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NATACHA IVANOVA “The Saga of the Bandits and Angels”

НАТАША ИВАНОВА “САГА БАНДИТОВ И АНГЕЛОВ”

Opening March 2nd, 2011 from 6 pm to 8.30 pm
Exhibition from March 2nd till April 30th



Let's shut the door. In the bluish light of the cell, the bodies are blue, too. Seventeen men are waiting for you. Cramped, despite the huge format of the new triptych “Brothers” devised by Natacha Ivanova. A woman dominates them, imperious, blind and almost naked. They patiently wait in silence for something vague, between prayer and threat.

They each form a *tableaux vivants*, stranger than they are dire. Their tattoos are one-colored. This line made with a razor in Russian jails unites them in one and the same suddenly universal tone, in the same unisex family, prisoner of this underworld. Like the hordes of

penitents awaiting the last judgment on a desolate crag in the old masters, artists who were still afraid of the wrath of God. The portrait is one of Natacha Ivanova's main themes: she is a painter fiercely in love with grand painting, the history of its pictorial techniques, and its iconographic codes, heir to the fine lessons of the Northern School. Over the years, this young native of St. Petersburg, has lost nothing of her wild imagination, or her hand, which is so confident, daring, and delicate. A marriage of opposites, as in children's tales, which has already given birth to haunted, melancholic frescoes, filled with “Nurses” (2008) and young men in uniforms, undergoing the discipline of the parade ground “The Soldiers” (2007). For her third solo show, with Valérie Cueto—the second at Cueto Project in New York-- Natacha the Russian sets off on the warpath like a prisoner secretly fighting and expressing herself come what may against the order of things. The artist plunges body and soul into an imposed figure, which she chooses from among the hardest, interprets it very freely, and transfigures it with all its symbolist power.

“What interested me in the ‘Russian criminal tattoos’ listed in two volumes by Danzig Baldaev, is not the glorification of the criminal or the pictorial art lurking in tattoos. It’s the human figure. The body, which becomes language *per se*, fascinates me”. With her, no fascination with brute force, like David Cronenberg’s ultra-virile killers in *Eastern Promises* (2007). Gentleness, something languid, and abandonment like the sinner’s between crimes and punishments. A certain pride at existing in the face of, and in spite of, everything, metaphor of youth and freedom. A meaningful nostalgia caught by the direct confrontation between subject and painter. A sense of unfinishedness which gives these *Brothers*, on the face of it accursed, the ethereal character of angels, those beings akin to people, and yet alien to them.

“A very large format is always an event, a decision, the act which calls for the most courage from an artist. It’s like talking out loud”, says this painter from another time who feels she is “more of a monumental soul than a miniaturist”. She attended classes at the Hermitage School, then at the Beaux-Arts in Paris. This time she has doubled the wager of the large format by imposing upon herself the technique peculiar to icon painters, so as to give these prisoners an unreal flesh, bluish like El Greco’s in some cases, pink and fleshy like Rembrandts in others. Each prisoner was first drawn with very hard brown outlines, detailing each tattoo. Then covered with a dark greenish layer, “so that the flesh then comes out pinker, the way the Renaissance painters liked it”. Making referenced to sacred icons to emphasize the prisoners’ melancholy, depicting bandits the way saints were portrayed, in an entirely coded way, “this is a deliberate contradiction, the most radical way of getting away from stereotypes and anecdotal descriptions”, says the artist of worlds gone astray and stubborn visions, one of the rare brave ones who has not turned her back on the easel in favour of contemporary installations.

From her love for group portraits has come the idea for this triptych, where each body is in motion, where the uniformity of the austerity underscores the identity of each figure, where sensuality springs forth from the squeezed rigor of the whole. Cold, detached sensuality, as in the dream, the shift from one state to another, from life to eternity. In the second triptych, *Transition*, the superb draped back of the central motif has a slightly menacing beauty which calls to mind the *femmes fatales* of David Lynch’s films, where the hereafter is always somewhere at hand. The picture, a monumental one, is at once intimate and intimidating through its juxtaposition of different frames and tempos.

The picture is a kind of film still, of the most contemporary sort, but in the tradition of the great Dutch pictures of the guilds and their impeccable dignitaries standing at attention. The first image that struck the painter? A group of women. “Painting is my refuge, more than ever. In it, I can do anything. My prisoners talk about the things in me that are the most raw, the most direct, the most honest and the most cruel, too”. The Ancients would agree.

Valérie Duponchelle (Translated from the French by Simon Pleasance & Fronza Woods)