



Anna Berezovskaya, Wade, 2013, oil on canvas, 80 x 200 cm. All images: Courtesy of the Artist and READSEA Gallery, Singapore.

# A Gardener Of Time

*In a world where all societies are under constant social and political change, the art of Anna Berezovskaya is an antidote to cultural angst and identity crisis. This young artist weaves time and place together in a closely observed tapestry of human activity that is frequently surreal as well as rich in historical and contemporary symbolism. Through her art Berezovskaya addresses humankind's rich singular voice, individually and collectively, that speaks to a yearning for a fresh, spirited world.*

By Ian Findlay



Being in the presence of paintings by the young Russian artist Anna Berezovskaya is to be embraced by an abundance of unique narratives that speak across time and place, showing us bountiful worlds in which all things are set upon their heads. While these are touched by surrealism, naturalism, realism, symbolism, and hyperrealism they are also informed by the potent mix of the elements of the folk tale, elegiac poetry, and the psychological thriller, which is appropriate given the artist's love of literature and the theatrical. At the same time, Berezovskaya's art is driven by a strong desire to make viewers appreciate the uniqueness of the world and its myriad uncommon associations and eccentrics. The vibrancy of the natural order of things, she is saying in the works of her exhibition entitled *An Enchanted Story*, is to be found not in a dull, stable world but in a topsy-turvy world, one in which life is full of surprises and myriad questions, joy and sadness and a visceral passion for living.

As an articulate observer of her worlds, both the real and the imaginary, Berezovskaya addresses many of life's most important questions and quandaries in an exuberant and probing manner. Love and hate, the tumult of war and the idyll of peace, odd acquaintanceships and close friendships, the corruption of luxury and the oppression of poverty and need, the life of childhood and the seduction of adult vanities, the importance of dreams and romantic love and loss, as well as the value of humor and the drama of personal discovery. While Berezovskaya's tales are rich in symbolism, the dominant voice throughout her art-making is one that is informed by deeply poetic magical realism, one that reminds me of some of the best works of the great Hong Kong artist Luis Chan (1905–1995). Both artists' visions are made more dramatic through a masterful use of color, unique line and forms that are often as much protagonists in the stories as are the figures.

Berezovskaya's settings are almost always densely populated and rich in

details; there is a playfulness in many of her tales. Looking at her art one is often reminded of the worlds that Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen (1805–1875) created in fairy tales. Extraordinary figures are often dressed in richly idiosyncratic ways and there is a wealth of symbolism and action that bridges generations and collapses time and place into a challenging pictorial tale. Yet, even with the constant drama and fullness of her protagonists' actions and the surreal descriptions of so many of Berezovskaya's narratives, one is always aware of a strikingly layered contemplative quality behind the vision that engages the viewer's attention instantly. One sees this clearly in the long, almost tapestry-like paintings entitled *Golden Fish* (2012) and *Finding Truffles* (2012), both of which emphasize some of Berezovskaya's best painterly qualities, especially the details in the making of her figures and her use of color as a driving force to narrative.

The theatrically dressed people of *Golden Fish* wait patiently in their orderly queue to move to the head of it where



**Above left:** Anna Berezovskaya, *Knight in Love*, 2012, oil on canvas, 80 x 75 cm. **Above right:** Anna Berezovskaya, *Knight's Return*, 2012, oil on canvas, 55 x 75 cm.

they will present their gift or petition to an anonymous figure at the head of the line. One questions the motives here of the people in the line: Are they all asking for help or are some waiting to give advice? The range of people here is a bizarre cross-section of the society of her dreams: many of the figures here, including the children, have played important roles in earlier Berezovskaya works. Her protagonists range from the aristocratic poseur and the religious fanatic to the fantastic knight and the stiff drummer, from two lovers with an empty crib to a couple with many children, with one more on the way. There are situations that make one take a step back, in surprise and delight: here is a man holding an umbrella under which it rains (a nod to Salvador Dali), a caged man, a bound man, a knight on crutches, a mermaid in an old-fashioned pram pushed by a sailor, and a Satyr waiting patiently, accepted, but

ignored by the others around him. This is Berezovskaya's world of oddities, yet it is steeped in an ever-changing reality, one in which a Pied Piper awaits to lead people away from the destinies. But within this work there is, as Berezovskaya notes herself, something of the "child that always lives in any adult person. Sometimes you want so much to ask for someone's help to make your dream come true. I believe that any dream can come true, you just really need to wish it and have a desire."

**F**inding *Truffles* exemplifies many of Berezovskaya's most appealing qualities, among which is her use of color to drive the narrative, the precision of her geometry with which she always creates interesting juxtapositions within the picture plane, and her attention both to details of dress and to the female characters' activities as well as to

the males' distinct postures, very different in tone from that of the women. The rich diversity of the hyperrealistically realized pigs is refreshingly humorous, from the pig being carried and cared for to the pig stepping out of its cage and the suckling piglets to the small, harnessed pig with an ancient gramophone on its back. There is a calmness in this work that is, even though the action takes place in woods: in many ways this calmness is so different from Berezovskaya's general emotional mood and painterly tone.

Color also drives the overall tenor of the beautifully realized surreal figurative work entitled *Seafarers* (2012). Blue, and various hues of it, informs everything from the sky to the sailor's clothes to the miniature sailing ships that float upon the pool of water formed at the top of the woman's wide skirts. Rival sailors are hunkered down on either side of the 18th



Anna Berezovskaya, *Finding Truffles*, 2012, oil on canvas, 120 x 300 cm.



Anna Berezovskaya, *Flight to the Moon*, 2013, oil on canvas, 90 x 180 cm.

century queen-like figure, whose heart they wish to win. She is an enticing figure holding an ice-cream cone and with a sailing ship on top of her bouffant-style hair. The sailors blow on the ships to move them, a war of wind, a bluster for love, the eternal struggle. It is like a love game. Their concentration is that of children. We are looking at the sailors and a few of them are looking back at us: perhaps they are imploring us to help or they are surrendering with their eyes.

**B**lue also lends such works as *Flight to the Moon* (2013) and *Islands of Love* (2012) a magical quality to the emotional tone of the narrative, drawing our eye quickly into the action or the stillness, as may be. The action in *Flight to the Moon* is

a pigtailed young woman in a heavy coat, long skirt and boots sits in the seat attached by rope to slingshot ready to be shot into space. The unseen figure pulls her back into firing position by her hair. The starry sky and a quarter moon beckon her on. Her main companion is an orange cat in a cage but there is also a fish in a jar and a bird in a cage: For her or for the cat? Her provisions are in jars mostly, loose fruit like pineapple and cherries or peaches on a tree. Indeed she is packed up like one might in an old wagon train off across the prairie. Everything is held together tenuously, more with hope than organization. But isn't uncertainty at the very heart of adventure and change? The men at the bottom right of the painting seem to have shrunk behind rock, unwilling to look at the young woman who is willing to risk

her life for challenge of the uncertainty of adventure and change.

In Berezovskaya's world love, which she often treats humorously, ranges generally from the blindly passionate, as in *Knight in Love* (2012) and *Knight's Return* (2012), to the painfully romantic, as in *Islands of Love*. In both *Knight in Love* and *Knight's Return* traditional roles are reversed. Before the castle and the fruit and flowers of love a large Rubenesque lady reclines waiting for her knight to return. He does so, but instead of a strong, burly man a tiny knight appears, with a small posy in his hand. This is a wonderful Swiftian image. But Berezovskaya is not mocking anyone or the desire for love. As she says of this painting: "I wanted to make a painting about love. A great love. A love that lives in the knight's heart is much bigger than he



Anna Berezovskaya, *Islands of Love*, 2012, oil on canvas, 75 x 85 cm.



Anna Berezovskaya, *Seafarers*, 2012, oil on canvas, 100 x 140 cm.

is himself. It sometimes happens. A love is not always mutual. But I don't want you to feel sorry for the knight. He is happy with his love."

In the *Knight's Return* the traditional romantic role is again reversed. Here, instead of the woman leaping into the arms of her lover, it is the armor-clad knight who jumps into her embrace. Berezovskaya is constantly turning accepted roles on their head.

This is also true in *Islands of Love*, "a painting about three states of infinity: ocean, the sky full of stars and endless love." Here Berezovskaya also stands romantic love on its head. Instead of people gazing longingly into each other's eyes, her pairs of lovers are isolated on cone-shaped rocks barely touching one another as they gaze into the star-filled sky. Instead of a feeling of romance there is a sense of aloneness, even alienation, in this work. This also dominates the mood of the richly realized *Moonlight Sonata* (2012) in which a naked young lady plays the piano as she gazes off into space surrounded by a wealth of good food, drinks and flowers as well as plants and objects. A loose white dress hangs from a cross-like mast as if it were a sail, waiting for the wind to fill it so as to gently edge the girl and the piano out to sea. One sees a tiny soldier on his paper boat hitched to the chair leg also waiting. The girl's gaze and posture also suggest that she is dreaming of a journey or of someone faraway—a lover or a friend—with whom to spend time, hence the abundance of food and wine.

Loneliness is so often about waiting, when time passes achingly slowly, and the sadness of the heart weighs heavily with desire and the mind fills with memories of longing. Yet loneliness is easy to misinterpret and should perhaps be viewed as solitude, a more generous view



Anna Berezovskaya, *Warm Evening*, 2013, oil on canvas, 90 x 90 cm.

in which the artist creates or an ordinary person dreams. One interprets this work as sad but Berezovskaya says the painting is "not sad loneliness. It is about creative solitude and the best moment in the life of a painter—when he feels inspiration. A woman in a boat is surrounded by the 'world' she takes along (a piano, flowers, good food and the music she composes). She even has the audience—a rooster in a cage and a tin soldier—heroes of Andersen's fairy tales. To feel happiness a man needs his own artificial world."

The subtle colors and the abundant detail in the clothing add greatly to the characters of Berezovskaya's protagonists. And along with the richness of her symbolism the viewer is encouraged to seek a wide variety of interpretations of her work, to know how bountiful the world really is, how complex are the metaphors for world at large and for people's lives. One is acutely aware of this in dark-red, brooding works entitled *Journey on a Dragon* (2013), where knights and musician serenade a young woman, with a



Anna Berezovskaya, *Golden Fish*, 2012, oil on canvas, 50 x 300 cm.



Anna Berezovskaya, *In the Garden*, 2011, oil on canvas, 130 x 110 cm.



Anna Berezovskaya, *Sunday Afternoon*, 2012, oil on canvas, 55 x 65 cm.

castle on her wide-brimmed hat, as she pulls back the curtain on a snow scene in which people are riding a fire-spouting dragon. The surreality of this work speaks to the drama of the ordinary hidden behind costume and artifice.

One sees in her symbolism—fire, food, water, fish, the moon, birds, the stars, fruit, old and new utensils, toys, and water and generous landscapes, architecture, and boats—the strengths and weaknesses of society, the importance of the mundane in life's cycles. In *Wade* (2013), for example, people are on the move, determined in their direction, moving with music and the clamber of their goods. They seem happy as they stride through their surreal world, fish at their feet and birds at their head, music in their ears, and smiles on their faces. Are they happy to be leaving or are they just arriving at a new place?

All of Anna Berezovskaya's art has its origins in the ordinary experiences of life that she alters in the most magical ways to give us something fresh. The half-fish, half-human women gazing up out of the river at the moon in *Warm Evening* (2013) are magical creations that startle us at first but quickly become accepted as something new. Are they dreaming of love? The rosy-cheeked, bare-breasted girl astride the town doing her laundry in *Sunday Afternoon* (2012) is a visual poem to the comfort of mundane activity. This is peace before the violent storm of *Gust* (2012) in which the wind blows everyone and everything hither and thither, bringing sudden and irrevocable change. Fantasy and reality both need the winds of change, just as relationships need realigning.

Whether she is imagining peace or

war, love or sadness, luxury or struggle, Berezovskaya's art is always about people. She articulates their presence with subtle grace. And in her recent works no relationships are better observed than the mother and her three children (the wife and daughters of Chris Churcher, director of REDSEA Gallery) in the work entitled *In the Garden* (2011). Rich in symbolism and fine detail there is a formal feel to this work that speaks across time and place, across all the seasons, imagined worlds and sensitive reality as well as the culture of Asian and England as well as that of the Russian dolls known as *matryoshka*, nesting dolls. This is the unique account of four females whose stories are constantly developing and engaging with the world and which fit together with exquisite ease in Anna Berezovskaya's own painterly vision. Δ

