

Eugenia Vronskaya

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Between The Lines

GEORGINA COBURN talks with Highland-based artist EUGENIA VRONSKAYA about the evolution of her latest body of work now showing at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery in London

EUGENIA Vronskaya's recent work includes the series of portraits on permanent display in the foyer of Eden Court Theatre. She will be exhibiting new work at Kilmorack Gallery later this summer.

GEORGINA COBURN: One of the images that really intrigued me as part of the latest exhibition, *Between the Lines*, is your 'Self-Portrait With My Sons'. It reminded me of Dürer's 'Self-Portrait With Fur Coat', not in any literal way, but because it seemed to be dealing with the idea of artist as creator. Can you tell me a bit more about the artistic references in that image and how it developed?

EUGENIA VRONSKAYA: The whole image began after the Royal Scottish Academy Exhibition last year [*How Others See Us*], where we were doing the portraits – I was making self-portraits at the time, so it was in that mode. The light on the canvas, what I saw in the reflection of the mirror (there was something I saw in both, on the canvas and my reflection) instantly prompted me to go at the level of my head, bang, bang, bang (painting gestures).

If you remember the self-portrait, the head is very light, it almost has the feeling of a halo around it. Then the head was left, it was just hanging there on this white canvas. One day I came up with a drawing of the body to the head, it all came separate – very fast, very fluid. After I'd done it, if you remember the pose, it looks like a crucifixion. I didn't intend this, it just happened, but I saw it.

I like canvases communicating, it was intended to be direct, to be open, the gesture of opening palms, it's disarming. I held my brushes in my palms and it was drawn in the same way. It had a definite feeling because of the light and because of the pose, of something you mention – the creator offering something in that open gesture.

I find most of the world fast asleep with what they call beautiful – to me it's as ugly as hell. What I understand as beautiful is very important to my work. I think there is definitely a question of beauty coming not from a visual surface but something within

GC: I also thought that having your sons either side of you was very interesting. As a female artist, it suggests representation of another aspect of creation. Was that a conscious act?

EV: Then it became a conscious act. You're talking about icons as well, taking down from a cross or any central figure you always have two characters. If the work is being commissioned for a church, a church being built in someone's name or as thanks for the birth of a child, the people who donated money for that would be painted in the icons. They would usually be either royals or distinguished figures painted on both sides of important central figure compositions. So that was not accidental, I intended to put my sons in there.

I wanted them to be on my both sides because they are my creation, my inspiration, my lifeforce. I wanted them to be like my two princes on both sides. All the other figures were not anywhere to be seen at that time.

GC: How did they emerge?

EV: I always did copies of the old masters, all the painters I put in are my all time favourite painters. Rembrandt, Goya and others. Goya's self portrait with that fantastic lip – disgust to the world, I wanted that to be there too. It arrives before you think about it, you want a message to be sent out but not necessarily through you. Sometimes you can't contain all that in your own figurative image. So through representing who they were, their attitude in the world, it suddenly just sprang out. I just thought Rembrandt – I love always looking, copying and painting. It was partly fun and that they contain so much I'd like to say. How it technically happens I don't know, I just knew I wanted them to be in a different dimension. It was about giving a hint.

GC: It puts the self-portrait in a context of ideas historically, by having those artists present.

EV: Yes, it was also like – you know what you do in your sketchbook, or probably when you write, you don't write a full sentence.

GC: Like a trigger?

EV: Yes, a reference, and to me that portrait started accidentally, it carried on and I felt like I was driven all the way through. Every day I just had a sense of doing that much, then that much and then I finished the work within the next two or three days. It happened very fast. I become obsessed with certain colours – the red/purple in the back, I love that colour, I use it a lot in my paintings. You can do extraordinary things with it, you can mix it with so many different things, I like the depth of it.

This particular grey, which is not black, it's quite a complex grey, I think it's stunning how they break the space, what they do to the space. Part of it was completely formal, wanting to introduce that colour, breaking the depth of it and seeing how thick, how thin – that dialogue with the canvas. As I said, you have ideas with the speed of light going through your head, when you paint none of the ideas stays in your head, you become empty, driven by something else.

Once you put down the brushes you remember you had all those ideas, so they are there before and after, the rest is obliterated in the world of things. The frightening thing is when you're three-quarters there, you like 75%

and you don't know what to do with the other 25. But then you're driven, what you imagine people will see in it and how you imagine they want you to finish it. That's where you either make a great painting by not allowing that to be the overpowering force and still walking your path, or you become an outside viewer, dragging it to where you think it should arrive. I love and admire those painters who are always with me in some ghostly presence, of what they have done in their paintings.

GC: They are part of the ground, the foundation.

EV: Yes, absolutely and my two sons are the most important creation as a woman and as an artist, my knowledge, my learning experience, my reflection in the world – they're there in the foreground. I don't find the piece to be sentimental, I think it can work in a very formal way too.

GC: Yes, it interested me because it brought in elements I hadn't seen in your self-portraiture before.

EV: No, I hadn't seen it either. The last strong self-portrait was "Self-Portrait As A Man". I found being a single mother bringing up two boys I wanted to provoke that side – that I am a mother and a father and what is it like in the art world as well if you are a man, it's very different. I'm not a feminist, I'm not a sexist – its nothing to do with that, it's not to do with gender or politics.

GC: Yes, that painting had nothing to do with gender and everything to do with creativity, that's why the latest self-portrait is so interesting.

EV: I also like the way it works formally. I like what's happening with the light. When you say light people think – light that shines from the left through the window illuminates one side. I think of light within a painting (and a very dark painting can have extraordinary light), the whole way I try to handle the paint – I want to express the light within the painting, not light from the right or left.

GC: It's not about physical light, but a different concept of physicality.

EV: Yes, that's right.

GC: How does this relate to your early training as an icon painter in Russia? Does that relate to how you view objects and the physical world?

EV: Yes, it is like when you learn to ride a bicycle, something you learn and know very early, it becomes part of your being. In icon painting they were very clever. On the ground of the icon, which would be done with fish glue, whitening and charcoal, they used to put silver or gold plate underneath and then painted with crystal, pigment made from stone. Crystal reflects light so when it is painted on the gold or silver reflective surface the whole icon is luminescent, particularly with a candle placed underneath. Unless you know how it is done you don't know why it has that effect and the whole way the faces are formed and shaped is very interesting because it is a two dimensional space.

The 11th century iconography created by Grigorie Palama was designed specifically to draw you away from the physical body and physical understanding of the flesh. However it had a very four-dimensional sensation, an incredible sense of light. The point of perspective in icons is behind your (the viewer's) back. The icon is not complete without the person in front of it, the viewer. It includes you.

GC: It's a shame that more contemporary art can't heed that lesson.

EV: I know. Because I've learnt it so early it is part of my thinking and awareness. It's not that I go to every painting thinking I am going to create back perspective or I'm going to create light, it is always there. It is part of the reason why I like confronting central images. To me it is always a dialogue, something you respond to. Iconography is so deeply mixed up, it is probably one of my biggest influences but it doesn't manifest in copying.

GC: No it manifests in how you actually handle the paint, particularly in the "still lives", that whole dance of light as part of the fabric of the work.

EV: Yes. I'm not copying or reproducing the reality of the light coming from outside or whatever for you to come and see it on my canvas, I'm looking with light within.

GC: An eye, heart, mind connection, rather than a trick of the light.

EV: Yes. Once you think that way you look around and that's what I believe about attitude – in Islam, for example, one of the most important things is intention. What is your intention? Before you have done good or bad. I also believe that about painting, what you want out of it. The whole icon painting training was so early and so deeply ingrained what I expect of the image by the end, and out of the whole process is not a reproduction of reality or not just my internal torment, it is something to do with bringing up that image, to a dimension which has become separate. Like Rilke said – it claims its own niche of existence.

GC: Is that how the "Altar" works function as part of this latest show? You described them as a platform.

EV: Yes. In the altar pieces I have made it formal. I have created that table, that platform or environment where I wanted things to happen which is beyond the repetition of doing the same thing. I hope that outside viewers are not bored, I am never bored. Within that structure of the sameness the most extraordinary things happen and they are everlasting. There is not a single day when you walk in and see the same thing, it is always different, and it's very subtle.

GC: Subtle colour-wise as well.

EV: Colour, light, slightly different angle and compositionally, all those things I want to explore. I wanted not to go and find everyday a new still life with bottles, I want to come back to the same thing over and over again.

GC: For one to inform the other as part of that process.

EV: Yes. On one hand there is the danger you become very familiar with that and it's a challenge to keep seeing what you are doing.

GC: Is that the greatest challenge in making images?

EV: I think it's the great challenge in life.

GC: Not resting on the familiar?

EV: Yes. I think it's very difficult and I'm not saying that lightly at all. I always think of Morandi, he painted the same things over and over but I love them, none of them are the same. The subtlety in his tones and light; very slowly they progress and are distilled to a pure essence, some of them where the object disappears, it's hardly there. He never got bored with those things, I don't find it boring. It is all so connected, life and painting. The two processes are closely linked.

It is extraordinary to find out having my own children that actually children don't like excitements everyday, they don't like unexpected everyday. They like routine and grounding. When you're younger you want to explore and bounce off the ceiling and everywhere, go in hundreds of different directions, which is fine, particularly if you've got lots of energy, but a time comes when you find that aspect that you're interested in or really want to explore and that's where I want to have my "altar". I want to have a platform for more than just visual excitement. I want to move deeper into the same.

GC: Also to create a space where the audience can do that too, they can be lead into a work.

EV: Well I hope so, it's always so tricky. I remember painting the altar pieces and at one point my studio was filled with "grey" paintings. It was winter and grey outside, people were walking in and going – too much grey! It is subjective, sure. It frightens me that people will be put off by not seeing how many more multitudes of colours are in the grey. I hope there will be a few people who will appreciate that. I don't expect my paintings to be universally applauded and liked and if I did I probably wouldn't paint them. Some people put it to me "Why can't you do something with jazzy colours?" Jazzy colours – what are they?

GC: Another very interesting set of images in this latest body of work is the midpoint between thresholds, can you tell me a bit more about those images?

EV: I always look for this edge of being uncomfortable. My intention in the work is to create that edge.

GC: A psychological aspect to the interior? It's never just an interior, just like it's never just a still life?

EV: Yes, that's what I'm interested in in the hallway. I want to create a space, an overall feeling of what you might experience inside. Subject matter is not hugely important. Painting-wise I find these things incredibly stimulating, I look at them and I want to grab a brush. I like objects that don't necessarily go together, I like their oddness and taken out of context. Making you feel within, quite idyllic and simple and then stretched to the limit.

I don't want you to find out why you feel that way that quickly. I want people to stand in front of a painting and think why does it make me feel so uncomfortable? And yet be drawn to it. It is a double-edge between being attracted and stretched, what I call strange beauty, uncomfortable beauty. I also want it to be pleasing in some way too.

GC: How important is beauty in your work, then?

EV: It depends on what you think beauty is. I find most of the world ast asleep with what they call beautiful – to me it's as ugly as hell. What I understand as beautiful is very important to my work. I think there is definitely a question of beauty coming not from a visual surface but something within. So you look at the surface, you see what not you see but what's beyond. It is a fusion of thoughts and emotional things provoking a dance through the visual. It's a paradox, what you see and what you experience. Mind, heart, eye all come together.

GC: Currently a lot of other art forms or disciplines are dominant in contemporary art. It is actually quite revolutionary to be a painter. What sort of need do you think painting fulfils for you as an artist?

EV: As an artist I have always said to people when I've taught, if you can go and do something else – go and do something else. It is like a curse and a blessing. It never lets you rest. I think you are either an artist or you're not. You can be skilful and make money and treat it as a job, lots of people do that, fair enough.

I find it never leaves me. When I don't paint I am like a fish out of water. The world doesn't make sense to me. If you are truly committed to the quest of what you do it is a very hard thing in our day and age. We want instant gratification, everything is disposable. The painting has a moment but it also has eternity. With a self-portrait you don't paint that moment when you look like this, you paint you. I think that's what is so precious, that painting can contain that wholeness in time.

GC: We have talked about technique alone being a hollow thing on its own. How has academic training in Moscow and London informed your development as an artist?

EV: I went to a fantastic school in the University of Moscow which was created by people like Kandinsky, Malevich, Larionov, Neblikev, Khlebnikov, Pinchorova, Goncharova. They were people who looked at all arts brought together, 3D, photography, cinematography, painting, architecture, so the object was never viewed out of context. We always drew the model, the still life within the space, within the context. It was never viewed as just figurative, just abstract. The elements of both plastic arts and art understanding of space was brought from all dimensions. I am very lucky I was trained that way.

GC: I think here our entire approach to art is compartmentalised.

EV: Completely. The teaching here is so chaotic, picked from all different directions from the wrong shelves. A lot of it was we would be left to sit down and do it and prove your point. You are taught very early how to draw a mark, going to art school at age 11, 12, 13 you are at the age and time to allow you to do that. By the time I matured I had the technical skill and then life experience bit by bit, I am still learning.

GC: It is a more holistic approach to art and painting, but also finding your own path.

EV: Definitely. It is like writing a book without knowing the alphabet. You have to know how to put letters together in order to make a word. I never feel in my work that technically I can't do it. However if you don't have the internal understanding, if you don't know how the form works it will always be flat and empty in the presentation. As my old tutor said to me: when you draw the model stand up yourself, close your eyes and imagine what is happening inside the body, physical, emotional, everything. Imagine, and then do it. It doesn't matter what technology you have, it's not going to do that for you. If you believe that we are all energy, painting is that kind of thing – you either create a true energy, compact, immense which talks to you over centuries, or nothing.

GC: So is it about distillation of truth then?

EV: Yes, of course it is.

GC: What other art forms have influenced your practice?

EV: I am a very visual person. I love looking. When I lived in London I used to go to Riverside Studios and they would be showing three or four films by the same director, sandwiches, and I would be sitting in the front row watching these enormous paintings moving, moving. I love films. When I'm looking in magazines I always tear off images that attract me, some images just filter through and some stay with me. It is often the trigger of ideas. The thought process and emotional combination of things lives in a dormant form inside you and then you see something and it is like a rush of particles, and then you try to pull it out. It hits a different stage with the painting and then it hits another stage and so on. It is within yourself. We are selective. What you are you look for the manifestation of.

GC: How has living in the north of Scotland affected your process as an artist?

EV: I didn't hop on a train and consciously move away, it just happened. Now I can't even remotely imagine working in a great big, loud city simply because the distractions are so penetrating. They go into your pores and into your bloodstream before you know it. I think you would be pulled apart by so many different forces. I find the moments when I really work, I would work in the studio overnight when everything goes to sleep, when everything disappears I find that's the moment when I can hear my strange inner voice.

GC: Devotional stillness, that kind of feeling?

EV: It is. It's a strange kind of feeling, to remove yourself, distil yourself. Get rid of all the clutter, until you retreat into this strange space where you are the only person who knows how this space works. Sometimes it doesn't happen, you walk into the studio and you have too little time or are in a different state, you know you're only half way and have to juggle that. The times when you can really retreat into this space from where you can begin, then you operate with the tools, imagery, knowledge and sensations which are just to do with painting. That's when it happens.

GC: The instruments are sharper too in that context.

EV: Exactly. Then everything is happening but those two worlds, they don't connect. I think that's why I have always had that division – war and peace, spaces of warm and cold. The whole world is created in pairs, in opposites. Day and night, the moon and the sun, man and woman. You always have that division.

GC: Is that also manifest in the way that accidental and discipline combine in what you do?

EV: I call it "accidentally deliberate". Definitely, definitely, and I don't separate them. You put all your intentions which are deliberate into it. Painting is my absolute tool of learning and knowing about life. You strive to make the best painting and you have to keep going because you never do. It is a wonderful despair, as Jean Paul Sartre said – fail, fail again, fail better. That's what you do. Inwardly you grow, but you have the heart of a child. I love Louise Bourgeois, her best work aged 90, her work is superb. I understand what she means; inwardly you grow, but you have the heart of a child because you become aware of this immense stretch of knowledge and not knowing.

GC: And you accept not knowing, accept that there is mystery in what you do and in life in general. You don't deny that but actually engage with it.

EV: Yes that's true, there is acceptance which comes with it, which is such an extraordinary quality.

GC: And hard won, I think, for most artists.

EV: Acceptance is very important. It is submission but not in a contemporary sense, it actually means inner peace. It is more to do with acquiring peace within yourself. It is not about giving up, it's the opposite actually.

GC: What aspects of your work do you feel have expanded through the creation of this latest body of work?

EV: I hope I am beginning to get closer to the point where I am moving away from subject matter. In some ways the subject matter is intensified but reaching the point where it becomes nameless, closer to the abstract meaning. They have stopped being just jars, acquiring a new status in the world of objects and in the painting they become more abstract rather than more subject orientated.

It is just the beginning of that molecular step which I hope will progress further so it becomes more formal. Its not that the jars are terribly important, but they become almost abstract, they are this body of jars, this something else which is moving to a different stage. I hope that in some of the paintings this happens.

I don't know what's next. Work is the only way I know. When I stop painting I have hundreds of ideas and I know that they are very dangerous and very empty until you actually put it onto canvas and start working- and then the whole thing changes. I am always driven by the process itself. This body of work felt like a little more of a step towards that fourth dimension.

GC: It certainly feels like that in terms of how things have evolved stylistically.

EV: I want the work to become simpler and simpler, I almost want the viewer to look at it and not always see anything. I want it to be very little, but I don't want to be pretentious – I don't want to place a tiny little jar in the middle of a huge canvas, that doesn't interest me. I'm not interested in being clever, I want to arrive at that work through the process of painting itself.

GC: So it is more about the relationships.

EV: Yes.

GC: The one you have with the canvas, and the one that the audience has with the work ultimately.

EV: Yes absolutely. That is the honesty I want to be driven by even if I am last century, even if I am not doing something that contemporary art is meant to be doing. I think the world is no better than 20,000 years ago. With all our so-called civilisation, knowledge and progress, have we actually progressed? I think we are who we are. So I don't think I should conform, to the new understanding of what contemporary art should be.

The truth, the true meaning of things around us, is not in the multitude of choices but within a more focused range and in that way I am happy to be isolated. In fact I want to be even more isolated because I don't find that all this information and exposure to it is actually doing a lot of good. Even though we evolve and change there is the truth deep down and you don't need to achieve it by travelling the world in the most noisy places with jazzy colours!

Between The Lines by Eugenia Vronskaya is at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery in London until 28 June 2008.

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