

The changing face of Bulgaria's icons

LUCY COOPER

JULIA Stankova exudes an air of gentleness and a warmth that is reflected in the deep, rich colours of her "icon" paintings that are hanging on the walls of the small, cosy Astry Gallery. "When I paint I feel as if I am writing love letters," says Julia. The inspiration for these expressions of emotion is "the search for the truth with love and sadness."

Born in Haskovo in southern central Bulgaria, Julia spent the communist era working as a mining engineer. After that period she graduated in theology and now dedicates her life to art. She began by painting traditional icons, of the type that can be seen in the icon museum in the crypt under Alexandra Nevski, or on sale in the square outside, the austere faces gazing out from gold backgrounds glinting in the sun. However, she says it was not long before she replaced the "well-known old patterns" with her own personal vision. "I create new iconography, new symbolical pictorial language, based on the old Byzantine one. Every image is a result of an inner enlightenment and sometimes this takes years of my life," says Julia. She admits that breaking from tradition was a brave move to make, especially in light of her thorough knowledge of Christian doctrine.

Her break from the traditional school of icon painting was bold as Bulgaria has a culture with over 1000 years of history in the art of religious icons. It was the first of the Slavic countries to take on Christianity as its official religion from Byzantium, adopting it officially in 865 CE and, as a symbol of Christianity and the church, the Bulgarian icon has developed as a fundamental part of the country from the 9th century to the present day.

"The Bulgarian icon is the revelation of the Bulgarian people, revealing the purest aspects of their spiritual feelings to the world. It is their window to world of goodness and faith, of the external striving of the human spirit towards perfection and freedom," writes Boiko Kortzanov (Welkya magazine).

The idea of the icon as revealing spiritual feelings is at the crux of her work. In her most recent exhibition, she explores the theme of the individual's strive towards perfection in her *The Mirror Stage* paintings. The *Mirror Stage* is a concept that was introduced into psychoanalysis by Lacan to refer to the stage of "primary narcissism", explains Julia. This is the "first self-identification of man that happens in the first eighteen months of his life. In other words, this is the stage of the first sketching of the human

ego."

"This notion serves me as a starting point in my thinking about the way in which a man acquires knowledge of himself," says Julia. "Through my images I express my idea that self-identifications continue during the whole life and they cannot happen without the help of the other. In other words, man is able to come closer to himself through the other person only.

"I think about the eyes of people as a labyrinth of mirrors. They reflect some pieces of one's image he/she has never seen in its completeness. This is impossible because of the permanent changing of both: the reflection and the reflecting.

"My presumption is that only in the moment of his/her death one stands face to face with him/herself. That's why I think that the concept of *Mirror Stage* is appropriate not only to the first but also to the last human enlightenment. In this last stage, in the moment of leaving the body, the human psyche unites in a perfect and harmonious integrity."

The *Mirror stage* constitutes half Julia's current exhibition. The other half consists of *Beyond the Temple Cupola* in which she explores the idea of the temple as a spiritual as well as a physical space. "Here I follow my notion of the temple not



STANKOVA

as an architectural construction but as a temple area," says Julia. "The solid, visible part of the temple – its shell – disappears and the empty space enclosed by it obtains thickness."

"Nobody enters the temple just like that, without some special reason. One steps across the temple threshold because he/she needs to offer up his/her prayer, regardless of its source: love, hatred, jealousy, anxiety, happiness or gratitude. Everything that one is not able to speak of in the daily round, is uttered in the temple.

"In the empty space of the temple something extraordinary happens – the attempts of the man to speak about the unspeakable are piled up here. In that



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way the man stuffs up the interior of the temple with the extreme products of his spirit.

"I believe that the extraordinary spiritual experience added to the architecture is the real temple, which is not to be demolished."

The result of these reflections on the individual and spirituality is a collection of beautiful, warm, thought-provoking paintings which are on exhibition at Astry Gallery, 34 Tsar Samuil street, Sofia until November 12. Opening times: 10am – 8pm daily. Tel: 9863780