



Together in Tension

written by Brett Anningson

Marina Sharapova and Igor Kozlovsky live in a beautiful and green Chicago suburb, only five minutes from Lake Michigan. Being "very much outdoor people" it gives them great pleasure and inspiration.

They explain, "We are artists, which is an excellent thing. We are married, also an excellent thing. We work together – not necessarily an excellent thing. What do we mean by this? Clearly, it isn't that we don't find inspiration in each other's work or ideas. However, on a practical level, it is hard to avoid some problems."

For example, though they have been together for 20 years, whenever Marina and Igor work on a picture together, they spend most of their

time arguing. They admit, "Perhaps this isn't all that surprising. Van Gogh and Gauguin tried to work together in Arles. They stood side by side, produced some wonderful work, and ultimately came to hate each other. Our task may even be harder. They weren't married after all, and we don't want to end up hating each other. Still, as we say, working together generally produces conflict rather than peace."

So why do they choose to work this way? Well, you can't deny that the tension creates beauty. Their arguments and egos allow them to come to a canvas from different directions. Igor's specialty is a subtle sense for colour, a wonderful appreciation of the tactile nature of paint, canvas, and an intuitive feel for how to play with abstract images. Marina, on the other hand, possesses an excellent and subtle touch for realistic drawing and is capable of creating new images based on the works of older artists, particularly those of the





Italian and Dutch Renaissance.

Over the years, this interplay that began firmly entrenched in realism has blossomed into something more – building on the achievements of abstraction and moving into those of the Russian avant-garde movement.

"We were able to do this because, in the Russian academic system within which we were educated, artists are rigorously taught the skills of the Old

Masters," says Igor. "However, we are taught to use those skills to create paintings with a deep humanity about them, we are told to strive for beauty, but beauty with depth, in order to create works that will stay with you for a long time."

"And so we attempt to combine what might seem to be the un-combinable," continues Marina, "the bold colours of contemporary artistic practice with the achievements of the Renaissance, to which we add some surrealist notes to give a new meaning to familiar images, placing them in unexpected frames, forcing the viewer to enter our invented world and to experience a new world of his or her own."

Perhaps either one of them could have gotten here on their own. Perhaps it would be possible for one person to synthesize so many different forms. But it is not likely. The interplay of emotion and creativity has allowed each of them to grow, change, and see the world differently – as it does in any relationship. But when two great artists play off each other, the aches and pains, the arguments and joys all seem worth it. To quote

one of Igor and Marina's favourite Russian poets, Anna Akhmatova:

"If you would only know
That rubbish from which,
Without feeling any shame,
My poetry is growing..."

The wonder of their artistic process is that they never know what will be the next inspiration, it could be Renaissance fresco or the old walls of a house ready for demolition.

Weaving Beauty

The beautiful and stylistic artwork they produce comes from an honest background in creativity – one that began with supportive parents, as well as mentors like Michel Tarran, director of the Alliance Francaise & French Institute in St. Petersburg, Russia, and Irwin Weil and Andrew Wachtel, professors at Northwestern University who were instrumental in helping Igor and Marina to navigate their adopted country when they



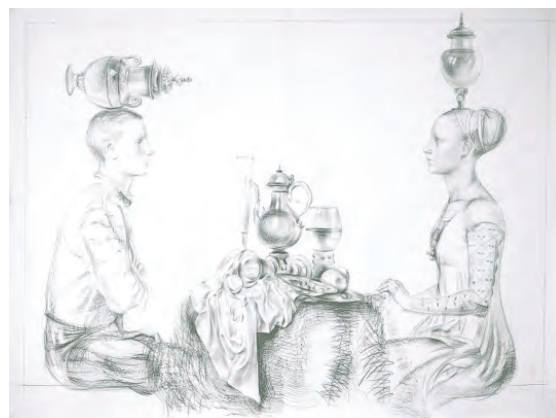
moved to the United States.

"There have been many strong influences in our life," remarks Marina, "different traditions have always spoken to us, like the work of the Russian Iconicists, Italian and Dutch Renaissance, classical artists, as well as the Old Masters. But then there are many other influences – the architecture of the world, including the beautiful design of Russian churches, old cities, the countryside of Russia, the architecture we have found in our new home of Chicago."

The couple also points out that anyone who







has ever been to St. Petersburg in Russia and experienced its strong and deep cultural history can appreciate how the city itself influenced who they are and what they create. "To walk the streets described in great Russian literature by Dostoevsky, Gogol and Pushkin; to be able to visit Hermitage Museum; casually stroll the

magnificent embankment of the Neva River – all of it left very deep impression on both of us."

"Take all of this," adds Igor, "and understand that over the years we developed a strong interest in the history and culture of different countries. Our bookshelves are fully packed with volumes on Renaissance Art, Russian Icons, Avant-Garde and Modernism. It's also interesting that only in the United States did we start to fully appreciate the history of Russia, as well as its people and cultural roots. We even discovered some very surprising facts about our own families, and how events like the Russian Revolution and World War II affected the lives of our parents and grandparents."

Igor and Marina come from their respective traditions to a place where they find a healthy respect for individuality which blossoms forth from tradition. This is reflected in the paintings they create; somehow seeming both ancient and modern. They manage to weave together elements from so many places and adapt them in such a way that there appears to be a new iconic

sense evoking the archetypes of the past, while at the same time moving beyond mainstream understanding.

"We studied the techniques and conceptions of Russian religious art, inspired by the work of Andrei Rublev and Dionysius, alongside those of the West European Renaissance," they explain. "We were made aware of the great contributions of East European artists to modern visual art, including such deeply spiritual figures as Chagall, Kandinsky, and Malevich, alongside our education in the techniques of Picasso and Matisse. Moreover, in our work we tried to synthesize these traditions. It is this synthesis of Western post-renaissance art with the Russian tradition, the religious tradition in particular that has, we think, given our work a new and unusual profile."

"You have to understand our art from within your own heart," says Marina. "It requires you to use your imagination and find yourself within our very unique style. We like to call it neo-classical with a touch of surrealism. Perhaps it is more that



we have been inspired by the beauty of the world and the iconic images of our past."

Getting caught up in the image is essential for Igor and Marina, whether they are thinking about the process of creation or the audience who sees one of their paintings. Allowing people to find beauty and wonder in their work takes first place



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for these artists.

Igor recalls, "Once in New York City, during the opening of our show, there was a very important art collector who purchased some of our paintings – one of which we considered the best in the exhibition. Naturally, we were very happy and decided to take a photo of the two of us with the collector and his wife. When we posed in front of what was now his painting, a very somber lady in a fancy hat entered the gallery. She stood before the same painting and waved angrily to us so we would stop blocking the view. Of course, all four of us immediately moved away so she could enjoy the artwork."

Although they see the creation process as incredibly complicated, it is fulfilling. "One day we should make a short movie from start to finish of one painting," jokes Marina, "which takes sometimes, a year or even more. People would see that the hardest thing in our work is to work together. It draws out amazing things, but there are certainly difficulties."

"The other thing you would see," says Igor, "is how different each work is – how different each process is. It is different every time. Sometimes

to get an idea we need months of working, and sometimes it comes unexpectedly, all of a sudden. It can even happen while we are taking a bike ride or swimming. Then there is the fact that we are always working with different materials; often it is oil and canvas, but sometimes it is wood or metal, even leather. And we can paint with Aquarelle, tempera, or acrylic – we also do a lot of drawings in pencil on paper."

To see more of the fascinating work of Igor Kozlovsky and Marina Sharapova, visit their website: www.igor-marina.com

