

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Arshile Gorky: A Retrospective

The first Gorky show in Britain for a generation shows a life scarred by unthinkable anguish, transformed into radiant, exhilarating art

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The Artist and His Mother: 'One of the greatest portraits of the 20th century.' Photograph: Whitney Museum of American Art (New York, USA) © Arshile Gorky Estate

If you think the art press has only turned spiteful in recent years, then think again. Consider the December 1948 edition of *ARTnews*. Barely five months after the Armenian-American painter Arshile Gorky hanged himself in a Connecticut barn after a year of incalculable agony – rectal cancer, a studio fire that destroyed much of his work, separation from his wife, a car crash that snapped his neck and paralysed his painting arm – the world's oldest art magazine chose to publish not a posthumous tribute but a derisively brief dispatch of his final show.

Among its insinuations was the claim that Gorky was an acolyte of the more successful Willem de Kooning, who immediately protested that the opposite was true. His letter remains the best of epitaphs: "When, about 15 years ago, I walked into Arshile's studio for the first time the atmosphere was so beautiful I got a little dizzy, and when I came to, I was bright enough to take the hint immediately... I come from 36 Union Square."

Gorky's studio in Union Square, Manhattan, appears the only fixed point in his adult life. From his name (assumed) and age (uncertain) to the tales he wove to obscure a devastating past, there are so many inconsistencies that the myths have become almost as familiar as the work. In Britain, where Tate Modern owns only one canvas, it often feels as if there are more biographies in print than paintings on permanent display.

Since this is our first show in a generation, it can hardly help but take the life and suicide into account. But Gorky, heralded as the father of abstract expressionism, is no Rothko aiming for the tragic sublime; nor is his art a chronicle of death foretold. The revelation of this tremendous show is, instead, the astonishing atmosphere his paintings exude and sustain.

Gorky died at the age of 44 – or 46. Of all great artists, he may be the slowest off the mark. It takes nearly 20 years (and four galleries) for Gorky to snail his way through the lessons of Cézanne, Picasso and Miró, emulating his masters stroke by stroke. Move briskly through, noticing his powers of concentration, his passion and physical relish even here, and you will still have absorbed something of his spirit before the exhibition proper starts.

The icebreaker is *The Artist and His Mother*, one of the most powerful portraits of the 20th century: heart-rending, irreducibly beautiful. The young Gorky stands next to his mother like a bridegroom, clasping a posy that seems to have sprung from the - blossoms on her apron; she sits erect and contained in the halo of her own outline, archaic as a Byzantine icon. Spectrally pale, their ghosts haunt the picture, traces of life and innocence lost when she starved to death in his arms after the Armenian genocide.

Even if you did not know the painting began with a photograph taken as proof (or reproof) to Gorky's father in America of a family waiting behind, you would have the sense of a relic reverently preserved. It is well known that Gorky reworked the painting over and again, sanding the surface like a man scouring for clues, trying to reach the past; he even began another version, never letting go.

And what is so remarkable is that the very loss at its core – a portrait is a person here, but not here – is countered by the slow lyricism of the work: Gorky's mother is brought back from annihilation, held in the bounding contours and gentle colour, her momentary image indelibly fused with the painting's hard-won surface.

The portrait drawings in the same room put Gorky with Ingres and Picasso as a master of concision. He has to master figuration before stepping away, and even when he does, images continue to suggest themselves as irresistibly in his art as in clouds. But the release into abstraction after his marriage is absolutely euphoric: the paintings begin to breathe, stretch and unfurl.

The pivot in this show is rural Virginia, where Gorky goes wild for the landscape. The sun's a flying saucer surrounded by rays of elation, foliage throbs, every little cricket, cottage and cow becomes an excited hieroglyph in a leaping black tracery. Colour suffuses the canvas like a blush, or gathers like condensation on glass, changing the picture's mood and temperature.

There is so much exhilaration here: *The Plough and the Song*, with its furrowed gold below a cobalt high noon; the rustling depths of *Water of the Flowery Mill*. Even when tragedy returns, when black becomes both teller and tale as in *Charred Beloved*, where Gorky reprises a burnt painting from memory in sombre tones, the effect is of resurgence – life (or love?) brought back from the ashes.

People find autobiography in the art – ploughs and palettes, his father's orchard, his mother's apron – that the poetry of his titles does nothing to discourage. But whatever the paintings absorb from his anguished life they also transcend.

And what increases the joy of them, to me at least, is that the source of this remains mysterious – not much apparent in either form or content. You can isolate the elements of a great Gorky: the decoupling of colour from line, the trademark shapes, from winged biomorphs to quirky triangles, their points on the verge of bursting open; the sense of being nose-deep in a scene that might be scaled to an insect or a giant, being equally intimate and epic; of teeming incidents held in nebulous space. The way his paintings are voluptuous yet august. But when you are in front of them, their open effects feel very secretive.

How does he get such cold colours to thaw, how can the paintings be so speechless yet eloquent? The hues shift and glow like St Elmo's fire, the tones may be discordant, the lines stringent, and still there is this radiant ambience. It seems to be a matter of atmosphere, as de Kooning said, of something beautiful in the air.