



VANIA

A CONVERSATION BETWEEN VANIA AND ULESHKA

The son of a painter and an art teacher, Russian-born Vania Zouravliov began experimenting with his mother's art supplies at a very early age. He still remembers drawing what he describes as 'evil hammerhead people' when he was only four years old. Developing an extremely skilful hand and eye for illustration, Vania became a celebrated child prodigy in Russia, which led to several appearances on Russian television and introductions to famous Communist artists, the godfathers of social realism. By the age of thirteen, Zouravliov was exhibiting internationally and had travelled to Paris, Canterbury, Colmar, and Berlin. After finishing his studies at the Edinburgh College of Art, from where he now spreads his mystical work to galleries around the world. Additionally, he has produced an enormous variety of work for magazines and CD covers, as well as for books and various erotic novels.

Looking at Vania's work now, we cannot help but be shocked, intrigued, touched, and tempted at the same time. His richly detailed illustrations are contemporary masterpieces bursting with symbolism, myth, eroticism, and children's nightmares in adult bodies. Many of Zouravliov's drawings showcase his ability to portray both fantasies and fears, combining modern imagery with historical references and elements from the East and the West. Technically accomplished, Vania's output ranges from stylised graphical pieces to rich artworks revealing the skill of a classical master.



VANIA, YOU WERE EXPOSED TO ART AND INFLUENCED BY ARTISTS FROM A VERY EARLY AGE. HOW DID YOU APPROACH LIFE AND DRAWING WHEN YOU WERE YOUNG? . . . Seeing works of Goya, Dürer, Mantegna, and Arcimboldo made me realise that there was a multitude of fascinating worlds out there. Even as a child, I felt that I needed a world of my own. Starting drawing early in life also taught me the importance of discipline and routine. Just like any other exercise, drawing needs to be practised regularly; otherwise, you lose form. My parents are very artistic and open-minded people, and thanks to them I became aware of Bayros, Sade, Rops, and Boris Vian very early, together with many other, less controversial artists.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE THE RUSSIAN ELEMENT IN YOUR WORK, AND WHO WERE YOUR MAIN INFLUENCES? . . . It's very difficult for me to pinpoint what makes something 'Russian' or 'Slavic'. Our art, religion, and language are all strongly influenced by other cultures, and yet there certainly is such a thing as a Slavic spirit that is instantly recognisable. For me, a work by Josef Sudek is a perfect example of what it means to be a Slav. The way I see the world is unmistakably Russian, and this is also represented in my work. Strong influences for me were Somov, Borisov-Musatov, Bakst, Vrubel, and Bilibin.

WHAT ARE THE KEY WORKS THAT HAVE INSPIRED AND SHAPED YOUR DRAWINGS? . . . I learned how to draw by closely studying the works of the German masters. The basis of my technique was formed by looking at engravings and drawings by Dürer, Martin Schongauer, Lucas Cranach, and Hans Baldung Grien. At various other points in my life, I've also been inspired by artists such as Wilhelm von Kaulbach, Max Klinger, and Eduard Thöny.

WHY ARE THERE SUCH STRONG JAPANESE INFLUENCES IN YOUR DRAWINGS? IS IT JAPAN SEEN FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF EUROPEAN JAPONISME? TO WHAT EXTENT IS CONTEMPORARY JAPAN VALID FOR YOU? . . . I was introduced to Japanese ukiyo-e together with everything else, so I'm as comfortable in the world of Utamaro, Yoshitoshi, and Kuniyoshi as I am in the world of Bilibin or Doré. When it comes to contemporary Japanese culture, high fashion and design are the areas I find most innovative and inspiring. I'm deeply in awe of Rei Kawakubo and her work. She's most definitely one of my heroes.

YOUR MULTI-LAYERED IMAGES SEEM VERY COMPLEX. HOW DO YOU STRUCTURE THEM? . . . I usually have two or three key elements in every drawing, including one or more main characters. Everything else is background. Decorative elements and costumes are there just to support the main image without overpowering or distracting from it. Most of what I do can be described as portraiture. People in my drawings are hardly ever caught off guard; they stare right back at the viewer. I usually do very little or no sketching. I have an image in my head, which I draw lightly onto paper, and then I determine what the darkest parts are. Finally, I add details and tone to the drawing until I feel that the image is completely balanced.

YOUR COMPOSITIONS ARE FILLED WITH RECURRING IMAGES: NAKED LOLITA BITCHES, PEOPLE IN BONDAGE, SHAMEFUL ACTS BETWEEN GIRLS AND DEMONS, EXPOSED INTESTINES, SCISSORS, ROOSTERS, AND DEATH. IT'S MOULIN ROUGE MEETS JESUS. WHAT DO THESE MOTIFS AND ICONIC FIGURES MEAN TO YOU? WHY DO YOU CHOOSE THEM, AND WHAT DO THEY SYMBOLISE? . . . I don't have verbal interpretations for most of my drawings. The sole purpose is to create a strong atmosphere. I feel that, as an artist, it's my job to give people pleasure. I would never draw anything that lacked beauty or life. When I draw people in bondage, I mean somebody being tied up or restricted. I mean it in its original sense, in the same way as slaves are portrayed in Michelangelo's works, or women in ukiyo-e prints. Open, visible intestines stand for fragility and mortality—a desire to devour somebody. Lolita bitches are the undeniable and raw energy of youth. Women or girls are really a representation of me, whereas male characters stand for danger in life, fear, and being forced to do something against your wishes. In some ways, all this is very similar to a character entering a dark forest in folklore. Scissors symbolise violence, roosters aggressive masculinity, death the shortness of life. Christianity means storytelling at its best—those beautiful allegories of what it means to be human. Youth and decay stand for cycles and metamorphoses, and the devil for being a victim of circumstances, about losing yourself and being devoured by somebody stronger than you. Animals in general are neither good nor bad, but they have an amazing energy. When I was a child, I read someone who described the women in Khnopff's paintings as 'half angels, half seals.' That's exactly what I'm interested in: impenetrable characters that have pure, pulsating energy.

YOU MENTIONED FOLKLORE, WHICH—TOGETHER WITH FAIRY TALES AND FILM—SEEMS TO BE A STRONG INFLUENCE ON YOUR WORK. . . . There are lots of reasons why I find folklore enjoyable, important, and inspiring. First of all, a great folk tale has a wide spectrum of emotions ranging from fear to hope, which are presented in a dramatic, captivating, and concise manner. A strong atmosphere is created by using very few words or sentences. Secondly, many folk tales have elements of non-linear storytelling. In Russian folklore, for example, all sorts of really bizarre and unpredictable things can happen within the main stories. I absolutely love that form of 'branching out' within tales; to me, it's much more representative of real life than anything with a rigid structure. Thirdly, folk tales are full of deeply powerful imagery—something that, in my opinion, most of the contemporary literature for children lacks.

YOUR DRAWINGS OFTEN HAVE A DAGUERRETYPE FEEL TO THEM, AND YOU'RE INSPIRED BY PEOPLE LIKE PAOLO ROVERSI. HOW HAVE EARLY AND CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY INFLUENCED YOUR WORK? . . . When I see albumen prints of the American Civil War, the first photographs of China or Japan taken by Europeans, or portraits by Julia Margaret Cameron, there's no doubt in my mind that these are some of the most beautiful images ever created. Many examples of early photography not only possess the same qualities that are important in a work of graphic art; they also have a deep emotional core that other art forms sometimes lack. When it comes to contemporary photography, I find the images of Sally Mann, Liu Zheng, Eikoh Hosoe, and Miwa Yanagi, amongst many others, more elegant, profound, and challenging than anything else I see in contemporary painting or illustration.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WOMEN AND MEN IS VERY STRIKING IN YOUR WORK. ALTHOUGH MEN OFTEN APPEAR IN THE SHAPE OF DEVILS, WOMEN ALSO HAVE SEDUCTIVE DEMON EYES AND LOOK AS IF THEY KNOW EXACTLY WHAT THEY WANT. WHAT'S YOUR VIEW ON EROTICISM? . . . I believe that sexuality is one of the things we have very little control over. It's primeval, uncertain in its nature, and extremely powerful. In my work it represents raw energy, a desire to live. I think it's important to remember that most of the images we consider to be masterpieces of erotic art today were done illegally or at risk of the artist's freedom and career. Most erotic drawings by Utamaro or Hokusai, for example, were created either anonymously or under pseudonyms. Although sexuality is a part of everyone's life, its power is so strong that it remains endlessly mystifying, threatening, and haunting in equal measure.

WHAT ABOUT DEATH? . . . Death is constantly present in one form or another. Our opinions about death change throughout our lives; some people choose to acknowledge or tame it, and some do their best to ignore or block it out. In my drawings death is a part of the same matter as everything else — people, trees, roots, bones, veins, all turning into one another—as a reminder of how short life is.

YOU'VE SAID THAT YOU'RE INFLUENCED A GREAT DEAL BY MUSIC AND LISTEN TO IT WHEN YOU DRAW. YOU'VE ALSO BEEN INVOLVED IN A LOT OF MUSIC ILLUSTRATIONS. WHAT KIND OF MUSIC DO YOU LISTEN TO? . . . Music has always been an integral part of my working process. It's very rare that I spend a day without listening to at least three or four different albums. In the same way that I'm interested in creating characters that represent mixed and often conflicting qualities, the music I find most interesting has a strong atmosphere, but allows you to perceive it differently depending on your mood.

IF YOU LOOK BACK AT EVERYTHING YOU'VE PRODUCED SO FAR, WHAT WOULD YOU SAY REALLY DRIVES YOU? WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO BRING TO LIFE? . . . I can express myself much better through my drawings than in any other way. For me, drawing is a form of dialogue with the world. Anything that people want to know about me can be seen in my work. I also deeply believe that creativity is one of the best human qualities. It's one of the very few things that elevates us in life and allows us to rise above the banality and cruelty of everyday existence.