

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Gorky's Mysterious, Erotic Art Intrigues in Tate Show: Review

Review by Martin Gayford



Feb. 16 (Bloomberg) -- Arshile Gorky (c.1904-1948) had a tragic life and a poignantly short career as a mature artist. It seems hardhearted, therefore, to say that the new retrospective of his work at Tate Modern is too big, all the more since Gorky was, at his best, a great painter.

On the evidence of this London show, his work is a case in which less exhibits would have meant more impact. Almost half the exhibition is over before we reach his breakthrough into originality in the early 1940s. Several rooms are filled with his emulations of Paul Cezanne, Pablo Picasso, Jean Miro and others. While everyone has influences, this makes a discouraging beginning.

After these long struggles to find himself as a painter came a period in which, along with Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, Gorky was at the forefront of the most exciting movement in art. He invented a novel type of abstraction, or near-abstraction: loose and free, yet filled with floating objects, sexual, organic and mysterious. The effect is of a psychological magic garden, with hints of the Anatolian countryside of his childhood.

One of the most glorious is the Tate's own "Waterfall" (1943), sparked off by a period in the countryside of Connecticut after decades in New York. Looking at it, you accept it as a landscape, though Gorky has actually described almost no actual object in paint, let alone a waterfall.

Fire, Accident

After that moment of achievement, poor Gorky had only a few years to live. Like a character in Greek mythology, from which he took his adopted first name "Arshile," the Russian form of "Achilles," he seemed pursued by the fates. Smitten with cancer, he lost the work of an entire year in a studio fire, and was later injured in a car accident. Gorky feared he might be unable to paint again, and on July 21, 1948, he hanged himself.

The critic Clement Greenberg remarked that Gorky had his greatest pictures to come. His end, and what might have been, is not the only tragedy in Gorky's life. It began with horror.

He was born as Vosdanig Adoian at some point between 1902 and 1905, 1904 being the best guess -- Gorky himself gave different dates -- in the Armenian area of what was then Ottoman Turkey. Of this period, he later said, "All my vital memories are of these first years ... when I smelled my first bread, I saw my first red poppy, the moon, the innocent seeing."

In 1915, he and his family fled the massacres then taking place in Turkey, walking over the border into Southern Russia. (He later took the name "Gorky" in homage to the revolutionary writer, Maxim Gorky.) Amid the chaos and food shortages of the period, his mother died of starvation. He and his sister eventually joined his father in the U.S.

Different Place

Out of this terrible experience came an earlier, non- abstract group of work, most notably the two versions of "The Artist and His Mother" (1926-36 and c.1926-42). These

are visibly derived from Picasso, though still moving, and seem to come from a different place than the polymorphous psychosexual undergrowth of Gorky's Abstract Expressionist masterpieces.

There is, however, something repetitious about the latter in a way there is not about, say, Pollock's contemporary drip paintings. A more tightly edited show would have made Gorky look greater. But marvelous, for a fleeting period, he was.

"Arshile Gorky, a Retrospective" is at Tate Modern, London, through May 3. The exhibition was previously at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and will travel to the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in the summer.