

Natasha Karpinskaia: Looking, Like Listening

Consider, if you will, music.

Consider it because Natasha Karpinskaia makes art that is *like* music: works that are avowedly visceral, overtly sensual, seductively lyrical. Look at one of the seminal works in her oeuvre – say, 2015's *Pencil Drawing 2* – and your mood will be affected, just as surely as your intellect is engaged. As so often happens with music, the two faculties – emotions and intellect – will be so thoroughly intertwined that you'll be hard pressed to analyze where one leaves off and the other begins. Look at a good Karpinskaia, and you will likely feel no more inclined to think about art world shibboleths (Is painting really dead? Has the artist taken you sufficiently outside your comfort zone?) than you would be to debate the respective merits of 12-tone music versus atonal music while listening to Bizet's *Carmen*. In some ineffable yet undeniable way, if only ephemerally, your brain chemistry will be altered, inducing deeply felt pleasure and keenly intuited meanings. You will probably not, in the moment of looking, feel any overwhelming compulsion to know where or how the artist lives, how *she* expresses her artistic philosophy, or what the critics, curators, and public think (though all of these facts might well interest you later). Nor might you care to hear about any defining theoretical rationale undergirding the work – is it Minimalist?

Conceptualist? Post-Modern? – because although Karpinskaia's art merits voluble intellectual discourse, it doesn't need the help of words.

But I digress. Let's get back to music.

Mozart, more than one musicologist has observed, was a subversive, because his works need no theoretical rationale to prop them up. The music itself is its own best explanation; its beauty is self-contained and self-evident. The same could be said of Matisse's paper cutouts, David Hockney's shimmering swimming pools, Francis Bacon's discomfiting visual ruminations on the human condition, and Karpinskaia's best work. So much for the wags.

Karpinskaia, who is flamboyant but not prone to bedazzling hyper-self-promotion, would not dream of comparing her art to Mozart's, though her passionate appreciation of his and other classical music is one of her driving inspirations. She is, rather, an avatar, embracing the axiom that form is to art what time is to music: a medium so malleable and fungible as to offer limitless possibilities. Likewise, in her work, color is like musical tone: an exquisitely nuanced and fluid element, alternately lush, muted, dense, delicately transparent, bold, or blazing. (It is not a coincidence that in musical terminology, the creative use of tonal variation is called "coloration.") Karpinskaia gives equally rich consideration to matters of design and spatial activation. Each of these is to her pictures what phrasing is to music: an element that, arranged with a certain deadly effectiveness, yields lyricism. If the composer [read "artist"] does this trick just right, she can engender deep thoughts and powerful emotions in a listener (read "viewer"). The point of the exercise is not solely to create something new; it is also, more importantly, to create something intensely moving and passionately reasoned.

Karpinskaia accomplishes all three. She does break new ground, but in the realm of intimately savored experiences, as opposed to the ostensibly grander but often shakier ideological confines of movement-driven art. Like all master printmakers who make monotypes, she knows that the element

of chance is inherent in the process; she herself never knows exactly what the press will yield. She has merely created the conditions under which interesting things can happen, and when the press delivers exciting images, she shares them with us. We see this dynamic at work throughout much of her printmaking output, in works like *Double Vision*, a 2014 monotype on paper that resoundingly echoes the natural world in all its multifarious splendor, at both macro and micro levels of perception. Which brings to mind another relevant analogy, this one best broached as a question:

By what process does nature itself design?

That mystery, standing as it does at the crossroads of scientific inquiry and artistic creativity, is at the root of so much great art that it would take an immense, monumental treatise to unspool the protean figures and fruits of genius it has inspired over the centuries. More to the point, Karpinskaia, like many artists in the modern era, is enthralled by a corollary question: What happens if an artist *emulates the process* by which nature designs, as opposed to simply representing the results, as Realism did? Many of Karpinskaia's influential forbears – Malevich, Matisse, Diebenkorn, Calder, and Klee among them – went down this path. Among her contemporaries, Elizabeth Murray has explored it, albeit more obliquely; Murray's master stroke was to reinvigorate the process by supplanting naturalistic imagery with her own cartoonish iconography.

Karpinskaia lets these questions drive her inventive and prolific explorations. A painter and printmaker, she works in both non-objective and representational modes, as well as some that, like Matisse's sublime musings, inhabit the fertile shadowland between Abstraction and Realism. Her work embodies a joyful irony: she holds a doctorate in art history from Columbia University, but gleefully eschews theoretical dogma. She realized, she has said, that when it came to making art, she wanted to do it, not talk about it.

She has now been doing it for more than a decade, with formidable skill and inspired abandon. Her images are like conversations that are replete with stories; they grab you and draw you in. They reflect both modernity and something primal. In appreciating them, you might wonder to what extent such works can be comprehended in the sterile precincts of a museum. They seem intended for a more personal setting, like someone's home or workspace, where the art becomes an emotively charged extension of the surrounding architecture and design, telegraphing its role in people's lives.

None of this is to say that Karpinskaia ignores theoretical underpinnings.

It's just that the theory she applies has little to do with the hidebound orthodoxies of "movements;" she is more interested in mining fertile principles of color and design theory for her own universalist ends, reconstituting them in new ways that evoke delight and wonder. The results feel anything but academic. Consider, for example, her use of opposing warm and cool colors. It is a rudiment: early in their training, art students are taught that the sympathetic vibration of warm and cool colors creates the illusion of light and space. In mature hands, the effect can be put to spectacular use. Stand before J.M.W. Turner's *The Harbor at Dieppe*, in the Frick Collection, for instance, and you will palpably feel as if you can reach inside the picture and sweep your arm around in the open air. Karpinskaia, largely an abstractionist, understands this device and employs it powerfully, in fresh and surprising

ways. In works like 2011's *Eclipse* and 2014's *Moonstruck* (both monotypes on paper), she merges these warm/cool oppositions with textural surface manipulations and gestural marks to create startling, otherworldly landscapes. These are purely abstract pictures, yet to look at them is to feel as if you are inhabiting a place.

Always, she draws on her seemingly endless vocabulary of forms – a visual language that she playfully parlays to achieve poetic or narrative ends – arranging them in luminous counterpoint: round, rectangular, singular, plural, big, small, linear, expansive. Many of her images look like mysteriously compelling icons, as in *Those Who Stay and Those Who Go*, from her *Monophon 2014* series, or *Enclosed Space 1* (2012), or 2009's *Reappearances* (all three are monotypes). In other works, she marries visual poetry to pure sensation, as she does with the dancing forms and sublimely muted colors of her 2003 work *Facial Expressions*.

In some of her paintings and prints, Karpinskaia's influences show clearly, yet the works are far from derivative. You can see Klee's influence in her 2009 monotype *Familiar Strangers*, for example, but the statement, with its gloriously electric color palette, elegant geometry, and raw, spontaneous drawing, is uniquely Karpinskaia's. That same year, she produced the evocative, lushly colorful *Monument Series, V*, a work that seems to pick up where Josef Albers left off. In *Monument Series, V*, Albers' expanses of pure color and reductive, hard-edged geometry give way to Karpinskaia's updated take on the theme: variegated surface textures and a subtle plurality of diffusely colored forms, drawn directly into the pigment. He gave us wondrously pure color, in quiet compositions that look man-made; she gives us a perceptive visual meditation on the sometimes-blurry boundaries between what is man-made and what comes from nature.

Karpinskaia, who engages in boldly wide-ranging experimental forays, has several times in her career delved into representation. She tends toward a whimsy that falls somewhere between Matisse and the great California colorist Wayne Theibaud. (Theibaud, who was critically lumped in with the Pop artists, deserves a loftier, more thoughtful assessment.)

Karpinskaia's *Chair Series*, a suite of oil paintings on wood, from 2004, melds the artist's love of pattern, design, and dense, bright colors with gorgeously whimsical drawing. Not since Van Gogh's *Bedroom at Arles* has the humble chair enjoyed such centrality in a painted composition. In 2004, Karpinskaia brought a Theibaudian whimsy to her playful depictions of men's shirts, executed in mixed media on paper. Here again, she leaves her own imprint; we get a starkly spare palette, with expanses of color that positively glow with exquisitely modulated intensity, punctuated by a drawing style that manages to be at once freewheeling and consummately controlled. These are all Karpinskaia's distinctive hallmarks.

Ultimately, Karpinskaia is out to give us pleasure and make us think, and she is hardly alone in that endeavor. But the Mozartian purity of her aesthetic is roundly impressive – especially right now, with the art world veering toward an obsession with political correctness. But never mind all that, she seems to be saying. Go ahead: be like the capacious college kid who encounters Gauguin's *Two Tahitian Women* in a museum and falls in love, wishing he could take the painting home with him and live with it. You'll feel good, and for good reason. You have been overtaken. The artist has transcended mere technique, transcended mere theory, and given you passion, and you were moved. A single word describes that level of artistry, and it is the same in both music and art: it is virtuosity.

– Mark Schnapper