



RA GALLERY

## Erik Bulatov

(1933)

*I LIVE I SEE*

1988

pencil signed in cyrillic, dated 88 and inscribed in lower margin

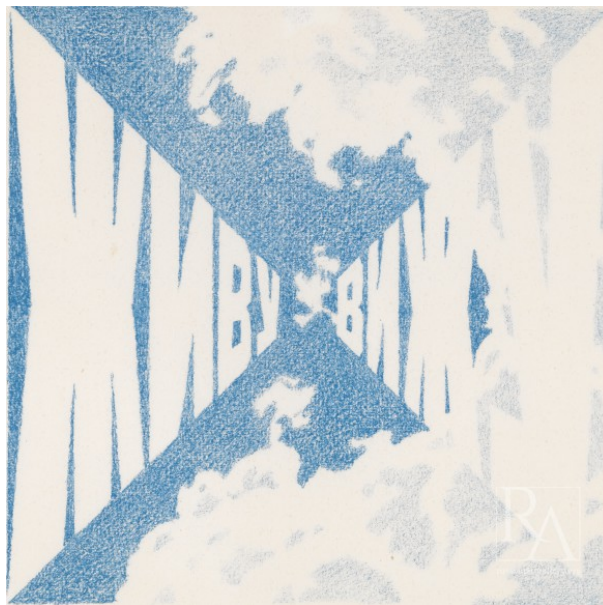
lithograph

48 x 40 cm

**Price on request**

**Provenance:**

Private collection, France



*I Live I See* is made by one of the most distinctive reformers of contemporary art on the world scene of the second half of the twentieth century, Eric Bulatov. Today, as many art connoisseurs would present him, a classic of contemporary art, and the creator of extraordinary, unique graphic works and paintings, Bulatov, is the outstanding artist of global scale, whose works are exhibited in major museums around the world and numerous private collections. *I Live I See* is a vivid example of Bulatov's conceptual approach. The artist poses questions that are significantly important for the new art: the relationships of words and images in the pictorial space, the position of the viewer in relation to the work of art, the interconnection of tradition and innovation. One of the most characteristic features of Bulatov's work is the use of printed text as a visual metaphor. Renee Magritte, a famous Belgian surrealist artist, conducted experiments with word and image and their interrelations in the middle of the twentieth century. Through the text, Magritte presented his version of the juxtaposition of the real world to the illusory, imaginary, and the irrational collision of these worlds, the separation of the word from the object. However, Bulatov has brought the relationship between the text and the imagery to a completely different level, adding political

ideology and relevant, topical problems. Bulatov has deepened the conflict between the two spaces - the physical plane, the surface of the canvas or paper, which is covered with any means of artistic expression, and the pictorial, hypothetical space, in which the physical space is subsequently transformed.

Somehow, critics and art historians have always tried to attach Bulatov's name and his work to the many historical and stylistic cliché, limiting his concept with the strict boundaries of Nonconformist art, Socialist art (Sots art), pop art, photorealism, etc. Classifying Bulatov's work in that way is to simplify the whole idea of his art, to shift the focus, and to distort the social mission of the artist. Bulatov's works are always composed of several layers such as the physical surface of the picture, the pictorial space beyond the surface of the painting, and the layer of spiritual, metaphysical light, which emanates from the depth of the work. Bulatov truly believes that art can be a fulcrum, which is positioned across the border of the social space, outside of any ideologies, regimes, and other restricting factors of our reality. It is beyond these boundaries of social space that freedom lies, and, as a consequence, the opportunity to look at our existence from outside. Bulatov has always perceived the problem of freedom and captivity, constraint as a spatial problem, the conflict of two planes. The content of Bulatov's works lies precisely in this conflict between the physical space and pictorial space within the picture. The canon of European painting until recently had implied that harmonious union of these planes is the ultimate goal in art, which all the artists should aspire to achieve. Nevertheless, the innovation of contemporary art is largely relying upon the importance of the physical space of the work of art as an independent element in the process of communication of the artist's idea.

Bulatov himself has stated that 'the painting is not the goal, but the way; through the painting, hopefully, I can go somewhere'. Even concerning just visual perception, many of Bulatov's works, as well as *I Live I See*, presumably offer to the spectator to plunge into another space, pulling inside the work due to the specifics of its composition. Whether it is the path to awareness, to the conscious realisation of problems that had been captured by Bulatov, or the path, like a time machine that leads us to the past, Bulatov has managed to 'catch the nerve', as he himself declared. The artist has separated the false ideological reality in his works. He actively expressed his vision with the assistance of icons of the time, elements of kitsch and mass culture. Bulatov has continuously raised an issue that people have these images so deep in their subconscious that often they cannot comprehend the true state of affairs. The renowned artist and Bulatov's life-long friend, Ilya Kabakov, said that 'Bulatov was using visual propagandistic products of ideology in a very special way. He has managed to use these symbols in a way, that it increased the danger, the falseness, ugliness and aggressiveness, which is implicit in the Soviet artistic production'. Decades later, after being officially forbidden from exhibiting in the Soviet period, Bulatov's works still can reach the spectator's soul and mind with their sharpness and tension.

For *I Live I See* Bulatov borrowed the text from 1970's poetry of Vsevolod Nekrasov: 'I already feel/ the heavy cloud/ although/ I don't want to/ and I'm not seeking to/ I live and I see'. The poetry of Nekrasov in the same way as Bulatov's art has fought against totalitarian power and its consequences. This line, the quintessence of the poem, has repeatedly been returning to Bulatov's lithographs and paintings. In one of his interviews, Bulatov stated that these words are part of his life credo. Despite all the changes in life, and especially his shifting focus from the political horizon



to the existential one, the artist continues to explore, create, and work with that material that is given at the moment. In *I Live I See*, the viewer's attention is instantly captivated by the bright, giant, voluminous letters that cross all the space on the diagonal into the distance driven by the rule of perspective. One of the main missions of the artist is to involve, to engage the viewer in active participation, to invite in the journey deep into the pictorial space, and to avoid just passive contemplation of the surface of the work. Thus, there is much greater emotional resonance in the heart and soul of the viewer. It is a very characteristic quality for contemporary art, and, partly, for this reason, Bulatov's works remain so relevant to this day. Words seem to drag us into space and, following the composition, bring us back in the same way. Bulatov has developed a 'horizontal-diagonal' theory for himself, which claims that vertical lines are designed for the space of real objects, but diagonals and horizontal lines for drawing and painting. The diagonal in Bulatov's works refer the viewer to the principles of Suprematism and Constructivism: it seems to open up space for the viewer, invites him to enter, but at the same time, leaves a clear sense of the flat surface of the paper or canvas. The letters fit harmoniously into the environment, they do not contrast with the background, as is often present in other Bulatov's works, where colour plays an important role. The background resembles the sky and clouds - a representation of absolute existential freedom. It is a recognisable landscape; it is close to all of us. However, we often cease paying attention to what is routinely in front of our eyes on a day to day basis. Bulatov has outlined his mission in the art as follows: 'My business was [to depict] the modern consciousness, comprised of the normal things that appear every day, to which people don't even pay attention'.

