

ART HAPS

Iva Gueorguieva
BY ARTHUR PEÑA
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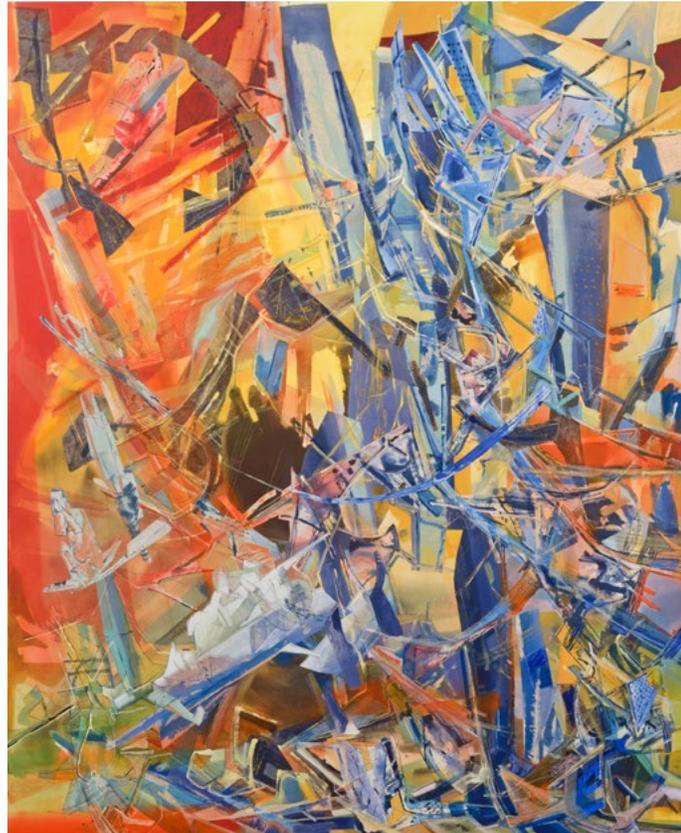
Arthur Peña: The role of history plays a big part in your work. This operates in two modes of objective history such as art historical content and the broader negotiation with our past and also the subjective history of your decisions that rest within the painting. How do you mediate between these two sets of history as content?

Iva Gueorguieva: I believe that we all carry within our flesh the memories, desires and traumas of the previous generations. There is a muscle memory that becomes alive in the act of painting and I feel it.

Then there is the history of human production of images, which is always in excess to simple necessity. The banality and cruelty of human existence become meaningful and bearable as they enter the realm of art. There is a clear aspect of magic for me. I look at everything: Navaho pottery, aboriginal rock paintings, James Castle and early Disney. However, I would say that early

20th century dada and cubism form the central intellectual crossroads for me. For me the canvases and constructions of Picasso, Shwitters and Dubuffet function as connective tissue to the history of visual response to the questions of time, the problems of simultaneity, of spatial fragmentation, or the delirium of the insane and of materiality itself. They searched for something elusive—an a priori sense of Abstraction possessed more easily by non-European cultures and I go to them again and again. Another anchor for me is Jackson Pollock. The American landscape has had the most profound intellectual and physical effect on me and I only understand that through Pollock's drip paintings. And then there is William Kentridge whose work makes me weep.

I think of my practice as a series of repetitions. The paintings evolve over the course of weeks or months and every day I struggle with the urgency to formally resolve areas of the paintings (my decisions are informed both by education and intuition) and the compulsion to paint on a separate piece of muslin and glue it rather abruptly on to the canvas. These fragments and scenes are visual responses and records of the feelings and thoughts that dominated my imagination at that particular moment. I think of the collage pieces as drift accumulations that push and disrupt the connectivity achieved in previous layers. They invade and disrupt and later become subsumed and integrated like all past stories. At some point I stop.



IVA GUEORGUIEVA, *Murmuring Swordsman*, 2013

The canvases are the result of my obsessive grappling with form, with color, and with movement. It's a tactile response set to distant rhythms, the noises of Dada performances or the taut lines that span Tatlin's sculpture, my childhood memories and war in Syria. The images of the past and present resonate loudly within my head space and my gut space. What characterizes the mediation between history and process in painting is the loss of boundary and an act of mutation.

AP: Is this "mutation" to be understood as your re-working of the surface of the painting, or does it have root in the morphing of the ideology that surrounds the work?

IG: In painting there is a gradual buildup of layers. It gives me tremendous pleasure to watch this buildup, to observe how a blue wash spills and pools around the edges of a piece of collage.

The image gradually emerges from the process of layering, but it is never stable. I am not sure if I am putting it there, rendering it, forming it, drawing it out, or just noticing its contours and accepting it. It's a bit like watching a scene in a movie where the cops are pulling a car out of a marsh. You anticipate it (there must be hundreds of scenes like it shot through the decades) and yet there is a moment when the top of the car pushes on the surface tension of the water and it's all there and yet perfectly invisible. I try to focus all of my energy on that moment where the surface can support infinite illusion and absolute physical presence. In that way I keep my ideas and expectations at bay and I am not crafting a story or meaning of any sort. It remains inexplicable to me and yet I see it. I read an interview with Dona Nelson (a close friend and my former teacher at Tyler) in which she says the following: "I try to watch a painting while I am making it. I have a friend who is very disparaging of this way of working. She says it is very female—ha, maybe so". Perhaps it is very female.

With representation it's more evident where the image is, and the image is more accessible. But even then, as with black and white photography, the image sits inside the grain of the paper. It seems to hover behind the material presence of the paper itself. When you start moving towards abstraction there is more room for ambiguity. I believe that abstraction allows access to a different type of visuality. I move from vivid images based in experience that crowd the space on the surface of my eyes...but I make the paintings with my body; I see them with my body. The mutation moves away from the space of duality, linguistic, logical, the mind versus the body, the visual versus the tactile, the personal versus the political and the surrealist versus the everyday. Your question implies a duality between the idea and the material. But the mutation I describe eludes these distinctions and renders them moot. It's all too close, too much in proximity, too inter-connected. Painting happens in that closeness.

AP: I think my question also suggests a negotiation. This negotiation may be with expectations, which you pointed to with the example of the car getting pulled out of the water or with an image that is re-presented. When this image becomes abstract then I think the negotiation is shifted away from the painter to the viewer who must come to terms with how to approach the work. Do you see your bodily relationship to your paintings and material as an entry point into the work for the viewer?

IG: There is always a negotiation. For there to be a conversation the members of this triad canvas/painter; painter/viewer; and canvas/ viewer inevitably have to bend and move towards the other in order for any kind of communication to take place. I am uncomfortable using the word "communication" here, since it implies so much of what I perceive as either evil or an utter nonsense such as, information, knowledge or meaning. I am more inclined to say "movement", a movement to and fro. Such steering of matter is life. The above triad is an occasion for a negotiation to play between our humanity and the inanimate, the ghostly.

When I picture the viewer I always see her lounging in a chair, not even turning in the direction of the painting necessarily. However, her peripheral vision caresses the surface, the colors and lines twist and writhe and pull her eye more and more towards themselves. She is now looking. Her body is trying to catch up and feel comfortable again. That never quite happens because seeing is never a state of comfort. At some point, I do think that the body of the viewer and the painter are one. That is the entry point not just to my work but any painting I have ever surrendered to.

I loved watching tango when I was a kid growing up in Bulgaria (there was not much on TV, when we had it for a few hours every day, besides Russian war movies, wrestling, folk singing and tango competition dancing). Watching tango is a revelation. There is no clear sense of which body pulls and which one follows. The precision and insanity of that dance collapses any conventional notion of individual bodies, gender, or gravity. It's in these terms that I wish to locate the relationship between the painter's body and that of the viewer. It's not just female. It's also very sexual.

AP: I'm interested in the distrust in communication you expressed. Is it tied to the manner in which we are consuming information, knowledge and meaning or the outlets and powers which are producing it?

IG: I guess I trust direct experience over passively received knowledge. I studied philosophy in college and I loved it. But when I went back to painting I had to push aside my ideas in order to open room for actual experimentation and experience. I had to learn how to paint. I loved when Stanley Whitney (my graduate school professor at Tyler) would say dismissively about a painting "Eh...too good".

There are also less personal reasons. The production, transmission and consumption of information are deeply problematic to me. One problem, but not the only one, is that the huge range of "information" leads us to overlook the systematic erasure of certain realities from its scope. I feel that many of the recent wars, financial crises, environmental disasters, etc. to a great extent rely upon the systematic erasure and distortion of reality. Another issue is the over-privileging of language and data. I love language and yet I distrust "true" words and the experts.

In the case of art, the insistence on communication over experience reduces museum exhibitions to the level of spectacle (of course under the guise of being educational and accessible), and allows conceptual art to appear as the paradigm of opposition, because it is allegedly anti-object and anti-material. The latter case is particularly interesting to me. First, I don't believe in the distinction between conceptual art and other forms. All art is conceptual. Let's take John Baldessari for example. He is the central figure in the development and institutionalization of conceptual art. His show at LACMA was a stunning and revealing experience for me. It proved that he is clearly engaged with the questions of making and the vicissitudes of the object. The attention to material, scale, color and line are as evident as they are when one looks at Vermeer. His tenderness and sensitivity to his images defies the textual narrative that dominates the theoretical reception of his work.

Another example is the reduction that Warhol's work suffers both in art history and in the greater culture. He is an incredibly complicated and deeply disturbing artist. His work is personal and political. It's vulnerable and violent. To me Warhol actually disrupts the fashionable and the slick. His seriality is an insistence. His use of pop imagery is violent. His films are utterly destructive of the efficiency necessary for the smooth flow of capital. I am not making this up. It was all so clear to me standing at the Ludwig Museum in Cologne and looking at a wall of Warhol's. I could see his work better being far away from the States and in Germany. I understood why it needs to be suffocated by texts claiming that it's otherwise than it is. I felt his work in my gut and understood history a bit better. When Warhol comes to be about concepts or information what's really powerful about Warhol disappears.

I seek out art in order to witness the movement of human thought in its idiosyncrasy and uncanniness. I don't need instruction, information, or meaning. There are no good ideas or great stories. I like the questions, the searching hand or voice, the bizarre decision, the twisted logic.

It's not that I'm pure. I consume so much art via magazines, catalogs and the internet. I scan over all this production and I know artists' names, galleries, techniques and lists of materials; I know this river of images drowning in text so well. The text has muscle. I read and accept. And later I repeat this stuff in random conversations.

But here is a vastly different experience. Last year right after hurricane Sandy I saw a show of Tal R's paintings in NYC and one work was shocking to me. "The Shlomo" is a large square painting with fields of color and interlocking planes that move your body deeper and deeper. The humming red field surrounds a huddling dark figure in the upper middle. It's a shelter but also a jail cell. There is another shape that resembles a camera whose

aperture points both towards the figure and towards the viewer. Looking, my mind rushes and my eyes touch the surface. I am both super slow and impossibly fast. I am seeing, I am being seen, I sense the dampness of the walls and the heat of red light. I am elsewhere and nowhere. I am so full of stuff and yet so light.

Robyn O'Neil's recent work has a similar effect. I am haunted by the grit of her graphite fields. The image of the red tree trunk has a hold on me even at night. I dreamt the other night that I was dragging it down a hill and desperately trying to place it over a creek. The drawings are melancholic and yet utterly resonant with the insanity of modern clutter, flux and violence.

These images won't save me but they let me drift into a state of wonder. They help me live.

AP: Your experience with art comes across as explicitly personal. I guess that is obvious in a way when we consider the subjective experience that art provides. But does this personal connection to others work carry over in your decision making in regards to your work? I'm thinking specifically of your show *Spill/Frame* at Acme in Los Angeles. The shift from a highly worked two-dimensional surface to a fully committed pursuit of a three-dimensional object doesn't read as drastic but logical, pragmatic even. Do you find yourself in situations where the work is occupying a very specific personal space yet there are other forces that push it into a completely different aesthetic experience? Is there a reconciliation that has to happen with new work?

IG: It all just takes time. It's only after the fact that I can start to think through the steps and construct some sort of story about how one work follows from another or how a significant change such as the shift to making the sculptures came about. This process is useful because I can think through and verbalize how a series of overlaps, coincidences, personal as well as wider political events and markers contribute and shape my thinking. It's useful but not necessarily the whole picture.

The paintings put their own demands on me. At Tyler I started making paintings based on battles. I loved Uccello's "Battle of San Romano" as well as Kirasawa's films. Later on in New Orleans the severity of hurricanes, the strength of rot, the violence of the Mississippi, the history of slavery or the stories of insanity, and my personal struggle with chronic pain changed the paintings. At the time, I often found myself drawing characters within the field of the thousands of marks that directly related to things I had seen or read. The difference starts to get blurred when you live down there for some time. The characters populated these shattered spaces where nothing seemed to have a ground. The paintings were done with small brushes and line dominated formally. Series of marks and clusters created a sense of dramatic and very fast motion.

The invasion of Iraq and subsequent endless war really affected the work. For example, I made a painting called "Final Vision" that was the green color of night vision images from Iraq, which were often reproduced in the Times Picayune. That was the color of reality for me at the time. The space in many of the paintings had an aerial quality.

As I look back there are themes that dominated and experiences that clearly affected the paintings. However, it's the actuality of the field of the canvas in relationship to my body on the one hand and on the other to the vicissitudes of abstract systems like geometry, seriality, and repetition that is at the heart of my practice. I have been immersed in these spaces for over a decade. Recently, the vortex motion started to break down and reveal more of the fragmentation and shard like rhythms that characterize the space in the paintings. It is a move towards more explicit abstraction. I also started to allow a greater break down of the underlying narrative and I became more sensitive to an internal and intuitive rhythms. The paintings are deeply muscular. Perhaps this story will clarify what I mean. Two years ago I traveled to NY especially to see the deKooning retrospective with my friend Liat Yossifor. After a few hours we both found ourselves in the last room with his late paintings. At some point I looked at her and I knew that we both were experiencing a profound sense of anguish. Mine however gave way to a strange relief. I reached a very clear understanding about the truth in painting looking at de Kooning's late works with their spare surfaces and graceful gestures. I knew that de Kooning was suffering from Alzheimer's at the time. I was very aware looking at the paintings that the disease was erasing his connection to narrative and memory. It was emptying out the space of the paintings. But the muscular memory in his body of the act of painting was fully intact and more powerful than ever. I saw these paintings as truly free. The late works of most great artists follow a similar distillation. I don't believe that it is a simple case of "less is more"...it's just that

the artist trusts her hand more and actually allows for that most significant question of their life-long journey to determine the course of the work. For Matisse the question is pure color and for Hopper light.

I think that over the years I stopped making images and started constructing spaces. I was always deeply aware of the physical space that separates each layer of paint. I linger there, I observe it and I touch it. The edge is both a boundary and a place of contact. Paint particles continuously shift places during the drying process, so the edges are not really static. The first step in dramatizing the edges further was the introduction of hand painted collage pieces into the paintings. The cut edge emphasizes that space. I often repeat the edge by allowing the line to caress it, miss it and appear in a different color. I use washes to obscure the physical edge under a veil of paint thereby creating perceptual confusion. As I moved deeper into that process I started to fantasize about getting in there with my whole body. The touch of my eye was not enough. That necessarily led to the need to make room between the layers by inserting the scaffolding/armature and physically pulling apart the layers. The three-dimensional construction came as a result of my need to feel the space. Now I no longer see any difference between working on the sculptures and working on the stretched canvas. I move back and forth.

As I tell this story I am aware of how much my interest in sculpture and especially Russian constructivism has influenced my relationship to painting. As I stated in the beginning I look at everything. I consume a lot of images. Certainly there are a number of artists that I come back to over and over again. Your question is leading me to consider what are the general things that attract me to particular work. Here are a few: a clearly present materiality, an exploration of painting and sculptural questions, a political position (interest in the external world), and a searching troubled eye. My connection has to be personal. I have to believe it. It is a mixture of pleasure and this back of the throat bewilderment. However, it's not just art that affects me. I believe that in some strange way we all tap into current visual moods where an image takes over our collective unconscious. For example in the early 2000s I was obsessively drawing characters in bunny suits. It was a canary in the mine type of thing. These characters signaled the state of a given situation. I was shocked when I saw Donnie Darko and encountered for the first time the scene of the giant bunny in the lawn at night. It was eerily familiar and deeply resonant. I think of these layering's as both accidental and yet absolutely necessary. The paintings in a way record everything as it intersects at any given moment both consciously and unconsciously. The inevitable editing (not everything goes into the painting) has to do with the internal and material logic that is specific to each and every painting.

AP: This idea of muscle memory in relation to gesture in your work and how you speak of de Kooning's late works suggests that the artist is merely a vessel through which muscle memory is pitted against conscious decisions. In this scenario there must be an antagonist, the thing that one must push against. At what point does the personal begin to breakdown and the decision to give into your bodily relation to the work happen? Is it an exhaustive process for you?

IG: Your question suggests a sort of binary opposition between muscle memory and conscious decision, but it's more complicated than that, and maybe the interaction to pay attention to is between muscle memory and something else that's also bodily. Conscious decision is inevitably there in the process, off and on, but what affects and pushes on memory and therefore alters each moment is all that is physically present at the time. The ambient conditions of the situation consistently affect the process; decision-making comes and goes. Earlier I was talking about how I watch as the work takes shape. This act of watching is like any other act of perception. It's not a purely ocular event. Perception involves the entire body with all of its habits and feeling, but agitated, disrupted by the particularities of the surrounding space. It's that disruption that I watch, forget and return to. Perception is discontinuous; the body and the situation engage in a more continuous dance.

I think that your work process too reveals sensitivity to the vicissitudes and character of your surroundings. You mine the studio floor and incorporate fragments and materials that are already there. You call attention to their existence and insert them into the skin of the work.

AP: Throughout our conversation you spoke of abstraction, and your paintings, in relationship to the physical space of not only the surface of the work, but how it relates to your own physicality/body. One word you have yet to use is "express(ion)." I want to ask an earnest question in regards to your belief system pertaining to abstraction as a painting language. Does the idea of "expression/expressive" still hold a place in painting? Is there,

for instance, room for love in contemporary abstraction?

IG: I like that you dared to use the word “love” in a question regarding abstraction. My friend Liat Yossfor always teases me that I make love to my paintings. I am fine with that. It is actually more vulgar than that. Painting is very sexual for me. I love when Robert Crumb tells the story in Terry Zwigoff’s documentary Crumb of how when he was a kid he was sexually attracted to Bugs Bunny and carried an image of him in his pockets until it was so wrinkled that he asked his mother to iron it, which made it fall apart completely. I think it’s very much about awkward, unrequited desire.

However, I stay away from the word “expression” because it means TOO much. When I say it out loud it feels like a sack of stones wrapped around my neck. I just don’t really believe it. The other problem I have is that I cannot say “expression” without the word “self” quickly resounding. The designation is deeply irritating.

I think about cave drawings and they are the opposite for me. There is a man, some tools and some pigment. He is making images in the dark. It’s a posture oriented towards the world around. The mark making is an attempt to reach out and touch all that evades us. It is this possibility of reaching out that interests me. Another way to look at it is as an act of practice or repetition similar to the way samurais practiced calligraphy in order to improve their swordsmanship.

Iva Gueorguieva was born in Bulgaria in 1974. She received an MFA from the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia. A solo show of her work is currently on view at Ameringer McEnergy Yohe through March 8, 2014. Gueorguieva has had recent solo exhibitions at such venues as ACME., Los Angeles, CA; Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, Los Angeles, CA; BravinLee Programs, New York, NY; Lux Art Institute, Encinitas, CA; Angles Gallery, Los Angeles, CA; Stitching Outline, Amsterdam, Netherlands; and Pomona Museum of Art, Claremont, CA. Recent group exhibitions include Galerie Lelong, New York, NY; the Contemporary Art Museum, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL; Pasadena Museum of Art, Pasadena, CA; and Dunn and Brown Contemporary, Dallas, TX. Her work is included in many public and private collections including the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; the Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minneapolis, MN; and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA. She is the recipient of the Orange County Contemporary Collectors Fellowship Award in 2012, the California Community Foundation Mid-Career Fellowship in 2010, and the Pollock-Krasner Grant in 2006. Gueorguieva lives and works in Los Angeles.

Arthur Peña is a painter and contributing writer to Arts & Culture TX, New American Paintings and ART HAPS. He is the founder/director of experimental art space WARE:WOLF:HAUS which will present George Quartz as the first band in residence this spring, and he is a co-founder of Deadbolt Studio. His solo show “slight shift, steady hand” is currently on view at the Dallas Contemporary Museum and he recently participated in the 2013 Texas Biennial. Peña received his MFA in Painting from RISD in 2012 and currently teaches at the University of North Texas and Mountain View College. He currently lives and works in Dallas, TX