

LOOK INTO THE LIGHT: PANAS TYTENKO (1963-)

Panas Tytenko is a talented and successful Ukrainian figurative painter. Based in the Kyiv region of Ukraine, he has been a member of the Ukrainian Association of Artists since 2000. Since 1990 he has also exhibited widely in Europe, the UK and USA. In addition, through the agency of Danusha Fine Art, from 1995 onwards his work has been regularly shown in British museums and art centres, and sold through the Bonhams and John Nicholson auction houses as well as through private galleries in London, Liverpool, Edinburgh and Aberdeen, and international art fairs in London and Belgium.

It seems that his work appeals to a broad range of international audiences. Examples of his painting may be found in private collections in the USA, UK, Germany, France, Belgium, Italy and Poland, as well as in Ukraine. Comments in the Visitors Book at a recent exhibition indicate that the key attraction of Tytenko's art is the way that he approaches his subject matter, using colour to create an impression of light and warmth, which evokes from the spectator a sense of tranquil enjoyment.¹ The aim of this essay is to explore aspects of how he does this and to offer some historical context for his practice.

The choice of subject matter plays an important role in directing the pleasurable impact of Tytenko's work. Rather than depicting moments of high tension or drawing attention to the ugliness that often permeates everyday life, Tytenko offers representations of still lives with flowers, landscapes, and figures in indoor settings. Such images encourage quietness and introspection and they have the power to stir up the spectator's own memories of fleeting, happy experiences.

Tytenko's still lives are centred on flowers, usually in vases, sometimes in baskets. Whether he represents his favourites – sunflowers and lilies – or any other flowers, their colours are repeated boldly in the painted shadows on white napery or in representations of reflective surfaces. The lighting effects

¹ *Panas Tytenko – Art from Ukraine*, Tweeddale Museum, Peebles, Scotland, June 1 – 29 2002, Visitor's Book, archive of Danusha Fine Art, pp.1-6.

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are usually dramatic, with high key contrasts of light and dark where the spectator is usually placed, metaphorically, in the shade, looking towards the light. There are no people in his still lives. Occasionally, however, human presence is conjured up by the inclusion of an object – a chair, a book, a glass of wine or a coffee cup that hints at the momentary absence of a person who has been engaged in some simple relaxing pursuit. While this makes an imaginative space for the spectator to inhabit at the focal point of the picture, the clues to a possible narrative are kept to a minimum. In *Still Life with Sunflowers*, 1998 for example, the specific detail of the location, the space beyond the flowers is deliberately blurred – as it is in almost all of his still lives – so that the spectators may project their own memories of summer gardens.

Tytenko's landscapes are typically of sunlit leisure in leafy settings, with the figures dressed in summery clothes, absorbed in some simple pleasant activity, reading, sketching, fishing, feeding ducks, or paddling in the sea. Many of these images have the feel of holiday snapshots, but they differ from such photographs not only by the brushy technique which declares the painted surface, but also by an absence of the self-conscious awareness of the viewer that is usually a feature of the holiday photo. The figures seem to be placed at some distance beyond the picture plane. There is no eye contact with the spectator, who thus becomes a voyeur on a private moment. Even where the figures look out of the canvas, as in *Girl in a Boat*, 2001, the gaze is not direct but angled to one side and seemingly focused on some inward thought rather than on a visible object.

Not all of Tytenko's landscapes relate to Ukrainian settings. Between 1998 and 2000 for instance, he made a series of works based round views of the Regent's Canal in London, which offered him opportunities to exercise his talent for evocative representations of light and strong colours reflected off water. He has also captured scenes in other British locations, in Hampshire, Buckinghamshire, Leicestershire, the Lake District, Portsmouth and Scotland. Since Tytenko largely follows the Impressionist tradition of *plein aire* painting,

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encounters with English weather, more changeable than that of Ukraine, offered a challenge. In a recent interview he noted that he had to 'paint like fury' in order to capture the image before weather conditions made painting outdoors impossible.² Perhaps this experience also encouraged him to experiment with representing the positive effects of light in bad weather. In *Haymarket at Night. Raining*, 2000, Tytenko focuses attention on the beauty of the city lights reflected on the rain-slicked road, while in his English hunting scene, *First Snow*, 2001 – representing the Quorn Hunt in Leicestershire - he concentrates on the tender pinkish light of the snowstorm.

Tytenko's landscapes, like his still lives, rarely offer a sense of deep illusory space. Often the horizons are high, as in *In the Stream*, 2001, sometimes, as in *Children on the Beach*, 1996, there is no horizon. The viewer's attention is held to the foreground and mid-ground, which supports the sense of voyeurism and privacy. The most extreme example of this is perhaps his painting of *Waterlilies*, 2000, where the spectator's eye is placed close to the surface of the water and a sense of perspective is given by the pattern of leaves, diminishing in size from the bottom to the top of the canvas.

This painting, which recalls Monet's studies of water-lilies at the turn of the previous century, is unusual for its lack of figures. A similar absence can be seen in *Venus at Wotton House*, 2001, a painting that also marks a departure from Tytenko's usual approach to illusions of depth. In this work the spectator is located behind a statue of Venus, looking down a long vista to the distant stately house – one of the last buildings designed by the architect, Sir John Soane. Tytenko's painting represents an ideal Neo-Classical landscape that has been organically constructed within the British countryside.

Such ideal landscapes and their realisation by the landscape gardeners of the C18th were studies in space and perspective designed to complement the architecture of the stately buildings they accompanied. Tytenko's paintings

² Julian Barnard, 'Six Visions of Britain', *The Telegraph*, September 8, 2001, www.telegraph.co.uk/outdoors, 17/10/02.

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With a Doll. Silver Room at Wotton House, 2001 and Girl at a Piano at Wotton House emphasise the spaciousness and scale of the architecture making a sharp contrast between the height of the tall windows and the sizes of the young girl and surrounding objects. This could offer a sense of threat, but it does not. Instead, the depiction of light suffuses the imagined space with a listening stillness, perhaps tinged with a faint nostalgia for a lost world.

Tytenko's experiences of Wotton House in Buckinghamshire relate to an exhibition and other cultural events held there as part of the Festival of Ukrainian Art in the UK. The festival, which ran from November 2001 through to summer 2002, was organised by the Ukrainian Embassy in conjunction with the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture, Ukraine-ART, the Cultural Relations Department of the British Foreign Office and British Council Visiting Arts. It included exhibitions at the Menier Gallery, London³ and Tweedale Gallery, Peebles in which Tytenko also participated, as well as dramatic, musical and literary events displaying the scope of Ukrainian cultural achievement. The festival itself was one of the recent manifestations of Ukraine's development as an independent nation gaining status and understanding in the contemporary world. Aspects of Ukraine's historical journey to this point are, arguably, closely interwoven with the development of Tytenko's art practice.

Tytenko was born in Kyiv in February 1963 during the period known as 'The Thaw', when the worst excesses of Stalinism were being denounced and the parameters of Soviet Socialist Realism were broadened. At the height of the Stalin era, in the 1940s-50s, the definition of Socialist Realist art practice throughout the USSR was very narrow, limited to legibly heroic subject matter (or landscapes seen as patriotic) that presented an educational picture of life as it ought to be. Allowable models of technique were limited to examples drawn from C19th Russian Neo-Classical and Realist works, for instance by Briullov and the 'Wanderers' group. Any brushwork or colour use that related to Western Modernist art, including Impressionism, was banned. Although the

³ *Art from Ukraine*, Menier Gallery, London, January 28 – February 28 2002.

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Communist Party characterised the ideal practice as 'national in character and socialist in content', implying that there was some leeway for emphasising stylistic differences between the non-Russian republics of the USSR, such emphasis was likely to be viewed by Party critics as a sign of unpatriotic republican nationalism, and punished.⁴ During the 'Thaw' however, the Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev (himself a Ukrainian) prompted some relaxation in the regulations imposed by the Communist Party on the style and content of art, encouraging more emphasis on regional characteristics. This had a profound impact on Ukrainian art practice allowing for 'a limited but real emancipation of Ukrainian culture'.⁵

In the late 1950s-1960s, pioneering artists in Kyiv such as Tetyana Yablonska and her pupil, Tetyana Holimbievska, as well as Konstantyn Lomykin in Odessa, began to develop new styles of Socialist Realist painting which referred to Ukrainian folk art, the bright colours of Post-Impressionism and the brushy techniques of French Impressionism extended into a broader and sometimes flashy manner.⁶ During the 1970s the definition of Soviet Socialist Realism shifted. While it remained committed to figuration there was a new emphasis on the representation of private rather than public social values, and on the painted image as a window into an imaginative space, rather than as a didactic narrative.⁷

These post-Stalinist concerns dominated Tytenko's art education, firstly at the Kyiv Fine Art Institute, from which he graduated in 1981, and then at the Kyiv Academy of Fine Art where he studied under Professor Tetyana Holimbievska. It is arguably from Holimbievska in particular that he derived both his highly coloured obsession with the effects of light, and his concern with evoking a sense of privacy and introspection that is conveyed as much

⁴ Pat Simpson, 'On the Margins of Discourse? Visions of New Socialist Woman in Soviet Art 1949-50', *Art History*, vol.21, no.2, June 1998, pp.247-267.

⁵ Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1998, p.356.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.356.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.456, 458.

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by technique as by subject matter. The celebration of Ukrainian traditions and embroidery in his *Wedding Day* paintings of the late 1990s seem to constitute a retrospective homage to the special significance of representing these indigenous customs and artefacts, afforded by the repression of such representations under Stalin. Meanwhile, Tytenko's concern for personal vision and emphasis on fleeting moments of simple pleasure, may have been enhanced by the terrors and excitements opened up by the series of events and circumstances that began to unfold from the mid-1980s onward.

Tytenko's art education, lasting from the late 1970s until 1987, spanned the shift in the USSR's political and cultural policies, from the 'stagnation' of the Brezhnev era to the ferment of Gorbachev's 'Perestroika'. In 1986, the year that he started exhibiting in All-Ukrainian art exhibitions, the tragic nuclear accident at Chernobyl power station on the one hand brought death and pollution, and on the other hand fuelled the nascent lobby for a revitalisation of Ukrainian culture and for its separation from that of Russia.⁸

Tytenko's brief period of national service in the Soviet army coincided with the events in Nagorny Karabakh during 1988, in which Soviet troops were sent into Erevan after a pogrom by Azerbaijanis of the Armenian population of Sumgait.⁹ The ethnic conflict involving Nagorny Karabakh, an Armenian enclave within the Soviet republic of Azerbaijan, was symptomatic of the ways in which many unresolved ethnic issues surfaced during the disintegration of authoritarian Soviet power under Gorbachev. In response to this, only two years later in 1990, the Lviv Regional Organisation of RUKh (Popular Movement for Restructuring Ukraine) were to call for the demilitarisation of society and for military service to be done on Ukrainian soil.¹⁰

⁸ Bohdan Nahaylo, *The Ukrainian Resurgence*, C. Hurst & Co., London, 1999, pp.59-61, 74-6, 109-114, 129.

⁹ Geoffrey Hosking, *A History of the Soviet Union 1917-1991 (Final Edition)*, Fontana, London, 1992, pp.474-5

¹⁰ Nahaylo, p.190.

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In 1989, the year that Tytenko started work at the State Art Studios – where he still works today – the newly appointed Secretary of the Communist Party of Ukraine announced: ‘We are entering a new era’.¹¹ So it proved to be. In the same year, the Central Committee of the Ukrainian Communist Party published a decree emphasising the need to develop the national culture and language of Ukraine, with the vain hope of controlling the political activities of the intellectuals – poets, writers, artists, philosophers and historians – who were the prime movers in RUKh.¹² The process of transformation was, however, unstoppable.

Already the Soviet doors to culture were more open to the West than they had ever been. This had been indicated by the Sotheby’s auction of contemporary Soviet art in Moscow during 1988. By 1990 more artists, including Tytenko, were being exhibited abroad, a prospect hitherto unthinkable since the closing of the so-called ‘Iron Curtain’ after World War II. Within Ukraine the struggle for genuine independence from the USSR moved into a new stage early in 1990, with the formation of a human chain between Kyiv and Lviv and the ‘singing demonstration’ in Kyiv in January, both organised by RUKh as protests against Soviet power.¹³ By the end of December 1991, the Soviet Union had been dissolved and Ukraine had been launched as an independent state.

Tytenko’s move into the British art market during 1995, coincided with the establishment of a new Ukrainian constitution, based on the French presidential democracy model, and serious concern, supported by the IMF and World Bank, with the reorganisation of Ukrainian politics and society on this democratic model. Today, Ukraine has a new identity within the West, as potential political partner and maybe eventually a member of the EU. The

¹¹ Ibid., p. 181, 230.

¹² Ibid., p.165.

¹³ Oksana Schafer, ‘The Ukraine’, in David Elliott & Bojana Peyjic, eds, *After the Wall Art & Culture in Post-Communist Europe*, Moderna Muzeet, Stockholm, 2001, vol.1, pp.202-3.

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works of Tytenko invite us to look optimistically into the light of this new society and recognise the personal values that we share.

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