

Anna Berezovskaya



Anna Berezovskaya, **Sea Battle**, 2017, oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm. All images: Courtesy of the Artist and Red Sea Gallery.

Voyages

By Ian Findlay-Brown

Fantasy and reality are at the heart of Russian artist Anna Berezovskaya's paintings. Viewing her work is always a great pleasure as her complex narratives challenge our imaginations in broad social, psychological, historical, and artistic terms. We engage affectionately with her artworks as one does with old friends and acquaintances.

Berezovskaya is a keen observer of the world, of its idiosyncrasies and of its orthodoxies, its emotional turmoil and generosity of spirit. In her various series she tries always to offer us more narratively and visually than before, which lends her art a finely layered authenticity as well as making scenarios in which the familiar and the impulsive, the heroic and the mundane, the past and the present are fluid partners.

The artist has often preferred to make works in series, not only because this fixes her firmly within her narratives but also because she feels that to work in series is an excellent way through which to see how her ideas can be opened up, explored, developed, and refined. The fundamental impetus of the work may initially be set out in a drawing or a sketch, through which she harnesses her wealth of detail: there are no inessential details here, for as she has noted, "My

works make sense, and are always connected with the heroes of my paintings."

It is at this stage, too, that Berezovskaya addresses the question of color she will use in her painting. At the end of the drawings she makes color sketches. "Color is very important to me, as it has a very important emotional role." And like color, for Berezovskaya improvisation is also central to the making of her paintings. As she says, "I stretch the canvas on the frame, draw on the canvas, and then I start to paint based on the prepared sketch and intuition. I improvise a lot, but improvisation is good only when it is prepared." Ideas on which colors to use, and how theatrical her visual sweep will be when her plans become a fully realized painting that speaks to her concerns are difficult to say: it is constant awareness of her material and research and how she improvises that have given her an astonishing command of her art making. When everything comes together, Berezovskaya's tales have a profound emotional impact on her audiences.

One senses a great deal of this in her attention to detail across her oeuvre but also in the processes of realizing individual pieces. *The Game* (2018), *The Kiss* (2018), *Cheesecake* (2017), *Picnic in the Autumn-Winter Forest* (2017), *Hot Woman* (2018), and *Cherry Garden* (2017), six



Anna Berezovskaya, *Bell for a Cat*, 2017, oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm.

dynamic, passionately colored, and meticulously detailed paintings speak to this. Here the artist plays not only with color and line, action and reaction, order and disorder, but also shows herself to be a master manipulator of humankind's personal dramas brought into the public space. It is in compositions such as these that we are aware of just how she dreams of myriad flexible pasts whose numerous styles are adroitly interwoven into intriguing presents where new dramas are knitted together from her generous materials, observations, and research.

Her recent work, in this appropriately titled exhibition *Voyages*, continues to speak to many times and places, many states of mind and emotions, passions and love: viewers familiar with her earlier work will readily connect with her new paintings. One work that exemplifies Berezovskaya's surreal magic of voyaging is the cheerful, poetic, and extravagantly detailed painting entitled *Sea Battle* (2017). An elegantly attired young woman luxuriates in her bath, looking at the viewer looking at her, surrounded by a range of exotic birds, fish, bottles, food, coral, shells, models of multi-rigged sailing ships, and food: a white shower curtain is an incongruous backdrop beside the bath. Through the open window a



Anna Berezovskaya, Cherry Garden, 2017, oil on canvas, 75 x 160 cm.

town rolls away into the distance, fluffy white and turquoise-blue sky beckon the traveller onwards. The whole scene is one of the promise of travel, the thrill of new places, fresh human contact, and escape from the cacophony of one's quotidian reality.

Overall one feels that her recent work is smaller and less extravagant not just in size but also in narrative: yet it is no less dramatic than those of just four or five years ago, which makes them, to me at least, more personal. Context and content are beautifully controlled, which draws the viewer more quickly into the narratives.

In psychological and physical situations Berezovskaya remains questioning of the world and humankind's place, insinuating answers but not quite providing them. Rather through her narratives she encourages us to think of responses that will lead to fresh revelations on living, love, loss, and play. Lovely examples in *Voyages* are the moody *Dressmaker's Island* (2017), the surreal *Bell for a Cat* (2017), the edgy *Hot Woman* (2018), *The Kiss* (2018), *Sea Battle* (2017), and the brooding *Sound of the Sea* (2017). Each

work here is reserved, multi-layered, demanding of attention and appreciation for the quality of their singular narratives. Such work highlights how Berezovskaya's art is, by turns, elegantly poetic, melancholic, and dramatic, but never dull.

There is a winning edgy drama in her psychologically taut works entitled

Medusa (2016), *Birthday Together* (2017), *Bell for a Cat* (2017), and *Dedication to Jackson Pollock* (2018). One stops in front of these works for some time to enjoy the candour of her vision. Though these paintings are among the most direct of Berezovskaya's tales, less overtly dramatic and busy, they are as psychologically and



Anna Berezovskaya, Hot Woman, 2018, oil on canvas, 100 x 150 cm.

visually challenging as her more extravagant works here including *The Kiss* and *The Game* (2018); in these paintings the artist draws together a number of symbols and characters that appear in other works: the blindfolded man and intricate hairstyles that suggest the female cultures of Central Asia.

In *Medusa* the long-necked, porcelain-colored Medusa, whose head of writhing multi-colored snakes dominates the picture plane, is caught between the demons of the archaic world and the modern. Her wide-eyed face stares out at the world as her nimble fingers braid her venomous snakes. There is an ominous tone to this piece. The range of stone faces arrayed behind her—for as the legend goes, any man looking upon face of Medusa will be turned to stone—reinforces this menacing tone. There are richly varied and sometimes disturbing feminist and Freudian interpretations of Medusa's power that remain firmly fixed in the modern mind and which continue to inform the fears of men.

While there is a definite sense of alienation in *Medusa*, the feeling in *Birthday Together* is one of unity: a red-haired couple is relaxed on floating platform at their table, beneath an



Anna Berezovskaya, *Medusa*, 2016, oil on canvas, 80 x 90 cm.

enormous moon. On the table is a large birthday cake, which is about to be eaten. The water on which the couple's

platform floats is dark, menacing; a solitary sharp-toothed fish sticks its head out of the water, its large teeth crowding its open mouth: waiting for morsels of cake, or perhaps for the couple to fall into the water. Around the couple are various personal items, from shoes to a hat. They crane their necks to look at the large moon above them, mesmerized by its close presence. The birthday cake has one slice cut from it. While Berezovskaya has noted, "for complete happiness you need [only] a small island and great love," this work, for me, is tinged with the sadness perhaps of longing to realize something in the relationship that is not there, something that has eluded them for a long time and which they believe may only be found in celebrating this special day on their tiny, precarious floating island gazing at the moon.

Bell for a Cat (2017) is lovingly informed by the surreal. In this work a long, slim, stocking-clad, S-shaped body of a beautiful naked woman with a bizarre hairstyle, reminding one of a weapon of war, dominates the picture plane. Even as there is an intriguing array of *trompe l'oeil*, realistic objects and a fine-haired cat around, it is difficult to move one's gaze away from the woman who is sipping coffee from a tiny cup. The same is true for the woman in *Dedication to Jackson Pollock* (2018). The abstract-expressionist painted dress the woman wears is a quirky homage to Pollock, and with the shoes and hairstyle the works references other



Anna Berezovskaya, *Dedication to Jackson Pollock*, 2018, oil on canvas, 110 x 110 cm.



Anna Berezovskaya, **Birthday Together**, 2017, oil on canvas, 100 x 150 cm.

social eras. In her right hand is a large palette on which there are colors waiting to be mixed. The abstract-expressionist dress here is mirrored in *Medusa*, as is the quietness of the figure. This painterly stillness and quietude is also caught by Berezovskaya in the tiny paintings above the right-hand shoulder of the woman. The tiny works speak to the art of Andrew Wyeth (1917–2009), Norman Rockwell (1894–1978), and, to my mind, Edward Hopper (1882–1967), among others. These works are witnesses to the care that Berezovskaya takes in building her narratives. At first, it may not be obvious but the exquisitely detailed and quite surreal piece *Dressmaker's Island* would be easily recognized by Wyeth, Rockwell, and Hopper as a common companion to their own works that are possessed by the unique

qualities of the dream. Berezovskaya's vision ranges across time and among artist as distinctive as Brueghel, Giotto,



Anna Berezovskaya, **The Kiss**, 2018, oil on canvas, 130 x 130 cm.

Caravaggio. Jackson Pollock, Botticelli, and Herluf Bidstrup (1912–1988), the eminent Danish cartoonist. “Herluf Bidstrup caused me laughter and joy; Caravaggio fascinated me with biblical stories,” Berezovskaya recalls.

Anna Berezovskaya is used to travelling in time and across cultures, revealing her real and imagined adventures: it is these that lend her *oeuvre* its continuous vigor. Sometimes it is a romantic moment like that of the two people in *The Kiss*, suspended in the air across a broad chasm, touching lips and cheek momentarily, as if it were to be their final moment of intimacy. The beautifully dressed man and the woman are like giant puppets masterfully held up in space by unseen people whose hands seem too delicate

to hold them. The whole scene is a fragile one that might at any moment end in disaster, dropping the protagonists on top of the bottles and objects below.

Works such as *Cherry Garden* and *Picnic in the Autumn-Winter Forest*, varied in their soft colors, are reminiscent of the great European and Russian masquerade balls. And they also recall pageants in which there was dancing and the great pleasure in being free, as well as special theatrical events. Here under water or on tiny sandy dune realism jostles with the surreal train, historical archetypes move in time with symbolic animals and birds, the abundance of food embarrasses, animals are sturdy, fish are free, and an astonishing range of costumes speaks to an inconceivable opulence existing, for the most part now, only in paintings and fine tapestries.

Picnic in the Autumn-Winter Forest and *Cherry Garden*, which reminds me of Japanese culture, are rich in symbolism, as the artist points out “all the



Anna Berezovskaya, *Dressmaker's Island*, 2017, oil on canvas, 70 x 70 cm.

details for me are very important for revealing the images of the main characters ... Many foods [in my art] symbolize prosperity; keys are symbols of the discovery of something forbidden. The steam locomotive symbolizes forward motion.” The clothes are of China, Japan, and Europe, and of the wealthy and the poor, which adds something magical to her vision, one that speaks to an intriguing bridging

color, movement and stillness, and balances in her abundance that are sometimes critically serious and, at other times, deeply amusing. It would be hard to ask for more. Δ

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Anna Berezovskaya, *Picnic in the Autumn-Winter Forest*, 2018, oil on canvas, 75 x 160 cm.