

Continuity and Creativity: The Roots of Contemporary Bulgarian Art

By Malvina Rousseva

Why is it that fire dancing or dancing on embers – part of an ancient ritual performed only in several Bulgarian villages in Strandja Mountain – should title the exhibition?

Dancing on embers is one of the oldest religious rituals preserved in the Bulgarian land. In this ritual the Initiated believer merges his vital energy with that of the fire to purify and symbolically burn all evil inside himself and his native land, people, and country. Purification through fire ensures the overpowering of Evil and the continuation of Good. The fire dancers, men and women called *nestinari*, dance barefoot on embers while one of them divines the future, cautions against coming evil, and presages good or bad omens. Dancing on embers is dangerous for the one who even momentary doubts himself, his mission, the Gods' favor, and ultimately, the powers of Good. For the fire, which purifies and brings light could also burn the one who does not believe.

The Bulgarian artists presented in the exhibition resemble the dancing *nestinari* – like them, they seek their vision and inspiration in the ancient traditions and rituals still practiced in Bulgaria. *Dancing on Embers* introduces Bulgarian artists whose creative imagination springs from the power of old myths and legends and whose work presents the Bulgarian cultural identity in its most pure form. These artists do not emulate “fashionable,” “provocative” or “European” subject matter and forms. Instead, they turn to the immeasurable depths of Bulgarian folklore that bears the cultural memory of the peoples who have inhabited the Bulgarian lands. These artists' works interweave Thracian, Bulgarian, and Slavic motifs and symbols that unify Paganism and Christianity. The significance of the presented artworks becomes even greater at a time of globalization and spiritual uniformity as these artworks become markers of the Bulgarian cultural and spiritual heritage.

Bulgaria's long-standing isolation from the West and its current re-integration have generated a mass imitation of Western European and American models in all spheres of life and art. These models are often foreign to the Bulgarian sensibility and worldview. The ambition to quickly catch up with Western art has moved Bulgarian art away from its ancient roots. *Dancing on Embers* aims to fill precisely this gap and open up cultural space that bridges contemporary art and millennia-old folklore.

The main themes featured in the exhibition display the different sides of the traditional Bulgarian Pagan-Christian ethos: Orpheus's sun-worship, his immortal music and art of healing; Dionysus' earth-worship and the ritual mask-dancers, *koukers*; the fire dancing of the *nestinari*; the walled-in bride, whose sacrifice secures the longevity of man's work; the weaving shuttle, which weaves the threads of life; the Thracian God-horseman whose image continues into that of St. George, the most revered Christian saint in Bulgaria; and always and throughout, the Mother-Goddess with her son or the Mother of God with the Christ-child, who will save the world. These disparate images and

symbols through which we make sense of the Universe ultimately return to their common Beginning represented by the Easter Egg.

The oldest mythological image in the exhibition is that of the Thracian Orpheus, immortalized in song by Homer and Hesiod, referred to by ancient authors as Thracian Healer, Musician, Oracle, King, and Priest. In Bulgarian folklore Orpheus symbolizes immortality, the music of the cosmos, the solitary genius sentenced to death for his difference—his body torn to pieces by Dionysus’ frenzied maenads. Legend has it that even physical death did not silence him – Orpheus’ severed head continued its song, it spoke wise words and prophecies as it floated down the Thracian river *Hebros*. Orpheus’ song lives on in present-day Bulgaria: in the haunting music of his native Rhodope mountains, in the rocks of Orpheus that face the sun each morning, in the “Orpheus” flower that attains anabiosis.

Orpheus’ opposite in Thracian religion is Dionysus – the merry, boisterous, and intoxicating Thracian god of wine. While contemplation and tranquility informed the Orphic festivities, Dionysian celebrations involved rowdy music, exhilarated cries, and unrestrained dances. The mask-dancers, the *koukers* and their dances have their roots in these Dionysian mysteries and constitute an old folk ritual still practiced in Bulgaria at the end of winter and the advent of spring. The costumes, the music, and the narratives enacted during the ritual carry the pagan elements of Thracian culture. The *koukers*’ processions take place throughout the country on the last Sunday before the Christian Lent – a time when man must move away from “Dionysus” and prepare himself for the spiritual and physical purification associated with the fast. Hence man’s life in Bulgarian folklore is symbolically split between Orpheus and Dionysus, between contemplation and action. Man in Bulgarian folklore constantly battles mountain and lake fairies (*samodivi*, *samovili*), dragon and serpents, female and male saints, gods and the elements, but he is also protected and shielded by them. His spiritual power lies in his firm belief in Good and Light, in the harmony between Man and Nature.

To capture the Bulgarian spirit and traditions through the means of contemporary art is also to turn to those who have eyes to see and a soul to understand. Every people carries a unique past that has marked its peculiar sensibility and inspired its individual culture. Every people becomes more valuable for the difference that it makes in a global culture. If Bulgarian-born and educated Christo could be seen as a citizen-and-artist of the world, who wraps physical matter, then the artists in this exhibit, living and creating in Bulgaria, “unwrap” and unfold the spiritual depths of the Bulgarian soul.