

SARIEV CONTEMPORARY

SARIEV Contemporary, Plovdiv

presents:

Pravdoliub Ivanov
On the Wrong Side
solo show

11 November 2016 - 6 January 2017

Opening: 10 November, 6:30 pm in the presence of the artist

I hope there aren't many who would agree with the simple-hearted statement that "people everywhere are the same." Our crippling fears and nightmares are different, as are our hopes and sanity-saving dreams. They are all colored by childhood memories and the places where we happened to be born and raised. They all have their own passport and nationality, their geopolitics and often unbearable history.

Even the darkest nightmares of the West, for example, seem to be imbued with a sweetly perverse ethos dating back to Hieronymus Bosch, and refracted, in more recent times, through the post-prism of Jean-Pierre Jeunet. Western dreams, on the other hand, are often naive, candy-flavored, mawkish, Amélie Poulainesque.

Looking eastwards, one is reminded of Georgi Markov's observation that "the best thing Bulgaria has had in the last two hundred years is its hopes. Russia is a very different case. I believe that the tragedy of the Russian national character comes out of its innate hopelessness."

Both the fears and hopes of East and West are different. But what sits in their middle, specifically South Eastern Europe, the continent's mucilaginous underbelly, is something entirely different. It lacks both the West's spectacular sense of around-the-corner apocalypse (in which "there is always tomorrow"), or Russia's desperation (in which there is never tomorrow). It is a timeless, formless area whose fundamental problem is the lack of self-definition, its most characteristic features passivity and eternal waiting.

This is an area which Pravdoliub Ivanov knows well. But his solo exhibition at the Sariev Contemporary Gallery complicates things further by going beyond the East-West dichotomy. The problem is that such stereotypes can no longer fully explain and exhaust our present. We are all aware that neither the West, nor the East are as we once knew them to be. Confusing new complexities and relationships are shaking up our reality, and our old geopolitics can no longer help us make sense of them.

The exhibition bears the title *On the Wrong Side*. Its fundamental question is as pertinent to a middle-aged existentialism as it is to a scared lost child asking itself: "Am I on the right river bank?"

Before we enter the space, we are met by a neon sign on the gallery's façade that reads *On the Wrong Side*. But the letters are spelled out in reverse, facing backwards, and the viewer can only properly see the inscription lit up against the wall on which the sign hangs. The work bears the title "You are..."

"I realize more and more," Ivanov explains, "that when I think of social, political and global problems, conflicts and dangers, I am actually thinking of my own fears. The elements of this project do not add up to a single unambiguous theme; they are, rather, fragments born out of my personal anxieties and hopes. It's why I've aimed at creating a sense of discomfort in the exhibition experience."

The show's centerpiece is a large object, "The Ladder", which is a perfect metaphor for what we ordinarily might call socio-political life. The work appears more immediately accessible than it actually is. How far up the ladder you get depends on which path you choose to take. But is it really as simple as that? Might it be that the ladder's very construction predetermines your ultimate position in the social hierarchy? The viewer has a choice, not least in how he/she interprets the piece.

In "Childhood", the artist's traumatic memories are embodied in a communist-era slide projector that brutally thrusts, drill-like, into the gallery's wall. In the 1970s and 80s, gadgets like this were used to screen fairy tales to children, as well as for educational and propaganda purposes. In "Childhood", the one-time "toy" has been turned into a powerful machine that can destroy thick walls and demolish systems. Or it could, were it not stuck high up the wall, its power cord too short to connect to the plug below... A piece of technology that was once formative for a whole generation is now useless and thoroughly bewildering to the following ones.

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Might this be a matter of viewpoint and perspective? Might it be that what is undisputable today will be insignificant tomorrow? Or vice versa? Who is the giant and who the underdog? "Truths", a drawing comprising two black squares, one large, the other small, is pregnant with such questions. On the one hand, it seemingly plays, tongue-in-cheek, with the Modernist and supremacist doctrines of the revolutionary first half of the 20th century. On the other, it might be construed as a commentary on late communism's tenet about "the Big Truth and the small truth".

An adherent of such absurd tenets (or of other, more absurd ones) can be seen in the ferocious figure in another drawing, "After Dürer". Its meaning is even more abstract than the minimalist abstraction of "Truths", yet it is also something of an icon of blind cruelty and its pointlessness.

But *On the Wrong Side* is not an exhibition that maps out our unconditional fears at the expense of everything else. It is a bit like the experience of sharing a nightmare with someone after waking up, while smiling with the awareness that it was only just a bad dream.

So put on a smile yourself. Bend low and look under the gallery's working table to see the video "Natural Fear". Yes, our fears are our daily companions, but we wouldn't be able to live a day without some life-affirming hope. In Ivanov's work, hope is lush and green, his video resonant with a gentle, soothing breeze.

Here, too, as in "The Ladder", Ivanov gives you a choice – to use the headphones and listen to the video's soundtrack or not.

So think about it. The headphones are there for a reason. You might as well put them on and listen...

Text: Boris Kostadinov

Translation: Boris Deliradev