TWENTIETH-CENTURY MAN

An Arshile Gorky retrospective.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

The safest and loneliest place in the world, for a devotee of modern art, is within arm's length of any first-rate painting by Arshile Gorky, the subject of a galvanically moving retrospective at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In that zone, where the artist's decisions register kinesthetically, awakening your sense of touch as well as enchanting your eye, it is hard to doubt the value of the modernist adventure: a bet on the adequacy of sheer form, in the right hands, to compensate for a lost faith in established orders of civilization. No other artist has invested more ardor in naked technique: how to activate an edge, how to rhyme a color. Gorky was an academic painter in a modern academy of one. Take "Scent of Apricots on the Fields" (1944). A pileup of loosely outlined, thinly painted fragmentary shapes, like plant or body parts, embedded in passages of golden yellow, hovers above a green suggestion of a table and below a skylike expanse of brushy rose red. Dabs of raw turpentine cause runny dissolutions, as if some forms were melting into their white ground. The downward drips yield a paradoxical sensation of buoyancy. The picture's visceral shapes seem to ascend like putti in a Renaissance firmament. The dynamics are at once obvious and inspired, stroke by stroke and hue by hue, and deliriously affecting—when viewed near at hand.

From a distance, the work flummoxes evaluation. Its style fits only too comfortably into a period vogue of surrealistic abstraction—that of minor figures like André Masson and Roberto Matta, backed by the giants Picasso, Kandinsky, and Miró. Its content—romanticizing supposed memories of a boyhood that Gorky regularly lied about—is "poetic" in ways that turn treacly and banal when you try to appreciate them. Art history and biography are blind alleys in Gorky's case. His art feels contemporary, because no discursive account of the past can contain it. That also makes it a lonely enthusiasm, difficult to espouse. Still, he is the twentieth-century painter dearest to my heart.

Of what use is biography in assessing someone who made himself up? Gorky told people, including his wife, that he was Russian, a cousin of the writer Maxim Gorky (evidently unaware that "Maxim Gorky" was a pen name), born in the Caucasus in 1905 and educated in France. Actually, he was an Ottoman Armenian, Vosdanig Adoian, born circa 1902, in a village near Van. He couldn't speak Russian and never saw France. His father emigrated to America in 1908. His mother died in Yerevan, perhaps of starvation, in 1919, four years after the remaining family had fled the Turkish massacres of Armenians. In 1920, Adoian and a sister joined relatives in Watertown, Massachusetts. The first evidence of his new identity appears as the signature "Gorky, Arshele," on "Park Street Church, Boston," a skillful pastiche of Neo-Impressionism that he painted in 1924, while teaching at an art school in Boston. He admired the work of John Singer Sargent before latching onto Cézanne, as a god of art second only, later, to Picasso. Early imitations of Cézanne, in the show, are astonishingly acute. Cézanne is the foremost of painters who unfold their majesty to close-up inspection. (Gorky stumbled in his tyro emulations of Matisse and De Chirico, artists more reliant on over-all design.) With Gorky, influence is no incidental issue. I think he never ceased to regard his own creations vicariously, through the conjured eyes of heroes—he cited Uccello, Grünewald, Ingres, Seurat. He spoke with scorn of "originality" as a criterion of artistic value. His friend and self-declared disciple Willem de Kooning reported Gorky's remarking to him, "Aha, so you have ideas of your own." De Kooning recalled, "Somehow, that didn't seem so good."

The tall, preposterously handsome Gorky, who moved to New York in 1924

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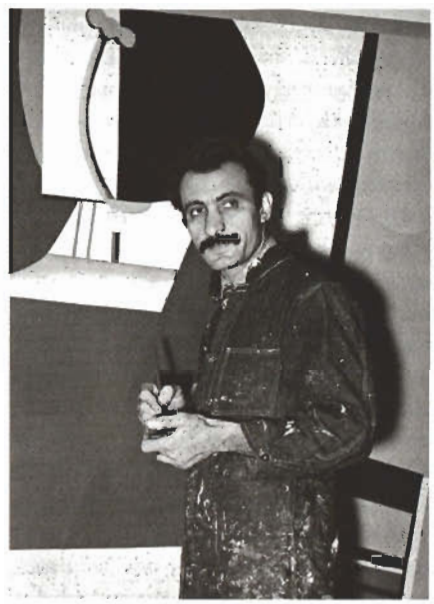
and took a studio on Union Square in 1930, was revered for his gifts, enjoyed for his clowning, and resented for his bossiness in the poverty-ravaged downtown art scene. Many women adored him. I incline to a partly cynical view of his famous images of himself as a painfully shy lad with his haunted-looking mother, based on a 1912 photograph. Gorky's suffering was surely real, but the pathos of the pictures strikes me as calculated to seduce. He wanted mothering. In politics, he was a loose cannon among radicals, an admirer of Stalin who pronounced social realism "poor art for poor people." In 1936, he produced W.P.A. murals, later mostly destroyed, for Newark Airport. (Photographs show him explaining the work to a visibly unimpressed Fiorello La Guardia.) Remnants of the murals, in the Philadelphia show, deploy a dashing, generic modern-artiness like that of his friend Stuart Davis. But Gorky's ambition centered on an intimate and desperate grappling with Picasso, whom he didn't so much emulate as channel, in a spirit nicely characterized by the critic Robert Storr in the show's catalogue: that of "a gifted pianist who habitually forgets in the middle of performing a canonical sonata that he has not composed it himself."

Gorky's Picassoesque works of the thirties are commonly scanted in favor of the pictures with which, from about 1940 until his suicide, in 1948, he anticipated the triumphs of Abstract Expressionism. (His end was terrible, in a madness brought on by a studio fire that destroyed much of his recent work, an operation for rectal cancer, his beloved wife's affair with his best friend, and a crippling car crash.) But the drama of, say, "Enigmatic Combat" (1936-37), a sprightly patchwork of amoeboid and spiky shapes, rivets me. Its thickly layered surface bespeaks long, onerous toil for a kind of effect that Picasso brought off with ease. The task seems absurd. Gorky's self-abnegating success with it has the equivocal glory of a saint's welcomed martyrdom.

The Philadelphia show, curated by Michael R. Taylor, is probably overcrowded and definitely underlit (a consequence of interspersing paintings with drawings, which, in standard museum practice, require dim illumination). And it's wacky, in the big section representing the early forties, when Gorky abandoned his downtown friends for the relatively glittering society of refugees—including Léger and Duchamp—who embraced him. Walls painted with a wraparound, jagged band of gray, evoking exhibition styles that were à la mode at that time, emphasize a revisionist thesis that Taylor spells out in a catalogue essay—assigning Gorky's breakthrough works to European Surrealism rather than American abstraction. I'm sorry, but that's wrong. Gorky is ours. The exiles inspired him; André Breton celebrated him as "the only painter in America"; Matta taught him a crucial trick of divorcing crisp line from atmospheric washes of color. But the younger Surrealists, like Matta, were mediocrities on the down slope of a movement. De Kooning, Pollock, Rothko, and other locals grasped and developed the revolutionary implications of what Gorky did, which was, roughly, to scale every inch of a painting to the impact of the whole.



"Enigmatic Combat," and Gorky with his Newark Airport murals, in 1936.

American eyes saw through the lingering Surrealist clichés in his work—often sketchily abstracted sex organs—to a new, expansive, burstingly songful type of pictorial unity.

Textures of intensely sensitive touch, making forms quiver and squirm, are the most eloquent element in late Gorky. Color comes second, yet it, too, is extraordinary, evoking bodily wounds and inflammations and ungraspable subtleties of nature. Drawing, though busily abundant, feels incidental, like fleeting thoughts of a mind in the grip of an extreme emotion. I am convinced that, had Gorky lived, he would have suppressed line, perhaps in a way that, absent him, fell to Rothko. He would also undoubtedly have undertaken bigger canvases, in the budding New York School manner. "Untitled" (1943-48), a medium-sized and not quite resolved painting, of scrappy shapes jittering in a surface of hot orange scumbled over a muted yellow, feels pregnant with promises of engulfing wonderment. The closing chords of Gorky's unfinished symphony remain incipient. ♦