

## Remembering Memory: Contemporary Bulgarian Art and Its Heritage

By Liliana Milkova

*Dancing on Embers: Cultural Heritage in Contemporary Bulgarian Art* is an exhibition centering around death and renewal, visions of the past and the future. The exhibition presents contemporary Bulgarian art as renewed and renewing, as constructive and constructing, as resurrecting Bulgaria's spiritual heritage and its visual manifestations. The images presented draw power and conviction from Bulgaria's artistic heritage, grounded in the complex national ethnos, comprised of Thracians, Bulgarians, and Slavs. Named after the ritual of dancing on fire that blends Thracian (the most ancient civilization on the Bulgarian lands) with Christian rites, *Dancing on Embers* examines the presence of mythological, religious, and folkloric references in contemporary Bulgarian art in the works of 10 living artists well-known not only in Bulgaria but also throughout Europe. *Dancing on Embers* situates Bulgaria's art from the last 10 years into the context of the country's political conditions and cultural practices, both newly liberated after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Thus at a time of economic strife, constant influx of Western high- and low-brow culture, when the visual space is saturated with the signs of a rapidly growing consumer society, national artists are turning to their own cultural heritage. The use of elements from Bulgaria's own enormous millennia-old visual culture and folklore in contemporary art is seen not as a route of escape or renewal, but rather as a reminder of their long-standing role in the definition and survival of Bulgarian cultural identity. The various themes manifest in the exhibited artworks retain the essence and visual form through the turbulent epochs comprising Bulgaria's visual lexicon of cultural memory. To paraphrase one of the most prominent scholars of Bulgarian culture, Thomas Butler, if we want to begin to understand a nation's artistic practices, we must first come to terms with its cultural memory.<sup>1</sup>

With over 30 works executed in various mediums ranging from oil to mezzotint, textile collage and bronze, *Dancing on Embers* presents the "other" trend in contemporary art practices in Bulgaria. That is to say, art that does not engage in political critiques and does not look back to almost five decades of an ideologically defined communist past. Rather, the artworks presented suggest the existence of an alternative Bulgarian artistic sensibility resulting from the same set of historical and social conditions as those artistic practices concerned with deconstructing the socialist order. To name a few, these social conditions include the state-monitored life during the communist rule, the early 1990s transition from totalitarianism to capitalism, the opening of the art market, the West's interest in post-communist art that thrives on the political past, as well as the processes of European-unionization and global integration. In short, *Dancing on Embers* investigates art from Bulgaria that transcends the trauma of the communist past as a source of inspiration and seeks inspiration in the spiritual roots of the country, in its unique mythological and folkloric makeup and its inscription within a world culture.

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<sup>1</sup> The exact quote is, "If we want to begin to understand a nation, we must first come to terms with its cultural memory." Thomas Butler, *Monumenta Bulgarica* (Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1998) xvii.

The exhibition is organized around several themes such as pagan rituals performed on Christian holidays (Georgi Zaikov's *Fire Dancer* and Rumiana Rusinova's *Koukers*),<sup>2</sup> mythological beliefs and heroes (Rusinova's *Walled-in Bride* and Borislav Rusinov's *Orpheus*), the role of music and typical Bulgarian musical instruments (Rusinov's *Percussion* and Peter Mitchev's *Melody for Ladies*) and textile motifs (Galina Yanakieva's *Composition III* and Sibylla Benatova's *Woven Rug*). Two other themes are the use of actual traditional objects such as hand-made fabrics (Ivan Pazlamatchev's *Only Once*) and the interpretation of the uniquely Bulgarian icon painting and fresco practices (Mihail Petkov's series *In Sacris* and Petur Petrov's *Madonna I*).<sup>3</sup> Along with these individual themes each represented by several works, the exhibition demonstrates the cultural and visual continuity of ideas and their material manifestations as they have flourished in the Bulgarian lands for the last five millennia. At the same time, nearly every piece in *Dancing on Embers* codes the conflation of pagan and Christian symbols and their peaceful co-existence in both religion and every day life.

Consider Georgi Zaikov's *Fire Dancer* (*Nestinarka*), which conveys the duality of Bulgarian culture embodied in the double nature of the ritual and in the work's message. Performed to celebrate a Christian holiday, fire dancing is a pagan ritual that ensures good harvest and the well-being of the people. It is also, as Malvina Rousseva explains in the preceding essay, a pagan act of purification associated with the cleansing powers of the fire. *Nestinarka* portrays one of Bulgaria's most spectacular customs connected on one hand with Thracian religion and, on the other, with the Christian celebration of the Feast of St. Constantine and St. Helen. The female fire dancer treads with bare feet on a thick circle of embers, holding an icon meant to protect her from burning. The fiery colors of her lower body and those of the embers beneath merge into one. The warm, earthly hues of her arms are repeated in the depiction of the icon, hence visually uniting her body with the sacred image, one issuing from the other, but also from the fire below. The convergence of binary elements (secular body/sacred image) is taken one step further—the fire dancer's body becomes the mediator, the link between the earth below her feet and the heavens above her head, each realm indicated by a brightly colored semi-spherical shape. The intricately “woven” background incorporates the figures of the *tupan* (large drum) player and the bagpipe player whose music seems to flow with the delicate geometric designs that construct the image. The colors, ranging from bright and dramatic to soothing and dreamlike, together with the textile-like patterned surface, may be seen as some of the other motifs occurring throughout the exhibition.

The contrasting of primary colors, the fabric-like textures, the works' a-temporal settings and the tendency towards literal and symbolic construction characterize all the exhibited artworks. These aspects, then, describe the particular Bulgarian artistic sensibility that *Dancing on Embers* reveals. For instance, Rusinova's mixed media painting *Koukers* does not hint at the setting for the Koukers (masked dancers during

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<sup>2</sup> As Butler explains, “The church assimilated the folk calendar and the folk culture substituted Christian saints for pagan gods.” (Butler, 473)

<sup>3</sup> For further information on Bulgarian folklore, see Mercia MacDermott's *Bulgarian Folk Customs* (London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1998).

Shrovetide), rather abstracts the procession of figures and transforms it into a symbol, an ornament. *Koukers* both simulates the texture of a traditional hand-embroidered material and incorporates pieces of such a fabric. Her bronze sculptures *Walled-in Bride* and *Young Girl*, too, possess a surface, finely knit into the decorative elements of traditional female costumes. *Walled-in Bride* derives from Bulgarian legends about the sacrifice of a beautiful woman, usually by immuring her, alive, into a newly built structure—building, bridge or fountain—in order to insure its endurance. Manifest in folk songs, this mythological preoccupation with the solidity and survival of a building may be seen as a metaphor for the wish to preserve the Bulgarian spirit untouched.

The desire for consolidation and construction is both literally and metaphorically evident in Benatova's works on paper *Sunset Village* and *Woven Rug*. Comprised of short unconnected gray, blue, green and sand-colored strips of hand-made paper, the rug becomes the continuation of the densely woven "fence" below. In *Sunset Village*, bright lucid paper "tesserae" construct the man-made elements of the landscape and the background of the tri-partite picture plane. Similarly, the grid-like structure of Pazlamatchev's *Pictionary M* reiterates the composition of the antique textile used to create the piece, and also recalls a coffered ceiling inset with square frescoes discovered in a famous Thracian tomb in Bulgaria. In addition, Pazlamatchev's *Only Once* converts the traditional textiles into an architectural structure topped by a keystone arch reminiscent of the numerous Thracian tumuli excavated in the Bulgarian lands. The artist uses antique textiles, hand-spun and hand-woven by his ancestors, thus weaving his own family's history and artistic heritage into his works. With its insertions of images of the Madonna, Mercury, the Medusa, a monkey, a maze, and a microscope, *Pictionary M* alludes to the children's game but also to humanity's common visual and cognitive heritage.

In spite of their different mediums, Petkov's mezzotint prints *In Sacris*, Mitchev's oil painting *Easter Eggs VII*, and Petrov's pastel *Madonna I* all comment on the Eastern Orthodox Christianity icon tradition. The icon is a religious image executed according to strict rules, and it establishes not just the likeness, but also the metaphysical presence of the portrayed divine figure. Even if fragmented, mutilated and de-contextualized, Petrov's *Madonna*, borrowing from Bulgaria's magnificent medieval church fresco tradition, and Petkov's *In Sacris*, which translates as "among the sacred objects," impart the idea that form does not determine content, that the sacred transcends its material manifestations. The sacred power of the icon, worshipped the same way as pagan deities were once revered, cannot be destroyed or debilitated through material damage. Could that be a metaphor for the Bulgarian people, who survived through foreign invasions and violent attempts at eradicating their faith, customs, and material culture?

*Easter Eggs'* female figure refers to Orthodox icons of female saints, but with its fully frontal pose and hand gestures it also evokes icons of Christ Pantocrator. The painting further alludes to the egg cracking contests held on Easter, thus conflating mythological, pagan and Christian symbols. In Bulgarian mythology the egg is the source of all live matter (folk songs describe the earth as an egg and life as the chick born from it), whereas in Christian iconography, the red colored Easter eggs signify Christ's

resurrection, hope and immortality. The fully frontal female figure is dressed in a costume resembling the Bulgarian traditionally red wedding outfit and holds a red egg in each hand. She may be seen as personifying both the Mother-Goddess, who is the central deity in the Thracian pantheon, and the Christian Mother of God, simultaneously mothers and brides.

Krustyo Todorov's large-scale oil painting *An Attempt to Fly* perhaps best summarizes the nature of the Bulgarian artistic sensibilities grounded in the free spirit of the nation. In Bulgarian folk mythology the act of flying is associated with the supernatural powers of the vili and samodivi (mountain and river fairies), the figures of the lamya and the zmei (dragon-like creatures), and the ability to choose freely, committing good and evil deeds by one's own volition. In legends and folk songs, the flight of the ordinary man appears often and signifies the symbolic act of liberation, releasing the grip of the every day and allowing the spirit to roam free overcoming its material bounds. In *An Attempt to Fly*, a dynamic mass of clustered bodies forms a static group, simultaneously attached to the ground and springing forward. The group contrasts against the solitary figure breaking away, overcoming the gravitational force of the earth and the people. Thrusting upward, the figure with the balloons symbolizes the flight of the soul freed from the corporeal, the mundane, and the paltry signified by the various characters below. This attempt at flying, whether successful or not, may be seen as illustrating a national trait, for Bulgarian religion and culture would not have survived through the ages without such flights.

The exhibition *Dancing on Embers: Cultural Heritage in Contemporary Bulgarian Art* opens on the eve of a significant Bulgarian religious festival associated with the coming of the spring—*Lazarov Den*, Lazarus' Day. Based on the biblical story of Lazarus' return from the dead and heralding the resurrection of Christ, *Lazarov Den*, like most of Bulgaria's religious holidays, effortlessly blends prehistoric pagan and Christian mythologies into a ritual meant to secure the fertility of the land and the prosperity of its people. Performed by young girls who personify simultaneously the pagan Mother-Goddess and the Christian Mother of God, the ritual dancing, singing, and future telling conflate the polytheistic and monotheistic faiths into a single incantation for procreation and continuance. Indeed, *Lazarov Den* celebrates the resurrection of all nature, its figurative death and rebirth, symbolizing the erasure of the past and people's gaze forward to a more auspicious future. Easter, celebrated a week after *Lazarov Den*, is the most significant religious holiday in Bulgaria. This year, Easter falls on May 1, thus coinciding with the first days after *Dancing on Embers'* own "birth."