



Yelena Popova interviewed
by Ellen Mara De Wachter on
22 June 2012

Ellen Mara De Wachter: There is a beauty and harmony to your canvases, which on a superficial level might seem at odds with some of the topics you address in your video works. Can you talk about the relationship between your 2-D work and your video work, which has addressed topics such as the nuclear disaster near your home town in the Urals, an unnamed place dedicated to research and development of atomic technology for military applications; or the market and human economies related to the production of coal in the United Kingdom and China?

Yelena Popova: This is a current question: to what extent can art be political? I think that painting cannot be politicised or it will immediately turn into a propaganda poster. The practice of painting can be political, but not the object itself. Painting is my main interest but I'm also interested in a very specific political aspect – the visibility of things. Which is the most painterly aspect of politics, isn't it? Painting operates on a different wavelength to my cinematic video essays you're referring to. Somebody mentioned that my voice in the video is soft and comes close to the same register. The conversation within my painting is very specialized and narrow. It refers to Russian Constructivism, Minimalism and some contemporary (mostly female) abstract painters (Tomma Abts and Tauba Auerbach for example). A lot of attention is given to support, surface and the material of paint itself, I'm a 'linen geek' and I mix my own paint. Making video work allows me to step outside the laboratory of the painting studio and interact with the world around me, allowing my social life and interests to enter my practice too. I've had so many moving conversations with all sorts of people (Russians, British, Americans, Germans, Japanese) about my video *Unnamed* (2011) for example. People shared their stories and thoughts with me about uneasy subjects such as the Cold War or radioactivity. However, the

core themes of my videos are very similar to the themes my paintings deal with on a very formal level: transparency, materiality and visibility.

EMDW: What about female painters you've mentioned? Is it really mostly female painters you relate to?

YP: A few years ago I listened to Katharina Grosse speaking on a Tate podcast. She was talking about painting saying: 'love is physical thinking, thinking with the body, and painting is a very similar bodily act, as the painter thinks with her body'. Male and female bodies are different and male and female touch is different too. I'm interested in this female sensibility.

EMDW: For this project you have also created a website which people can access with their smart phones by using a QR code, which is exhibited in the gallery, as if it were a work in its own right. I was intrigued by the image you've sent for this leaflet: the MacBook posing in front of the camera has an anthropomorphic quality, watching us and capturing what is behind it.

YP: Did you notice: sometimes things seem not to be complete or even real if they are not online? I've felt recently that I exist and work simultaneously in two spaces: physical and digital. My connections, conversations and even the production and distribution of my work rely on the Internet. I was wondering how it could be possible to bring this aspect of my practice into the show. We could also talk about historical references here too. Russian constructivists were very interested in the relationship between humans and machines. These relationships changed dramatically over the last century: machines have become quieter, slicker, almost invisible, but powerful and indispensable. Now they are watching us and we rely on them for everything. Did I mention the deep and meaningful relationship I have with my MacBook and iPad? (Yelena makes a few stroking gestures over her iPad screen).

Also I was interested in digital space itself. There is a difference in the notion of time in digital and physical space. Digital things exist in the infinite now, there is no sense of future or past: everything is available in one click. Working with the themes of circular movement and balance I started to make short video loops that present random moments of this 'digital now', the moment just before a spectacle happens. These (looped) anticipations of a big spectacle, I thought, are quite relevant to the current London Olympic atmosphere.

EMDW: The way you move from one medium to another requires versatility, skill and coordination. Each time you approach a new mode of production, it is like learning a new language or choreography which brings with it a set of rehearsed and improvised gestures. Can you talk about your research into notions of harmony, balance and a movement, in particular in relation to the references that come out in your new works for this show?

YP: I was interested in different perspectives on balance, from Greek antiquity and Chinese philosophy to the Bauhaus teaching on harmony. Previously, I've looked at the dangerous balancing act of the Cold War; the constructivist architectural approach to painting was always present in my work where all elements are balanced on a 3-D principle, determined by their mass, shape and gravity.

I was trying to find a metaphorical equivalent to the practice of painting in sports whilst listening to the radio talking Olympics. The figure of the discus thrower came to mind. If we take the movement of the discus thrower as an abstracted metaphorical act – the painter does the same thing really. It's the combination of a circular movement, of balance and force. The painter spins within a circle (of painting's history), projecting the work (discus) as far as possible: there is always a wish to paint

a painting you have not seen before. The work (discus) develops and moves forward through circular repetition, balancing on that rotation. Well, it's hard to explain, but I felt comradeship with the discus thrower and I went to see Myron's sculpture *Discobolus* in the British Museum. There's another analogy to painting here: Myron's sculpture is as 2-D as a painting. It's supposed to be seen from one fixed position. Have you ever seen the sculpture from behind? And his face looks rather sad too. But the reason it was chosen to be an emblem for the London Olympics in 1948 is because discus throwing is a balance-centred sport. They say that the discus thrower develops all groups of muscles equally, unlike other sports. The first post-war Olympic Games in London in 1948 was about (political) balance – 'the important thing is not winning but taking part, the essential thing in life is not conquering but fighting well'.

EMDW: Your work encompasses a number of different practices, which address various formal and conceptual areas. You are a painter and you make videos. Recently you've started working in a more sculptural way to create installations with your paintings and you've even made 'online installations'. With this approach, there is sometimes a tendency to bring various practices into a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total artwork, which synthesises different disciplines and embraces a multitude of different media. This holistic approach to making work seems to be something that interests you; is this because you feel it enables a constant renegotiation of your own abilities, or because a multiplicity of activities can communicate idea and feeling better than a singularity, or is there another reason why you are interested in this way of making work?

YP: I see the multitude of different media as an active space where everything is connected. Different media are

gateposts leading to the same territory. I often feel, mostly under the pressure of making 'new work', that I need to move the gatepost further, to extend this territory. I'm not interested in making single objects, but in creating a complex network of facts, fictions, emotions, gestures, materials and images, which could relate to the world outside it.



Artist's presentation
Yelena Popova
Thursday 12 July, 7pm

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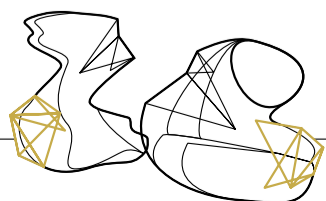
Yelena Popova: *Olympic Throw*
Reverse: studio shot, June 2012
Courtesy the artist
www.discusdiscourse.com

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Opening times
Thursday–Sunday, 12–6pm
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