

Eric Bulatov

At first glance, the image on this card seems quite ordinary: a depiction of some people at the beach. But closer inspection reveals several strange items, including that the people depicted in the lower left are wearing street clothes rather than beach attire and that there is a red and gold stripe placed in the middle of the work, where the horizon should be. What are these things about? The stripe, in particular, must be very important to an understanding of the piece since it features prominently in the title: *Red Horizon*.

In the early 1970s, when the image shown in this drawing was created, Eric Bulatov was living in Moscow and was part of a small group of artists and other intellectuals who met regularly in each other's homes and studios to discuss art, life, and the world around them. They had received exquisite academic training, but they did not pursue painting careers within the official Soviet structures since doing so would have obligated them to paint what the government wanted them to paint rather than what they wanted to paint. Although joining the official artists union, Bulatov—along with fellow artists and friends such as Ilya Kabakov and Oleg Vassiliev—became members of the graphic section of the union and illustrated children's books to make a living. They did their creative artwork in their spare time.

The official Soviet mantra was that all was well in this workers' paradise. This point was driven home by propaganda slogans that were so much a part of daily life that you almost stopped noticing them, much like commercial advertisements are in the West. In those times, you could be critical of the Soviet government in your thoughts. You might even be brave enough to share those thoughts with a close friend. But expressing such thoughts publicly could be very dangerous. As a result, it became quite natural for a Soviet citizen to have two faces: a "private" one that you showed to perhaps a few close friends, and a "social" one that you showed the outside world. The problem was compounded in Moscow and other large cities, where most families lived in "communal apartments." In such apartments, each family would have its own room, but all of the families living in the building would share a bathroom and kitchen. Consequently, it was almost impossible to have even a private conversation without risking being overheard and reported to the authorities.

The question facing Bulatov and his friends, then, was what do you paint in such an environment? How can you artistically depict that conflicted and complex reality? Bulatov's solution was to depict, simultaneously, things that blended harmoniously at a visual level, but that clashed at an intellectual level. During this period of time, Bulatov frequently created works that blended a peaceful, realistic nature scene and threatening words or Soviet slogans. For example, in a typical painting from the 1970s (*Danger*, 1972-73), Bulatov painted a beautiful scene of a middle-aged couple sharing a quiet picnic lunch in a meadow by a stream, with cows grazing quietly in the background. Superimposed over this bucolic scene is the Russian word "DANGER," repeated four times in blood-red, capital letters. Visually, the painting is beautiful, and even the placement of the words operates to frame the picnicking couple. But the clash between the words' meaning (presented in such an urgent manner) and the beautiful scene is startling. Why is this picnic dangerous? Is the stream poisoned? Are there beasts in the woods? Is the couple having an affair? Are the picnickers discussing politically impure ideas?

Unlike the word paintings—such as *Danger*—the contrasts in *Red Horizon* are more subtle. The people in the lower left might really be at the beach, but it would be more likely to see them walking down the street in a big city. They seem oblivious to both the beach in front of them and the stripe—the "red horizon"—that hangs above their heads. Why?

Although the red stripe might mean nothing to those of us from the West, those from the Soviet Union would recognize it as referring to the Order of Lenin, one of the Soviet Union's highest accolades. Visually, this "red horizon" fits naturally into the beach scene. But when the red stripe is recognized as the Order of Lenin, it becomes clear that the painting depicts the psychological truth that Soviet control overshadowed every aspect of life and that it was so pervasive as to almost be unnoticed and invisible.

The red stripe also covers over and blots out what would be the horizon in the painting if we were just looking at a beach scene. The true horizon, if depicted, would appear to be far off in the distance. But this "red horizon" is visually flat and frontal. It reinforces the fact that this thing you are looking at is flat and two dimensional. The hard, cold reality is the flat sheet of paper or canvas. The beautiful beach scene that is depicted (the version of Soviet life that the government wants you to see?) is merely an illusion.

Finally, the red stripe refers back to a similar stripe used to define the horizon in a 1932 painting titled *Red Cavalry* by Russian artist Kazimir Malevich. Paintings by Malevich, along with those of a number of other early 20th Century avant-garde artists, were banned by the Soviet government shortly after the Russian revolution. By referring to Malevich's painting, Bulatov is paying homage to the Russian artists who preceded him and asserting a connection between Malevich and his circle of friends, on the one hand, and Bulatov and his friends, on the other.

This may seem like a lot of weight for a little red stripe to bear, but Bulatov and his artist friends would have understood the complexity intended by his inclusion of that simple stripe.

Currently living in Paris, Eric Bulatov is recognized as one of Russia's leading painters. His work has been shown in museum and gallery exhibitions worldwide and is included in the collections of many of the world's most prominent museums.

Russian painters seem to have a particular affinity for referencing works by other artists in their own paintings. For example, if you still have it, take a look at our holiday card from last year, the one featuring a painting by Oleg Vassiliev titled *Portrait of Erik Bulatov in Mayakovsky Square*. You will notice a red and gold striped horizontal band in the painting, which seems to be the result of a time-elapsed viewing of car taillights. However, it also is a reference to this *Red Horizon* painting by Eric Bulatov, whose portrait was on the painting featured on last year's card.