



Nikolay Breaking Away from the Mold

by caitlin anne Flynn

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I had the pleasure and honor of corresponding at length with our Artist of the Month, Nikolay Sokolov. Nikolay generously gave of his time and patiently responded to all my questions with great detail. Yet, through all the correspondence I received, I readily admit Nikolay the Man is still a puzzle to me, a contradiction, an enigma. But, for all the uncertainty, all the questions, I have decided that the man cannot be separated from his art. He is “an artist with conviction” and the fact that he has “never worked another job but painting and music performances” speaks to his dedication and his commitment to his craft.

So deeply rooted are Nikolay’s convictions, he has “never had to face the disproportion between creativity and bills, bill and creativity.” While living in St. Petersburg, Russia (1972-1989), Nikolay was privately sketching and drawing. But his day job was traveling from one end of the city to the other to give “private classical guitar lessons to teens who wanted me to teach them some Deep Purple or Led Zeppelin tunes,” while their parents were paying him money to teach their children “to play some fancy Bach adagios” about which “the child didn’t really give a damn.” After commenting to one of his friends about this frustrating situation, his friend saw Nikolay’s private drawings and told him to “frame them and sell them!”

As Nikolay tells it, “I had to struggle with my consciousness because I never saw myself selling on streets anything, especially art, or especially my art – by then I was so naïve that I thought that art just cannot, must not and shall not be sold. And I was pretty sure I do still believe that art cannot be sold! So, you see how damn naïve was I! Anyhow, after a certain struggle I brought my ‘immortals’ to the street and you know, that very day I sold a piece.” Realizing his art could support him, Nikolay cancelled all his students’ guitar lessons, and began producing more art.

However gratifying and emancipating selling that first piece of art was, Nikolay now looks back on that time and views it as “the beginning of [his] grand fall into an art-commercial.” Yet, while Nikolay may still grapple with the transition from art purist to commercial artist, we are the beneficiaries of Nikolay’s struggle, for were he not to have made the transition—even briefly—we would be deprived of viewing his works.

Nikolay channels Masters of the past through his art and in so doing, adds a dimension of tranquility and harmony that radiates from his pieces, most of which are composed of different patterns, figures and brilliant colors.

Most of Nikolay’s works are created through a unique process called ‘gravure on cardboard.’ Nikolay explains that this process combines direct carving and etching with needle-points and razor blades into the surface of the picture. Nikolay’s “muse is a femme” – and this theme can be found in almost all his images.



With his muse Nikolay creates art in perhaps the purest manner one can create art, for he is not delivering a message. He is not, "building up some philosophic base behind it. What message the beauty may carry out? Just a message of beauty, that's all! Art may be as purifying as destroying. I like the first one." And, without any doubt, Nikolay's works are purifying, evocative, sensual, and harmonic. Nikolay's process of carving seems to evoke a sense of rhythm and composition perhaps most prominent in Madonna Perceiving the Holy Spirit.

This simple composition has a distinct Byzantine feel with the flatness of space, and the minute details that allow your eye to travel throughout the picture. Furthermore, while the black, flat, and heavy background serves your eye in unifying the composition, it also poses as juxtaposition between the most prominent figure, Madonna, and the background. This black background allows your eye to do a double take. On the initial glance the space between the Madonna and the background appears limited and flat; yet, the space develops the longer you stare. Soon, Nikolay's representation of the Holy Spirit floats out of the composition. The lightness of his Holy Spirit deeply contrasts the heavy background, all the while connecting your eye to the outside world...perhaps the journey to come.

Unlike other depictions of Annunciation scenes (three that come to mind immediately are van Eyck's The Annunciation, Fra Angelico's Annunciation, and Murillo's The Esquilache Immaculate Conception) where the Madonna is depicted as almost startled by the conception, Nikolay's portrayal of the Madonna is calming. His Madonna embraces the Holy Spirit with her eyes closed, she looks inward as to accept the gift she has been given. Nikolay's portrayal of the Madonna is more empowering, for he gives her a choice; he presents a strong woman who is aware of the hardships to follow, yet he develops her as a peaceful woman.

Where Nikolay's Madonna Perceiving the Holy Spirit emits a strong woman who is willing to take on the challenges destiny sends her, his Angel by the Window seems to exist simply for beauty's sake. Here, Nikolay portrays the grace and the peace of feminine beauty and tranquility. As the angel sits by the window her curvaceous body, often associated with the female shape, is mimicked by the patterns on the wall. Contrasting the roundness of the picture is the large window that frames the angel's head. Again, Nikolay creates a sense of distance through contrasts. The angel's flat, dark red hairpiece seems to come forward in space while the textured light-blue sky rapidly recedes into space.





Contrasting Nikolay's other 'gravure on cardboard' pictures is his oil painting of Girl with Lily. Again, playing with the notions of contrast, this painting is more evocative of a fresco style than it is of an oil painting. The muted background space serves to push the primary figure forward. This 'girl,' who is depicted much more as a woman, delicately holds the lily while looking into space. Perhaps the most captivating aspect of this painting is the female's recognition of her beauty. She stares, perhaps at a lover, with passion, strength, and confidence- all the while flaunting her feminine power.

Feminine strength and beauty—these are two qualities Nikolay so adeptly portrays in his works. The preoccupation with the femme is not modern, yet the gentle, loving, respectful portrayal of women so endowed may be a thing of the past. Nikolay reflected that "feminine beauty was one of the central themes in the art of the Masters of Renaissance, Baroque, Classicism, Arte Nuvo." Yet, he also recognizes that, "nowadays, even though we are bombarded with a porno production in any imaginable form, so that every

hidden subject may be found on any market-store shelf next to some Snickers or Coca-Cola, it would seem no more mystery remains when we think of a female beauty." Well, perhaps for many people, but for Nikolay, "the mystery will always be there, as we will never manage to thoroughly discover our galaxy or any other galaxy. Perhaps, for all of these reasons, although undecidedly, unconsciously, a woman happened to become a center of my artistic galaxy."

Contrasting the bombarded images of overexposed female flesh that have become so prevalent in today's market, Nikolay presents his viewers with a beauty that has been lost for centuries. His beauty is real, and in many ways it has been forgotten. Visit Nikolay's website <http://www.nikolayfineart.org/>, study his art, listen to his compositions, and learn. We are living in a world of instant gratification, where anything we could ever need is right around the corner, or sometimes even a click away. We are living in a world where technology changes on a daily basis, where discoveries are being made, and wars are being fought. Nikolay is one of the few people I have encountered who breaks away from this mold. He is an artist who is willing to look to the past to better understand the future. He is an artist who creates art (both visual and musical) for harmony and peace...

Nikolay Sokolov CV:

- 1985-1990 studied classical guitar in St. Petersburg while attending the University of Hermitage. There, he studied both the history of Western Modern Arts and the History of Russian Avant-garde.
- 1992 exhibited at the Dumskaya 3 Gallery in St. Petersburg
- 1992 was featured in a Munich TV documentary where he played music
- 1993 moved to Prague and played in a blues group Tupelo Sugar
- 1994 moved to Holland and had his first solo art show at the Post Modern Café and Gallery in Amsterdam
- 1995 lived in Seattle and published a book of poetry Time of Butterflies
- 1999 moved back to Prague and worked on a large mural project for an Erotic Museum