

# SAM BURI

**Swiss Institute - New York**

**Sam Buri**

From Switzerland to California  
Paintings, Watercolors, Lithographs

September 19 - October 19, 1991

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## Foreword

Born in a century that indulges in scenes of violence and in a country - Switzerland - that cultivates introspection, Sam Buri cuts against the grain with his joie de vivre and vitality.

I am grateful to Katharina Katz for enthusiastically introducing this artist to the United States. Her interpretation of Sam Buri's art highlights the complex influences behind the work of a European artist who has assimilated the heritage of Matisse and of postwar American artists *inter alia*, while successfully creating his own style. In the Swiss Institute's effort to bridge the American and the Swiss cultures, the choice of Sam Buri is a pertinent one.

My sincere gratitude also goes to all the people acknowledged by Katharina Katz. Once again, I extend my thanks to her for gracefully managing this project in the midst of a busy professional schedule.

Ariane M. Braillard  
Director

New York, July 1991

## Acknowledgments

Among those who have helped to organize this exhibition, I want to thank in the first place Samuel Buri. We are very pleased that Buri has agreed to show his work at the Swiss Institute, and he and his wife have been most helpful and cooperative during the preparations for this exhibition.

Ariane Braillard, Director of the Swiss Institute, has been very supportive, advising me all along on countless issues. Ursula Biemann expertly and enthusiastically managed publicity and press relations.

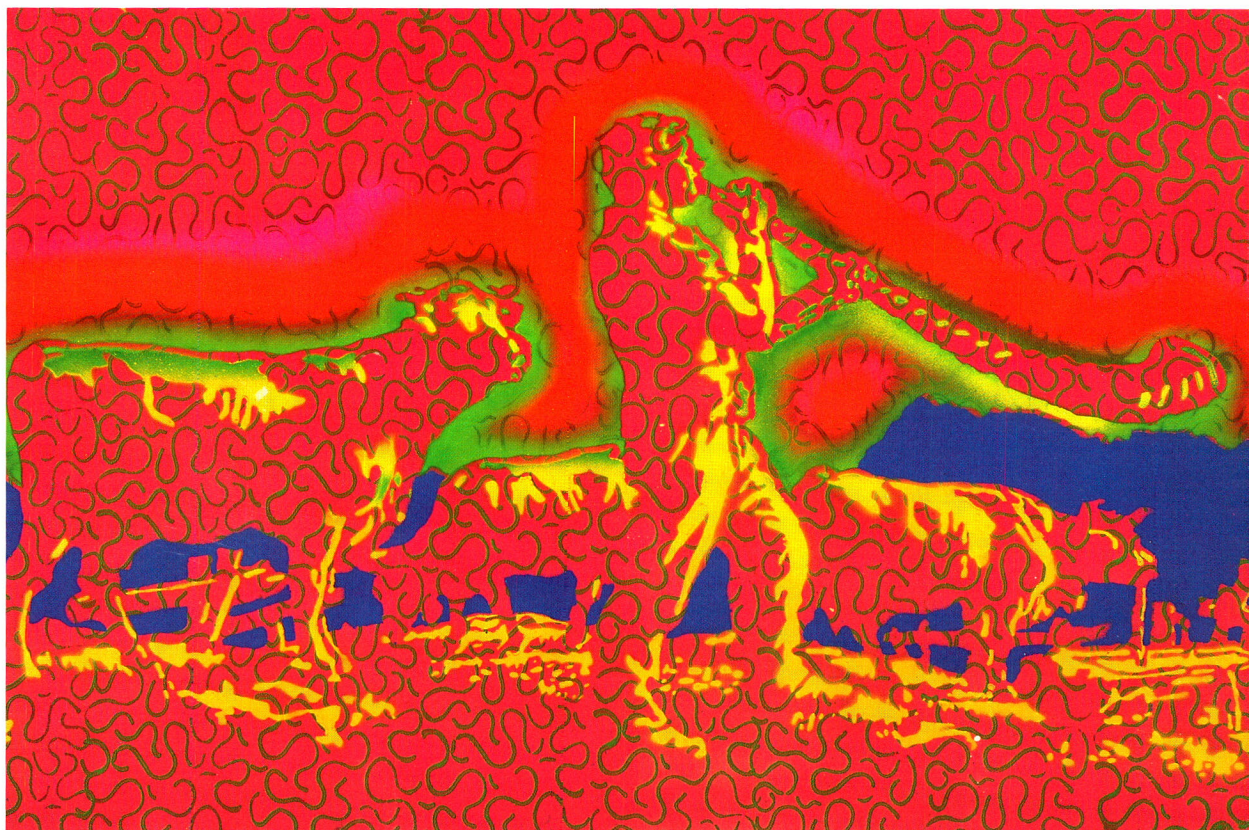
Sigrid Bovensiepen, Associate Director of Corporate Art Services at CIBA-GEIGY Corporation designed the catalogue. Her professional experience was of great help and I very much appreciate that she made herself available for this project. Many thanks as well to Sylvie Müller who designed the invitation card. I am also grateful to Colette Hughes who edited the catalogue essay on Sam Buri and to Sabine Dylla for her comments on the essay.

I wish to thank the photographers Christian Baur of Basel and Bill Paullus of Pebble Beach, California for their photographs of Buri's work and the photographer Claude Giger also from Basel for the portrait of Buri.

I am most indebted to the institutions and corporations which have provided generous support for the exhibition and express my gratitude to PRO HELVETIA, Swiss Council for the Arts; Swiss Center Foundation; Bank Julius Baer Co., Ltd.; CIBA-GEIGY Corporation and MAT Securitas Express AG/SA, Basel.

Katharina Katz





1 **Alpenhorn**  
1968  
Spray on paper  
26" x 40 $\frac{1}{8}$ "

Standing in Sam Buri's studio or visiting one of his exhibitions, and letting the eye wander, one is struck. Here are landscapes, flowers and gardens painted in ever new combinations of vivid color, and it is hard to deny that the works express the beauty of things. One is reminded of the title of a well-known painting by Matisse, *Joy of Life*.<sup>1</sup> How is it possible for an artist to paint this way in the 1990s? In an article on Buri's work, Werner von Mutzenbecher describes a visit to his fellow artist's studio and asks himself, "How does he do it...I am thinking of the dark smoke which rose today from the factory chimney stacks into the somber skies..." But his question drops away as he is drawn to see through Buri's eyes: "...the wine in the glass is of a beautiful wine-red color, the sofa of a deep blue, the shrivelled apples on the windowsill and small table are green and yellow and orange-red and brown..."<sup>2</sup>

The exhibition at the Swiss Institute presents works painted by the artist during spring and summer 1991, in the United States, as well as paintings and lithographs created in Switzerland between 1988 and 1991. A painting of 1968 will provide the link to his earlier work.

<sup>1</sup> *Joy of Life* (Joie de vivre), 1905-06; coll. Barnes Foundation, Merion, PA.

<sup>2</sup> Werner von Mutzenbecher in the catalogue to the exhibition at Galerie Beyeler, Basel, *Samuel Buri*, January 16 - February 27, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> The watercolors painted during the travel are illustrated in fig. 8 a - h. The California studio paintings however, were created simultaneously to the preparations of the catalogue. Thus these works are not reproduced or discussed.

Sam Buri now lives in Basel and spends long periods in the Bernese countryside. In April of this year, Buri and his family left Switzerland for half a year to travel through the American Southwest and West in a mobile home and later settled in California. Along the way, the artist recorded his impressions in watercolor. These pictures are meant to be experienced as colorful postcard greetings from the journey. Later in his studio in California, Buri continued painting with watercolor.<sup>3</sup>

The artist was born in Switzerland in 1935 in a rural area of the Canton of Berne. After studies at the School for Applied Arts in Basel, Buri moved to Paris where he lived through the 1960s. At the outset of his artistic career he was exposed to various trends in abstract art as investigated by American and European artists,



including Abstract Expressionism, Art Informel and Tachism. Not surprisingly, Buri explored abstraction and, already at that time, American artists had an important influence on his work. The pictures of Sam Francis and Marc Tobey particularly impressed him.<sup>4</sup> Still, the artist seems never to have completely detached himself from the physical reality of the subjects which originally inspired his painting, and he soon returned to figurative painting.

An early figurative work is *Alpenhorn* (fig.1) of 1968, an Alpine scene done in spray technique. The work shows a cowherd blowing his horn. Coming out of the violent Paris of 1968, a scene with an alphorn blower is a startling image. It strikes us as a reaction to the city with its multiple stimulations and its nervous energy. The artist enriched his craft in Paris, but for his subjects he looked more to the countryside. In 1971 he moved with his family to Burgundy, where he stayed through the 1970s before returning to his native country.

Although alphorns and cows are typical images of Switzerland, their representation in 'high art' became a virtual taboo after 1945. Buri broke this taboo with his various alphorn blowers, his yodlers and his sculptures of cows in synthetic materials. With these works he created a style that might be called 'Country Pop'. The usage of commonplace cultural symbols recalls Jasper Johns's American flags from the mid-1950s. *Fromages*, another 1968 work, alludes to a familiar kind of Swiss cheese and its wrapping, and brings to mind Claes Oldenburg's plaster *Hamburger With Pickle and Tomato Attached* from 1963.

Buri's three-dimensional cows, life-sized, patterned and colored animals in plastic, first grazed in the artist's garden in Burgundy, moved next to country fairs and came finally to Paris, where they greeted the visitors at the entrance to an exhibition at the Grand Palais in 1972.

The artist is intrigued by the common as a subject for painting. Inspired by a mail-order catalogue for seeds, he created another of his 1960s paintings, *Girl Watering Flowers*.<sup>5</sup> The visual presentation of this scene is as sophisticated as its subject is trivial. The commercial image is blown up and integrated into a patterned background using stencil and screen techniques. Buri undoubtedly had his eye on Pop art and specifically on American artists like Roy Lichtenstein, who were inspired by the techniques and images of advertising and cartoons. Buri's Pop, however, has its own unique

<sup>4</sup> Jörg Denzler, *Samuel Buri: Ein Maler zwischen Avantgarde und Rückzug*, Berne, 1990, p.29.

<sup>5</sup> *Girl Watering Flowers* (La petite arroseuse) of 1965 is in the collection of the Swiss Bank Corporation in Basel.

identity; it combines rural subjects with an urban sensibility and is very painterly. The artist plays with color and with patterns until the different elements hold together to create a strong, unified composition.

How does Buri keep his folkloric scenes such as *Alpenhorn* (fig.1) from slipping into kitsch or triteness? Partly, at least, through the directness with which he announces that his representations are artificial, even though they demonstrate his responsiveness to nature. The shapes of the figure and the animals are naturalistic, but the colors are not. We cannot make out the color or texture of the skin or clothes, nor distinguish the flowers in the grass. The blue center background suggests the sky over the mountain pasture, but it is a sky alienated by its interplay with the surrounding colors. The larger part of the picture surface is a dull purplish red. The angle of the light is indicated by yellow highlights. The red evokes the alpenglow, but the yellow lights suggesting bright sunshine contradict it. Furthermore, the green in the picture is not to be found in the Alpine meadow where we expect it. Instead it appears in a cloudy stripe extending horizontally across the picture, outlining two cows, the cowherd and his horn. Above this green is another cloudy layer in two shades of red. The picture is unified and enlivened by a network of serpentine shapes, recalling a jigsaw puzzle, which covers the purplish red surface. The spectator is left to imagine his own alphorn blower, to respond to the scene as sunset, sunrise or midday, and to strike his own balance between natural and artificial elements.

<sup>6</sup> Martin Schwander, *Kunstwerk des Monats aus der Sammlung Bankverein*, Basel, November 1986.

In a 1986 interview, Buri remarks: "That is the nonsense of this picture: to combine Pop with a rural subject. My specialty is to use Pop to represent those curious, almost idyllic rural subjects."<sup>6</sup> He explains that he was strongly formed by his youth in the countryside. The influence of nature is common among the Swiss, for whom mountains and countryside are an integral part of their lives. This has been reflected in many Swiss artists' work. Buri continues the artistic tradition. One is particularly reminded of Cuno Amiet's gardens, flowers and fruits.

Buri's works do not always reveal their biographical content at once, except in the portraits of his family and friends. Gradually, though, we recognize that all the subjects are drawn from the artist's daily life. A lithograph from 1989, *Arioso* (fig. 6), is a still life reflecting the artist's vacation in the south of France. A flute—

Buri himself plays the instrument—lies across a sheet of music entitled 'Arioso'. Here as always the artist tightly controls and animates his composition. A round plate full of asparagus dominates the foreground. The paint box is partially visible on the left, and fruits and flowers complete this airy composition. Again a pattern, this time built of stripes, unifies the picture. But here the colors are true to life. The stem of a partially visible tulip cuts boldly across the upper right of the picture. Below it are two large yellow and red blossoms which further balance the composition by creating a dialogue in color with the paint box and the fruits in the basket diagonally across from them. They are disproportionately large compared to the nearby objects. Although all the objects seem to be on the same plane, perhaps instead we are looking down on a table, with the flowers standing in a vase and brought closer to the observer.

One year before *Arioso*, Buri experimented with colorful variations on the theme of the Alpine foothills. *Colorland* (fig. 2) consists of three separate lithographs which are meant to be viewed together. In the foreground, two trees are cut off at the top and bottom. Behind them, a panorama of a mountainous, colorful land unfolds, with houses clustered along the slopes. The colors systematically follow the sequence of the color circle, starting with green-blue on the right and moving gradually through green, yellow, orange, red and, finally, into the red-violet hues on the left. Against this background, such elements as houses, trees and winding roads add color counterpoints to this underlying movement.

Buri took up the subject of the Pre-Alpine landscape once again at a later time, to create a lithograph commissioned by the Swiss magazine 'Der schweizerische Beobachter' (The Swiss Observer) which he called *Observed Landscape* (fig. 4 a). The title refers not only to the magazine but also to the depiction of this scene, which is more strictly based on an observation of nature than is *Colorland*. The color circle is reflected in *Observed Landscape* as well, but here it takes the form of a linear frame around a naturalistic landscape. Buri also made a single impression of *Observed Landscape* in which the landscape itself is rendered in violet (fig. 4 b).

Another example of Buri's fascination with color and of his play with primary, secondary and complementary colors is the large *Three-Part Still Life* (fig. 3). It is painted on three pieces of cotton canvas, and its composition is rigorously structured. The correspondence of colors from one picture to the next is visually arresting.



Each canvas is divided into two color halves and repeats the identical still life, but each is rendered in different color combinations. The overlap of the patterned color fields from one canvas to the next serves to link the canvases, and leads the eye to recombine their parts into new combinations that transcend the canvases' physical boundaries. Although the three pictures are not abstract, they are almost perceived as such. Gradually, we make out the still life with fruits and paint brushes on a patterned cloth. While the composition recalls Matisse, Buri's analytic and systematic variation of color is taken so far that it almost becomes an end in itself.

Here too, the artist returned to the subject at a later time, representing it in a more naturalistic fashion. In the still life of the lithograph *Violet Cloth* (fig. 5) no abstract color play detracts from the inherent pattern and color of the cloth, the fruit bowls and the paintbrushes.

In Buri's most recent pictures, the influence of Pop art seems to have given way to an even stronger influence of French painting. The French painterliness is always underlying in Buri's art, but it is more clearly detectable at some times than at others. In the two-part lithograph *Irisblock* (fig. 7) of 1991, Buri's occupation with Monet's work becomes apparent. One is particularly reminded of Monet's series of waterlilies and irises. Yet, Buri uses color more tectonically and less atmospherically than did the Impressionists, and his representation of irises fuses modern poster techniques and Impressionist visions. Like Buri's other lithographs, *Irisblock* is very painterly.

The visual stimuli which Buri receives through relentless observation drives him to paint and to transform reality, until he achieves a composition which passes on the optical thrill. He does not look for a sublime subject, but takes anything that catches his attention among his daily surroundings. His variations on the same subjects and themes through rearrangements of composition and color are prolific.

Katharina Katz, New York, June 1991



## 2 Colorland

1988

3 Lithographs\*

each 22 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x 29 $\frac{7}{8}$ "

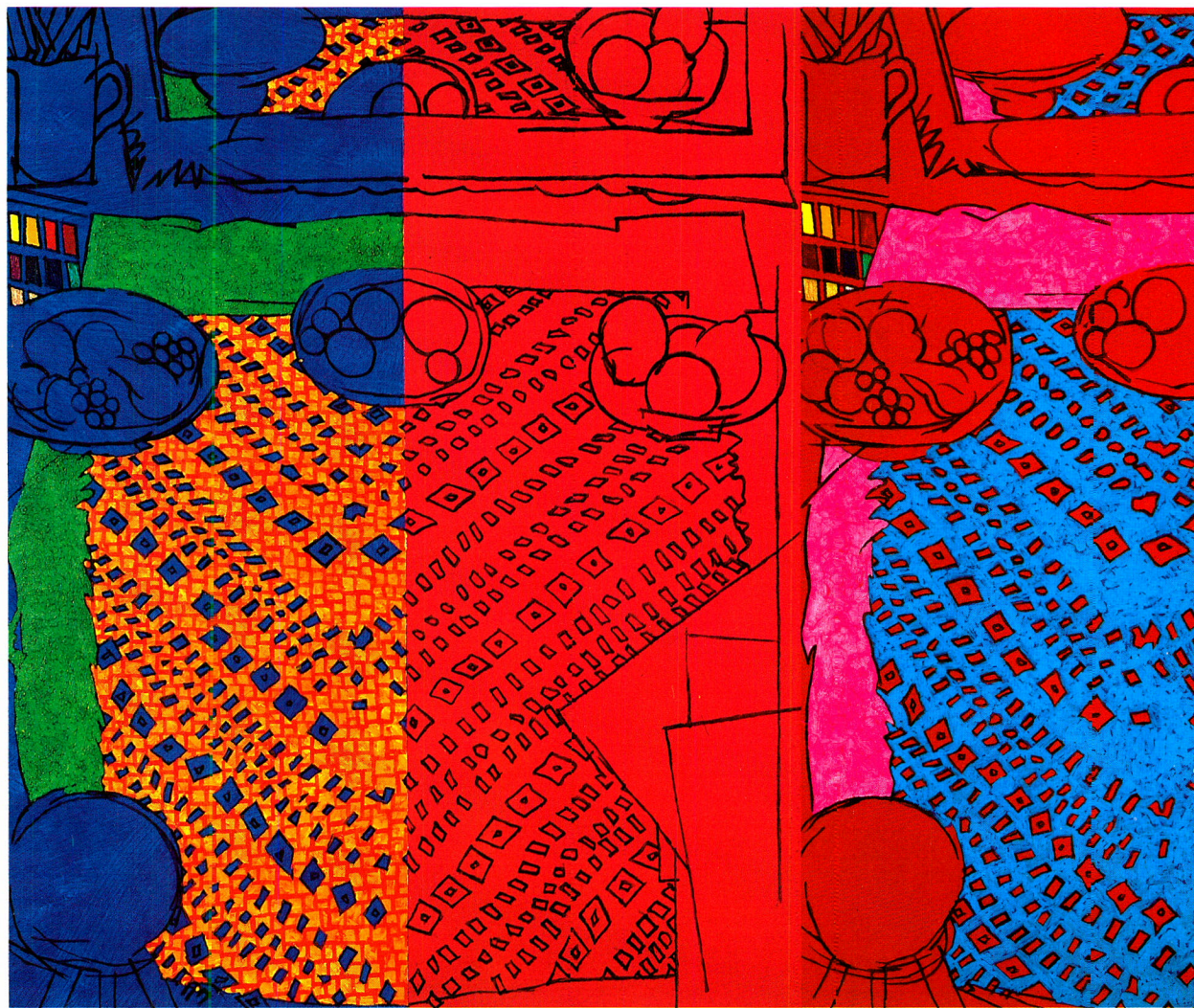
Edition: 93

\*Lithographs in the exhibition  
were printed at Graphische Anstalt  
J.E. Wolfensberger, Zurich,  
Switzerland.







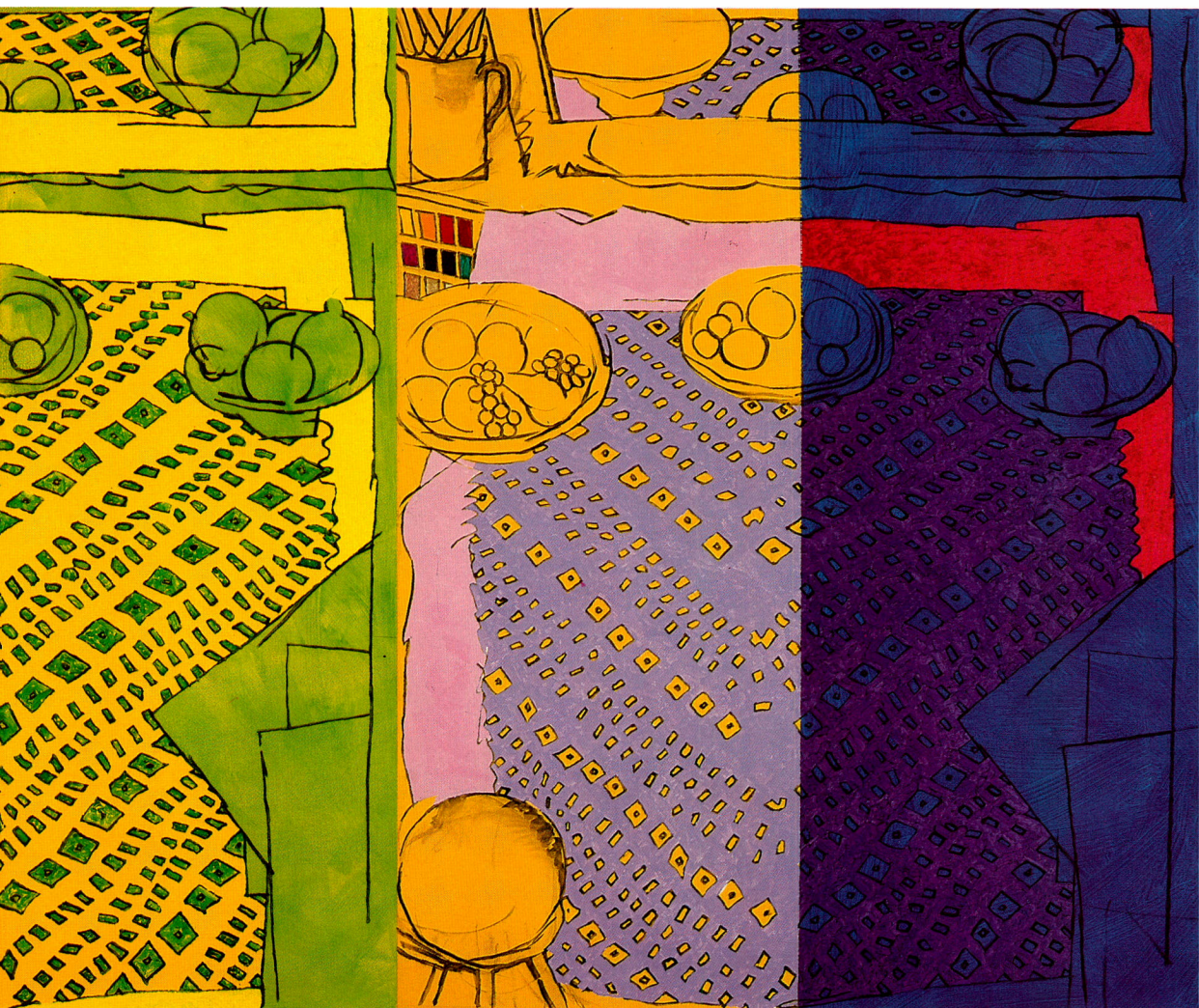


### 3 **Three-Part Still Life**

1990

Acrylic on 3 cotton canvases  
each 63 $\frac{5}{8}$ " x 51 $\frac{1}{8}$ "









4a **Observed Landscape**

1990

Lithograph

23 $\frac{5}{8}$ " x 31 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

Edition: 17





**4b Observed Landscape**  
 1990  
 Lithograph  
 23 $\frac{5}{8}$ " x 31 $\frac{1}{2}$ "  
 Single impression





5 **Violet Cloth**

1991

Lithograph

31¾" x 25"

Edition: 96



**6 Arioso**

1989

Lithograph

23¼" x 30¼"

Edition: 16





**7 Irisblock**

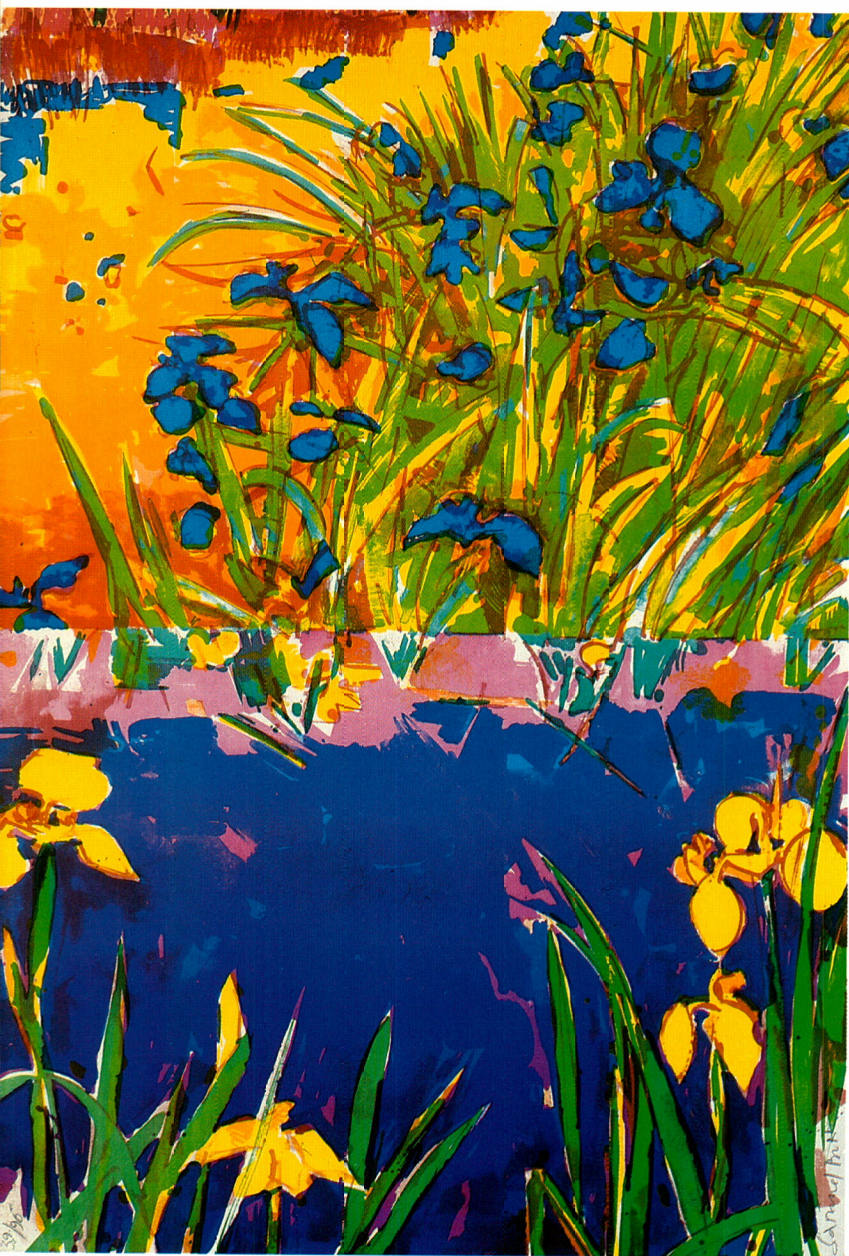
1991

2 Lithographs

each 41 $\frac{5}{8}$ " x 28 $\frac{3}{4}$ "

Edition: 96





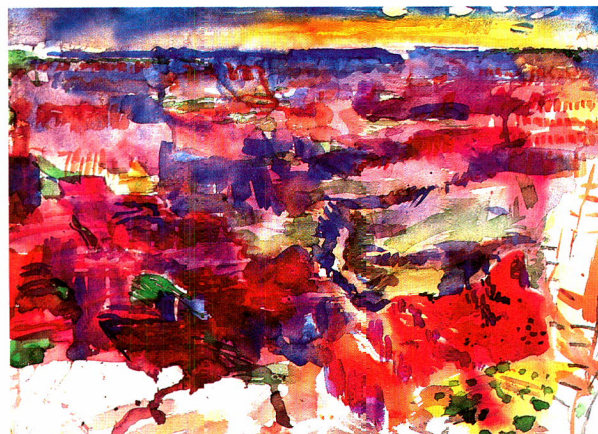




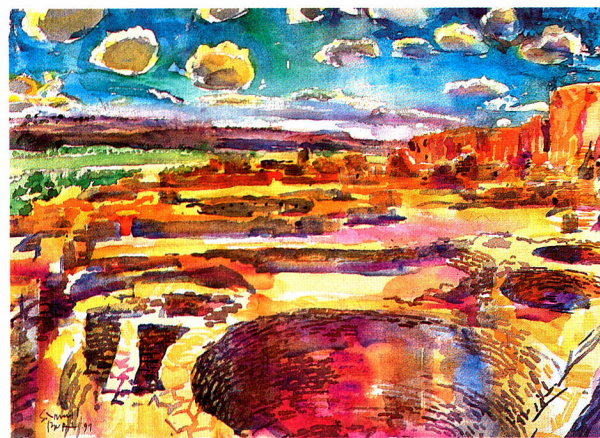
8a



b



e



f

1991

Watercolors on paper

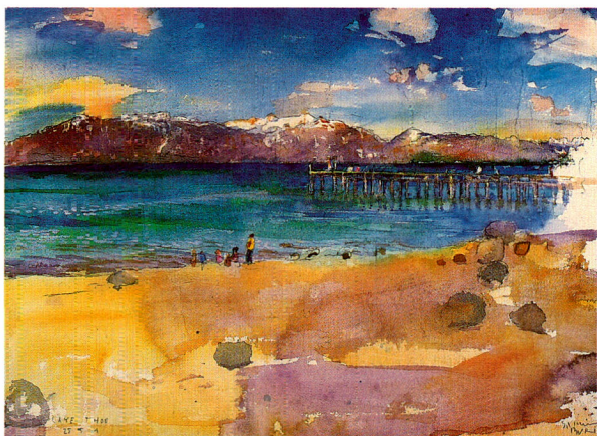
8a **Malibu**  
22" x 29<sup>5</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"

b **Downtown San Diego**  
22<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" x 31"

c **Lake Tahoe**  
19<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>" x 30<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>"

d **The Black and the White Boat, San Diego**  
22" x 31"





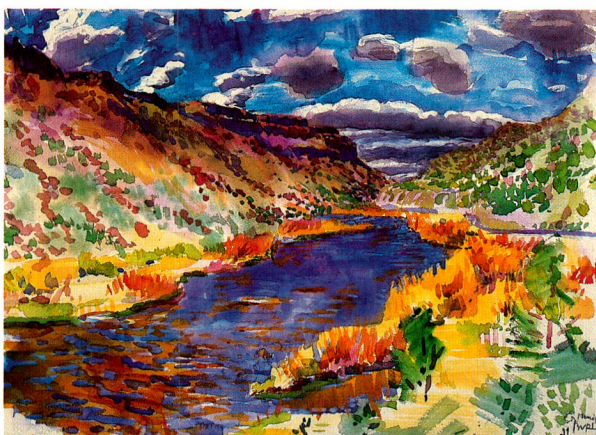
c



d



g



h

e Grand Canyon  
22" x 31"

f Pueblo Bonito,  
Chaco Canyon, New Mexico  
22" x 30½"

g Springtime in the Mojave  
Desert, California  
22" x 31"

h Rio Grande Canyon,  
New Mexico  
22" x 31"

## Important One-Man Exhibitions

- 1959 Galerie Riehentor, Basel
- 1962 Galerie Handschin, Basel
- 1965 Galerie Handschin, Basel
- 1965 Galerie Lienhard, Zurich
- 1966 Galerie Jacques Massol, Paris  
Universität Basel
- 1968 Galerie Handschin, Basel
- 1969 Galerie Krebs, Berne
- 1970 Galerie Handschin, Basel
- 1972 Galerie Scheidegger und Maurer, Zurich
- 1973 Galerie Scheidegger, Zurich
- 1974 Museum zu Allerheiligen, Schaffhausen  
Galerie Medici, Solothurn
- 1975 Galerie Handschin, Basel
- 1976 ARC 2, Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris  
Galerie Le Dessin, Paris
- 1977 Galerie Scheidegger, Zurich  
Kunsthalle Basel  
Galerie Angst + Orny, Munich  
Galerie Jean Briance, Paris
- 1978 Kornschütte, Lucerne  
Kunstverein Biel (Berne)
- 1979 Galerie Scheidegger, Zurich  
Galerie Le Dessin, Paris  
Galerie Nord, Randers, Denmark
- 1980 Galerie Jean Briance, Paris  
Kunst bei Sandoz, Basel
- 1981 FIAC, Grand Palais, Paris (Galerie Jean Briance)  
Trudelhaus Baden (Zurich)  
Galerie des Idées et des Arts, Strasbourg
- 1982 With Bernard Rancillac, Collège Jean Moulin les Andelys, France
- 1983 Galerie Beyeler, Basel  
Galerie Nord, Randers, Denmark
- 1984 Galerie Jean Briance, Paris  
Galerie Le Dessin, Paris  
Galerie Scheidegger, Zurich
- 1985 Retrospective, Abbatiale de Bellelay (Berne)
- 1986 Galerie Krebs, Berne  
Galerie Jean Briance, Paris
- 1988 Galerie Beyeler, Basel
- 1988 Galerie Aarequai, Thun (Berne)
- 1989 Musée gruérien, Bulle (Fribourg)  
Galerie Wiedenkeller, Zurich  
Galerie Haftmann, Zurich
- 1990 Galerie Noëlla G., La Neuveville (Berne)  
Kunstmuseum Thun (Berne)  
Galerie von Gunten, Thun (Berne)
- 1991 Galerie Esther Mürger, Burgdorf (Berne)



## Important Group Exhibitions

- 1958 *Biennial Sao Paulo*
- 1961 *19 junge Basler Künstler*, Kunsthalle Basel
- 1963 *Biennial Tokyo*  
*Biennale des jeunes*, Paris  
*Salon de mai*, Paris
- 1964 *Mythologies quotidiennes*, Musée d'art moderne, Paris  
*7 jeunes de Paris*, Gothenburg, Malmö, Stockholm
- 1967 *Le nouveau paysage*, Galerie du Fleuve, Paris
- 1969 *Für Veränderungen aller Art*, Kunsthalle Basel  
*Distances*, Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris  
*22 junge Schweizer*, Kunsthalle Berne, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam
- 1970 *Biennial Venice*, pavillon français
- 1971 *22 artistes suisses*, Grand Palais, Paris
- 1972 *Expo 72*, Grand Palais, Paris
- 1975 *Tapisseries nouvelles*, Musée des arts décoratifs, Paris
- 1976 *La nouvelle subjectivité*, Festival d'automne, Paris
- 1977 *Biennial Sao Paulo*
- 1978 *Beginn des Tachismus in der Schweiz*, Kunsthhaus Zurich
- 1980 *Les chapeaux*, Galerie Jean Briance, Paris  
*Schrift im Bild*, Galerie Beyeler, Basel  
*Pop Art und verwandte Strömungen in der Schweiz*, Kunstmuseum Thun (Berne)
- 1981 *37 Artists of Today from France*, Konsthall Stockholm  
*2. Biennale der europäischen Graphik*, Baden-Baden
- 1982 *Le baiser*, Galerie Jean Briance, Paris  
*Lithographies*, Fondation nationale des arts graphiques et plastiques, Paris  
*9. Internationale Triennale für Originalgraphiken*, Grenchen (Solothurn)
- 1983 *Bonjour Monsieur Manet*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris  
*Aquarelle*, Kunsthhaus Zug  
*Das Blumenbild*, Galerie Ursula Wiedenkeller, Zurich  
*Malzeit*, Galerie 57, Bienne (Berne)
- 1984 *Aquarelles*, Galerie Jean Briance, Paris  
*La clé des sols*, Fondation nationale des arts graphiques et plastiques, Paris
- 1985 *International Exhibition of Painting*, National Gallery of Hungary, Budapest  
*FRAC Alsace*, Mulhouse, Séléstat, Strasbourg  
*10. Internationale Triennale für Originalgraphiken*, Grenchen (Solothurn)
- 1986 *Le musée en FRAC*, Musée des beaux-arts, Rennes  
*Paravents*, Galerie Ursula Wiedenkeller, Zurich  
*Förderankäufe des Landes Baden-Württemberg*, Basel, Alsace, Freiburg i. Br.  
*La fin des années 60*, Abbaye Saint-André, Meymac/Corrèze, France
- 1987 *Artmobil, aus der Sammlung des Bündner Kunstmuseums Chur*, *Stilleben*  
*Grafikkassette*, Franz Mäder, Basel  
*Des corps en décors*, Yverdon-les-Bains and Centre Culturel Suisse, Paris
- 1988 *Porträtkunst*, Kulturhaus Palazzo, Liestal (Basel-Land)  
*Paysages*, *FRAC Bretagne*, Galerie des Urbanistes, Fougères  
*Copain Vincent: Die Wirkung van Goghs auf die Schweizer Kunst*, Kunstmuseum Olten (Solothurn)
- 1990 *Wege zur Farbe, 13. Gemäldeausstellung*, Trubschachen (Berne)  
*Figuration narrative/Nouvelle figuration*, Galerie Pierre Lescot, Paris
- 1990 *Projekte für das Basler Münster*, *Brice Marden*, *Samuel Buri*, *Ernst Messerli*, Kunsthalle Palazzo, Liestal (Basel-Land)
- 1991 *Schweizer Aquarelle*, Stadthaus Uster (Zurich)  
*Ausgewählte Werke*, Galerie R. Haftmann, Zurich

In addition to the articles published in the exhibition catalogues the reader is also referred to the dissertation of Jörg Denzler which contains an extensive bibliography: Jörg Denzler, *Samuel Buri - ein Maler zwischen Avantgarde und Rückzug*, Verlag Peter Lang AG, Berne 1990 (*European University Studies: Series XXVIII, History of Art; Vol.111*).

## Sam Buri



Samuel Buri was born in 1935 in Switzerland in Täuffelen (Canton Berne). After his youth in the Swiss countryside he studied in Basel and received his artistic education at Basel's School for Applied Arts. After living and working in Paris in the 1960s and in Burgundy in the 1970s, he returned to Switzerland. Today he lives with his wife and his two youngest children in Basel and in Habkern, a village in the countryside of Berne.

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