

Ruslan Vashkevich

New Retrospective



MIGHTY OMPH

RUSLAN VASHKEVICH'S
INVIGORATING IMAGINATION

BY MAHA MAJZOUB

I don't care much for Estonia. I'm close to sure I'll never visit that country in my lifetime. The kidnapping of the seven Estonian cyclists in Lebanon last year has further cemented my conviction that I should steer clear from Estonia in the event one of the angrier bikers decided to do unto me what my country has done unto him. And judging by the way my government deals with such situations, I think I'll be cycling my way to the afterlife on my own. There are several other small European nations I feel I don't care much for either. Belarus is an example. But a recent trip to Q Contemporary gallery on Zaitunay Street left me wishing I knew Belarusian. It made me wish I was among the world's four to ten million people who could converse with Belarusian artist Ruslan Vashkevich. I would have liked to get a firsthand taste of his fabulous facetiousness and unsweetened sarcasm. Vashkevich wasn't physically there but his whiplash-like wit, which bordered on the absurdity, as well as his invigorating imagination jumped from the canvases that lined the walls of the fresh and edgy art space.

A MAINSTAY IN VASHKEVICH'S OEUVRE IS THE
**SHOCKINGLY
 UNEXPECTED**



LEFT:
GIRL WITH A BREAD AND CO
 120 x100 cm
 OIL ON CANVAS
 2006

This isn't the first time the works of the 46-year-old artist travel to Q, but "New Retrospective" was his premier solo in Beirut. Syrian art collector Motaz Kabbani, who founded the traversal art gallery in 2009, is very fond of Vashkevich's artwork, and as one skims through the pieces he chose to showcase, it is easy to understand why. "Ruslan's work attracts people in general, not only myself," Kabbani explains. "The artworks command the viewer to take a closer look since there is always something to discover, something much more than the expected." Each one of Vashkevich's pieces is intriguing, the young collector adds. "During his successful career over the years, Ruslan managed to experiment with different periods and con-

cerns." The exposition acted as a survey to the various styles and stages in the artist's prolific opus.

Vashkevich has been exhibiting at home and across Europe since 1994, just two years after earning a Fine Art degree from the Belarusian Academy of Arts in Minsk. The Q collection included early hits such as "Twins", a 120x90 cm diptych produced in 1997. The work shows almost duplicate art pieces of two boys, sitting back to back. But once the viewer takes a closer look, tiny differences emerge. "The apparent reflection is not a reflection anymore – it happens that one shoe is missing and the boys are not identical," Kabbani points out, adding that "nothing is what it seems in Ruslan's works."

The premise for this project lies in a post-modern idea of "new exploitation of old things", he goes on to say. "The topics of parity, duality, and symmetry in space and time are explored, coupled with the general symbolism of the number two." This, he says, is why Vashkevich makes generous use of diptychs, in which various arms, feet, and hands are employed for new and unexpected meanings in the paintings.

A mainstay in Vashkevich's oeuvre is the shockingly unexpected. "His ideas are original and reflect a wild imagination," Kabbani remarks. Firmly asserting the collector's claim is "No Parking", a 2009 oil painting of a nude voluptuous woman with pink skin. The character is edged by coiled arms as fists pop out ►

LEFT:
STRONG WILLED GIRL
100x50 cm
OIL ON CANVAS
2007

BELOW:
NO PARKING
95x160 cm
OIL ON CANVAS
2009



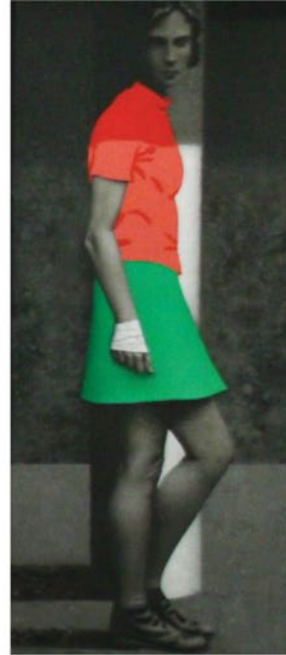
between her legs and in the center of her buttocks. Provoking thought and fantasy, the artwork is as bold as it is entertaining by an artist who generates buzz wherever he goes. Whether good or bad buzz, Vashkevich doesn't seem to care. He just does what he wants. It is an arrangement that has worked well for him so far.

"Ruslan easily steps over any laws and traditions. He breaks the barriers," Kabbani indicates. And as the artist himself states: "I use a picture as a traditional form to present non-traditional ideas." Vashkevich can seriously paint, but his messages are sometimes comical or at least non-conformist. Once labeled the "The Belarusian Quentin Tarantino" for his satirical approach to his narrative subject matter, the wickedly intelligent Vashkevich attempts "to let go of fixed concepts" beyond "the safety of recognition and repetition, and opens up to new formations," reads the exhibition statement.

The level of freedom and nonchalance exhibited in Vashkevich's work makes one assume he was a fully self-thought artist, as many of his pieces are a reaction to established art schools and practices. But the Belarusian artist uses his artistic schooling and deep knowledge of the classics without a pinch of swaggering – he does it to entertain and to engage to viewer into rethinking classic aestheticism. Vashkevich heavily references old masters in more ways than one, only to reject them.

"Strong Willed Girl" is a case in point, where the artist depicts a girl with a giant bow in her hair but missing an eye and nose, and with a tiny opening for a mouth. "Girl with a Bread and Co" is another example, which incorporates a greater level of grotesqueness. Vashkevich exaggeratedly distorts and plays with the faces of his six characters, all of whom appear disgruntled – one man is poking his nose and is sticking a cigarette in his eye while the only female in the sextet has her pigtail freakishly inside her mouth. The audience is at once captivated and perplexed, as Vashkevich challenges our expectations from classic portraiture. In doing so, his pieces may not appeal to everyone. He doesn't seem to mind, as he thinks the best position an artist can adopt is in standing "in the corner against the entire world".





ABOVE:
COLOR BLINDNESS (TRIPTYCH)
120X245 cm
OIL ON CANVAS
2002

Straddling the lines between traditional and conceptual art, Vashkevich communicates his ideas via expressive thinking rather than expressive painting using a simple and clear visual language, defined spatial depth, and a direct color palette. This comes to stark relief with the monumental triptych “Color Blindness,” where each panel portrays a female protagonist in different stages of her life and during various phases of love – from being punch-drunk in love to being broken to pieces at the end of the affair.

Each cloaked in early 20th century attire, the ladies sport monochromatic tones with just dabs of bright red and green. They appear to hail from a bygone era. This absence of colour is also part of creating a documentary-like feel, leaving one free of referring to externalities, Kabbani says. “The quiet power of the painting lies within the poetics of the psychological spaces that each figure occupies,” according to the work’s accompanying wall description. Kabbani says Vashkevich rebels against the grey-toned settings, which makes the works more visually appealing. “At the same time, the lack of color declares the extreme expressions and gestures to the clarity of Ruslan’s technical capabilities.”

VASHKEVICH CHALLENGES OUR EXPECTATIONS FROM CLASSIC PORTRAITURE.

IN DOING SO, HIS PIECES MAY
NOT APPEAL TO EVERYONE

With pulsating imagination, intoxicating wit, and laudable technical prowess, Vashkevich draws us into a world that transcends the language barrier. A harbinger of a new wave in art, Vashkevich piques our interest in Belarusian art and culture. ■

www.ruslanvashkevich.com

www.qcontemporary.com