

THE WORLD OF BRAJO FUSO

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The name is unknown, his works rarely seen. Sadly, only his recent death will alert the public to this artist's startling treasure

Between Rome and Florence stand the ancient hilltop towns of Umbria, graceful medieval citadels that seem to dream their lives away in the peaceful highland sunshine. They are places of stone and mortar, tranquil villages that have almost forgotten they were built to withstand siege and bloodshed. People lead quiet lives in them; they mind their own business. The regional capital, Perugia, is the sort of place to work in well-mannered seclusion, so it should come as no surprise to discover that an important figure in 20th-century art spent his life there in almost total obscurity, dedicating his entire artistic career to one of the grandest and most eccentric bodies of work on the continent.

The work is the Fuseum and estate of Montemalbe, an enormous and compelling monument to the imagination of its creator, Brajo (BRAH-yo) Fuso. Crammed into the estate's gardens and sculpted forests are thousands of reliefs, statues, paintings, hangings, and constructions – in dozens of styles with every conceivable kind of material, all a testament to Fuso's inexhaustible curiosity and drive. The individual pieces themselves are striking, but it is the estate as a whole that is truly overwhelming, for it is nothing less than a world to itself, created and tended by its owner.

For nearly 40 years, Fuso the artist labored with little public recognition, never traveled outside Italy, and only rarely exhibited, when coerced by friends. If he is generally unknown, it is because he followed his inner vision, forgoing the art world quite literally to cultivate his own garden. Last December 30, 81-year-old Brajo Fuso died. Very soon, according to the terms of his will, the world that Fuso left behind is scheduled to open to the public for the first time.

Fuso came to the world of art relatively late, in mid-life, after he had already gained a reputation as an oral surgeon, university professor, inventor, and author of children's books. Born in Umbria in 1899, Fuso was, by his own account, a rambunctious boy with a stubborn sense of the way he wanted to do things. At age seven he was sent to a boarding school whose Somaschi priests were reputed to be especially good at dealing with ornery children like Brajo. But Fuso fled three times to an uncle who, after applauding the boy's instincts, returned him to the boarding school to meet his punishment.

With the onset of World War I, he went to the Austrian front as a naive flag-waving patriot; it was an experience that changed him for life. During the first assault the young Fuso spent the entire time buried face-first in the mud of the trench. Confronted with his cowardice, he burst into tears in front of his commanding officer. Though he eventually overcame his horror – and won a medal for courage under fire – he developed a permanent hatred of warfare.

Thanks largely to this aversion to violence, Fuso decided to study medicine and graduated from the University of Rome in 1924 with a degree in general medicine. With his practice set up in the tiny Umbrian farm village of Brufa, Fuso ran into trouble almost immediately. His first delivery so alarmed him that he took the mother's pulse six times, wiped his brow, and abruptly announced that the case's extreme complexity made it necessary to fetch a gynecologist from the hospital.

When Fuso returned with the specialist, he was greeted by howls of laughter; the baby boy had been born after one of the easiest parturitions in the villagers' memory. Fuso decided to return to school and become an orthodontist. But even a busy dental practice, plus a professorship in medicine, could not satisfy the restless Fuso's compulsion to work. During the 1930s he spent much of his time tinkering with various dental devices, patenting a few until he produced, in 1938, his triumph: a prototype of the modern dental chair. Fuso incorporated an instrument stand into the arm of the chair, designed a special headrest and frame, and hooked a spittoon to the side. A photograph from the period shows him standing proudly beside his invention, its spidery arms extending out in a manner reminiscent of some of his later sculptures.

Meantime, Fuso had married a respected Perugian painter, Bettina. It was Betty – as she was known to her friends – who first encouraged him to paint. But initially Fuso was too busy with his growing practice and inventions to take her advice. He didn't pick up a brush until he came home from World War II with a shoulder wound acquired during service as a medic. It was 1943, and Fuso was 44.

"I found myself for the first time in front of a completely white canvas," he explained in an unpublished autobiography finished a few months before his death. "What did I feel? The canvas looked back at me, and I didn't have the courage to assault it. Then a sudden force came to me and I went on the attack: a point, two lines, a blot – and I had painted a woman."

But he didn't paint women for long. Impatient with drawing people and places, Fuso felt inside him something "that wanted to explode in another way," into another realm. His fascination with texture and this desire "to do something more, something much more," led him to quickly jettison what he called "anything that could even be the memory of a figure, threw away the brushes and began to use melted color. I dripped it from above."

Though Fuso didn't know it, the art world was then on the brink of a shattering reappraisal. Living in Umbria, totally isolated from the main currents of painting – for 20 years, Mussolini's Fascist regime had banned news of the avant-garde - Fuso nevertheless began simultaneously to explore the same realm of abstract color that was making Jackson Pollock such a sensation in New York City.

Fuso, in fact, arrived at completely non figurative "action" painting – the well known splashes and splatters of color – totally ignorant of Pollock's work. In the early '50s Fuso moved beyond action painting and began to create compositions from found objects and junk, steering a highly personal path through any of the artistic movements that would highlight that decade and the next.

"Without doubt," says the noted French critic Andre Verdet, "Fuso is one of the greatest contemporary Italian artists, one of the pioneers of relief, chance effects, and the object, yet ... the most unrecognized, the most unknown, and the most solitary of them all."

Though many artists are not recognized during their lifetimes, it is generally not through lack of trying. But Fuso neither advertised himself nor tried to stay a jump ahead of the mode. He was that rare breed too often dismissed by cognoscenti as a romantic fiction – an artist who simply did what he wanted to, expending enormous amounts of energy and time on projects that, for all he knew, might vanish the day he died.

"Today I find myself an esteemed professional [in the field of medicine] who has worked for 40 years," he wrote. "But in the field of painting, where I have given all of myself, I am unknown to most people. I have a miserable portfolio as a painter: a few shows, five real ones in big galleries, but nothing more. Do I have any regrets? No."

The reason for his self-assurance is apparent at Fuso's estate – the 12,000 square meters of wooded hilltop in Montemalbe that he bought in 1957 and immediately began to form and sculpt. At the top of the drive the visitor is greeted by a courtyard ringed by jazz musicians made from moped gas tanks, blowing toy saxophones.

Above is a low, 130-yard-long gallery, which coils over the hill and merges with Fuso's house, La Brajta. Both buildings were constructed by Fuso himself, using designs and materials that local architects scorned. Wind blows through the area, rattling, banging together, and clinking the sculptures that Fuso hid among trees and the bells that hang from the branches.

When Giulio Carlo Argan, one of Europe's foremost art critics, first saw the garden, he exclaimed, "Brajo, it looks as though you even sculpted the trees!" Actually, Fuso had. He kept a little chain saw around the villa for pruning the trees into desired shapes. In some ways the Fuso estate appears like other private utopias created by individuals. American examples of such handmade universes include S. P. Dinsmoor's Lucas, Kansas, version of the Garden of Eden and Clarence Schmidt's Journey's End in Woodstock, New York. However, most of these creators did not consider themselves artists nor their products works of art. They were recluses and eccentrics who experienced a sense of personal disarray and loss of control over their environment; they sought to withdraw from the pressures of social life, often literally into the woods, and set out to create a world according to their own intuitive notions.

Fuso, on the other hand, was not interested in hiding from the modern world that lay beyond Perugia. Rather, the Fuseum was an embracing of and a commitment to that world. Everything there is made from contemporary junk – the refuse of consumer society – mixed with natural elements like sand, leaves, and wood. Fuso cared little for the distinction between natural and technological objects: he used everything he found, even human teeth, which now adorn the comb of a metal bird. He called the result of this mix "Debrisart."

The Fuseum's Debrisart is a struggle for a synthesis of an individual point of view and the frequently indifferent world. "What are the reasons one makes this stuff?" Fuso asked about his own work. "People who love pretty little figures, still lifes, and nudes can't accept pieces like mine. [Contemporary] music, poetry, painting, and sculpture will never be understood if they aren't heard, looked at, listened to, and judged in rapport with the times that produced them. I did my work after a world war, in the time of jazz and pop music, in the days of punk and drugs, during the epoch of kidnappings and the Red Brigades. It was, in short, a disturbed world, and my work represents it. I wanted to enrich these times with compositions full of broken, bent, and rusted iron, [works about] war and automobiles - all put together with today's materials. They are works that represent the tormented souls of all of us, living now with all the weapons we've made beneath the nightmare of a new war. ... Nice world, no?"

Fuso was perfectly aware of the perils of portraying that nice world in his own way. Having neither seen nor heard of abstract expressionism himself, he was chary of showing his strange abstract constructions to a potentially hostile public with a similar lack of exposure. And he was right: as late as 1962 a professor at the famous Accademia in Venice announced to Fuso that his work was porcate, a vulgar Italian expression related to pig by-products. Nevertheless, Fuso's wife and friends encouraged him to persevere, and he spent over a decade producing 30 pieces, enough for a 1960 exhibition at Rome's Galleria Schneider. Fuso was so nervous that he had to be forced to attend the opening.

Once there, however, he discovered that the world had finally caught up to him. Argan and the new abstract critical establishment lauded his work. Exuberant over the favorable reviews, he stayed up all night, nervously smoking and pacing along the Tiber with his wife while he considered abandoning Perugia and moving to Rome, where he would be closer to the critics, galleries, and buyers. Visions of the fame and, best of all, the intellectual respectability of being a crusading modern artist filled his head. But in the morning it was all gone. The whole idea seemed profoundly foolish, especially to a man whose patients had cavities to be filled. "Ovations are fleeting pleasures," Bettina counseled her husband. "The passion in your heart and your painting – cultivate it, make it grow – but moderate your enthusiasm."

Fuso never tried seriously to show his work again. Instead, he returned to his own 'garden,' continually spading through his ideas in search of the perfect way to put together the confusion he saw around him until, in July 1980, Fuso suffered a stroke that paralyzed his right side. He had been working that day on a new piece, one filled with coffin like shapes, that seems now both like the beginning of a new departure and a harbinger of his death. This proud, raucous man, who loved to dance until the early hours of the morning, was suddenly unable to walk or paint, and could barely speak.

While he sat in his studio, directing a family assistant in the task of putting together new compositions, his mind kept slipping in and out of conjunction with the real world. It was a process he understood in his lucid moments; now it terrified him. He was not consoled by the first stirrings of real critical acclaim.

Two months before Fuso's stroke, Argan had organized the only exhibition of his estate ever held, in the process saying that the dentist from Perugia was the nation's greatest living artist. Nevertheless, the ailing Fuso still refused to modify his almost anti-intellectual stance toward his work. "I have always believed there is only one thing for us to do in this world – to work, to use what you have, all of it, all the time."

On December 30, 1980, Brajo Fuso died in his bedroom, the fragments of a new construction on a table beside him.

"In the hours of dusk, my mind flies always to Montemalbe, my Montemalbe to which I am so desperately attached. There is most of myself – my life: the Fuseum, the long gallery that watches over many of my pictures, and, to a side, La Brajta, my tiny house "

– Brajo Fuso, September 7, 1979