

GAGOSIAN GALLERY

VOGUE

FILM



COSIMA SPENDER
AT HOME
PHOTOGRAPH
VENETIA DEARDEN



FROM TOP:
PAINTING (1944),
BY ARSHILE GORKY;
MARO AND HER
MOTHER IN 1943,
WITH HER FATHER
PAINTING IN THE
BACKGROUND



The LEGACY

The suicide of artist Arshile Gorky has long loomed over his family. Now a documentary by his granddaughter seeks to heal the emotional scars, says Hannah Rothschild

On July 21, 1948, shortly after discovering his wife was having an affair, the abstract expressionist painter Arshile Gorky walked out of his house into a nearby wood and hanged himself. This fatal decision still haunts his family; he is known as “the ghost”, and the repercussions of his suicide have dripped down through time. Sixty years on, the painter’s granddaughter, Cosima Spender, has made an extraordinary documentary exploring the effect of Gorky’s legacy on three generations of women – his wife, Mougouch, his daughters, Maro and Natasha, and, to a lesser extent, Cosima herself. The documentary was edited by Spender’s husband Valerio Bonelli and co-written with her sister Saskia. The interviewees are all relatives, the source

material personal. The film’s atmosphere is tense, claustrophobic and, at times, almost unbearably intimate. It is also, like them, original and entertaining.

My family (the Rothschilds), and the Gorky/Spenders have been tangled up for years. Mougouch was best friend to both my maternal and paternal grandmothers. My father lived in the basement of her house in London’s Chapel Street, where – according to Maro – I was conceived. I spent many summer holidays at Cosima’s parents’ home in Tuscany.

Her father, Matthew Spender, and mother, Maro, are artists; her paternal grandfather was the poet Stephen Spender. Being around them is intoxicating but disarming: as a family they are rumbustiously direct. Cosima is no exception. Like her relations, she is wonderful looking: strong, long-limbed, with

dark-framed, almond-shaped eyes; and, like them, she is blisteringly forthright.

Asked what she thinks of her daughter’s film, Maro says, “It is like *Grey Gardens* [the Maysles brothers’ documentary about a deeply eccentric mother and daughter] and *Festen* [Thomas Vinterberg’s portrait of a highly dysfunctional Danish family].”

I ask Mougouch what she expects others will think of her relations. “I suppose we are not typical,” she says dryly.

Making a film about one’s own family is not for the faint-hearted, as I well know. Recently I made a documentary and wrote a book, *The Baroness*, about my great-aunt Nica. Some relations were delighted that old secrets were being outed; others accused me of trespassing on their memories. At times it was like walking a high wire between the poles of objectivity and sensitivity without a safety net. I wondered why Cosima had flung herself into this maelstrom. “I was worried someone else might do it first,” she says. Did she also find it hard to predict what would upset another person? “You don’t want to hurt someone you love or stir up shit for no reason. But I realised that it would only work if I was honest.”

Two of the most important qualities for a documentary filmmaker are being inquisitive and remaining aloof. “I’ve always felt like an outsider,” Cosima says. “My first language was local Tuscan, a dialect no one born outside the area could understand.” For the first 10 years of her life, Cosima and her best friend, the daughter of the local cobbler, were inseparable and spent every spare minute in the local village. “I wasn’t one of them, but I always managed to integrate. At night I would go home to another raucous artistic life. It made me very adaptable.”

Against her parents’ wishes, Spender applied for the boarding school Heathfield, and moved to England aged 14. Later she attended Westminster School and Soas, where she took a first in art history and anthropology before winning a >

FILM

coveted place at the National Film and Television School.

Her first real meeting with her grandmother Mougouch took place in Paris. "I was 18, we got drunk, I got hooked. Even if she hadn't been married to Gorky, I knew one day I would tell this extraordinary woman's story."

Born in 1922, Mougouch was the daughter of Admiral John Magruder and Essie, a society beauty. Her father's job took his family to exotic locations. In Shanghai, she learnt to tango but when, aged 16, Mougouch was caught with a sailor *in flagrante delicto*, she was packed off to America in disgrace with one hundred dollars in her pocket and a suitcase full of ballgowns. Ravishingly beautiful, suitably mischievous, Mougouch was never going to be alone. In New York, she met Willem de Kooning, André Breton and the surrealists, then Arshile Gorky, with whom she started a relationship. Since then, she married twice and was always something of a femme fatale. "I am a bit of a gadfly," she admits, "a bit hoppity-hop." Now 90 years old, she has finally settled in London.

Cosima was determined to establish the truth behind family myths. "My knowledge of Gorky was based on my mother's throwaway remarks, so I was tangled up and confused about what really happened." Over the course of filming, she took her mother and aunt Natasha back to America, to the place they grew up, to the wood where Gorky hanged himself, and to his birthplace, Lake Van in Armenia. Piecing together her grandfather's life through his letters and paintings, Cosima draws a picture of a man beset by tragedy. Deserted by his father, the nine-year-old Gorky watched his young mother starve to death on a forced march during the Armenian genocide, an event that claimed more than 1.5 million lives. Relatives paid for Gorky and his sister to emigrate to America, where he found his father. One day, opening a drawer in his father's house, Gorky found a photograph of himself with his mother, a memento she had sent to her errant husband, hoping to trigger feelings of mercy or at least money for food. Realising his father had ignored her plea, Gorky left the house, changed his name, invented a fake history, and forever distanced himself from his paternal family. For the rest of his life, he painted and repainted that image: a starving, destitute mother and son.

During Gorky's lifetime, few recognised his talent or bought his work: he spent most of his life in penury. He was 37 when he married the

18-year-old Mougouch. The couple had two daughters, Maro and Natasha. When cancer destroyed his guts, Gorky, an intensely proud man, tried to conceal his colostomy bag by bandaging his stomach tightly and, to minimise the calls of nature, hardly ate. He was permanently hungry and in constant pain.

Impoverished and disheartened, the couple borrowed a house in Virginia. For a brief period, their spirits lifted. Gorky, inspired by the landscape, painted well and soon amassed enough work for a new show. Then a fire broke out in his studio, destroying many of the canvases. Shortly afterwards, he broke his neck in a car crash, which left his painting arm temporarily paralysed. He became increasingly depressed and desperate. Mougouch recalls how he would stride out of



the house carrying a length of rope. "The most heartbreaking thing," she says, "was having to send the children after him to stop him."

In the film, Cosima revisits Mougouch's decision, shortly before her husband's suicide, to embark on an affair with a family friend, the painter Roberto Matta. Once regarded as an act of treachery, her actions are shown in the documentary as a desperate cry for help. "I had to get out, I had no choice," Mougouch says. "Otherwise I would have ended up at the bottom of the pond."

Following his death, Mougouch put her two daughters into a Swiss boarding school – the only decision in a long life that she "really regrets". It compounded the girls' sense of loss and abandonment. Today, Natasha lives alone and has sought comfort in Eastern alternative medicine (qigong and t'ai chi). Maro became a painter "because that was what Daddy wanted", and uses the same techniques and colours that her father loved.

Although a respected artist in her own right – an exhibition of her work, *The Geometry of Nature*, is currently showing at Long & Ryle gallery in London – Maro admits to feeling overshadowed by her father's reputation. It was not until 20 years after his death, in the late Sixties, that Gorky's work was recognised. It is now highly prized, hanging in major museums and collections. His estate is worth millions.

Cosima's father, Matthew, was also caught up in Gorky's wake; he wrote a biography and edited anthologies about the father-in-law he never met, and admits that every night for more than 40 years, he and Maro have each drunk a bottle of wine and ended up talking about Gorky. "In many ways," Cosima says "my mother got stuck at the point of trauma. She is still a five-year-old child."

Cosima hopes that the film has been healing, cathartic and a way to finally "emotionally scatter Gorky's ashes." We see Natasha speaking angrily about her mother's treatment of her grieving children and, finally, Maro telling her mother that she forgives her for their abandonment more than 60 years ago. "After the first screening," Cosima recalls, "Mougouch summoned me to her house. I was terrified, but she told me that hearing everyone laugh – seeing the humour in their particular brand of theatre – made her realise that Maro does love her."

The devastating repercussions of a suicide, the scars of genocide and the splintering of successive generations are issues my family also faced. Perhaps shared experiences go some way to explaining why Cosima and I get along

so well. Different generations have distinct ways of dealing with past hurt. Both she and I believe in airing, rather than suffocating, our issues. When my biography of my great-aunt is published in May, I hope that it is as healing.

A few weeks ago, I saw Spender with her husband and sons, all racing their bikes through Hyde Park. Bundled up in cashmere and tweed, they looked effortlessly chic and happy. We chat for a few minutes; one son is impatient to go skating, the other is getting cold. I ask her how life is since she finished the documentary. "I have no idea – I am still recovering," she says seriously. She asks if *Vogue* will photograph her grandmother and mother. I tell her that they only want a shot of her. She laughs. "Good. It's my turn now, my turn." Blowing me a kiss, she cycles after her boys, away into the bright winter sunlight. ■ *"Who is Gorky? An Abstract Life", will be broadcast on BBC Storyville on March 12; and available on BBC iPlayer for the next seven days*