

Interview With the Artist

“My pictures are painted dreams or nightmares” - Konstantin Sotnikov

The Hamburg-based artist on his youth in Russia, the dreamlike elements in his work, the irrationality of the art market and emotional roller coasters when painting

You were born and raised in Kirovo-Chepetsk, a town in North-Eastern Russia. In 1991 you moved to the town of Tambov 500 kilometres south of Moscow to attend art school. Who or what motivated you to focus on art?

One reason was certainly my mother. She had a great interest in culture and wanted to give her children a grounding in art as well. She went to considerable effort in this respect. Art played a major role in family in every event. I discovered my love for drawing, painting and modelling as early as nursery school. While everyone else was asleep, I always used to draw with crayons.

After completing your artistic training you decided to study German Literature at the University of Tambov, and then attended the Academy of Fine Arts in Hamburg, which you completed in 2010 with a Diploma in Fine Art. How did this interest in German culture and in Germany come about?

We had an exchange programme at school which took me to Hamburg for the first time. I was fascinated by everything I saw; as a child in the Soviet Union, I was culturally in quite a different place. German as a language I found very clear, direct and structured, and I really liked that. Involvement with German culture has given me something that I just wasn't able to experience in the Soviet Union. When I went to Germany later on, a whole raft of new ideas and opportunities suddenly opened up for me.

So on the other side of things, how did your youth in Russia impact you?

I had a great family who provided a feeling of loving and caring togetherness. On the other hand, there was what you could call the counterpoint of the violent, aggressive reality of Russia. Russia has always been positioned between West and East and impacted by both directions, so in Russia even different cultures are brought together and have an effect on one another. It would be nice for me to know that I could always go back there and feel protected and cared for at home. Unfortunately that's not the way it is, it's a rather tragic situation, and there are simply no prospects there at the moment.

KONSTANTIN SOTNIKOV

Is having a home in two cultures an advantage or a disadvantage?

Definitely an advantage. Distance sometimes puts things into greater focus. If you stand too close to a mirror, you can't see anything, or not very much. It's only when you're a certain distance away that you have a clearer view of yourself.

The label "contemporary" has taken on a defining function in the current art scene. To a certain extent you seem with your imagery to be removing yourself from this categorisation; your pictures have a timeless quality. How do you achieve this?

The motifs come from different times: internet, photographs from my trips and things I've stumbled across. They become worlds of their own showing different times and epochs. This means that intensive communication arises from these worlds. For me, this also provides the opportunity to create a place where I feel comfortable. So moving away from media madness, and inventing a new fairy tale where exciting stories develop and messages are conveyed. A seemingly perfect world, sometimes playful and funny, mysterious, irritating and demonic.

As you say, a "seemingly" perfect world. In fact, there are disruptions and dark areas.

The inspiration comes from life, from the daily grind. And it is multi-coloured.

On closer examination of your work, it is clear that your artistic mode of expression is as unique and unmistakable as it is clearly positioned in the context of European art history. The references range from the fascinating imagery from the Renaissance artist Hieronymus Bosch to the compositions of the Late Romantic composer Eugène Delacroix. What role models and influences for your art would you cite yourself?

In particular Old Masters: Flemish painting, pictures from the Renaissance, and also the Surrealistic school. I am a modern painter, and that's how I refer to myself, just like an old-fashioned painter. I've always found Sacred Art interesting, for example. Icon painting as part of Russian culture had a powerful effect on me. There is something mythical and irrational about it that you can't understand or explain. I certainly find it astounding the ideas people had in earlier times such as the Middle Ages or the Renaissance, mainly because the works are incredible in terms of the craftsmanship, and the artists created everything from their heads and by hand without any technology. I sometimes also miss the diversity of ideas in today's art made for current times.

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Critics have often aligned your paintings with surrealist art, in which dreamlike, imaginative and unconscious themes became the primary focus of artists to acquire new experience and insights. What is your relationship to surrealist art?

My works often have surreal features, but are not strictly of the genre. There are imaginary worlds: many objects, many proportions just don't go together; such as still life mixed into a portrait or a landscape, creating multiple images.

What role do dreams have in your paintings?

Well, there are different types of dreams. There are beautiful dreams accompanying new insights, and there are nightmares that you really do not want to have. Naturally my own past arises in the pictures and my demons as well; tackling things that have happened in my life. I am a positive person and I would like to pick out nice dreams, but I just can't do that. I dream everything so my paintings include everything as well. The paintings are created intuitively.

So dreams have a strong influence on your work?

They have a strong effect on me, and actually the pictures are painted dreams or nightmares. This is very personal, very naked. We all dream in images, after all, and these are very rarely complete abstractions but very often stories that sometimes have a happy ending, and sometimes an unhappy one; it's often this way with my paintings as well.

As well as the dreamlike, in terms of imagery and narrative your works also make numerous references to the genre of fairy tales.

What is it that interests you about fairy tales in terms of your imagery?

They quickly transport me to another world. For me, fairy tales are highly visually charged; when I read them, I see the images. Fairy tales are apolitical, non-religious, not fixed, and you always see yourself reflected in a fairy tale. And fairy tales succeed in taking people out of the everyday world for a short time. I really like the fairy tales and stories of Oscar Wilde, for example, and I've taken inspiration from these at times for paintings.

What is your working method in the process of painting? How much of a picture is in your mind already before you begin to paint?

There are sketches and an idea, then a story develops. From the artistic point of view, in the midst of working there is a point at which the picture takes on its own momentum where I notice, for example, that the colour scheme is not quite right and I have to change it completely. It's only later on that I can see this, but the message is normally planned out in advance.

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When is a painting finished?

That's a difficult one. The relationship with a painting also evolves. Sometimes I return to a painting years later and think: this is still not finished, I really need to change this or that. Initially it's the feeling that tells me that the topic is visually and artistically complete and that I've poured all my emotions into it. Then I let things sit and see what happens.

Are there any paintings that left your hands a while ago that you would now like to change?

A lot. There are some works I'd like to repaint, not completely, but there are certain elements I'd like to leave out, add to or paint quite differently. These days I take a lot more time over painting. But I think you see every painting differently, depending on the day. You can never paint a perfect or universal picture, after all. That's what you think when you start. You think you're painting your best ever work, the best painting, then two weeks go by and you realise: no, sadly it wasn't. So you set it aside and continue painting, it's a vicious circle, really.

Do you sometimes find that frustrating?

It's a permanent state of flux between satisfaction, dissatisfaction and moving on. But there are many works that I do really like. It's not that I write off each work emotionally and that they no longer interest me. Thankfully that's not the case.

An artist is not able to influence directly how his art is received, but he can set the framework. What impact are you seeking to trigger in the viewer?

Every person sees what speaks to him personally, his present, his past, his experiences, his own stories. This is exciting for me to hear. It's not just about the aesthetic experience, but it's also about personal reflection. The energy of a good painting is transmitted to the viewer.

We talked about dreams and fairy tales. Is there an intentional effect that the viewer loses himself in a painting, in a "painted dream", or even finds a reflection of his own fears and positive feelings?

For me it is a journey through the emotions. This may sound a bit cheesy, but if someone feels something in the process, then I've achieved my goal. If people simply walk on by, it could be that the concept needs rethinking. The paintings are intended to move, inspire and engage people, and to trigger questions.

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The author Samuel Beckett writes in his essay "The World and the Pair of Trousers": "Everything you will ever know about a painting is how much you love it (and at a push, why, if that interests you)". How important is it for you that people looking at your works experience aesthetic pleasure?

I want to create aesthetic paintings. No one wants fat, bearded men hanging about. There are enough artists who are trying to provoke, but I don't need all that. There's enough provocation out there already, and I think that art should be distanced from this a little. Life is too short to permit having so much ugliness around; this is not my concept of life or of art.

Religion has largely lost its significance for Western art. There are some paintings among your works that make direct reference to the Bible, such as the paintings "The Tower of Babel", "The Sixth Day" or "Noah's Ark". How important is religion in your work?

I grew up in an Orthodox environment, and experienced the biblical stories. There are many pictorial narratives here that I take inspiration from. Aside from that, religion does not play a major role. I don't want to abuse this area, but I see it as cultural heritage.

What is good art to you?

Art that touches me, that irritates me, that makes me think, that causes me to reflect on specific issues. Good art is also art where I think: pity I didn't think of that, I'd have liked to have been the one to have that idea first. Good art is where I feel the personality of the artist, I can see him painting.

Art "must succeed in changing the way society thinks" said performance artist Marina Abramovic. "Artists are servants of society. And its oxygen". The conceptual artist Bruce Nauman is of a different opinion: "Art doesn't redeem us from anything", he says. What is your opinion on the societal function of art?

I'm not trying to change society.

Does this mean that art stands on its own?

It's like a filter. Naturally art also reflects societal and political events, as well as religious themes. We see the artistic position, the works, and we know the period in which they were created and what moved us at that time.

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The The prices being paid for art have never been higher than they are today. Often it seems like it's more about value than content, though; art and commerce are in any event difficult to separate. Does art enjoy any freedom?

There is art and there is the huge art market. How the art market works is completely irrational. I've got nothing against art being sold; it's only a problem when it becomes a matter of making an investment. But I think a true artist creates art based on passion, he doesn't have any choice, and is not a businessperson manufacturing goods. So much has happened in recent years, many artists have become businesspersons and vice versa; the boundaries have shifted here.

Has the influence of the market become so strong that art is now subject to a kind of bondage because art essentially has to be produced in response to demand?

Every successful artist has to come to terms with this. This takes a lot and you have to think about how to protect yourself against this pressure and how you can protect your own art from this. It's like a kind of spiritual death when artists copy themselves. The prices are set completely independently of this; they have a life of their own and are sometimes so astronomical that it's hard to believe. I really can't see any relation to the things that are important in life.

As well as painting, the main focus of your work, you often also create three-dimensional objects such as sculptures and reliefs. What significance do the sculptural works have for you?

This is an important change for me. These works are of course more time-consuming than the paintings, but they open up a new dimension and a new form of expression. The paintings can also be seen as artistic objects; each way of working flows into the other. I also enjoy experimenting with different materials and techniques to create things that don't yet exist.

Interview: Andreas Klement