

LIGHT & DARK

Stuart George samples *La Vie Parisienne* with prize-winning Russian painter **Natacha Ivanova**.



One of Natacha Ivanova's biggest influences, she tells me, is Alfred Hitchcock. It's tempting to think of Natacha as one of Hitchcock's ice blondes (Grace Kelly, Kim Novak or Janet Leigh, say). She certainly has the looks.

It is indeed difficult to reconcile this attractive personality with the stark paintings that she produces. "I paint to explore something inside of myself, my own life vision of something," she says.

"It's not that I have only dark experiences but as you go down into yourself you find a lot of dark things." She says that *Love*, which shows a woman being seduced by a sinister wolf and then apparently pointing a gun at herself, is "very personal, based on a real love story, about giving up yourself to be with someone, sacrificing yourself". The green background of the painting is a vivid metaphor of sexual jealousy.

Her work is striking and unique (she

often uses herself as a model), featuring large canvases of bold, dark colours and powerful, unsettling and sometimes high sexual imagery. Despite the smile, she takes her work seriously. She warns me that "I am not here to make jokes. Making jokes in paintings is not my kind of thing."

She has had an impressive prize-winning career in France, including the 2006 Académie des Beaux Arts Dumas-Millier prize; the Special Grand Jury Prize of the



"It's a male job. It's very physical. There's no glamour at all, it's very dirty. The paints are bad for your health. It's very solitary."

Previous page: *Leda and the Swan II*, oil on canvas, 146x114cm.

Above: *Based on a True Story*, oil on canvas, 50x400cm.

Below: *Love*, oil on canvas, 180x250cm.

Over page:

Main: *Dallas Family*, oil on canvas, 162x130cm.

Inset: Natacha in front of her prize-winning painting *Samolet II* at the Salon de Montrouge in Paris.

Paul-Louis Weller Portrait Competition in 1999; the André and Berthe Noufflard Painting Prize, also in 1999; the Pierre-Da Design Competition at the Académie des Beaux Arts in 1998; and first prize in the Reflets de Paris Competition in 1996.

She held her first major UK exhibition in November 2005 at Jerwood Space in London and is represented in this country by Stephen Walton Fine Art, which "found Natacha via the Ukrainian painter Ulyana Gumeniuk (with whom Stephen Walton also worked). Walton was also instrumental in the establishment of a venture fund for Natacha, which saw an anonymous patron sponsor her for 18 months and also underwrite the cost of the Jerwood show.

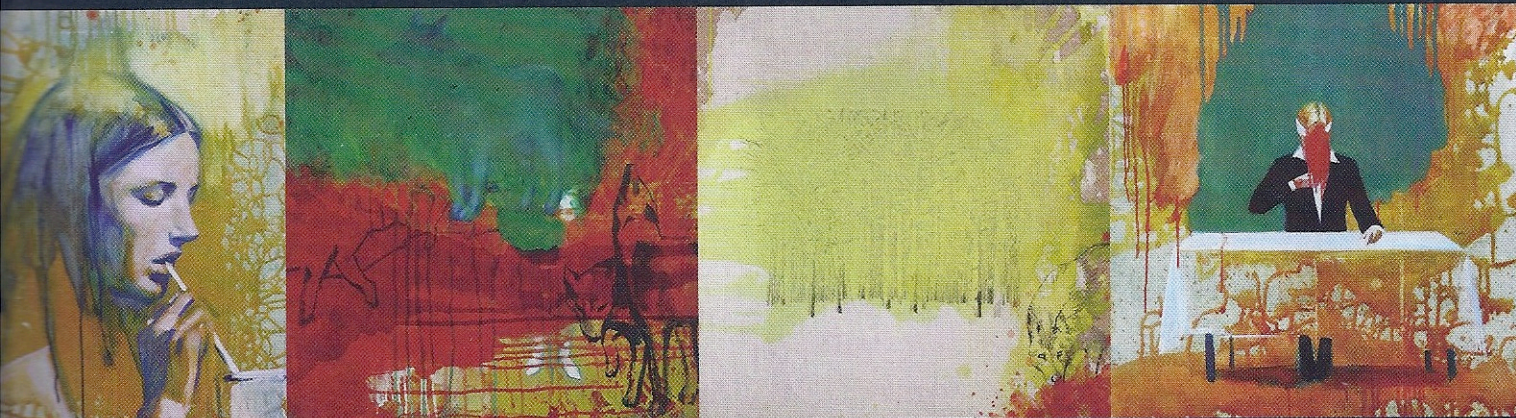
Born in Saint Petersburg in 1975, Natacha has enjoyed a long and prestigious education as an artist, despite coming from a very modest background. Both her parents are artists (they taught art to earn a 'proper' living during Communism) and she studied with her mother from the age of two. She started her painting career at the ripe age of six, when she passed her first exam for entrance to a children's art school at The Hermitage: "As a child, it was an unbelievable chance, because The Hermitage has the best art from everywhere," she says. "There was also a very good art history



It struck me was the really pink, very particular light, very different to Russian light," she remembers. "The light was a big surprise." She graduated with a diploma from the Johansson School of Fine Arts at

I was chosen because by then I had huge experience of sketching ballet dancers." The Tour is "a huge organisation of thousands and thousands of people, moving together every day. It was quite scary at the

want." A section of another of her Salon paintings, called *Based on a True Story* (part of which is a portrait of her late sister Anni), has been blown up to 80 square metres and can be seen on the side of a building in Paris.



Russian Academy of Fine Arts in Saint Petersburg in 1998, although she went to Paris in 1993 and has lived in France, more or less permanently, since then. After The Hermitage, she enrolled at the prestigious École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris in 1995 (alma mater of Géricault, Delacroix, Fragonard, Ingres, Degas, Monet and Renoir, among others), graduating with a diploma in 2000. She was remarkably busy as a student. In 1996 she won first prize in the Prix du Concours Reflets de Paris and showed her work at the Rendezvous Gallery in Aberdeen. She also worked for the Comédie Française theatre company, executing 30 portraits for Offenbach's opera *La Vie Parisienne*, and from 1996 to 1998 was an illustrator for the monthly magazine *Saisons de la Danse*.

The hitherto teetotal Natacha won the 1997 Prix du Concours Perrier-Jouët des Artistes: "I won a six-litre Methuselah of champagne but at the time I didn't drink alcohol. I only began drinking in England!" In 1999 she held a solo show at the Stephen Lacey Gallery in London (with several subsequent shows) and spent three months at the Accademia di Brera in Milan as an Erasmus student.

One of the highlights of Natacha's

beginning. You meet a lot of other painters and writers who come to the Tour de France; that was quite interesting, too." She made 600 drawings during the month-long Tour. "I thought I would never draw again, because my hand was aching so much."

During the Tour she met her (now ex) boyfriend, a journalist, and afterwards moved to London, where she acquired her fluent English. The city was a tonic, she feels, and "my painting changed completely". She enjoyed London, but Paris remains her first love: "London has a more interesting lifestyle, but Paris is more pleasant."

After graduating, she continued to work in the opera world as a decorator at the Grand Opéra in Paris. For her, the appeal of opera is that it is "often a very tragic story, and what I like about it is that you live a tragedy in a very short time. You have a story that goes so quickly and quite often ends badly; a tragedy rather than a happy ending." She taught drawing at the Ateliers des Beaux-Arts in 2001 and painting at the École d'Arts Plastiques in 2002, and she featured in the BP National Portrait Award in 2001.

Last year Natacha was winner of the Salon de Montrouge competition, named after a southern Parisian suburb where Picasso once lived. When we visited the gallery

Asked what has most influenced her work, she replies that "it's difficult to say which painters have influenced me. I am a painter but I'm not influenced by other painters as such. I'm more influenced by photography, cinema or by my own vision." As previously mentioned, Hitchcock's films have made a strong impression on her. "I didn't see his films for a long time", she explains, "and it was a big visual shock for me... I love his films, *The Birds* in particular... he managed to create atmosphere from nothing, from just small details, the composition and angle, the light... I like his vision, he knew what he wanted." The Russian director Andrej Tarkovsky is also an influence (Natacha's fiancé Andvei Volkov, whose father is a renowned film designer, knows Tarkovsky's family).

The conspicuous sexuality of much of Natacha's work has some of its basis in cinematic influences. She cites Stanley Kubrick as a favourite – the dreamlike eroticism of *Eyes Wide Shut*, for instance, is seen in many of Natacha's paintings. Her 2003 work *Dallas Family* takes its cue from the infamous Japanese hardcore film *In the Realm of the Senses*, showing the film's female protagonist coupling with eight men (one at a time) of the past



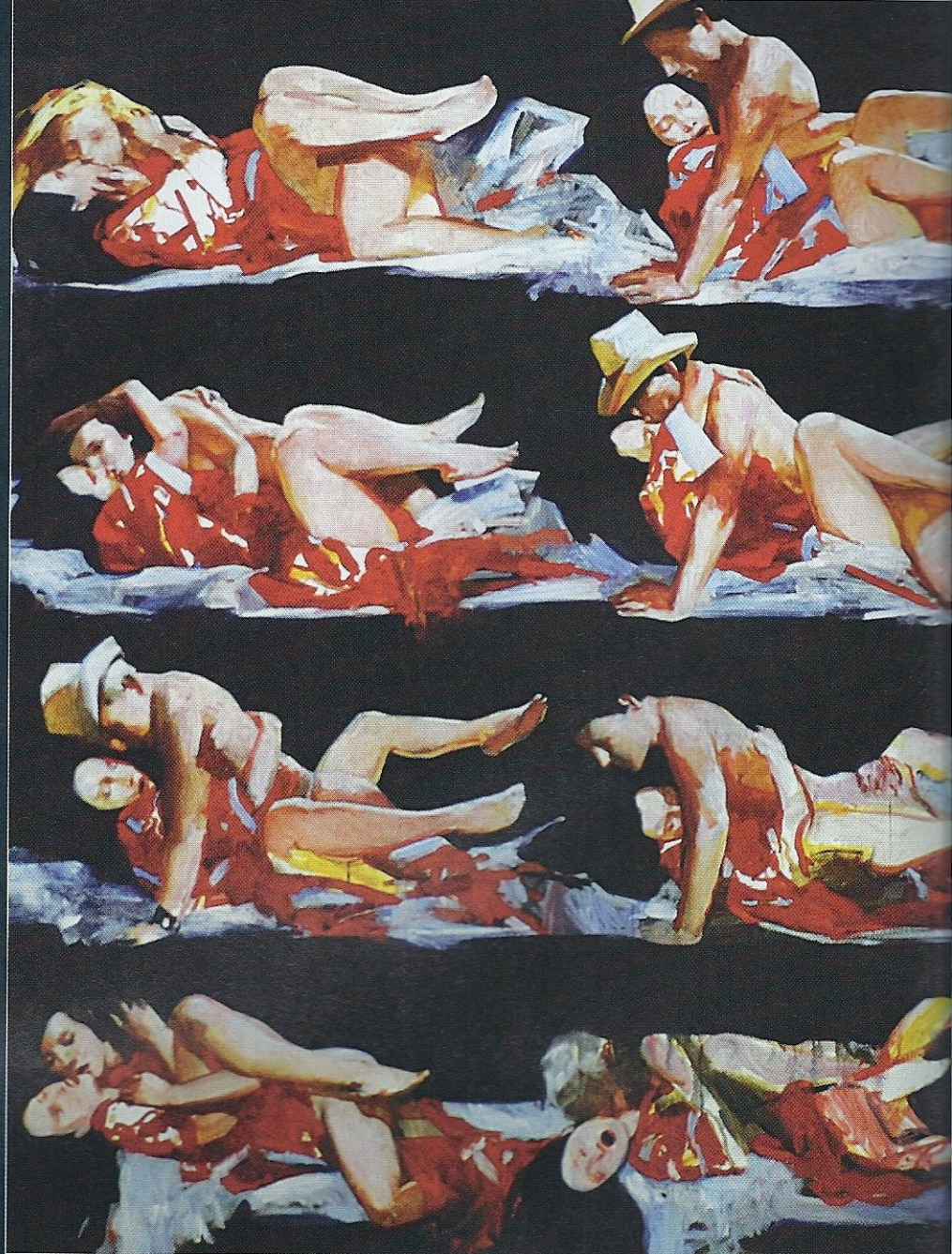
of Dallas (the man in the ten gallon hat is surely J.R. Ewing). Her love of mythology and eroticism manifests itself in her sensual but restrained depiction of *Leda and the Swan*. She summarises her work and influences by stating simply that "I like imagery".

Natacha doesn't have a Paris gallery to represent her; she sells her paintings herself and private collectors also buy her work.

"In the art world you have to move on very quickly, to cash in on opportunities. The ideal situation for an artist is to have a good gallery, but it's very difficult to find one."

An influential French art critic wrote about Natacha's work being shown at Galerie Valérie Cueto, next to the Picasso museum in the Marais. They weren't, but Valérie, influenced by this critic's unknowing mistake, subsequently showed Natacha's paintings anyway. At Stephen Walton's gallery her paintings typically sell for £1,800 for a smaller canvas and up to £10,000 for a larger triptych.

She likes to paint with hog brushes 'because they're hard. For a long time I used a No. 4 or 5 brush, exactly the same for years and years. I'm very conservative. But now I use much larger brushes.' For her canvases, she likes "linen... I never stretch them myself. I'm a woman, I'm entitled to some luxuries in my life." Her work rate varies – the large *Samolet II* painting at Montrouge took only a month to complete, but other works can take two years or more to finish. She thinks that it is more challenging to be a female painter than a



"What's important is someone's vision. Artists differ more in their vision than in how they actually paint."

physical. There's no glamour at all, it's very dirty. The paints are bad for your health. It's incredibly solitary." Her future plans include a couple of group shows in Paris later this year, including the *L'Amour du Gloire et Beauté* show.

As our chat concluded, she told me: "What's important is someone's vision. Artists differ more in their vision than in how they actually paint. I pick up my ideas from

copy, good artists steal'." Picasso was once married to a Russian, after all...

Profile

Born Saint Petersburg 1975. 1993-1998 Russian Academy of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg. 1995-2000 École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris. 1996 First Prize, Reflets de Paris Competition. 1996-1998 Illustrator, *Les Saisons de la Danse* magazine, Paris. 1997 First Prize Concours Perrier-Jouët des Artistes. 1997-2002 Designer, Grand Palais, Paris. 1999