

ana tzarev

the life
of flowers

r u s s i a n m u s e u m



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*As I travel through time, I record my experiences in paintings
and leave them as postcards to future generations.*

Ana Tzarev

Ana Tzarev's studio, Phuket, Thailand

▼ **Blue Lights.** 2004. Watercolor on paper. 50.8 x 35.6*

* All measurements are in centimeters





ana tzarev

Alexander Borovsky

I feel the desire to renew myself, and to try to apologize for the fact that my pictures are after all almost a cry of anguish, although in the rustic sunflower they may symbolize gratitude.

Vincent van Gogh
Letter to Wilhelmina van Gogh, *Saint-Rémy*, c. 20 February 1890

The manner in which artist Ana Tzarev emerged on to the contemporary art scene was quite extraordinary. Her works were first represented and exhibited through private galleries in both London and Monaco, specifically to introduce her art. But before long, with the rapidly growing interest to make the works more accessible for public view, a gallery was established in New York, at the notably “respectable” address of 24 West 57th Street as the sole global representation of Ana Tzarev. Exhibitions followed one after another in New York, and soon traveled over to other countries, including most recently the Vietnam Fine Arts Museum in Hanoi and now the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg. On one occasion, Russian writer Yuri Olesha used a memorable metaphor to describe a sudden emotion: “[it] swished like a branch full of flowers and leaves.”¹ Well, Ana Tzarev’s artwork does feel like a branch that swished in a flash before the eyes. Viewers witness a spectacular demonstration of motion, color, shape, texture, and perfume that leaves no spectator indifferent, making them either recoil in fear or rush forward with wonderment. The motivation of those who recoil could appear to be quite understandable: according to institutional rules and regulations, the artist’s emergence on the international art scene might be considered by some to have not been staged “properly.” There is a rigidly followed code of artistic behavior — and even beliefs — that ensures promotion and success to a present-day representative of contemporary art. According to this code, an artist is expected to go through a certain succession of art galleries that will take notice of him and undertake to bring him into the limelight gradually, in line with the gallery’s order of magnitude. The artist should abide by certain conventions and run through a range of art fairs and international biennales of varying sorts and significance, etc. The artist should go through a certain chain of command and climb up step by step, as he captures the attention of art critics and museums; and so on and so forth. Nothing of the kind happened with Ana Tzarev. Perhaps she comes from the world that was dubbed “Outsider Art” by British critic Roger Cardinal? (This term currently appears to be the most conventional, even though it has slightly different meanings in the United States and Europe. In the United States, for instance, it tends to be much more flexible and applies to a much broader material that includes, in addition to the art of traditional naïvists and autodidacts, folk art, the art practiced by various ethnic and even professional groups, and also children’s art.) Especially if one takes into account that today’s Outside Art has divested itself of many of the myths of the so-called cultural and anthropological nature: in our time, one can hardly expect to deal with a purely “reflective” mind or its opposite, the naïve or natur-



al mind. Yet it is this opposition that has brought about the traditional division of art into representative art and direct, “presentative” art (with an isolated area reserved for naïve art within the latter). So to answer the question is Ana Tzarev an Outsider artist, the answer is no: of all the Outsider Art characteristics only one applies to Tzarev. She was attracted by art, driven by her passion to create, and began to practice art—yet she evolves outside of the art establishment. Moreover, she worked initially “for her own benefit” only, with no concern for how her artwork is perceived by others — to say nothing about her mainstream audience. As for other cross-references, including the emphasis she places on spontaneity and emotions and on nonconceptual and unmediated ways, we will deal with them later as specific poetic traits typical of Ana Tzarev alone.

Meanwhile, the appearance of Ana Tzarev on the contemporary art scene deserves special treatment. Let me use another quotation, this time from A. S. Pushkin: “A Comet without laws among / the calculated round of stars.”² Most likely irrespective of her own plans, Tzarev has stirred up the interest of many just by virtue of the circumstances that may, in our context, be hiding behind these two epithets. We have already discussed her “outlawed”— that is, unconventional — nature. As for “calculated,” I believe the world of art has grown somewhat weary of the excessive regulation and control exercised by the top echelons of the art establishment. So any contravention of the “rules of the game” tends to be perceived as a breath of fresh air. In this respect, I fully agree with Edward Lucie-Smith, who writes about Ana Tzarev that “her work reverts in spirit to an earlier and more heroic time.” I think what is implied here is the early-modernism era, when individuality hewed its way without relying on special art-promoting institutions, independently and at its own risk. Moreover, it hewed its way without recognizing any rules of the representation game and without restraining its right to self-expression in any way.

Ana Tzarev was born in Croatia. As a child, she lived through the hardships of war and the post-war times. She studied horticulture which has become one of her great passions in life: for decades, she has been laying out gardens all over the world. She spent long periods of time living and working in New Zealand and Australia, and now devotes all her time to her studios in the South of France and Thailand. Her other passion is traveling — not only around Europe, but mainly across the Asian Pacific region as well as Russia, Africa, and South America. Her unquenchable thirst for new spiritual, mythopoetic, ethnocultural, and worldly experiences makes her connection with other realms devoid of any superficiality and encourages her to accustom herself with diverse cultures — sometimes even to become rooted in them. Her childhood and adolescence spent in a region that suffered so dramatically from wars and violence brought about her care and compassion, as an artist, for the traumatic experiences of those nations that continue to suffer from social, humanitarian, or wartime adversities. That



is how her “Dispossessed” series came about. Yet Tzarev never expresses her social views directly: they come through figuratively, as metaphors, or as a theme developed in a mythopoetic key. Her spontaneous expression, direct response, and impulsive gesture are all reflected primarily in the images of nature appearing in her works — in particular, flowers. This subject deserves a more detailed treatment.

Indeed, Tzarev’s works look like an outpost of spontaneity surrounded by the cerebral, conceptualized, deliberate, and “calculated” (to use Pushkin’s word again) contemporary artworks. But are they really? The answer is both yes and no. I think Tzarev can afford to treat the depictive motif as it is, namely, as the subject of appeasing a visual hunger, a shape-generating passion, an appetite for new visual stimuli. This appeasement becomes the main theme of many still lifes produced by the artist. As a matter of fact, this is a perpetual transformation theme, something that any artist who is focused on direct contact with reality, and relives reality in an empirical fashion, formulates in just three words, “How to capture?” Ana Tzarev has learned how to “capture” the depictive motif very quickly. She has developed a powerful gestural style with an energy not unlike that of the post-impressionist era: an open color, a three-dimensional brush stroke—or rather, a fiery haze of strokes drifting optically in space; a triumph of the de-reflective approach, driven towards capturing and mastering nature’s signals. Some of her works, such as *Emerald Prince*, *Melody*, and *The Olive Tree*, generate impatience as a principal emotional state: they seem to rush forth to express their own emotional condition using the nature motif as the underlying “material,” and to learn how to temper it using pictorial means of expression. Her method comprises primarily “molding” techniques, applying layers of paint, and handling both the paint and the canvas manually. She fashions the world demiurgically — the way she wants it. In her particular case, the moment of attainment doesn’t mean mastering any mimetic skills. Approximately at the same time, Ana Tzarev painted the sophisticated and almost tangibly figural *Red Silk* and the brutally conventional, heavily textured *Cerulean Sky*. She focuses on the inward condition and the “boiling point” it reaches. As a natural motif, a flower appears to be an ideal material, manageable and ready to splash over and extricate itself to the outside world. Yet, almost parallel with this objective, Ana Tzarev seems to pursue another one as well. This other objective refocuses on the natural as such and creates a certain balance between the spontaneous and the reflective. The artist restrains herself and brings her expression under control. I believe this objective is born from the artist’s attempt to expound a natural philosophy of her own. I find it hard to tell if this philosophy is based on any traces of Pantheism or the Buddhist tradition, or if any philosophical or religious context is present in it at all. One thing is obvious, though — the natural philosophy subtext seems to manifest itself more and more plainly in her artistic work, first and foremost in her interest in organic matter and her keen awareness of natural rhythms and



the “creative techniques” used by Mother Nature herself. This focus is easy to explain: Ana Tzarev is at heart a horticulturist, passionate about the beauty and complexity of flowers, an expert in plant life, and her scholastic background inevitably reveals itself in her attitude to nature. At this stage, Tzarev’s color scheme is not only “intrinsic,”—based on inner feelings and emotional states — it is also physical, “borrowed” from nature. A new plane comes into view — a plane of colorful and dynamic transformations observed in another pictorial reality. Her depictive methods reciprocate both the real and the symbolic states of nature. V. V. Kandinsky’s *The Odorless Flowers* comes to mind: “The whole truth of sunrise is revealed to the burning eye in this song. Ah, people say when the big bell rings, and the rays turn golden, with bluish purple, partly greenish edges. A red tree trunk with a blue treetop and rainbow fruits grows out of platinum.”³

The flowers in works like *Rainbow Dance*, *Gold of Hawaii*, and *Lilies of Cannes* pull the viewer in almost literally, making him take in the colors and even the perfume of the flower, it seems—the viewer feels, almost as if by touch, the epidermal tissue; explores the curvatures of the shapes which can only be described by using a dictionary of botanical terms: the thalamus, the calyx, the stamen filaments, and so on. However, this has nothing to do with Botany 101 — even though Ana Tzarev’s knowledge of the “anatomy” of the flower is quite profound, of course. In fact, it is on this objective knowledge one can encounter so infrequently these days — a “knowledge” associated with old-fashioned atlases and herbaria — that the multifaceted nature of the “Tzarev flowers” is based. Botanical objects underlie an entire author-created architecture that features its own specific morphology: *Hawaiian Ginger*, *Golden Bubbles: Leucospermum*, and *White Bird: Strelitzia Nicolai*. They are way off from the aspect of traditional admiration — from the aspect of embellishment of reality — customary, yet ever so vital. The artist seems to “size up” a flower or a fruit for the functionality and design capacity of an architectural vision, thus creating a dimension that appears unsuitable for the genre, but quite acceptable in the context of the author’s natural philosophy. Likewise, the flower and fruit images could be given a different representational construal — namely, through their corporality. In paintings like *Gold of Hawaii*, *Absolute Star*, *Red Sunset*, and *Blue Candy*, the shape appears to possess a special suggestive and evocative capacity. Consequently, the metaphorical plane tends to coexist with a corporally tactile plane of possession. It offers sexual connotations associated both with old-time metaphors (such as “the flower of desire,” “pluck the flower of pleasure,” etc.) and with more up-to-date visual practices permeated with Freudian symbolism. I believe this plane features both the so-called “European,” therapeutically subliminal aspect and the tantric, Ananda-like context.

No description of the Ana Tzarev phenomenon can forgo the subject of existing artistic context. Indeed, the artist follows her path — especially in terms of institution-



al relations and her “outside the establishment” tactics and strategies. This doesn’t mean, however, that she evolves in a vacuum. Reflectively or not, Tzarev makes herself real within the confines of a certain coordinate system. Flower images constitute a vast domain: even if we disregard past history and limit ourselves only to parameters that are relevant to us, it commences with postmodernism chronologically and continues through the most recent milestones of contemporary art. This domain is also delimited geographically: on the India side, it’s the well-known Indian and European artist Tarlocan Oberoi; on the Far East side, it’s Tinami Nakajima, a hereditary Nihonga artist and perhaps the most popular flower painter in Japan. What’s important, he is a modern artist, even when he uses traditional visualization techniques and related conceptual settings. That is why he switches registers so easily from traditional contemplation to staginess, among other things — when a flower occurrence is compared to a spectacle and its scenic nature opens up its narrative potential. These are fairly exotic coordinates of the flower domain, and I refer to them just to point out that Ana Tzarev can show profound interest in art practices that appear unconventional from the point of view of a European artist. In my mind, her closest role models during her formative years as an artist were Post-Impressionists like Van Gogh to whom she dedicated her still life of golden sunflowers, *Vincent’s Dream*. These reference points on the map of the “flower domain” undoubtedly served as true guidelines for her. What further influence came after that? In future generations? Perhaps it was Emile Nolde’s Peonies, Piet Mondrian’s Amaryllis, or “bouquets” by Marc Chagall? Any allusions like that appear well justified, as the flower domain implies imaginary, if not corporeal correlations. What I believe is truly close, however, are the flowers painted by Georgia O’Keeffe, which even dictionaries like the *Oxford Dictionary of Twentieth Century Art* describe as “sexually provocative.” Ana Tzarev’s *White Orchid*, *White Amaryllis*, *Black Okika*, and *Lilies of Cannes* effectively correlate with Georgia O’Keeffe’s dangerous flowers by their vitality and visual magnetism achieved through the ability to manipulate eye reactions.

There is yet another aspect to Ana Tzarev establishing herself in the contemporary art environment. The artist has been exhibiting her art for a relatively short time — yet, paradoxically, she has been able to demonstrate her varied creative objectives right from the outset. Even if we take into account that a few years were contributed to the Sturm und Drang period — that is, to an upsurge of artistic emotions — other approaches, as discussed above, were implemented almost immediately, following a negligible time interval. I would also like to add yet another approach. It didn’t take Ana Tzarev long to learn to think in terms of a certain multiplicity, as opposed to individual, specific works of art, namely, diptychs, triptychs, and other multipart art forms. What stood behind it? An attraction to the folding-screen shapes that are traditional in, but not limited to, Oriental art? Or was it not so much tradition or the nature of the art medium as something else—something to do with perception of the world, perhaps? Or a



Golden Gift. 2001. Oil on linen. 101.5 x 70

desire to give an additional dimension to the reality around us — a more comprehensive picture of the world? Incidentally, multipart, large-scale compositions have often been used by Tzarev to develop images pertaining to other cultures. A picture of the world as seen through the eyes of the Vietnamese, Pacific Islanders, and so on. The pace at which she embedded herself in these cultures was different from those of her works that were based on an instant impulse or upsurge — it was measured and musical. The artist often chooses a certain customary, symbolic motif, characteristic of the local art tradition — with minimum stylizing, yet with an all-embracing effect of physical presence. The image is flattened, and conventionality and ornamentation are emphasized, because mythopoetic imagery requires a special kind of temporality. No individualistic drive appears suitable here — the picture of the world is produced by the artist as a harmony of ornamental nature, not yet transformed by human activism. Not by force and not through appropriation — but at a meditative, measured pace, with an almost tangible passage of time. But the main elements that Ana Tzarev uses in her work are mirror-like reflections, rhythmic reiterations, and repetitions. This is how the *Glorry of Spring*, *Miracle of Love*, *Love Music*, and *Celebration of Life* series are built. These artistic devices bring us directly to pop art. Have Warhol's or even Ross Bleckner's uncentered, unscaled, intentionally unexotic flowers of questionable vitality, painted using a specific, chemically commercial color scheme, influenced Ana Tzarev's poetics? Possibly — but I know for a fact they have affected the viewer's optical perception of her works. As you look at the splendid large-scale canvases, *Garden Lilies* and *Lilies of the Field*, both of which could either combine to form a diptych or exist separately, you can't help expect certain recurring elements. Both canvases share the same scale and the same theme and color scheme. The eye automatically looks for mechanical, pop art "duplications," but finds no repeated or serial images. What it finds are echoes, reflections, reverberations. This kind of emotional and color-sculptural sophistication works only in a post-pop art environment. A similar post-pop art effect of "sameness from the contrary" stems from one of the most powerful works of Ana Tzarev, *Wilderness*.



Pink and White Magnolias. 2002.

Oil on linen. 100 x 81

Emerald Prince. 2000.

Oil on linen. 81 x 65



There is another thing that Ana Tzarev's multipart works call to mind. Her art possesses a certain rhythm of incremental accumulation — of an evolving wholeness — that has nothing to do with serial art. Her art possesses a kind of a viscous, encasing mobility. In our time, a contemporary artist lives from project to project, and the effect of his work is often determined by his ability or inability to keep up with the time. Ana Tzarev not only controls, in the most archaic way, the flow of her own time — she involves her viewer in the flow.

So the viewer turns toward the “swishing branch full of flowers and leaves” and, oblivious of his jam-packed organizer, realizes that nothing is as important as being able to listen to that swishing sound.

Notes:

¹ Envy (1927)

² The Portrait (1828)

³ From The Odorless Flowers (1914)