

Andrei Protsouk

The indifferent iron skies of Donetsk, Ukraine are more likely to produce championship boxers than fine artists but Andrei Proutsouk can take something from the reference.

They both require intense dedication and great strength. In boxing, a knockout can be a thing of beauty, and so is the feeling of having made a great painting, Andre says.

A bleak environment encourages the imagination. While attending the dreary public schools of Donetsk, Andrei's teachers noted his precocious talent. Andrei was transferred to the Donetsk Art School, and then to the Lugansk School of Fine Art. Later on, Andre was recommended to the prestigious Repine Academy of Art in storied St. Petersburg.

St. Petersburg is as far from Donetsk as Peoria is from New York City. Even through the bleak Stalinist epoch, St. Petersburg remained the sentimental capitol in the hearts of most Russians. Fond memories of St. Petersburg account for a certain wiffulness in the Ukrainian emigre. But it was in America that Andre accomplished his ultimate dream. With his wife and son, he moved to the United States in 1994. There he was able to meld the discipline and training of the great Russian academies with the wild freedom of expression infusing American culture. Andrei found America strange, but welcoming.

It was like surfing....like riding the waves of the post-glasnost era. I wasn't prepared for such a friendly welcome from Americans eager for the humble works of a poor Russian artist, says Andre, with a trace of irony in his expression.

A question often asked of Russian émigré artists is how their work was changed by moving to their adopted country.

I owe a great debt to both worlds....to freedom and tradition... and also to my brilliant professor E. Moiseenko during my studies in St. Petersburg, observes Andre.

Both new and old traditions of influence are reflected in Andrei's recent paintings. Andre makes frequent and playful references to American iconic symbols in his new work. Female football players, jazz musicians, svelte dancers, archly sophisticated diners in evening dress, sexy billiard players, even beachgoers are given new meanings and arranged into intersecting planes and fractured mosaics of sensuality and power.

But success has its perils. In an interview conducted between a bombardment of phone calls, Andrei shows me a stack of legal papers. These letters, back and forth to Singapore, have thwarted a copyright thief from marketing crude copies of Andre's work in several Asian galleries. Andrei Proutsouk smiles patiently.

Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, they say. So I will take this as a compliment. These days I don't have time even to be angry, he chuckles.

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The reinvention of images is an art that builds new bridges on the path to comprehension...

Born in Ukraine, Andrei Protsouk drew his first breaths in the coal and iron filled skies of the city of Donetsk. Donetsk, situated in the heart of the powerful industrial engine of the former Soviet Union, is a place more suitable for working in factories than for dreaming. Yet, there is something about a bleak environment which encourages the growth of the imagination. It was while attending public schools of Donetsk that his teachers noticed Andrei's talent for art. Under the competitive Soviet system in the 1950s and its desire to outshine the West in all disciplines, Andrei was quickly transferred to the Donetsk Art School. Upon graduation, he applied for and was accepted to the Lugansk State School of Fine Art, graduating from there in 1981. While at the

Lugansk School, Andrei continued to receive the attention and praise of the school's fine arts pedagogy. His professors urged Andre to go on to develop his talent further. For Andre, that meant moving to the storied ancient city of St. Petersburg. Andre received a Master's degree in Fine Art from the prestigious Repine Academy of Art in St. Petersburg in 1990.

St. Petersburg is as far from Donetsk, Ukraine as Peoria is from New York City. Though Moscow was the political capitol favored by the Stalinists, St. Petersburg was the ancient capital first envisioned by Peter the Great, one of the most famous of Russian Czars. Even through the bleak Stalinist epoch, when the famous city was renamed Leningrad in an attempt to eradicate all traces of empire, St. Petersburg remained the sentimental capitol in the hearts of most Russians. Then and now, St. Petersburg remains the cultural center of the New Russia conceived by Peter the Great.

Through years of study and training, Andrei studied, restored, and copied the working techniques of the Old Masters at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg. His favored medium is oil, applied onto linen. Andrei Protsouk uses lots of gold and silver leaf in his paintings, in the manner of the revered traditional Russian iconographers. His rendering of St. George slaying the dragon is an obvious religious reference, but the composition's rich and dark tones, its jagged dramatic action, suggests a lineage rooted in timeless historical painting.

Moving to the United States in 1994, Andrei found inspiration in his new experiences as an émigré. Exposure to the exciting and often strange culture infused his works with a liveliness characterized by bright colors and a dance of images part real and part fantastic.

But it was always my dream to have my own studio and gallery. This was suddenly in the realm of the possible in my new country, says Andre Protsouk.

Andre raises a weary eyebrow when he contemplates the double life he must lead in order to complete the vast amount of work necessary in being gallery owner and artist.

It has advantages...it has disadvantages, too. I think many artists fall into the trap of repeating themselves. I try to avoid that by self-publishing. Self-publishing does pull me away from my own work sometimes, but I work with many outside galleries, too. The main thing is that I have more freedom and independence. I have the best of both worlds.

The society and culture, the ordinary objects of daily existence become mystical symbols in the hands of the artist. A dog is never a just a dog in Andre's painting-- it is a hunger and a lust for something illusive though real lying just beneath the surface of human consciousness.

All internal human experience connects with the universe, says Andre.

Food, drink, men, women, the entire universe, are transmuted into symbols in Andrei's work. Through it all, we are reminded symbolically of the animal depths from which we smile and cast our nets of charm and civilization. Andre's vision is of an extraordinary conjunction of events, occurring simultaneously and within many planes. Men and women date, dance, dine, and desire each other with studied abandon.

Andre's work is sometimes comic, sometimes petulant, often sardonic, but it is always sensual. Two people depicted having Lunch on the Moon posture and float in fanciful shards of color. The unapologetic sensuality of Andrei's imagery may cause some to blush, but the underlying passion is unmistakable and real. Passion is palpable, even in the absence of human figures. An After Dinner composition contains no human figures. Instead, we find the remnants of a sumptuous meal. You're led to conjecture regarding a table abandoned by lovers who perhaps, having dined on light fare, have mysteriously retreated to other rooms, leaving lurid beasts to lick the plates.

The natural connection between the senses and the creatures represented by the images confirms for us the eternal connection between man and his nature. The symbolic language in Andrei's work is apparent, but it is the juxtaposition of the various elements, their sometimes conflicting and sometimes complementary nature, which reveals the integral themes in Andrei's work.

The artist presents love as an opposition of emotions, a collision of appetites, impulses, and feelings. The ancient theme of sexual tension and power invades the eternal struggle between men and women and is colorfully dramatic and playful in many of Andrei's paintings.

A question often asked of Russian émigré artists is how their work was changed by moving to their adopted country.

In Russia, there was a tremendous dedication to the work, a dedication to discipline, accompanied by a powerful emphasis on self-criticism. But here in America, people aren't as concerned with the mastery of the technique, and criticism as they are with the concept of freedom of expression. I owe a great debt to both worlds, and also to my very critical professor E. Moiseenko during my studies at St. Petersburg. In the best of all worlds, the artists with the more complete mastery of technique would be able to express themselves with the greatest freedom. How poor the English language would be if not for variety of the alphabet! And how poor would be the literature of the world if not for the richness of ideas and words and language, observes Andre. It is the same with art and its endless incarnations of ideas and techniques.

The influence of American ideas is not anything Andre would disdain. In a recent playful series of works, he makes frequent use of American iconic symbols, regarding them as universally recognized vehicles of communication. Andre's football players, billiard players, tennis players, snowboarders, and beachgoers are broken into teasing mosaics of sexuality and power. This is the NFL as everyone would like it to be. So it is with every other American preoccupation, sports idiom, or what-have-you. Better than the real thing, which of course involves bruises, bad weather, and tendonitis, or worse. But the abiding themes in these thematic incarnations frequently refers to sensuality, and is not limited to platonic love.

Andre explores artistic ideas to the fullest in his series entitled TANGO. These paintings depict the grace of the dance. Lithe tuxedoed dancers spin and whirl in a fluid artistry of motion. The elegant dress fails to conceal the underlying tensions of the courting ritual.

The BEACH collection reflects the artist's ability to capture hedonistic beach combers and sun worshippers with a high sense of fashion. Playfulness blends with humor in this series. These beach notables are not shy. Neither are they concerned with approaching frosts.

The ROMANTIQUE collection harkens to the twenties. It pictures a well-dressed and formal gentry, lithe in limb and long in body. Still, romance goes hand in hand with eros, and a long string of pearls cascading down upon the skin of a woman in backless dress suggests the liveliness and elegance of those eternal times. The overall tone of these pictures is serious, intimate.

JAZZ and BLUES is a wonderful collection, musical and colorful. Andre displays more unusual uses of color and movement in this series. These pictures can be listened to, as well as seen, and they come alive in a way that brings a feeling of joyfulness.

The GOLF and TENNIS scenes on the green and court are reminiscent of the great fashion illustrators of Vogue and Elle. The hormonal surge of sports is manifest in the male gallantries and coiffed coquetry of independent women on tennis court, golf green, and gridiron.

The FOOD IS LIFE series makes the happy connection between love, life, food, health, vitality and Andre delivers this series with brio. The gallery of chefs wave forks, chopsticks, and spatulas in the manner of a music conductor. This is taste-perfect artistry, taking the raw ingredients of life and turning them into a playful soufflé. These are not earthly chefs, however. They are galactic messengers. For that matter, so are the dinner guests.

Andre sees his chefs and art patrons in the same light as he perceives his art.

Everything in the universe is unique. My job is to illuminate that, not to bury it in artistic clichés. Moreover, art patrons and clients are very sophisticated these days. They are looking for authentic works, for new ideas, not for some revisiting of old clichés. It's very satisfying for me, for any artist, to bring a new image or look in the world of art and publishing.

Andrei Protsouk has displayed his art in many exhibitions around the world; in Germany, Holland, Russia, Ukraine, and America.

Andrei's works are a part of private and corporate collections:

Aurora Publishing House; Academy of Art in New York City; Barcelona Museum of Art, Spain; Coca-Cola in Denmark; Italian Art and White Knights of Venice, Italy; Zimmerli Art Museum, New Brunswick, NJ, USA; Museum of Art Academy in St. Petersburg, Russia; Johnny Walker Expo Co, England; Francais Lang Art, Hamburg Germany; Art Connections, Zurich, Switzerland; Gallerie Adrienne, San Francisco, CA, USA; La Jolla, Artrageous Gallery, New York City, NY, Phoenix, Arizona, USA; Vera Gallery, Aphine, Greece.

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