

Yuriy Yegorov. Memories

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I first heard the name Yuri Yegorov in 1978. I was a first-year graphic art student and had begun wondering who the best artist was in Odessa. To my surprise, most everyone I asked – people of different generations and aesthetic persuasions – gave the same answer, a name I did not know. Even one of the workshop patriarchs, Aleksei Popov – bard of harbour cranes and turned up bows of ships, student of Osmerkin and Fraerman – said: “The strongest artist works here with me, behind the wall – Yuri Yegorov. Unfortunately, he’s mixed up with those lefties.” And before that, one of my mother’s friends, who hobnobbed with artists and was close to the Bozhiev family, told me that the best artist in Odessa was the husband of her friend Geta, who had painted a stunning portrait of her in a pink peignoir. She said that he has a very simple Russian name, which she doesn’t remember. When I asked her later if it was Yegorov, she replied: “Yes, exactly. Geta’s husband’s name is Yegorov.” And only later, when I went to the second floor of the art museum on Korolenko Street, I saw that Yegorov was the artist who painted my favourite almost naked girl – “topless” we would say today – in contre-jour, coming out of a sea that stares at the viewer, a heavy glare scattered behind her.

Then there was photographer Valentin Serov’s self-published catalogue, which along with artists whose names couldn’t be said out loud – Khrushch, Anufriev, Strelnikov, Yastreb – had a page on Yegorov. He was 15 years older on average than the others. In the photograph he was sitting on a low stool in his studio, barefoot. The grey-haired, barefooted classic.

Our drawing teacher, Valeri Arutiunovich Gegamian, who enjoyed almost unquestionable authority, disparaged Yegorov’s work: “Look at his women. It’s a desecration of plasticity.” I felt it best not to argue, though his opinion of Yegorov didn’t influence mine in the least. I was so enthralled by his paintings that I began to see many things through their prism: the sea, trees in the city park, coastal hills, women’s bodies and hair, the paintings of Titian and Giorgione. I was surprised to discover that the horizon of the sea really does seem to curve. Only later did I read about perceptual perspective. I then began to paint a round sea and grew to like applying thick slabs of paint.

I first met Yuri Nikolaevich (only after many years would he make me call him by the familiar “Yura”) in 1981, at his studio. My art history teacher, Tatiana Basanets, brought me there. At the time I had decided to write my term thesis on Theophile Fraerman. There wasn’t much written about him, but many of his students were still alive, including Yegorov, who while studying at the art college was an obvious favourite of the low-profile Odessa Parisian. Yegorov told me stories about Fraerman. About how one day he came to school, took off his fur coat, and was horrified to see that he had forgotten to put on a shirt and jacket, and was wearing his suspenders over a sleeveless shirt – the kind that today is called the “alcoholic’s t-shirt”. And about his aphorisms, one of which was “Darker in shadows, lighter in light”. And how if a student’s drawing was too contrasting, Fraerman would say: “Now make it greyer.”

I spent more time paying attention to the inside of Yegorov’s studio than to what he was saying: stacks of painted canvases, abstract sculptures, an old table for still lifes (I bought one for myself several years ago, but still haven’t used it). In that setting, his reproduction of Titian’s “Portrait of a Lady in White” on the wall seemed like one of Yegorov’s own paintings, and in the ‘90s I dissected it obsessively. Oh, and the paintings. I couldn’t tear

myself away from contemplating and experiencing his work. I was taken by their materialism, seemingly born of misery, overcome by a thick, almost stirring texture, and at the same time having an enlightened simplicity and lightness. Yegorov was talking away, and I had a date in a few minutes. Finally, stuttering out of shame, I said that I was very sorry, but I had a very important matter to see to in five minutes. Basanets was peeved and asked what the matter was. After all, she had worked so hard to get a respected and busy man to agree to meet with a snot-nosed kid like me. Nervously, I blurted out that a girl was waiting for me. Basanets called me an idiot, while Yegorov laughed and said that he would have done the same when he was twenty, and that women are no less important to the artist than art.

Two years later, so as not to defend a diploma in painting and have to produce a socialist realist piece, I decided to defend my diploma in art history. It was a manifestation of youthful exuberance. Tatiana Basanets suggested that I write about Yegorov. I agreed and set to work. I tried to analyse the syntax of Yegorov's language, his spherical space, museum range, Cézannesque statuary of characters, structure and texture, to trace the cultural reminiscences. During the process, I met with Yegorov on several occasions and each time left feeling on cloud nine. Basanets would always bring me back down to earth and deride my overly juvenile theoretical word constructions: "This is all rubbish. Remember that Yura is a romantic." Yegorov was impressed with the final text and said it was the best thing ever written about him.

And from then on, he held me in kind regard.

We didn't speak very often. In the '90s we visited each other a few times.

I remember seeing him at his only large solo exhibition on Krimsky Val Street in 1990. The country was in the midst of Gorbachev's perestroika, restrictions had been lifted, the system was collapsing. In that context, Yegorov's subtle contemplative paintings, his stoppage of time, picturesque nuances, dozens of variations of "Girl with a Flag" simply didn't read. One floor below was a large exhibition by Shemyakin; it was filled with crowds, while Yegorov's halls were empty. He sat there with his paintings, alone and downcast.

I went to see him once in the early '90s with Sergey Anufriev. Yegorov asked him everything about Moscow, what Kabakov was doing, about conceptualism. In the end he got angry: "That's the same literature I have been fighting my whole life! Where there is painting, there should be no literature!" Several years later he came to my studio and I decided to show him a series of semi-pornographic compositions with close-ups of monumental copulating genitalia, painted in a very Yegorov-esque manner. Yegorov demanded that I "get rid of this filth". I teased him: "But it's a painting. You yourself said that you are never interested in the narrative plot, it's just the cause for a painting. And now you're concentrating only on the plot." Yegorov sighed heavily and in a tired voice said: "If it was any other story... but this is the devil... if you only knew how much blood it drank from me, how much I lost because of it, how much I didn't do... This is not a situation where I can ignore the plot."

Sometime in the early 2000s, after returning from America, I bumped into Yegorov on the street. It was autumn and there was a nasty rain. He was wearing his usual grey coat and beret. I said that I was very happy to see him. Yegorov, who was then over 75, replied: "I don't understand. If you're so happy to see me, why haven't you run to the store yet?" We went to the grocery store on the corner of Grecheskaya and Ekaterininskaya streets and I

bought vodka. At the master's suggestion, we drank it in the nearest alley. Yegorov asked me if I knew why he, old enough to be my father, was drinking with me in an alley "from the bottle". No, I said. "Sasha, don't pretend," Yegorov said slyly. "You know perfectly well that there are two museum artists in Odessa – you and I." I understood that this was a figure of speech and that he probably said the same thing to other colleagues whose work he liked, but still I was blown away.

He really could have been my father. He was the same age as my mom and one year older than my dad. And his biography was the same as my father's: evacuated in 1941, joined the army in 1944, serviced aircraft, was "released" only after the death of Stalin. And he died the same year as my mother.

We last met when he was 82, several weeks before his death. It was an unbearably hot day. I bought a bottle of ice cold mineral water and went to his studio.

"Sasha, I understand that you respect my grey hair, but how about I decide," Yegorov said. He took out a bottle of cognac and we drank it. Yegorov began talking about the philosophy of existentialism.

"Marx was very naïve to believe that the main question of philosophy is about the primacy of life or matter. This is a very minor philosophical question. The main philosophical question is whether life is worth living, despite the circumstances, or whether the apogee of man's spiritual path is a voluntary exit."

He began talking about the problem of choice, about Kierkegaard, Camus, Sartre. Turns out he regularly visited the library at the art museum and scrutinized philosophical texts. He tried to argue with the authors, refute them.

Yegorov continued: "One of Kierkegaard's central arguments is about Abraham's sacrifice. How he decides to sacrifice his son, about the existential experience, about God taking away his choice... Everything's fine, and one can agree with everything that Kierkegaard writes, except there's one thing – he writes nothing about Sarah. So let's develop this. He returns home with Isaac, whom he was ready to sacrifice. The whole time Sarah knew where he was taking him, and she spent all those hours thinking that her husband was cutting up their only son like a ram. And here they've come back. How is she to go on living with him now? How will he live with himself?"

Several years ago, I read something by a Jewish religious authority saying that Sarah left Abraham after this episode. Yegorov, obviously, didn't know this.

Once the bottle was finished, we called a collector that Yuri and I both knew. When he found out that we were together, he practically demanded that we come to his restaurant in Arcadia. He even said he'd send a driver for us. Fifteen minutes later we were driving there in a white Mercedes. At Arcadia Plaza we drank cold white wine and talked for several hours. I regret that I didn't record that conversation, simply because I didn't know how to use my phone as a voice recorder. Yegorov shared many interesting and unexpected things about the time, about his colleagues: about Atsmanchuk and Fraerman, about Tsimpakov, about Khrushch, Shopin, Morozov, Basanets, about Vakhrameenko, who died in the war and nobody remembers, but whom he considers to be one of the three strongest artists of his generation, along with Atsmanchuk and himself. He was ruthless in his opinions, sometimes unfair, but he was exact in his details and formulations. For example,

when recalling his first encounter with Oleg Sokolov after returning from the army, he said: "I entered the museum on Pushkinskaya and saw a totally non-Soviet man walking towards me. I hadn't seen a non-Soviet person in such a long time that I immediately wanted to hug and kiss him, even though we didn't know each other."

He told us the story behind Krushch's "Kombed" [Committee of Poor Peasants]. When Khrushch was to be evicted from Odessa in 1968 for welfarism, he came to Yegorov and said: "Uncle Yura, write me a certificate saying that I'm not a social parasite." Fortunately, an exhibition was opening several days later, and Khrushch slapped together a painting in two days of people sitting at a table covered in bright red fabric, under a portrait of Lenin that looked very much like Khrushch. Yegorov took the painting to the exhibition and wrote Khrushch a certificate saying that he was an active member of the union of artists. This piece is now in my collection. By the way, Khrushch was the model for many of Yegorov's male figures.

He also told us about how Tetyana Yablonska lived in his Odessa studio for three days while he was away. His works made such a strong impression on her that she stayed in Odessa for another two weeks just so that she could meet him when he returned. But official Kyiv never recognized Yegorov.

There was a time when I wanted to copy Yegorov. Then I tried to not be like him. Last year I started painting homages to him.

Yegorov's works in his final years surprised me. He seemed to have washed out his view of the world. Painting that was once heavy, textured and restrained, became light and colourful. I remember Igor Gusev telling me after visiting Yegorov's studio how masterfully the 80-year-old maestro used unmixed cadmium to rhyme an apple with the nude model's lipstick.

Shortly before Yegorov's death I spoke with Mikhail Rashkovetsky about him. "I want to write about Yegorov being an existentialist," he said to me. "For decades he has been varying the same plot - 'We're departing soon.' But the question is - 'Where to?' Every painting in that cycle is the experience of the fear of death."

He knew his own worth. Yegorov once refused to take part in an exhibition because he considered one of the other participating artists to be a dilettante. "An Olympic champion should not play on the same team as a man whose only relationship to sport is that he does morning exercises."

I knew his worth too. I once called him the god of Odessa painting, and even managed to tell him that before he died. He smiled.

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Yuriy Yegorov. At the Bright Sun. Exhibition catalogue/edit. K. Filyuk, A. Dymchuk, V. Marynyuk. – Kyiv: Sophia-A, 2018