



Anna Berezovskaya, **Feast of Kings**, 2010, oil on canvas, 50 x 300 cm. All images: Courtesy of the Artist and Red Sea Gallery, Singapore.

Of Dream And Reality

Anna Berezovskaya takes viewers on a quirky voyage across time and space, through dream and reality into secretive and surreal worlds. Her art speaks to the youthful spirit of a new generation of emerging Russian artists.

By Ian Findlay

While most young artists struggle for years to gain their unique artistic voice through which to express their concerns, the young Russian painter Anna Berezovskaya has already established hers. It is a narrative voice that is exhilarating, bold, colorful, and richly textured as well as deeply personal and timeless. To enter Berezovskaya's world is to be embraced by a series of narratives that even Salvador Dalí and Lewis Carroll would find invigorating. There is, too, a touch of magical realism and lighthearted music to her tales: both art forms are of particular importance to her. As she writes, "Reading literature, especially a new book, is like living a new life, [which] gives a lot of

experience and knowledge. And of course good music inspires and encourages improvement in every note of the paintings."¹

However playful, fantastic, obsessive, and sentimental Berezovskaya's works may appear to the viewer, there is nothing immature about her vision of the world. One need only look at such lively works as *Keys to Fidelity* (2009) and *After the Ball* (2010) to see this. Her tightly packed realistic narrative paintings have a singular range of warm figuration, fairytale nuance, remarkable dream, and richly layered surreal tales. Here there is an abundance of symbolism and metaphor that is refreshingly informed by the spirit and energy of youth. Beyond the panoply of merry actions of the commoner and royalty, peasant

and knight, lover and voyeur, Berezovskaya addresses not only love and sexuality but also the quirks of human relationships, nature, and humor as well as something of sadness and pain. "Yes, some pictures are with humor. I like people with a sense of humor. [But] with my pictures I try to interpret all spectrums of human feeling—melancholy, happiness, humor."

Anna Berezovskaya was born on August 21, 1986, at Yakhroma, a small town 55 kilometers north of Moscow. In 1995, Berezovskaya began her art studies, specializing in jewelry, in Hot'kovo, where she now lives in a spacious house in which she has a large studio. While studying at art school, Berezovskaya took private painting lessons, although she says that she began



Anna Berezovskaya, **Snowballs and Spring**, 2010, oil on canvas, 120 x 300 cm.



Anna Berezovskaya, **Keys To Fidelity**, 2009, oil on canvas, 110 x 130 cm. Private collection.



Anna Berezovskaya, **After the Ball**, 2010, oil on canvas, 90 x 100 cm.

"painting and sculpting" at the age of five, which, today, she considers to be a little late. However, she says, "painting only became a passion at 14." Before this time she was "just dreaming of being an artist but from 14 I began seriously studying."²

By the mid-1990s, the totalitarian world of the Soviet Union was history. The demise of the Soviet Union not only brought an end to decades of cultural repression but also to a century of artistic contradictions. For most people Socialist Realism was the only face of Soviet art with which they came into contact, but there was always a lively independent, experimental art scene running parallel to the official art world.

The vitality of contemporary Russian art today, which embraces everything from traditional secular and religious styles and techniques to new media art, owes much to the struggles and suffering of earlier generations. This is something upon which Berezovskaya has built freely, without fear of censorship: for this she is happy.

Berezovskaya's fecund imagination is not only able to take flight without hindrance but its reality has become vibrantly tangible on the canvas, as is clear in such works as the beautifully colored and textured *Feast of Kings* (2010) and the dreamy *Golden Fish* (2010), both works from her series made over the past two years for her exhibition at Singapore's Red Sea Gallery.

Anna Berezovskaya's

world entwines cultural history and the present in a wide variety of scenarios, all of which possess an enigmatic quality. Whether she is speaking of friends and family or commenting on contemporary life elliptically through surreal pageantry or simply visualizing herself and her dreams, there is always a sense of literature and cinema present in her narrative.

The cinematic and the theatrical in her art are particularly strong in *Iron Lady* (2010) and *Evening in the Village* (2010). She notes that such film directors as the Sarajevo-born Emir Kusturica (b.1954), Federico Fellini (1920–1993), and Bernardo Bertolucci (b.1940) are of particular importance to her life and art. Such directors have played with reality in a powerful and poetic ways, taking viewers deep into new areas of the imagination. So it is for Berezovskaya, for as she notes,

these directors "made me look differently at the world around me ... [but] I do not portray a particular time, I create my own world. My pictures are above time. They are about feelings, about the emotional experience of people. Feelings are something that people have always had. Nowadays is not an exception. I think that the world only seems chaotic, but in fact it's well ordered." But, of course, it has not only been film directors that have had an important influence on her art, but also a wide range of writers and painters, from Franz Kafka and James Joyce to Ray Bradbury, from Lucian Freud and Stanley Spencer to Malevich and Rodchenko, as well as traditional icon painters.

A sense of Berezovskaya's well-ordered and fun-filled world is clear in the lavish painting entitled *Snowballs and Spring*. While this painting shows the artist's historical interest, with its groups of knights and court ladies, on the right and left, engaged in a snowball fight, there are a number of modern and surreal details that strike the eye. There is the First World War pilot in his cap and goggles among the knights and a helmeted knight sipping from a modern teacup. There is a modern village scene painted on a lady's dress. Among the motifs that feature in this work and are included in many other paintings are the numerous fruits, cakes, flowers, intricate hairstyles, and the presence of a stealthy cat. Even with such frenetic activity in this work there is a strange sense of silence, almost as if one were watching action in a silent



Anna Berezovskaya, **Iron Lady**, 2010, oil on canvas, 89 x 98 cm.

movie. While one sees this as an historical painting, for the artist it is one inspired by personal family experience. "My father's birthday is in the beginning of the summer," she writes. "This day we always get together with all family and schoolmates and have barbecue in the forest. At this time of the year flowers blossom and there are butterflies everywhere, but sometimes at the same period you can find snow as well. So once we began to play snowballs. So this is a picture from a series where adults behave like children. Sometimes you would like to mess around behaving like a child."

A sense of silence is common in many of Berezovskaya's works. One might feel it as that of a silent movie in which activity frequently appears exaggeratedly frenetic, but one may also sense it as the silence of dreams. In paintings such as *Sleeping Volcanoes* (2010), *Narcissists* (2010), and *Streams Where Trout Sing* (2010) there is the silence of surreal dream. In each of these works there are groups of people with odd instruments—musical and scientific—talking stock of the happenings within their environments. Scientists listen with long, ear trumpets to the giant lumps that appear on the surface of the sea, like so many strange elliptical-shaped islands at whose apex is a depression like a belly button. Are these spots where one can listen to the rhythm of the world or are they merely small volcanoes about to erupt? The sad narcissists gaze longingly at themselves in tiny pools of water in a rugged landscape, while a half-dozen musicians listen to the sound of six trout in a stream whose mouths are open in song above the water.

The figures and the environments in these three paintings are beautifully realized through their soft creams, browns, blues, and rust reds and rolling lines that emphasize the fullness of their dress and ruggedness of nature. Some of the figures appear to be the same—a friend or relative perhaps. Among the faces one sees the influence of icon painting or religious art.

The temper of the works is one of groups who know each other well. And this perhaps is why they are so revealing of character. As Berezovskaya says, "The idea of *Sleeping Volcanoes* came to me after a meeting with my friend, who was pregnant at



Anna Berezovskaya, *Sleeping Volcanoes*, 2010, oil on canvas, 100 x 150 cm.

that time. She told me how a doctor listened to her belly through a tube. *Streams Where Trout Sing* comes from the title of a Russian story named *Streams Where Trout Play*. Musicians in this picture appeared after watching the movie directed by Emir Kusturica. Running musicians are frequent characters in his films. Then who but a real musician can appreciate a beautiful singing fish."

Berezovskaya's range of narrative impresses in its detail and construction. *Feast of Kings*, which was inspired by a wedding, and *Snowballs and Spring* are

fine examples of her large paintings and her attention to detail. The figures are alive with activity; they act decisively most of the time and this reveals not only character but something of Berezovskaya herself, who appears often in her stories. There is something of the spirited character of Frida Kahlo about Berezovskaya, who also admires female artists such as Vera Mukhina, Tatiana Yablonskaya, and Annie Leibovitz. But in Berezovskaya's memories or dreams of her childhood the world becomes one of abundance and the richness of nature and the village, as in *Evening in the Village* (2010). "This is painting is a picture of mood, a picture that represents my memories of how I spent one summer in the village with my grandparents. Every morning and evening I watered the garden (cucumbers, tomatoes.) That's why probably the watering cans are so big."

The surreal and the influence of classical painting are never far from the heart of Berezovskaya's narrative. Even when her work has a strong sensual overtone, there is the surreal in situation and a startling formality that would not be out of any number of painting made between the 16th and 19th centuries, periods that are of particular interest to Berezovskaya. The exquisite clothes and the abundant luxuriousness of food juxtaposed with the nakedness of her forms add greatly to her sensual reality. *After the Ball, Duel, Iron Lady*, and *Golden*



Anna Berezovskaya, *Evening in the Village*, 2010, oil on canvas, 80 x 70 cm.

Fish (all 2010) are fine tales in her genre. Although the nudity and sensuality are well defined, she says, "I don't mark out or feature naked women into a separate part of my creativity. It's only a way to impact the idea of a picture. The naked women symbolize openness; they are vulnerable in front of this world. These women are not literal portraits of me, but the images of women similar and clear to me. I like when a picture is full of details and the story on a dress can tell more about the life and emotional experiences of the characters of my pictures. Dresses were always decorated, embroidered, painted, and this is the explanation how the idea came about. I was always amazed by the way how Alexander McQueen dealt with a garment. His ideas are striking and they inspire me."

There is a quirky combination of the classical and the modern and a cunning humor in so many pieces that enliven the pleasure of looking at Berezovskaya youthful art. There is a wry humor in *Stubborn People* (2010) in which three people on their knees bang their heads against a wall which, Berezovskaya says, are "adults like children. There are a lot of such people in this world who are stubborn in their beliefs and don't want to listen to anyone else." The king in *Five O'Clock Shadow* (2010) is



Anna Berezovskaya, *Narcissists*, 2010, oil on canvas, 110 x 110 cm.



Anna Berezovskaya, *Five O'Clock*, 2010, oil on canvas, 85 x 70 cm.

lonely, "but he is happy with his loneliness. Usually the loneliness associates with sadness, and in this picture I wanted to show the other side of loneliness, resting."

Berezovskaya doesn't always succeed in rounding out her well-researched narratives, that begin with small sketches and the colors which have their origin in fashion magazines and movies. But the energy that she realizes in each work, even the most subdued, draws the viewer

into the middle of the tales, engaging with a wide range of subject matter and theme that always surprises. At the same time, she is asking questions of the world through her narratives. The character of *Golden Fish* has everything; the woman in *Iron Lady* is a contradiction: she is strong but it is suggested that she needs a strong knight, which is the sentimentality of fairy tale. In works such as *Daughters of Robin Hood* and *Keys to Fidelity* there is also a strong feeling for tradition and myth as well as the reality of the power of virginity.

Anna Berezovskaya speaks not only for herself but also for a new generation for whom the starkness of the past is but a memory of their parents. The harshness of the past has been replaced by a surface abundance that is another way of controlling the masses. Once we had religion as the opium of the masses, then we had communism, and now we have

rampant consumerism. Each generation is blinded by its own 'religious' experience that when corrupted is replaced by myths and fairytales. Δ

Notes:

1. Unless otherwise indicated all quotations from the artist are taken from e-mail correspondence with the author between April 12 and 18, 2011.
2. Interview with Selina Boyd, March 2011.



Anna Berezovskaya, *Streams Where a Trout Sings*, 2010, oil on canvas, 100 x 105 cm.