

Yuriy Yegorov. Paintings

Richard Dyer

The Black Sea is transformed into the mercurial opalescence of a nacreous globe, turning away into the late afternoon shimmer of a setting sun. The sea is as much a character in the work of Yuri Yegorov as the caryatid-like women and simple fishing boats; calm and sparkling like a shower of pearls, or vigorous and turbulent, riffled by waves, it functions as an archetypal glyph for the force of nature. The women in Yegorov's paintings also fulfill a symbolic or mythic function, their solidity and stature alluding to the ancient stone statues found in the countryside of the Ukraine, figures which embody the presence of the mother goddess of pre-Christian religions, a goddess of the earth and the seasons, denoting the cycles of birth, death and regeneration.

There may be superficial resemblances in Yegorov's work to the early Blue, Rose and neo-Classical periods of Picasso's oeuvre - with his stout women and classicised poses - but a much closer resonance is found in the work of Balthus. In particular Yegorov's interiors with a single standing figure have a great affinity with many of Balthus' similar compositions such as *The Moth* of 1959 and *Nude in Profile* of 1977. Both share the same frieze-like patterning of space and simplified forms, but whereas Balthus' nudes smoulder with a pungent and dangerous eroticism, Yegorov's women achieve a balanced and serene poise, the often elongated figures reminding one of the stately Virgins of El Greco. The model may have been his wife or daughter but these figures stand for all women, they are not so much portraits as portrayals of the essence of the feminine.

A prominent member of the Odessa Group, Yegorov's work is well known and collected throughout the former USSR and in Europe and America. He first showed in London ten years ago at the Red Square Gallery where his work received an enthusiastic response. Now in his seventies Yegorov has demonstrated that there is no weakening of his command of his chosen medium. The work in this exhibition demonstrates his continuing mastery of the fundamental elements of painting: space, light, colour, structure, symbol and surface.

There is a new clarity and simplicity in the recent work, a coherent rendering of the lucid light of his native Odessa. Subtle greys and muted blues and browns are played off against vibrant primary hues and succulent oranges and greens. In the still-lives the repeated appearance of the six-sided conic object and the abstracted spheres of the fruit remind us of Cezanne's dictum about reducing all forms to the cylinder, the cone, the sphere and the cube.

The pictorial space is flattened in the still-lives by tipping the surface of the table towards the viewer, the same mechanism we find at work in the paintings of Braque and Picasso during the late cubist period. In the seascapes the same flattening of space is achieved by placing the horizon at the very top of the picture, this has the effect of privileging the surface of the painting over any evocation of illusionistic space. This modernist concern is further reinforced by the tactile application of the paint in a thick and sensual impasto, drawing attention to the surface. It is the pictorial space rather than the depicted space, which is important to the artist, and it is these concerns which place Yegorov's

oeuvre firmly in a modernist tradition stretching from impressionism and cubism to contemporary artists such as David Hockney and Lucian Freud.

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