

Fantastic worlds

A delicate female figure is crouching in a snowy winter landscape. She is looking directly at the observer from a cold and silent world. Krista – her name, which is revealed by the title – seems very close to us; her huddled figure is positioned at the far right corner of the image. She appears to have been squeezed into this space, with the frame touching her back and left foot. Krista's clothing is strange, with a style and colours that are reminiscent of another time in a faraway world. Her bodice is woven of sky-blue brocade, the knee breeches are made of colourful polka-dot fabric. Her feet are clad in delicate oriental shoes that seem totally unsuitable for this kind of winter weather. And then there is the barrel-shaped pink hat and sash which seem to have sprung directly from an oriental saga or medieval times.

The background shows a village, very small and far off in the distance: numerous small colourful wooden houses, their roofs covered by a thick layer of snow. The settlement extends beyond the edge of the image. The houses also populate and occupy the frame. Scattered bare trees – delicate black skeletons in the all-encompassing whiteness – stand between the homes. Outside the village: three frozen lakes dotted by the small figures of skaters that look like ants. The horizon is barely discernible, since the white landscape transitions into a snow-laden sky of the same hue. Soon, the thick clouds will silently open over the landscape and bury it even deeper under heavy layers of snow.

This fantastic scene was painted by the young artist Veronica Smirnoff (* 1979). Like all her pictures, *Krista* is painted on a small gessoed wood panel using egg tempera. Veronica Smirnoff, now living in London, was born and raised in Russia. She uses the egg tempera on gessoed wood technique to create a link to her origins and identity, as the same techniques have been used in Russia for centuries to produce icons. Icons – to provide a brief history and explanation of their significance – are the cult images of the Orthodox Church. They are usually small enough to be portable, and are installed at a central location in the church on the so-called iconostasis, a wall of icons and religious paintings. Icons were originally produced exclusively by priests, and later also by monk painters in monastery workshops. This is due to the fact that painting icons was not considered an artistic act or a handcraft, but a liturgical act. In Byzantine Orthodox culture, the significance of the icon – with a design that follows a strict image canon to this day – is totally different from sacral paintings in the west: instead of being a mere illustration of biblical events, the icon creates an existential connection to the person depicted. As a result, worshipping an icon is equivalent to worshipping the person it shows. Instead of being mere decorations or pieces of art, the plates are imbued with great spiritual force and power. They are windows to the spiritual world, intermediaries between the present and the afterlife.

The tradition of icon painting is alive in Russia to this day. Veronica Smirnoff takes advantage of this fact: she obtains her plates directly from a monastery considered one of the strongholds of the modern Russian Orthodox church. There, in Optina Pustyn, monks and neophytes produce plates according to her specifications which usually deviate very little from traditional standards. Sometimes the artist does express a special request, for example the production of an oval shape. In addition to the plates, she also obtains all other materials required for her paintings from Russia. Pigments and hand-made squirrel

paintbrushes come from her native country, since they are simply not available at a comparable quality in Great Britain. As a result, it is fair to say that Smirnoff is connected to the long history of icon painting by more than the use of traditional painting techniques. Her works have a physical relationship with her native country, since their material roots are clearly located there.

After this brief technical excursion, we would like to return our attention directly to Smirnoff's works and the reality they depict. The format of all of the young artist's paintings is fairly small. Miniature portrayals, such as the village in the painting *Krista* discussed above, can be identified in this reduced space. The viewer almost feels compelled to reach for a magnifying glass in order to examine the details. As a result of this attention to detail, the observer has to approach the painting very closely to be able to read it. In order to truly perceive the works, we have to enter the immediate sphere of the painting which creates an intimate space for an intensive encounter.

I would now like to make a bold attempt to categorise Veronica Smirnoff's works into three main groups. Recurring themes include portraits, battles, and (single female) figures set in landscapes (shaped by human activity). The *portraits* consist of the images of female figures clad in imaginative garb. The facial features of the characters are reminiscent of the works of Lucas Cranach. In particular, the area around the eyes appears to have been inspired by the great master. These female figures have also inspired the title of Smirnoff's first personal show in Italy: *Morozka* in fact is the protagonist of a traditional saga, situated in Russia's winterly cold forests. The images in the battles category (Russian: *Bitva*, which is also reflected in the titles of these pictures) consist of illustrations of fabulous events: a mass of horses, riders, and flowers whirls about in a two-dimensional background. This group of images is directly related to traditional Russian folk art and miniature painting.

Krista, the painting discussed at the outset, is clearly a member of the final group. This classification of pieces I call *figure in the landscape* can be considered the focal point of the artist's work. The category is defined by the depiction of a female form in the foreground. Like the women in the *portraits*, this figure is clad in imaginative garb associated with medieval times, Russian traditions, dreams, and fables. Human settlements are visible in the background: these are either comprised of the colourful wooden houses mentioned earlier, which could be interpreted as traditional Russian wood structures in rural areas, or of modern multi-storey blocks of flats – box-shaped prefabricated concrete structures – that represent the socialist housing program after the Second World War. The landscapes in these paintings appear bleak and unfriendly, with no more than an occasional solitary tree on a barren plain. While the entire scenery is buried under heavy snow in some images, Smirnoff sculpts the bare earth into a moving patchwork consisting of many shades of brown in others.

The pictures in the core group *figure in the landscape* are related to historic artworks on many levels. Carl Larsson's depictions of winter landscapes and villages are very similar to Veronica Smirnoff's paintings. The interesting aspect of this comparison is the close relationship of the settlement structure, which clearly identifies the close cultural ties between Russia and Sweden. In both cases, buildings were erected as traditional wood structures. The single houses, usually painted in bright colours, were constructed at a distance from each other in order to reduce the risk of fire spreading quickly from one

building to the next.

In addition to Carl Larsson, Pieter Brueghel the Elder and, in particular, his painting *The Return of the Hunters* (around 1565) is another important historical reference point. In keeping with the tradition of seasonal paintings – five of Brueghel’s pictures in this genre have been preserved – it depicts the everyday rural lives of farmers in the winter. The foreground shows a group of hunters returning home with their meagre quarry, accompanied by a pack of famished dogs. Two frozen lakes are visible in the background, where the village people are skating. Both the use of skaters as an element in the picture and the icy atmosphere form clear parallels to Veronica Smirnoff’s works. In addition, Brueghel’s intention was to depict everyday events of his time. In Veronica Smirnoff’s case, it is surely not possible to speak of a direct illustration of real events. But while the protagonists created by Smirnoff appear to come from a distant, fabulous world, the young artist also seems to be motivated by the aspiration to express her personal view of Russia in her art: although most of the Russian population now lives in large, anonymous, residential settlements, most of them still have a “Datscha” in the country as a getaway from everyday big-city life. This duality, this existence that alternates between the city and the country, is most clearly expressed in paintings that show both the traditional village architecture and the anonymous, modern, prefabricated concrete structures. I am almost tempted to assert that the fabulous (in both senses of the word) creatures express another part of the “Russian essence”. The female figures seem to form a link to ancient times, to fables and fairy tales that are an important part of the former tsardom’s cultural heritage. The multiple layers of everyday life, memories, and fanciful elements – like a sampling process – turn Smirnoff’s works into modern icons that appear to transcend and dissolve time. And, like the traditional examples they are based on, they can unfold spiritual power.

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