

A GALLERY BEYOND COMPARE

HIDDEN AWAY IN A GENEVAN LANE,
ARTVERA'S STRIVES TO BE DIFFERENT
- AND CLEARLY SUCCEEDS

BY BRIAN NOONE

In the rarefied and sometimes stuffy milieu of private European art galleries, Artvera's director Sofia Komarova cuts an unusual figure: still in her mid-30s, she's half the age of many of her peers, and she comes by way of a childhood in St Petersburg and a Master's degree in, of all things, international politics. But this atypicality is perfectly suited to the gallery she leads, which is itself anything but typical. Unlike almost all other galleries in the world, Artvera's does not have a monthly, or weekly, changing display, nor does it fill its walls with whatever pieces happen to be at hand. Instead, the gallery puts all its focus on two themed exhibitions per year, which are so extensive that they often include some borrowed paintings that are not for sale. "These particular pieces," says Komarova, with admirable dedication to the craft of curation, "are absolutely necessary to achieve a better understanding of our [exhibition] concept."

RIGHT: Gérard Schneider's *Composition 50G*, currently on display at Artvera's, top; *Fantastic Symphony*, 1949, by Serge Charchoune, subject of a recent retrospective, bottom

HIDDEN QUALITIES

Remarkably, this idiosyncratic combination of connoisseurship and commerce is not what the gallery is best known for. At

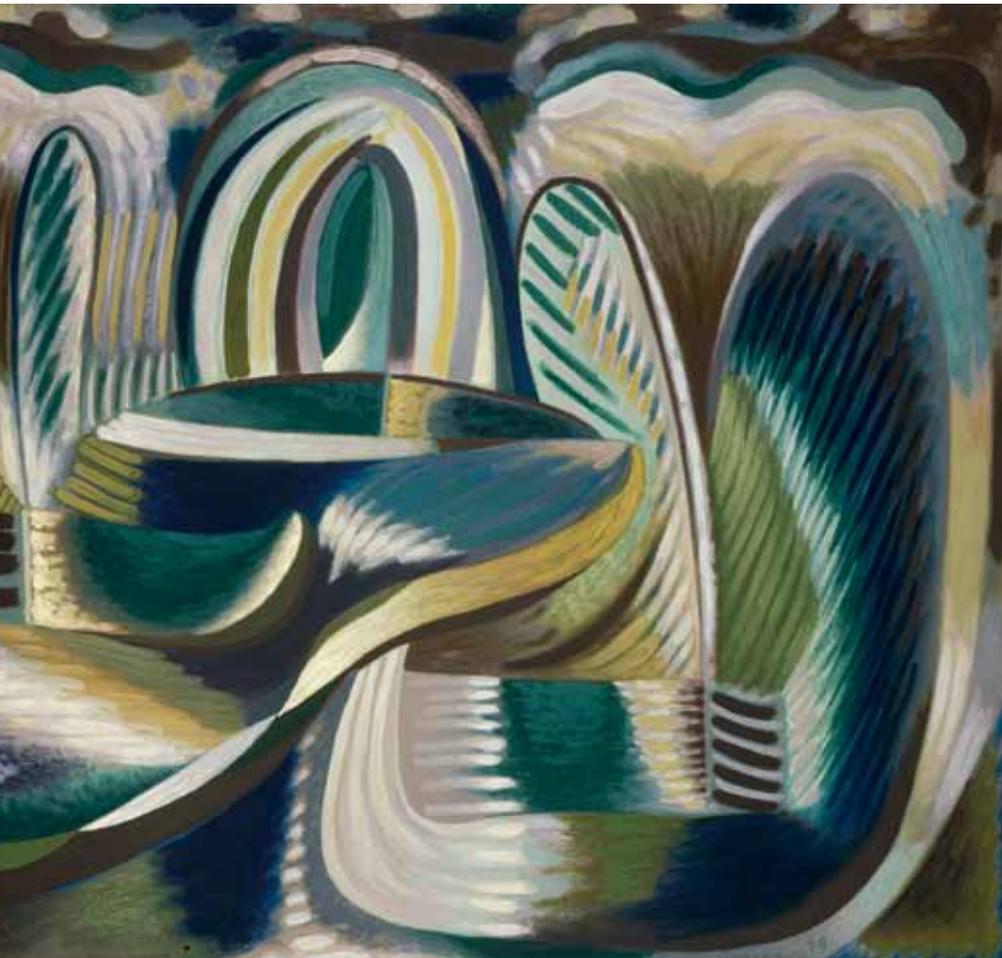
least, not yet. Over the past six years, the gallery has played a key role in the largest art forgery scandal of the post-war era: in uncovering the first of German artist Wolfgang Beltracchi's forgeries, the gallery displayed wisdom, patience and maturity beyond not only Komarova's years, but also beyond the abilities of many galleries and auction houses in Europe.

If Artvera's were located on London's Bond Street or had a space in one of Paris's key arrondissements, it's likely that the gallery would be a regular in the art sections of international newspapers and magazines. Instead, the 500sq m gallery is set on a narrow lane in Geneva's medieval city centre and remains an insider's tip for aficionados of late-19th-century and early-20th-century European and Russian art, in which the gallery specialises.

PERFECT SPACE

Spread across six rooms over two storeys, the gallery's dark-hued walls are complemented by wooden ceilings and parquet floors, which foster sedate contemplation of the works. Most of those on display deserve it: exhibitions in recent





years have included pieces by Renoir, Chagall, Jawlensky and Sisley, among many other masters.

Each exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue with academic articles and dozens of full colour prints – more befitting a traditional museum show than one at a private gallery. And indeed, that’s what many surprised critics have found when they have attended: about a recent exhibition, one French commentator glowed, “After seeing the exhibition, one’s first reaction is to ask oneself why it appeared in a gallery and not one of Geneva’s museums,” while in the respected London-based *Burlington Magazine* another writer called it “museum-scale”. Buyers, too, have evidently been impressed: Artvera’s is looking at the possibility of expanding in Geneva, and perhaps also abroad, though nothing is certain for the moment.

Yet despite this growing international success of the biannual shows, most press about the gallery has been about the forgery scandal, the biggest one in the European artworld since Han van Meegeren’s Vermeer imitations were

RIGHT: Sofia Komarova, top, the director of Artvera's, is an unusual but successful choice to oversee the gallery's six rooms, one of which is pictured, bottom

unmasked in 1945. Over the past five years the story of German artist Beltracchi's forgery of more than 50 paintings – perhaps numbering in the hundreds once all the facts are known – has come to light, and Artvera's was at the centre of uncovering it.

FINDING FAKES

The gallery's involvement began in 2006 when Malta-based firm Trasteco bought a painting entitled *Red Picture with Horses* from Lempertz auction house in Cologne. The firm asked Artvera's, which they had not consulted about the purchase, to go through all the post-purchase formalities with Lempertz, including obtaining a certificate of authenticity. When Lempertz failed to supply one, the gallery hired Dr Andrea Firmenich, an expert on Heinrich Campendonk, the artist believed to have painted the piece. Dr Firmenich unexpectedly ordered a scientific analysis and then requested another. Artvera's recommended that Dr Nicholas Eastaugh in Munich conduct the second, and it was he who found the telltale titanium white, a pigment which did not exist in Campendonk's day and which proved the painting to be a forgery.

Komarova continues, "After this unbelievable discovery, we initiated our own inquiry in the market and we found other pieces that presented similar inconsistencies, such as comparable fake Flechtheim gallery labels on their reverse sides, so we contacted other buyers and experts." A lawsuit followed – about which a judgement is expected later this year – and a further investigation was launched into the painting's origin, which resulted in the arrest and imprisonment of Beltracchi and his collaborators, who still have yet to reveal just how many paintings they forged.

ALL IN THE DETAIL

The cinematic logic of the discovery – a simple request for a certificate of authenticity that unearths a worldwide scandal – has the appearance of a happy accident, but the story gets at the heart of Artvera's approach to art. The gallery is dedicated to looking carefully at paintings: they care about the details, both artistic and administrative. "We want to offer relevant exhibitions based on a real concept, itself based on both solid scientific and historical research," affirms Komarova.

And despite the gallery's frequent inclusion of paintings by artists whose names are familiar outside the artworld, perhaps its most impressive feat is staging wide-ranging exhibitions on artists who deserve a bigger reputation than they have. A recent retrospective of Russian-born and Paris-based artist Serge Charchoune included nearly 80 works spanning the artist's career, from his early Dadaist creations to his Purist to Abstract Neo-Symbolist experimentations.

PROFILE RAISING

The current show, which runs until 20 March, focuses on another under-represented artist, Gérard Schneider. A Swiss-born Lyrical Abstractionist who settled in Paris in 1922, his career included multiple Venice Biennales, the first Documenta in Kassel, numerous major solo shows around the globe and, in 1975, France's Grand Prix National des Arts.

The exhibition promises to be revealing about the now little-known artist, and, as always, the details – of the paintings' selection, the research about them and their presentation – will make it worth seeing. artveras.com ●

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CEILINGS
AND PARQUET
FLOORS
COMPLEMENT
THE DARK-
HUED WALLS

