite's box. This container doubles as the empty mystical space of a body into whose private garden fingered-thoughts and eyes with a nose for the scent of forbidden places browse:

I came down to the nut garden to look at the fresh growth of the valley, to see if the vines were in bloom. If the pomegranates had blossomed before I knew it, my heart had made me The blessed one of my kinswomen.<sup>2</sup>

"In no other book of the Hebrew Bible does the imagery figure so prominently," biblical scholar Carol Meyers writes, "as it does in *The Song of Songs* (where) the rich and

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<sup>1</sup> This text was first published as, Kristine Stiles, *Ion Bitzan: The Song of Songs; The Cabinet*. Bath, England: City of Bath College, 1994. Research on this essay was supported by grants from Duke University and the efforts of Dr. Adrian Bejan, Distinguished Professor of Engineering at Duke University, who forged links between Duke and Bucharest Universities that enabled me to teach at the University of Bucharest and the Bucharest Art Academy in 1993 and 1994, where I taught the history of performance art and various issues in contemporary art. The artists Lia and Dan Perjovschi, Ion Grigorescu, and Ion Bitzan were foundational in my knowledge of Romanian art.

<sup>2</sup> "The Song of Songs," Chapter 6, Verse 11-12, from the "Wisdom Books of the Old Testament" in *The New American Bible*, translated from the Original Languages with Critical Use of All the Ancient Sources by members of the Catholic Biblical Association of America (Wichita, Kansas: Catholic Bible Publishers, 1983), 699.

extravagant array of figurative language boldly draws the reader into the world so joyously inhabited by the ancient lovers.”<sup>3</sup> But while the paintings, drawings, and objects in his installation provide access to this voluptuous scene with all its carnal pleasure and perfumed sumptuous corpus, the sheer beauty of Bitzan’s work alone, and it is stunning, is not the sum of his measure. Bitzan does not pander to aesthetic elegance. Nor does he descend into the “facile or inaccessible” countered by “irony,” that Romanian art historian Anca Oroveanu astutely cited as a central issue of beauty.<sup>4</sup> Bitzan uses beauty to ply his seduction.

The land of the body is written, he suggests as he ties land to books, words to places. These sites Bitzan links to the salubrious body of Solomon's anonymous betrothed who assumes the form of a continent. Rich in sensuous metaphors is her landed loam with its exotica of choice fruits, nard and saffron, calamus, cinnamon, incense and aloes, the finest spices, honey, sweetmeats, wine and milk, aromatic herbs, red blossoms that drip myrrh, verdant vineyards, cypresses, lily of the valley, gold and silver. All the poetic double-entendre and voluptuousness of the text suggests Bitzan’s work. Yet, however draped with purple cloth, mandrakes and mellowed fruits, the loamy clay of the beloved is motherland. Bitzan’s amorous covenant remains with Romania, which his work refigures. *The Song of Songs* and *The Cabinet* requires both luxuriating in the evocative atmosphere of sexuality while keeping an astute alertness to the varied topoi of love he presents. For Eros and Agape bracket the homeland. Father-nation and mother-earth marry culture and nature and embed identity.

Since the overthrow of President Nicolae Ceaușescu, Christmas Day, 1989, several subjects have preoccupied Romanian contemporary artists and critics: the Occident avant-garde, the Orthodox Christian East, books, and sexuality. These themes comprise the core of Bitzan's exhibition in Bath, England. *Filocalia*, an exhibition that probed the East/West relation, was mounted at the National Theatre in Bucharest in October 1990, ten months after the revolution. *Cartea-Object*, a multimedia show devoted to the book-object, followed in May 1991. This exhibition “was originally designed to commemorate the destruction of cultural values” referring to December 1989 when “the Central University Library (former

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<sup>3</sup> Carol Meyers, “Gender Imagery in the *Song of Songs*, in *Hebrew Annual Review* 10 (1986): 209.

<sup>4</sup> Anca Oroveanu, “Ambiguities,” *Arta* [Bucharest] 38, No. 1 (1991): 6. Oroveanu’s essay belonged to a lively debate about “Bad Painting” undertaken by Romanian artists, critics, and art historians during this period.

King Charles II Foundation) had been bombed and set ablaze.”<sup>5</sup> Calin Dan, a leading Romanian critic and art historian, Editor of *Arta*, the principle Romanian journal of contemporary art, and now Cultural Director of the Soros Foundation in Bucharest, commented: “The smoke rising over the body of the Library was by no means an offering to freedom and reconciliation ... No revolution broke out there; it was an offering whose meaning remained hidden, insofar as the deity it had been destined (to acknowledge) has not shown up yet.”<sup>6</sup> Dan's discreet, yet ironic, observation connects the fire to the revolution. In this way, he unifies the question of who caused the conflagration at the library with the problem of who instigated the revolution. The Word - of which the book-object is a sign - is joined to government and religion, vehicles that, in yet another twist, implicate the Orthodox spirituality some imagine may revitalize Romanian culture. I think Ion Bitzan's *The Song of Songs* and *The Cabinet* may be understood to visualize such complex condensations.

Bitzan has been fascinated with the book-object since the late 1960s, and was one of the first Romanian artists to explore it as a medium, producing exquisite hand-made papers often covered in mysterious script. Attracted to “the pulse” of a book-object's content and the “carnal expression” of the paper, the covers, the format, the letter characters, he said: “I would like my objects, resembling books, to probe the inner universe, the inner richness treasured in thousands of books worldwide; consequently they could be genuinely true.”<sup>7</sup> His *Turnul*, 1992, a mammoth and magnificent reading table supported on hand-carved legs with busts resembling a composite of a Baroque portrait and angelic putti, contains sheets of weathered, ochre, hand-made papers with unreadable script piled atop each other, the leaves forming a mound of suggestive occult knowledge far removed in appearance, intellectual substance, and teleological import from the synthesized floating computer information of the present. *Turnul* is an anachronism appealing to the alchemical past upon which the simulated future draws unconsciously. Carmen Popescu, writing on *Turnul*, thinks Bitzan to be nostalgic for “books ... journeys ... forgotten geography.” Like many before her, Popescu locates Bitzan's art in relation to the writing of Jorge Luis Borges:

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<sup>5</sup> Aurelia Mocanu, “Cartea-Object: Reactia la bibliocid (The Object-Book: Reaction to Bibliocide),” *Arta* 38, No. 5 (1991):17.

<sup>6</sup> Calin Dan quoted in Mocanu's “Cartea-Object,” *Arta*: 17.

<sup>7</sup> Bitzan quoted in Mocanu's “Cartea Object,” *Arta*: 17.

In that Empire, the Art of Cartography had reached such a perfection, so that the Map of a single Province covered a whole City, and the Map of the Empire a whole Province. In time, these Maps were not satisfactory any longer and the Colleges of Cartographers made up a new Map of the Empire which had the size of the Empire and coincided with it.<sup>8</sup>

In another essay, “The Library of Babel,” Borges observes, “*The Library is unlimited and cyclical*,” (his emphasis).<sup>9</sup> Bitzan weds the unlimited circulation of both sacred and secular texts metaphorically represented in *The Cabinet* to the sensuality of *The Song of Songs*. He has admitted that “the carnal expression” of paper and books attracts him, but this affinity is woven into a denser tapestry. For, the constant sensual presence of his work bespeaks the fourth subject to which the Romanian avant-garde has addressed itself: sexuality. The exhibition *Sexul lui Mozart* [The Sex of Mozart], opened in Bucharest, December 1991. Romanian artist Theodor Redlow remarked:

It's commonplace knowledge that during the long years of Romanian 'spiritual resistance through culture,' mystics and erotica have been taboo subject matters, only seldom approached in the form of disguised involvement To this effect what did really happen after the execution of the dictator? To put it bluntly, sex and religion have been let loose; a deliberate purpose of manipulation cannot be entirely dismissed at this stage.<sup>10</sup>

In this body of work, Bitzan seems to share Redlow's doubt about the political faction responsible for deliberately releasing long repressed forces in Romania. *The Song of Songs* comprises six sections - The Symbols, The Continents, Erotic Drawings, The Bed, Exodus Landscapes, and The Verses - while *The Cabinet* is composed of four - Books with Maps, Books with Technical Drawings, Four Old Documents, and Secret Maps, Documents, and Books. These works, I think, refer as much to the cycles of Romanian history, drawing the anachronistic past into the troubled present in a compelling way as they do with sacred texts.

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<sup>8</sup> Borges quoted in Carmen Popescu's “LABYRINTH/BABEL/JOURNEYS (the book of ALEXANDER), ACCOUNTS, DIARIES/NUMEROLOGY/TIME/MIMESIS/THE BOOK/THE LIBRARY/Writing/THE FRAGMENT/TALBES/DESKS/THE ASTROLABE/THE HONEY/SCRIPTORIUMS/MATTER/LABYRINTH/TIME/OBJECT/NOSTALGIA,” in *Ion Bitzan: Obiecte Scriituri* (Bucharest: Ministerul Culturii Bucharesti, Romania Uniunea Artistilor Plastici, and Galeria Artexpo Etaj 3/4, 1992-93): n.p.

<sup>9</sup> Borges in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories & Other Writings*, edited by Donald A. Yates and James E. Irby, Preface by Andre Maurois (New York: A New Direction Book, 1962), 58.

<sup>10</sup> See, Redlow quotes in Amelia Pavel's “Sexurechea lui Mozart.” [Sexear of Mozart], in *Arta* 39, No. 1 (1992): 20-21.

*The Verses*, some eighteen collage-drawings with texts from his *The Song of Songs*, are derived from translations Bitzan identifies as culled from a Bible attributed to Serban Cantacuzino [1640 - 1688], a nobleman who, in 1678, took the throne of Wallachia, which, like Moldavia, was a Principality together with the constantly contested multiethnic region of Transylvania, that then, and now, comprise Romania. According to Katherine Verdery, it was in this context of “early efforts by Romanians to define their national identity [that] the fierce competition for empire-building among the Habsburgs, Romanovs, and Ottomans.”<sup>11</sup> The fact that Bitzan cites Serban Cantacuzino's Bible as the source for *The Verses* is in itself telling. An early history of Wallachia – “The History of Wallachia since the Right-thinking Christians Came to These Parks” (The Cantacuzino Chronicle), whose authorship is ascribed to Stoica Ludescu – “describes the Cantacuzinos as protected by God”<sup>12</sup> It is further noteworthy that Bitzan's section on “The Continents” pictures the body of a woman as the form of the land, and that a relative of Cantacuzino, Constantine Cantacuzino, is credited with having produced a map of Wallachia that was printed in Padua in 1700. It provides “valuable information on the settlements of the country, the monasteries, the administrative division, etc., (and) is one of the most valuable historical maps” in Romania.<sup>13</sup> Bitzan seems to be suggesting that in the cycle of love God blesses both motherland and father-nation. But this love takes place in the midst of strife and warfare in a territory mapped and remapped by governments.

With the exception of the last four years [1990-1994], Bitzan spent his entire life under one totalitarian regime after another: Stalin, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, and Nicolae and Helene Ceaușescu, who imposed the Romanian silence so present in Bitzan's work. This silence led to a heteroglossia of private languages in Romania. Silence was maintained efficiently by the Romanian secret police, the Securitate, who enforced Ceaușescu's crushing control. That organization was successful through the sheer force of rumor, hearsay that

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<sup>11</sup> Katherine Verdery, *National Ideology Under Socialism: Identity and Cultural Politics in Ceausescu's Romania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991): 30. Wallachia has been a principle seat of Romanian nationalism since Cantacuzino. Some accounts suggest that Cantacuzino cooperated with the Moldavian and Transylvanian princes in the siege of Vienna, 1683, on the Turkish side. Other historians argue that Cantacuzino was forced to cooperate with the Turks against the Hapsburgs and was responsible for constructing two bridges over the Danube above and below Vienna. What is clear is that he was determined to recover autonomy from both the Ottoman and Hapsburg Empires, and that he established connections with neighboring countries in that effort. Whatever autonomy Cantacuzino managed, he dies too soon to enjoy it. But the long reign of his successor Constantine Brancoveanu, on the longest in the history of Wallachia, suggests his success.

<sup>12</sup> Andrei Otetea and translated by Eugenia Farca, eds., *The History of the Romanian People* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1970), 289. Originally appeared as *Istoria Poporului Roman*. Bucharest: Editura Stiintifica, 1970.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

numbered the Securitate, with its system of informers, at one in six Romanian citizens. No one remained above suspicion. Fear and secrecy resulted in the effective supervision of all aspects of Romanian life. Stealth was augmented by reports of reprisals against challenges to authority, threats that were invigorated by actual punishments. Extreme even among nations of the former Soviet block countries, Romanians endured their conditions in isolation. The government withheld Romanian passports and politically sequestered the nation from exchange with most of the world. Romania resembled a concentration camp.<sup>14</sup> While such coercion was the most obvious process by which Romanians were traumatized into obedience, a double bind comprised of intense nationalism coupled with economic shortage incapacitated the people into perceiving themselves absolutely dependent upon a government, which they could not criticize without being labeled unpatriotic.<sup>15</sup>

This paradoxical predicament reinforced what Verdery calls the “symbolic-ideological” discourse in Romania, a discourse that utilizes “the Nation ... as a master symbol.”<sup>16</sup> Alexandra Cornilescu, a linguist from Bucharest University, noted that survival in Romania depends upon “hedging.”<sup>17</sup> “Hedging” means that one cultivates the ability to live multiple lives. Romanians learned to say one thing and mean something else, to speak in layered codes impenetrable to informers, often even confusing to friends, to use their eyes and gestures as if they were words. or, as Codrescu confessed: “I lie in order to hide the truth from morons.”<sup>18</sup> “Repressive discourse,” Cornilescu continued, “gradually developed towards a rigid inventory of permissible topics; religion, non-dogmatic philosophy or political theories,

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<sup>14</sup> See my, “Shaved Heads and Marked Bodies: Representations from Cultures of Trauma,” *Strategie II: Peoples Mediterraneens* 64-65 (July-December 1993): 95-117. See also, Primo Levi and Walter Benjamin, who both believed that the concentration camp was a microcosm of the external world. See Levi’s *Survival in Auschwitz and The Reawakening: Two Memoirs*. New York: Summit Books, 1986, originally published in Italian as *Se questio e un uomo* (1958) and *La tregua* (1963); and Primo Levi *The Drowned and the Saved*. Translated by Raymond Rosenthal. New York: Vintage International, 1989, published originally as *Sommersi e I salvati* (1986). See also, Peitro Franssica *Primo Levi as Witness: Proceedings of a Symposium held at Princeton University* (Florence: Casalini Libri, 1990); and, Hans Sahl, *Walter Benjamin: Im Lager*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972.

<sup>15</sup> Verdery, 101. This complicated history involves claims made by Romanian intellectuals for the priority of Romanian cultural inventions and even historical events in the cultural and political history of Europe. Verdery carefully charts *protochronism* (temporal priority) in several chapters.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>17</sup> Alexandra Cornilescu, unpublished paper “Transnational Patterns: Symptoms of the Erosion of Fear in Romania Political Discourse,” delivered at the Modern Language Association’s Annual Meeting, New York, 1992. All further quotes by Cornilescu come from this article.

<sup>18</sup> Andrei Codrescu, *Monsieur Teste in America & Other Instances of Realism* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 1987), 14.

poverty, prisons, concentration camps, political dissidents, unemployment, sex, etc., were, as many taboo topics, unmentionable and largely, unmentioned in repressive discourse.”

As a student under Stalin, Bitzan first discerned that transgression was impossible. He remembered the painful “unmaskings” (his term) during which students denounced each other and their professors, denunciations accompanied by obligatory applause, the same obligatory applause required at the very mention of Stalin's name.<sup>19</sup> His terror was so deep, he remembered, that he felt “guilty for being human,” and was afraid of “being an enemy of the party, an enemy of the State, an enemy of the Soviet Union.” In 1964, one of Bitzan's paintings was selected for inclusion in the Venice Biennale. A social realist work of “a Lorie filled with wheat, a field worker, and a red flag in the corner,” the socialist subject and style, like the applause, was mandated. But Bitzan felt his work was “perfect” because he had composed it precisely according to the rules for the golden Section. When he traveled to Venice to attend the Biennale, however, he saw the assemblages and collages of Robert Rauschenberg, the first American artist to receive first prize at the Biennale. Bitzan returned to Romania confused, disturbed, and embarrassed by his art. He felt himself to be a provincial outsider and was humiliated by the very painting of which he had been so proud. Three years later, Bitzan also began to make collages, constructions, and to fabricate hand-made papers on which he wrote his indecipherable language, texts that offer a visual microcosm of the conflict that characterized Romanian artist's conduct, their need to invent languages and to make public something of the content of hidden lives.

Most of these works remained in his studio. Mikhail Bakhtin, a victim of Stalin's despotism, might have compared Bitzan's textual and visual narratives to the heteroglossia of the oppressed longing to speak. For, Bakhtin observed, all social life is an ongoing struggle between the attempt of power to impose a uniform language and the attempt of those below to speak in their own dialects.<sup>20</sup> In public, Bitzan continued to paint in a socialist realist style. Like many Romanian artists, he capitulated to Ceausescu's frequent requests to paint Him or Her- the terms Romanians used for Nicole and Elena. For his compliance, Bitzan earned money, prestige in the Art Academy, and the right to travel. He “sold” himself, he insisted, “but only for an hour or so a day when I worked on their pictures.” After that he turned the

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<sup>19</sup> Ion Bitzan in conversation with the author in his Bucharest studio, October 1991. Hereafter cited as Bitzan/Stiles.

canvases of Him or Her - emblems of his repression - to the wall and began his secret life. In telling this story for the first time, in his words, Bitzan felt “ashamed” and left the room. I too felt shame that the interrogative format of the interview had perpetrated the persecuting questions from which I had been sheltered.

Such tensions are the foundations of *The Song of Songs* and *The Cabinet*. This friction forms a slippage along the boundaries between the seen and the unseen but named between word and image, the territory of books. Bitzan's entire oeuvre is, in some sense, entirely about books, the course for his meditations, knowledge, and escape to taboo worlds, foreign travel, suppressed ideas, repressed emotions, and spiritual traditions - restrained. Bitzan expanded the spaces of refuge provided by books into temporal experiences of optical contemplation. *The Cabinet* signifies the fauna and flora of lands unknown. Alexandra Titu, states poignancy that Bitzan translates values into images, “pointing to the relationship among cultural signs, as instruments of pressure, of subconscious molding, of persuasion.”<sup>21</sup> She continues: “Game and irony, means getting away from and freeing himself of all the features of the historically and geographically defined reality, (which) ... parallel meditation on cultural developments, on the human instruments used for the world's reading and practice, realizing the affective, censorial and conceptual levels from the patterns of ideologic dogma.”<sup>22</sup>

Returning to *The Song of Songs* at the center of this exhibition. This text has been a riddle and a fascination for more than two thousand years.<sup>23</sup> Like Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Psalms, The Song of Songs is classified as Wisdom, the closest thing to philosophy in the ancient world. It depicts human, erotic love-poetry, an allegory of divine Judeo-Christian love, in dramatic and liturgical means. It is a semi-continuous sequence of fourteen scenes: The Arrival, The Audience, The Courtship, The Night, The Procession, Wedding, The Consummation, A Knock at the Door, A Lover Lost and Found, The One and Only, The Dance, A Night in the Country, Love's Demand, The Queen. These move in a progression from the arrival of the anonymous Arabian princess from Nadiv at Solomon's court, to his acknowledgment of her as his favorite queen. Bitzan, who turned seventy in August of 1994,

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<sup>20</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin's *The dialogical imagination*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, quoted in Katherine Verdery's *National Ideology Under Socialism*, 122.

<sup>21</sup> Alexandra Titu, “The Other Side of Freedom,” *Romanian Review* [Bucharest] 68, Nos. 298-299, 8/9 (1993): 114.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Michael D. Goulder, *The Song of Fourteen Songs* (Sheffield, England: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series 36, 1986), vii.

concentrated his visual narrative on *The Consummation*. An extremely vital and handsome man, his focus recapitulates the erotic preoccupations of Picasso in his seventies. Moreover, the surging desire in this work, recalls the dramatic conversion of the American poet William Everson who renounced his Dominican vows as Brother Antoninus in 1969 in order to consummate his lust for Susanna, a woman he had been counseling. He recorded his uncontrollable passion for Susanna in *Man-Fate: The Swan Song of Brother Antoninus*. In “Man-Fate,” a poem that gives its title to the book, Everson declares: “The fate of man turns on the body of woman.” “By what she is,” he confesses, “she defines them.”<sup>24</sup> Consumed by lust, the genesis of his frenzy resides in “The Gash,” the title of the poem that reveals the source of the poet’s corporeal and psychic agony:

To covet and resist for years, and then  
To succumb is a fearsome thing. All you craved and denied  
At last possesses you. You give yourself  
Wholly to its power - and its presence,  
Invading your soul, stupefies  
With its solace and its terror...  
And I bend my head,  
And cup my mouth on the gash of everything I craved,  
And am ravaged with joy.<sup>25</sup>

Everson's vivid account of the power of female sexuality permeates Bitzan's images. The two artists share a passion for woman that seems both specific and general. In this sense, it is not a surprise that Bitzan chose *The Song of Songs* as the focus of his attention. Carol Meyers points out that it is the “one biblical book in which female behavior and status stand apart from the largely male orientation of the rest of the biblical canon.”<sup>26</sup> “Vineyards and gardens ... have nuances of female sexuality,” she writes, as do the “Song's gender imagery in the faunal world,” and the many architectural descriptions of the female body which “link her to military structures.” These all suggest that, “a gynocentric mode predominates” as distinct from the “patriarchal world of ancient Israel in the biblical literature.”<sup>27</sup> Bitzan offers a

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<sup>24</sup> William Everson, *Man-Fate: The Swan Song of Brother Antonius* (New York: New Directions Books, 1973), 23.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Meyers: 211.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid: 212-13.

pictorial parallel to Meyer's point that, "in the erotic world of human emotion, there is no subordination of female to the male."<sup>28</sup>

But the biblical coupling is not only erotic. The site of the rendezvous is "the famous apple-tree where David slept with Bathsheba, and Solomon himself was conceived."<sup>29</sup> In this respect, the song has been interpreted as a revelation of God's love for Israel, his mystical being, and Christians have reinterpreted the text as Christ's love of the soul. There is a slippage here between Eros and Agape that German poet Rainer Maria Rilke records in *The Book of Hours*:

Put out my eyes, and I can see you still;  
slam my ears to, and I can hear you yet;  
and without any feet can go to you;  
and tongueless, I can conjure you at will.  
Break off my arms, / shall take hold of you  
and grasp you with my heart as with a hand;  
arrest my heart, my brain will beat as true;  
and it you set this brain of mine afire,  
upon my blood I then will carry you.<sup>30</sup>

Although Rilke denies, persecutes, and submits the body to a non-sensual love of God, his words refer to a mystical, divine love. Suppressing the physical for a metaphysical connection, Rilke's ache for God appears, nevertheless, to be a sexual longing similar to that of St. Theresa of Avila. Pierced through the heart with a sacred arrow, the saint experienced an erotic, yet, spiritual conjugal union.

Sexual union in the Old Testament is associated with the verb "to know," intimacy and knowledge of another that binds the physical to the teleological. In the continent Bitzan creates of a woman's body (a body he then covered with words and symbols), in his erotic drawings, the books that open into maps, his arcane documents with obscure texts and invented languages, and the bed. Bitzan issues his viewers into the territory of the Kabbalah.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid: 220. Bitzan's marital history links the Old and New Testament. He was married first to a Jew and then to a Christian. When he and his Christian wife had their daughter christened, in 1966, they were compelled by the repression of religion in Romania at the time to perform the ceremony secretly in the middle of the night.

<sup>29</sup> Goulder: 7.

<sup>30</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Poems from the Book of Hours*, "Das Stundenbuch." Translated by Babette Deutsch (New York: New Directions Book 1941), 37.

There the Gnostic “body of truth” is inscribed with magical combinations of letters ... and secret names” and The Song of Songs is forbidden until “the age of full maturity.”<sup>31</sup> In short, love desires in the borderland between body and spirit.

It is difficult to tell whether Robert Desnos, French Surrealist poet, conjured a beloved or summoned God when he wrote these words just before he died in a German concentration camp in 1945:

I've dreamed of you so much that you have lost your reality  
Is there enough time left on earth to ever reach that actual  
physical body and to kiss on that mouth the birth of that voice  
which is so dear to me?  
I've dreamed of you so much that my arms, which by now have  
become accustomed to embracing your shadow and then  
folding back across my own chest might not be able to bend  
around to the literal shape of your form, perhaps.  
So much that to once actually stand before the living illusion of  
what has haunted and possessed me for so many days and  
years, could very well transform me to shadows.<sup>32</sup>

The shadowy landscapes of Bitzan’s works suggest these lines from Desnos’ last poem. We are also plunged visually, by Bitzan’s texts and images, into the body of Romanian spirit where pictograms and writing merge. As Romanian philosopher Andrei Pleșu has pointed out, the image is “the ‘body of the emblem,’ and the explanatory texts below, its soul.”<sup>33</sup>

With his images of land, continents, languages, books, and bodies - classical art historical genres Bitzan depicts and writes the soul of Romanian history. “For everything that exists is self-expression, a well-established formula in the great cosmic syntagm....Writing exists in planets’ orbits, the outlines of our bodies or of clouds, writing is our silence.”<sup>34</sup> The silent soul of Bitzan’s work communicates something of the spirit of his country, now in such painful and historic transition. The Romanian philosopher Constantin Noica wrote that the

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<sup>31</sup> Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: A Meridian Book, 1974), 17.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Desnos, “I’ve Dreamed of you so much,” 1944-45, reprinted in *The Poetry of Surrealism: An Anthology*, with Introduction, Critical Notes and New Translations by Michael Benedikt (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1974), 268.

<sup>33</sup> Andrei Pleșu, “Image, Writing, Breathing,” in *Carte: Object-books made by Romanian artists* (Amersfoort, The Netherlands: De Zonnehof Cultural Center, 1993), 8.

aim of philosophy is to perform the function of mediation among learners. Philosophers, he thought, should operate like “states of spirit.”<sup>35</sup> In Romania, the term spirit has at least three meanings: spirit in terms of personal attitude; spirit as a referent for a religious or teleological view of the world, a feeling; and spirit in terms of an active material agent for political change. The maintenance of spirit in socialist Romania was a material form of resistance. Philosophers, Noica argues, must provide contents, advice, nor teachings, but be transmitters of shifting states of spirit.

“We are living in the age of the commentary, of intellectualism,” Romanian artist Sorin Dumitrescu stated, and “modern art has lost (its) spiritual values but is on the point of appropriating them again.”<sup>36</sup> He concluded:

Communism forced upon us the very vows of monasticism: the vow of poverty, of obedience and of chastity. One can say that God has deliberately given the Romanian people its trial for there is a great destiny in store for it.<sup>37</sup>

Ion Bitzan’s art traverses sexuality, religion, and politics as a unified anatomy of books.

The first art book that Bitzan encountered was on the Renaissance, and he was stuck by images of the work of Michaelangelo. Indeed, there is a monumentality to Bitzan’s paintings, drawings, and objects that recalls the values and perspectives of the Renaissance as filtered and softened through time. Romania’s political confinement limited his access to original works of art, and he was able to examine only reproductions. This visual relationship to the reproduced imbues the sense of remove in Bitzan’s work. Although materially present, time is always a visible factor in his art. In 1946-47, he lived in the house of a Romanian painter with a library containing books with images by Van Gogh, Picasso, and Chagall. He recalls that they “completely changed my way of thinking about art even though I continued to make the social realist portraits of ‘The New Man’ that I was compelled to paint at the time.”<sup>38</sup> These historical restrictions only fueled his longing and his invention. As he has stated, “These conditions never changed my inner ego.”<sup>39</sup> His studio was the “universe” in which he sustained his inspiration, the profoundly provocative mystery and allusion that is

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>35</sup> See Noica quoted in Verdery, 278-79

<sup>36</sup> Calin Dan and Sorin Dumitrescu, “Interview: Painters and Saints in the Lower Stands,” *Arta* 28, No. 1 (1991): 29.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid: 31.

<sup>38</sup> Bitzan/Stiles.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

contained in, and communicated by, his art. For half a century under conditions unimaginable in the West, Ion Bitzan, an artist of difficult experience and rare ability, remained full of joy and desire. I thank him.