

Barbara Oudiz, Meeting with Anton Solomoukha

Born in Kiev, in Soviet-controlled Ukraine, Solomoukha boasts of never having suffered under Communism. In 1978, at the age of 29, he nevertheless seized an opportunity to emigrate, arriving in Paris at a time when it was “absolutely impossible” he says, to leave the USSR. How did he do it? Easy. “I married a woman who was doing a doctorate in musicology in Kiev. Her mother was from Guadalupe. I told the Soviet authorities I wanted to go to France to study the plight of workers from Guadalupe. Thanks to my wife’s French nationality, the Soviets gave me permission to leave for a month, and I never went back”.

Barbara Oudiz: Life for you as a student and an artist in Communist Ukraine was not particularly difficult, you say. That’s surprising, isn’t it?

Anton Solomoukha: My father was an official in the education department of the government. That’s why I always had very good relations with big wigs in the Soviet regime. As a result, I never had the slightest problem in the USSR! All I had to do was phone the police! This was in the days of Khrushchev, when there was a certain degree of openness, and so my father didn’t work in a repressive structure. On the contrary!

On top of that, at the age of six, I was lucky enough to win second prize in a worldwide drawing competition. That experience taught me that it wouldn’t be necessary for me to study math and geometry later on. I hated those subjects. So throughout my youth, I concentrated purely on art, history and literature. Under Khrushchev, we were able to talk about Picasso and other Western artists and so I was able to come in contact with Western art. This was after Stalin and before Brejnev, so the 1960s of my youth were a little like the 60s here. We listened to the Beatles, to the Rolling Stones, etc.

B.O. And after your military service, you entered art school in Kiev.

A.S. I studied at the best Fine Arts school in Ukraine with a fabulous professor who was very well known at the time, Tatiana Yablonska. I studied there from age 21 to 27, and did two doctorates. It was a very positive experience for me, even though the courses were very classic and demanding. The level was very high and the selection process was extreme. Each year they weeded out dozens of students. Seven or eight hours a day were devoted to drawing, five or six hours to painting, and in the evenings we studied Marx. Or rather Marxist-Leninism.

B.O. The Socialist Realism ideal was still in full swing then. How did that affect you?

A.S. Socialist Realism was actually very good for us artists! We could earn money by making official art! Each exhibition contributed to the Revolution, to industry, to the Kolkhoz, or to some other official cause and so our work was bought by the state. (*laughs*) We were the elite!

B.O. And you became a successful painter in Kiev?

A.S. I have pursued an artistic career all my life. There were moments of great success. I won many second prizes in painting and drawing competitions. I always came in second, though. And I know why. It’s because I wasn’t represented by a gallery in those days. I was independent, so I always got the jury’s prize, but never first prize.

B.O. How did you get involved in photography?

A.S. I’ve only been doing photography seriously for about four years. While my daughter was at art school, she used to criticize me and say that I spent all day with my paintbrushes and never looked around me, never noticed what was going on in the outside world. It was a joke between us, but one day I took it to heart and made a decision: everything I hated most, I would study! And since I hated photography, I decided to take it up.

At first I did it especially to flirt with women. I'd make portraits of women to get to know them. I used to save the images to use later for my painting. Then the Director of the Russian Photography House -- which is like the Maison Européenne de la Photo in Paris -- came to my studio one evening. She looked at the dozens of slides I had taken and told me: you have to become a photographer! So I started forging my path. Over the past four years, I've been in at least 70 group or solo exhibitions. That's almost an exhibition every month. For a gallery owner, representing a painter is like marriage. Whereas the relationship between a gallery owner and a photographer is like adultery. It's just a fleeting affair, a much "lighter" relationship.

B.O. More often than not, you pose in your staged series.

A.S. Yes, but this is not out of narcissism. Although I see narcissism as a very positive thing! It's already the beginning of Christianity. Jesus' most important rule is "Love you neighbour as you love yourself". I love myself a lot, luckily! Good thing, because if you don't love yourself, you'll never make it... It's often more out of convenience that I pose. Sometimes I just don't find the right model. Or I replace a model in a photo when a shoot didn't work out as expected.

B.O. In your earlier series, such as "Lolita, the Mechanical Doll", there was only you and your model. Why?

A.S. The relationship between a photographer and his model is something very intimate. "Lolita" was a very interesting, very intimate project. Tatiana, the model, was 18 years old when her mother brought her to me to be photographed. People see something erotic about the series, yet Tatiana is never nude in these images. The idea was to construct images in relation to literature. A man, an artist, finds a sort of big damaged doll, and he repairs it. She becomes his wife and then she leaves him. It is in fact the opposite of Nabokov's book. I worked with another woman named Irma, she was Dutch, in "The Sex of Angels" and the "I Fuck your TV" series, which was the first series I ever showed. They were all bought by people working in TV. I put Irma on all fours on a table in front of me, and instead of watching TV, I watched her backside. I got lots of letters about that series.

B.O. And you say don't see your work as erotic fantasy?

A.S. I am not the right person to speak about eroticism. I see my work as being glacial, very cold and cerebral. All my models are so covered with powder and talc that they become like marble. You wouldn't know it, but they are actually very made up. I study their bodies enormously. I spend the first three or four sessions just analysing the body and the effects light has on the body. This is a necessary step for me, and it kills all sexual desire. The relationship with my model becomes rather perverse in fact, because she shows me everything, and I become practically absent. I'm behind the camera. The only relationship between us is in the eye. I become a tyrant. I draw and use Photoshop to imagine the staging of the scene. I create the scene first in Photoshop using bits of existing paintings, so that I can imagine the scene before shooting it. I scream! And my models laugh! I am extremely demanding and meticulous!

B.O. So despite the "perverse" nature of your relationship, your models are enjoying themselves as much as you are?

A.S. As I said, the relationship between a naked woman and a man working with her is very perverse; I can't say it is innocent. The fantasy of pleasure exists. For a naked woman, there is also pleasure. She knows we are working together to make her beautiful. It is like "Beauty and the Beast", "Sleeping Beauty" and "The Arabian Nights", because they never want it to end; they want me to continue photographing them. I am also experiencing pleasure. But I'm like a fisherman going fishing. To be honest, I have more fantasies when looking at a painting than when seeing a naked woman I'm going to photograph. I feel both great respect for her and a duty to be ready to make an excellent picture. I can't imagine how humiliated I would feel if I were not ready when she comes for the shoot! I need to be ready in order to give her confidence and

to make her feel necessary. Everything must be perfect.

B.O. You always stage your scenes against a black backdrop. Why is that?

Because I'm very disorderly, I need something that is a permanent element in my photography. Black is my favourite colour. Night is my favourite time of day. In the dark, light bursts out more powerfully and forcefully. It's like an image is bursting out against a dark sky.