

# Iva Gueorguieva: Time Present Time Past

Elizabeth Frank

Iva Gueorguieva's new paintings and sculptures virtually explode with transformative energies. To describe her surfaces as stained, brushed, cut, collaged and marked barely begins to do justice to the ceaseless, restless, searching ways in which she dips into a deep reservoir of technical skills and resources that she handles with passion and assurance.

The origins of her art lie in another world, one that has virtually ceased to exist and yet bears the traces of an ancient civilization little known in the West. Born in Sofia, Bulgaria, in 1974, when no one on either side of the Iron Curtain could register even the faintest tremor of the sudden collapse a mere fifteen years later of the Eastern Bloc's communist regimes. Gueorguieva was a visually and intellectually precocious child. Her parents recognized and encouraged her gifts. By the time Gueorguieva was two, her mother, at the time a medical student and later a pediatrician, was making up and telling her long spun-out stories without beginnings or ends, and letting her daughter look at the beautiful color illustrations and diagrams in her medical texts. The future artist loved to "bubble" the words in these books, that is, fill in, with a pen, on page after page, all the "closed" letters, such as "a" and "o" and "p" ("r" in Cyrillic). From the age of two, Gueorguieva obsessively made pen drawings of a single figure: tall, human, with buttons larger at the bottom and smaller at the top, indicating her instinctive grasp of height and proportion. A little later she loved to do UNICEF jigsaw puzzles, with their bright, complex images of art by children. She was equally taken with the natural world: the way sand looks when it's being poured from a pail, or leaves dappling the ground with light and shadow. She loved to look at patterns, the fractal-like blocks, for example, on the granite floor of a bathroom. Wallpaper mesmerized her with its repeating forms and "glitches"—sites where the wallpaper was interrupted by cuts and seams and edges, in other words, where predictable sameness was violated by abrupt difference. As a second-grader she attended an after-school program where she made large-scale collages, directly cutting the images without drawing them first.

During Gueorguieva's childhood, it's true that art was, to some extent, constrained by the doctrines and conventions of Socialist realism, what the great Bulgarian poet Valeri Petrov, in conversation some years ago with this writer in Sofia, once ironically characterized as "academic art in bad taste." Nevertheless, not every communist regime was alike, and in Bulgaria, both film and the visual arts had more wiggle-room for individual talent than is generally supposed. Of particular importance to Gueorguieva was that Bulgaria's communist regime "never tried to erase the past." Thus she grew up surrounded by Sofia's many fascinating Roman and Byzantine architectural monuments and stone fragments. Bulgarian Orthodox icons—austere, solemn, elegant, inherently abstract—could be seen in every church and monastery, including Sofia's golden-domed St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral. Color and pattern, omnipresent from time immemorial in Bulgarian folk arts, can be seen in textiles, articles of domestic use, and regional costumes worn for narodni tanci, or national dance, a living and much beloved tradition in this Balkan country.

Under communism in Bulgaria, abstract art was not necessarily forbidden. In Plovdiv, Bulgaria's second largest city and a long-established cultural center, the abstract and semi-abstract paintings of Georgi Bozhilov, known as "Siona" ("Elephant"), for the most part eluded state recognition, yet won him wide admiration in the larger world of Bulgarian culture. Even so, Bozhilov's work was not such an anomaly. Small countries can have large aesthetic aspirations. Decades before the communist government was established in Bulgaria in 1944, an accomplished tradition of both nineteenth-century academic and emerging modernist art flourished in Sofia and other Bulgarian cities. It was not unusual for Bulgarians to study abroad, in both France and Germany; landscape and portrait painting by Bulgarian artists demonstrated a thorough assimilation of the Barbizon School, Impressionism, Post-Impressionism and beyond, as in the Fauvist portraits of Bulgarian peasant women by Vladimir Dimitrov-"Maistora" ("Master," 1882-1960). As a child, Gueorguieva saw examples of his work in Sofia's National Museum of Art (once the tsar's palace). In the 1920s, communist poet and painter Geo Milev (who had studied in Leipzig and followed German Expressionism) edited the journal *Plamuk* (Flame), in which he published avant-garde poets, writers and artists from Russia, Western Europe and the United States. After Milev was garroted in 1925 during a police interrogation, the journal ceased to exist, but avant-gardism was not eradicated in Bulgaria; it merely went underground.

During Gueorguieva's childhood (and still today), Bulgarian children with recognized aptitudes were sent to specialized, prestigious high schools. Gifted in math, Gueorguieva was slated for the mathematics gymnasium in Sofia. But the teacher who ran the after-school collage program had taken note of her visual talent, and insisted to her parents that she go instead to the High School for Applied Arts. There, as a textile major, and under a teacher who was herself an established textile artist, she was introduced to implicitly "subversive" aesthetics: she saw, for instance, how the ancient designs of Bulgarian rugs were woven with abstract geometric and semi-abstract animal motifs. She saw too how textiles incorporated elements of Cubism and Bauhaus design. Wall hangings were "like paintings in yarn," she recalls.

The one clearly repressive feature of the communist regime was that for almost all ordinary Bulgarian citizens, travel abroad was severely restricted. Gueorguieva's parents were unusual in that they often traveled and worked in foreign countries. In 1985 Gueorguieva herself accompanied her father, a flight engineer, to Zimbabwe, and later to Sri Lanka. Her father went several times to Vietnam, and her parents together visited Cambodia, where they filmed the Angkor Wat temple complex. From Africa and Southeast Asia her father brought home objects that Gueorguieva found utterly enchanting. His suitcase, filled with postcards, masks, carvings and statues, were, in the words of the great Polish-Jewish writer Bruno Schulz, "redolent ... of the aroma of distant countries and rare commodities." As a child, Gueorguieva would dust these objects, and she remembers a mask "with big chunky teeth," each curve and crevice burrowing into her memory.

She remembers too her grandfather's house in a beautiful ancient village, now a suburb of Sofia at the foot of deeply forested Vitosha Mountain, the southern bookend to the Sofia plain bordered to the north by the Stara Planina ("Old Mountain"), the Bulgarian name for the Balkan range. Her grandfather had been an engineer, and he put his house together, as so many Bulgarians still do, with his own two hands and with what Gueorguieva recalls as a "hodgepodge" of materials. In fact, she observes, "This house was a three-dimensional collage that my grandfather took apart and changed continuously over the years."

Throughout Gueorguieva's childhood, her mother would take her on excursions to Rakovska Street in downtown Sofia, then as now teeming with galleries, theaters, cafes and bookstores, including the still-flourishing open-air book market, Slaveikov Square. It

was through books that Gueorguieva fell in love with the Daumier-esque drawings and caricatures of Ilia Beshkov (1901-1958) and Chudomir (1890-1967), both celebrated in Bulgaria for their visual wit and virtuoso draftsmanship.

The forty-five year Bulgarian communist regime imploded in November 1989, when Gueorguieva was fifteen. But a not-so-funny thing happened on the way to "Western-style democracy": "the complete breakdown," Gueorguieva remembers, "of an entire social and political order." People of good will, among them Gueorguieva's father, who had yearned for, welcomed, and now participated wholeheartedly in the "Democratic Changes," were appalled by the insolence, arrogance, greed, hypocrisy and corruption of the kleptocracy that swiftly took control of the country and has, in one way or another, ruled it ever since. Thousands of people fled Bulgaria in disillusionment and disgust.

So, just around Christmas 1990, Gueorguieva and her family arrived in the United States, eventually settling in Baltimore. Her English was rudimentary, but she attended the Baltimore School for the Arts, where materials and equipment were free, and she could take photography, sculpture and video as well as painting. She frequently visited the Walters Art Museum and saw for the first time Renaissance paintings, works by followers of Hieronymus Bosch, and Japanese prints. At Goucher College, rather than majoring in art, she studied philosophy, because, she explains, "I wanted to learn how to ask better questions and how to think."

Studying for a master's degree at the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia, she discovered, as she candidly puts it, that she was "behind" in her awareness of modern and contemporary art. Somehow she hadn't yet been exposed to American postwar painting—the grand sweep of Abstract Expressionism, Color Field, Minimalism and points beyond. One of her teachers at Tyler, the painter Dona Nelson, would take her students to the museums in New York, and what Gueorguieva saw was nothing short of a revelation. She took in, at just the right moment, Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, Barnett Newman, Lucio Fontana and Philip Guston, and, not to put too fine a point on it, they knocked her socks off, rocked her world. She responded to virtually everything she saw, especially Abstract Expressionist processes and aesthetics, with omnivorous curiosity and visceral understanding. With exponentially increasing sophistication she absorbed as well what her other teachers, Stanley Whitney, Margo Margolis and Frank Bramblett, imparted to her. She also followed suggestions of fellow students, among them Trenton Doyle Hancock, who encouraged her to use cartoons and caricatures in her paintings—elements put to great effect in his own work. She learned by heart the collections in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where she worked as a curatorial assistant, "spending many hours," she recalls, "looking at Duchamp's large glass and other works and the Cy Twombly Iliad paintings." She developed a number of deeply personal enthusiasms, the paintings of Warren Rohrer and the abstract geometry of Gees Bend quilts among them.

After completing her master's degree, and needing time to digest what she had learned, Gueorguieva moved from Philadelphia to New Orleans. "It was a great place to become a painter," she recalls. "I wouldn't be the artist that I have become if it hadn't been for that experience. New Orleans is the most culturally vital and alive place I have ever been." Essential though it was to her development. New Orleans turned out to be one more stop on her journey. Leaving two months before Hurricane Katrina made landfall, she eventually moved to Los Angeles, where she has lived and worked ever since. When I spoke with Gueorguieva about the activity of painting, she described to me—with irresistibly contagious wonder—how, at its most basic, painting is the creation of space out of a flat surface. "Every time the brush hits the canvas, it makes a space," she said. "And even though I know it's going to do this, every single time I put brush to canvas, I am surprised: It made a space!" As she was telling me this, one of my favorite



AMERICAN VORTEX  
ACRYLIC, COLLAGE AND OIL ON CANVAS  
87 X 71"

formulations by Hannah Arendt sprang to mind: "The one essential prerequisite of all freedom ... is simply the capacity of motion which cannot exist without space." Likely I thought of the Arendt because I've never spent time with four artists who struck me as more free. I don't mean free from societal pressures, cultural or natural forces, the burdens of history, the vicissitudes of the art world, the caprice of its market, the insidious reaches of racism and/or sexism, individual neuroses or hauntings, and so on. I mean that each has set herself astonishingly free to pursue her vision, be it over the past twenty years or the past forty, no matter what may have threatened or impeded its full expression along the way. I stand impressed and inspired, not to mention newly committed to following suit.

As for the show's title, "Making Sense," the artists with whom I spoke took pains to distance themselves from any implied enterprise of logic-making. I doubt they would feel the same way, however, were the title interpreted to mean something like "inventing sensation." For while these artists are very smart—in some cases downright brainy—their work never substitutes interesting ideas for material exploration or visceral effect. Perhaps Feinstein speaks for them all when she talks about her desire to make something more complex, more visually compelling—be it via bewilderment, seduction, overwhelm, impudence, or affliction—than "sense-making" or intellectual proposal alone achieves. "How could I make what was an already complicated condition into even a slower read, making it a more vexing experience than it already was?," she asks. "By trying to engage with the question visually. Who am I to make a painting about this? Agency is the answer to this: I am the artist." They are the artists, indeed. What luck to have them not only gathered together for this blast of a show, but also leading the way with such audacity, curiosity, and virtuosity into the unknowable, often unnerving future of both art and human history.

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Gueorguieva has never looked back. Like so many millions before her, she has gone through the archetypal transformation that turns an Immigrant into an American. Yet from Bulgaria she brought with her an incalculable and inexhaustible treasure: the seething, churning, fermenting compost of memory and image that has only grown richer over time with the constant admixture of all that has happened to her since she left her native land, particularly postwar American art. In their extraordinary, exuberant and even riotous "muchness," her works bear witness to a probing sensibility given to rigorous problem-solving and powerful expressive urgencies informed by a deeply knowledgeable art-historical consciousness. Yet this consciousness is not, as it was with high modernism, the actual subject of her work. Indeed, what distinguishes Gueorguieva's second exhibition at Ameringer | McEnery | Yohe is not simply her brilliant and continuing grasp of modernist abstraction in both her paintings and sculptures, but the self-trust with which she allows feeling to hold sway. She has found the perfect fit between her emotion and the material techniques and conceptual resources of American painting from 1945 to the present. Yet her work manages to remain not only completely free but actually indifferent to the "formalist" dogmatism of the 1940s through the 1970s. Instead of subordinating herself to the then-vital but now-tedious prescriptions and prohibitions of the Ab Ex paradigm, she swims like a dolphin in the possibilities of various modes of abstraction for the sake of her own interior imperatives alone. The modernist "rules" insisted on reductiveness, "flatness," the rejection of illusion and the privileging of the "framing edge." But we can see in the show's centerpiece, the suite of four recent 80 x 80 inch paintings (Detroit Phone Book, Morning View, Suitor and Wave) that

her work is joyously additive and proliferative, with countless hints of illusionism and perspective playing through the interstices of deep and shallow space, and visual incident that appears to continue beyond the so-called framing edge. In the sharp-edged, sometimes glass-like piles of "shards" within her paintings, we witness her engagement with the fractured and fragmented facet planes of Analytic Cubism, interrupted with hints of figuration, as in the insertions of an evocative Matissean female figure in the lower register of *Suitor* or the witty little picture-within-a-picture on the upper right of *Morning View*; yet she is not so much involved with breaking down pictorial logic as she is with interweaving visual fugue and counterpoint. Her free-associative, stream-of-consciousness and "automatic" gestures evoke Surrealism as they travel from one passage to the next, suggesting something approaching narrative but stopping short, as serious abstraction does, of actual reference. In the stained canvas areas of her painting—the color often delicate, almost transparent—she acknowledges the diaphanous seductiveness of Color Field technique, but she always slams it up against her fierce need to draw, to define contours, indicate edges and inscribe marks without necessarily delimiting closed shapes, her drawing sometimes tending toward a cartoony Basquiat-like vernacular that thumbs its nose at "high-art" pretentiousness.

Above all her paintings and sculpture seem to fuse her personal history—the space of memory, desire, and even violent, angry, destructive emotion—through her ongoing immersion in modern and contemporary "issues." When she paints cut strips of cloth that she pastes to the canvas, her response to Cubism fuses with her early experience with collage, and in this sense she is "in" her painting as surely Pollock was, with total physicality and presence.

Her paintings and sculptures are always in motion. Every stroke, every line, every drip and accent and cloud of color moves in multiple directions and turns into something else, as if churned by great winds. Whether tilting, floating, sinking, rising—often doing all of these in one painting—her visual vocabulary achieves a complex integration in which she welcomes conflict, as if different voices within her work were contesting each other for dominance. Again and again stained, collaged and drawn passages (and this holds true for her sculptures as well, with their conscious engagement with Tatlin and Constructivism) enact a polyphonic battle of visual opposites: What is soft, melting and curvilinear rides up against what is sharply defined, finely edged and enclosed. Occasionally a cartoon-like figure appears and almost dissolves and then reasserts itself as in the near-grisaille surface of *Dual Ablutions*, where a sensual De Kooningesque shape is possibly holding a smaller figure (perhaps a mother and child?) within the angled planes and the soft warm grays and beiges of this tender, human-scale work.

We can detect as well in her paintings, in fleeting analogies, the Surrealism of Matta and Masson, the sublime grandeur of Still and the sexual, organic vocabulary of Gorky—another immigrant from a land that, like Bulgaria, lies uneasily at the crossroads of East and West. Gueorguieva's biomorphism, however, is always offset by the assertiveness of the geometric angles, lattices, ladders, and hatchings that interrupt and counter the floating haze and blur of her softer passages.

In the studio, she works on multiple paintings at once, and at different stages, so that she can take advantage of every shifting mood. She lets nothing go to waste, as it were. The total configuration of a Gueorguieva painting or sculpture is both a physical and psychic palimpsest, layering over and simultaneously revealing the multi-dimensionality of her feeling and process. Her surfaces conjure up bodies and body parts, aggressive and tender physicality, eroticism, aggression—the range of human emotion. A woman's breasts, a suckling child, a hint of the phallic: All swim in the oceanic plenitude of her imagery, which can instantly turn into menace and threat—the broken, the collapsed, the knife-edged, the weapon-like. The rhythms of "creative destruction" and unstoppable emergence—like those in Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*—can be felt in

passages that seem to pound and throb with primordial forces. The scale of a painting may shift internally: multiple clusters of small, sharply drawn forms are enveloped by lunging curves, pillars, big structural anchors that suggest the heroic and the monumental, shifting configurations that evoke interior, psychic cities tumbled and churned by whirlwinds of line and color.

At the same time she includes islands of tranquility or even isolation within, under or beside piles of tumultuous disturbance. A volcanic passage erupts and spews a lava-like cascade of shapes, then subsides to pools of gray and violet serenity. In this way the kinesthetic also becomes the synesthetic: "When I look at dance, I see drawing," Gueorguieva explains. And when she draws, the viewer sees and feels dance. In her sculptures, for instance *Swindler* and *Saw Ripple*, the physicality of the armature suggests the human skeleton, the way the vulnerable, ingenious body is put together with bones and joints and encased with skin that can be both cut and bandaged.

A painting may start with a simple mark on a canvas, but she sees each one through to its own self-articulated conclusion and answers its every call, no matter where it leads her—into paradox and contradiction and ambiguity, if need be. Hers is a totalizing vision, inclusive, encyclopedic, rejecting nothing. Bringing together her past world with her present one, finding no impulse of hand or eye and therefore no part of a painting too small or unimportant to leave unworked, tolerating and even welcoming breaks, interruptions and disjunctions, she gives her work the absolute freedom to be itself, endowing it with boundless vitality and uncompromising aesthetic necessity.

That she has the courage of her epic imagination hardly needs saying. And she isn't even out of her thirties.

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