

Watching Luba Think

BY MATTHEW PORTER

THE VERY AIR

OVER THE YEARS LUBA LUKOVA HAS DEVELOPED A LOYAL FOLLOWING. SPEAKING THROUGH THE UNDULATING CADENCE OF HER RICH BULGARIAN ACCENT, LUKOVA OFTEN IS INVITED TO ADDRESS AUDIENCES ABOUT HER WORK. SHE RARELY SHARES THE DETAILS OF ANY PROJECT; RATHER, SHE USES THESE OPPORTUNITIES TO SPEAK ABOUT THE ROLE ARTISTS PLAY IN SOCIETY AND THE OBLIGATION THEY HAVE TO BRING ATTENTION TO THINGS THAT TRULY MATTER.

SHE IS AN ELOQUENT SPEAKER, BUT SHE PREFERS TO SPEAK WITH IMAGES. WHEN SPEAKING THROUGH EITHER WORDS OR IMAGES, LISTENERS AND VIEWERS ARE STRUCK BY THE ECONOMY OF HER LANGUAGE.

“I WANT MY WORK TO SAY A LOT BY SAYING VERY LITTLE,”

SHE STATES. WORK, PER SE, IS OF LITTLE INTEREST TO HER.

YOU WILL NEVER HEAR HER SPEAK OF “PROBLEMS/SOLUTIONS” OR CLIENT RELATIONSHIPS.

“IF MY SUCCESS HAS BROUGHT ME ANYTHING, IT IS THAT IT HAS GIVEN ME THE FREEDOM TO INTERPRET ASSIGNMENTS IN MY OWN WAY,” SHE SAYS.

“THEREFORE, MY WORK IS A MEANS TO SAY WHAT I WANT TO SAY.”

FOR ANY ARTIST (OR ANY SENTIENT BEING, FOR THAT MATTER), FREEDOM TO EXPRESS ONESELF IS FUNDAMENTAL. FOR LUKOVA, RAISED UNDER A TOTALITARIAN REGIME IN SOVIET-DOMINATED BULGARIA, FREE EXPRESSION IS THE VERY AIR SHE BREATHES, THE OXYGEN OF HER WORK. BUT IF YOU ASK HER TO SPEAK OF HER EARLY CHILDHOOD AND YOUNG ADULthood, SHE DEMURS. SHE SIMPLY PREFERS TO FOCUS ON THE PRESENT, NOT THE PAST.



THIS IMAGE WAS FIRST PUBLISHED AS A COVER FOR THE BOSTON REVIEW, A PUBLICATION OF THE DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY AT M.I.T., AS PART OF A SPECIAL ISSUE ON THE FUTURE OF WAR. LATER, THE CONCEPT WAS USED AS PART OF AN OP-ED ILLUSTRATION FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES. ITS FINAL FORM, SHOWN HERE AS A POSTER, WON THE WORLD'S MOST MEMORABLE POSTER PRIZE AT THE INTERNATIONAL POSTER SALON IN PARIS. “THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WAR AND PEACE IS ONE OF THE GREAT CONTRADICTIONS OF OUR LIVES. WE DON'T LIVE NOW IN A COLD WAR; WE LIVE IN A HOT PEACE,” SAYS LUKOVA.

INTERNAL EXILE

But unless given insight into her past, no one can fully appreciate Lukova's voice. Two days after graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts in Sofia, Bulgaria, the country's capital, Communist authorities sent her to work in an obscure village named Blagoevgrad near the border of (former) Yugoslavia. Her family's background as diplomats, successful merchants, and intellectuals placed her on the blacklist. While working in this small village, she discovered that she was not only the best graphic designer in town, but she was the only designer in town. Consequently, she got all the work. In this vacuum, she created opportunity.

Rather than face internal exile with sadness or resignation, Lukova faced it with intellect and determination. She threw herself into her assignments and quickly distinguished both herself and the Blagoevgrad arts community through breathtaking, incisive poster art.

Meanwhile, back in Sofia, the officials responsible for approving which posters could or could not be printed began to take notice. Representatives of the state-sponsored artist union soon began submitting Lukova's work to competitions, frequently without her knowledge or permission.

In spring, 1991, two years after the collapse of Communism, several of Lukova's posters were accepted for exhibition at the Colorado International Invitational Poster Exhibition, the only international poster competition in the U.S. For the first time, an international jury was able to contact Lukova directly without government interference. They asked her to come to the U.S. to participate in the exhibition. Granted a visa, Lukova booked a round-trip ticket to Denver, returning home through New York. She would never make the New York-to-Bulgaria leg of that trip.

THE TURKISH LAUNDRESS

During the few days she had to explore New York, Lukova was browsing the art and design section of a local bookstore. There, while thumbing through the prestigious *Graphis* Poster Annual, she was stunned to come upon several of her own posters. She had not sent the work. She had no idea they had been published. Also, she noticed, her name was misspelled.

She decided then and there that she would make the corrections to her record. Henceforth, she would represent herself in America and everywhere else. She returned to the flat where she was an unwelcome Third World houseguest, thanked her hostess for her bed, left, and took a job at a Turkish-owned laundromat where she slept on a cot in the back. She was in New York, in America, to stay.

“That story always impresses people,” Lukova adds with a tinge of bemusement. “But, really, I did what millions of other immigrants have done before me. I was no hero. I did what I had to do so that I could live my own life.”

THE ART OF ACCESSIBILITY

History lesson over. So, what is it that makes her work resonate with so many people from so many different places and perspectives? The key to this is that human beings are drawn to symbols, irony, riddles, and puns. Lukova is a master of the visual pun and the visual metaphor. When you view a Lukova image, you “see” her approach to visual problem solving and expression. Rarely using written language to communicate a message, she prefers to convey meaning with bold, simple metaphors which communicate universal truths about desire, fear, creation, hope, despair, and man's endless capacity for love, hate, and self-immolation.

To some, work that is universal is accessible; and work that is accessible is unworthy. As one critic said of Lukova's work, “It is decoratively conceptual,” as though well-suited for rolls of funny toilet paper but not national newspapers or gallery exhibitions. This breed of critic is the most pervasive and annoying: “I cannot write it, cannot draw it, cannot paint it, cannot sing it, cannot dance it, cannot in anyway express it; but, by God, I know it when I see it!” Yeah, right, and thankfully we are all clairvoyant, so such high intellect is not lost on us.

Lukova's instinctive ability is her power to capture the very essence of an idea and convey it in such a way that it is comprehensible to villagers in Ecuador and lawyers for Warner Brothers. Anyone with that level of talent will always be unjustly dismissed by at least one bitch in the gallery whose hideous envy is thinly masked by hand-held, high-brow, cartoonish disdain. But that is another story for another article.

“To an artist, complacency is the equivalent to exile. You must always push yourself to the next highest level. You can have peace, but you cannot be content. You can appreciate the little things, but you cannot be distracted by the insignificant. There is no greater challenge to an artist than the quest for the significant.”



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THIS WAS LUKOVA'S FIRST POSTER, CREATED FOR THE DRAMA THEATRE BLAGOEVGRAD IN BULGARIA, THE TOWN THE AUTHORITIES SENT HER TO WORK IN. THE POSTER WAS BASED ON A PLAY ABOUT THE POEMS OF THE SPANISH WRITER FREDRICO GARCIA LORCA. “AT THE TIME, NEARLY ALL THEATRICAL WORK HAD SOME UNDERLYING POLITICAL MEANING. THIS SMALL THEATER WAS IN THE PERIPHERY OF MAINSTREAM CULTURAL LIFE, AS IT WAS FAR FROM SOFIA. MANY THERE, LIKE ME, WERE NOT ALLOWED TO PRODUCE WORK IN THE CAPITAL. PART OF WHAT I WANTED TO EXPRESS HERE WAS THAT ART CAN TRANSFORM PAIN INTO BEAUTY AND THAT ART ITSELF SURVIVES EVEN THE WORST POLITICS,” LUKOVA EXPLAINS.

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“SIR PETER HALL, WHO DIRECTED ROMEO AND JULIET AT THE AHMANSON THEATRE IN LOS ANGELES, IS THE FOUNDER OF THE ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY OF LONDON. BECAUSE OF HIS IMPORTANCE, I WAS A BIT PARALYZED BY THIS ASSIGNMENT,” LUKOVA CONFESSES. “SO, I DID MANY SKETCHES, BUT I ONLY PRESENTED ONE. SIR PETER LIKED IT. IN THE POSTER I SUGGEST THAT THE COUPLE'S LOVE TRIUMPHS OVER THE HATRED BETWEEN TWO FAMILIES, AND THEIR LOVE EVEN SURVIVES THEM, THROUGH THIS IMMORTAL PLAY.”



KEYS TO UNDERSTANDING

Lukova—the artist, not the poster-maker—has long lived by her own credo: “What comes from the heart, goes to the heart.” Take, for example, one of her earliest and now more famous posters for the Drama Theatre Blagoevgrad. The completed work (shown on page 63) is entitled, *No Death For Songs*. It suggests what happens when culture is stabbed in the back by censors. A mute, dying instrument bleeds (and weeps) for mankind’s loss.

Metaphors are everywhere. They are symbols and omens, warnings, and lessons. A keen eye can see them in the most mundane. “Not long after I made the decision to stay in New York, I was fumbling in my purse when I came upon my keys from Bulgaria,” recalls Lukova. “I realized they were in fact keys to a past life, a life I had left behind forever. To me, those keys represented how adrift I was in this new country; they could open no doors for me, and they could lock out no monsters. To survive in America, I knew I had to find new keys to a new life.”

But at that moment Lukova still had in her possession the most important keys of all: talent, experience, determination, and self-respect. With these, she was capable of opening the biggest door of all, the one that leads to the road of human understanding. For her, everything relates to the human condition; work is simply part of the journey.

STREET SIGNS

Lukova draws metaphors from many sources, including Biblical parables, Greek mythology, politics, French philosophy, world literature, and great theater. At times the formulations come from the street, witty and insightful ironies that many simply miss: Cars that look like ski boots; ghastly, oversized sculptures that resemble cavorting celebrants at a Communist grocery store ribbon-cutting ceremony; war material that forms the dove of peace. She does not have to look far to find material. The comedy of life is omnipresent: “Right off the train platform near my studio is a big sign that reads: ‘School Supplies and Cigars Available.’ Really, daily life provides all the amusement one needs,” the artist says.

While she does not live in the past, Lukova is affected by it. Today, she is one of the most widely recognized illustrators in her profession, and she fully recognizes that she has achieved a level of material success beyond her greatest expectations. But the comparison of her past and present situations reminds her that neither happiness nor success can be measured by status or money:

“To an artist, complacency is the equivalent to exile. You must always push yourself to the next highest level. You can have peace, but you cannot be content. You can appreciate the little things, but you cannot be distracted by the insignificant. There is no greater challenge to an artist than the quest for the significant. And in this world, surrounded by new information, new ideas, new technologies, new everything, few others have a greater responsibility to bring attention to the essential than an artist.”

EAT A PEACH

Reading this, you might picture Lukova as a dark, brooding woman. Yet her seemingly Quixotic quest to make sense of human nature and discover the limits of her own ability do not make her despondent. And if you’ve ever seen her go through a basket of fresh peaches, you realize this woman appreciates the joys and wonder that life brings. Certainly, a sharp wit and sense of irony bring an edge to her work, an edge that is tempered by a gentle heart.

“I cannot say that I am a religious person in that I go regularly to a church or temple, but I feel religion is essential to taming one’s passions. If you allow your own light to blind you, if you let your own ego fool you, you are finished. You must tame ego and not become its victim—faith can do that. The French philosopher Pascal once said that every scientist in his research will come to a point of vacuum where science can go no further. It is in that vacuum where God is found.”

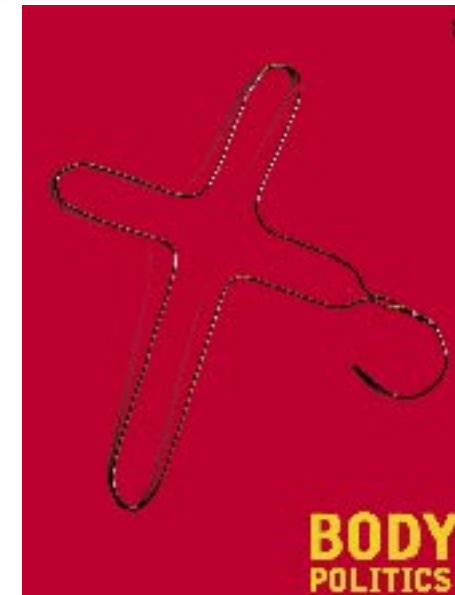
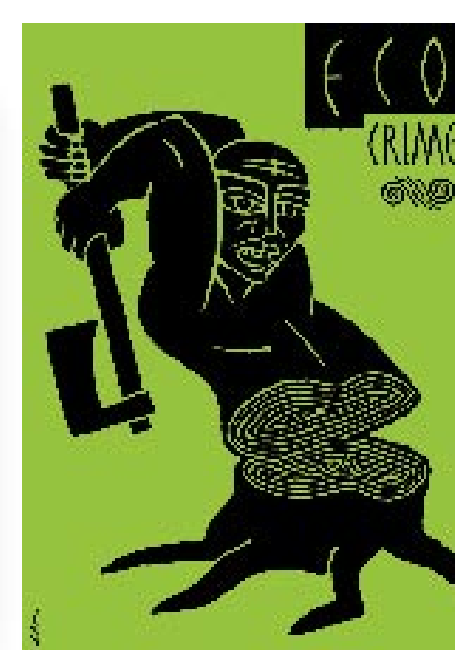
Lukova’s work speaks to us because she is a student of the human condition. She shares these lessons through her creative expressions. These expressions draw people in through their simplicity, brevity, and wit. They translate well into many languages because they speak the language of the heart. These are not the methods of a brooding spirit.

GOD IN AN AIRSHAFT

A shaft of sunlight falls upon a speck of earth at the bottom of a New York airshaft. The small parcel is surrounded on four sides by soot-covered walls. Its ability to support life is dubious. Most residents of this nondescript 15-story apartment building simply ignore it, unless they have occasion to toss down a piece of trash or a cigarette butt. To them, it is simply an ashtray and a garbage can.

In this shaft of sunlight, Lukova sees possibility. She sees it from the rear window of her ground floor studio. She cleans it up. She plants some grass, adds some bushes and then some flowers. She lays paving stones and a clean pebble walk. No one helps her; no one contributes a dime. As the shaft of light returns each day at its revolving hour, the shaft changes from colorless to colorful. Human behavior changes, too: Cigarettes stop flying through the air, trash appears respectfully in receptacles, a passerby bends over to remove a leaf and admire a valiant patch of green. A sense of pride, value, and ownership begins to fill a once lifeless space. It is transformed, and transforming.

It is not the things you make in life that give life meaning: It’s what you make of the things life hands you that do. That, in essence, is what Lukova thinks, and believes. ■



5 THIS SUNDAY FEATURE COVER STORY FOR THE TIMES’ ART & LEISURE SECTION WAS ABOUT THE CENSORSHIP OF MUSIC AND ART BY THE TALIBAN AND OTHER DESPICABLE REGIMES. “AT FIRST, THE ART DIRECTOR WAS RETICENT TO USE AN IMAGE THAT WAS SO DARK AND DRAMATIC FOR A SECTION OF THE PAPER THAT IS OFTEN CHEERFUL READING ON SUNDAY MORNINGS. I WAS DISAPPOINTED, BUT THEN LATER, AFTER SEEING SOME OTHER IDEAS, THE EDITOR DECIDED TO USE THIS IMAGE ANYWAY. THAT MADE ME VERY HAPPY,” THE ARTIST EXPLAINS.

6 LUKOVA FIRST CREATED THIS IMAGE FOR AN ISSUE ABOUT ECO-CRIME FOR THE MAGAZINE NOZONE, AN UNDERGROUND PUBLICATION IN NEW YORK. HER MEANING IS UNMISTAKABLE: “WHEN YOU DESTROY NATURE, YOU DESTROY YOURSELF,” SAYS LUKOVA.

7 ORIGINALLY, THIS CONCEPT WAS PRODUCED AS A POSTER FOR UNESCO, BUT THE GERMAN ART DIRECTOR IN CHARGE OF SELECTION CHOSE ANOTHER LUKOVA CONCEPT OVER THIS ONE. LATER, WHEN THE UNION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY (NEW YORK) INVITED LUKOVA TO PRESENT HER WORK IN THEIR GALLERY, SHE SELECTED THE IMAGE TO BE THE FOCUS OF HER POSTER FOR THE EXHIBITION. “I ALWAYS THOUGHT THAT THIS WAS THE STRONGEST OF THE IMAGES THAT I SUBMITTED TO UNESCO. IT HAS NOW BEEN FEATURED IN A NUMBER OF COMPETITIONS AND ARTICLES, SO IT REMINDS ME THAT YOU SHOULD TRUST YOUR INSTINCTS AND FIGHT FOR YOUR WORK,” SAYS LUKOVA. BESIDES THE MORE OBVIOUS SUGGESTION OF HOW MANKIND TAKES WATER FOR GRANTED, BY USING THE FISH AS A SYMBOL FOR FAITH, IT ALSO SUGGESTS THE SPIRITUAL DROUGHT SOCIETY FACES TODAY.

8 A RECIPIENT THIS YEAR OF A GOLDEN PENCIL AWARD AT THE ONE SHOW IN NEW YORK, THIS LOGO FOR A FLEDGLING AD AGENCY IN ORLANDO, FLA., SUGGESTS SOMETHING EVEN LOUDER THAN ITS NAME: THE INDOMITABLE SPIRIT OF A CUBAN-BORN MAN NAMED JULIO LIMA, WHOSE IDEAS AND CREATIVITY WERE LONG REPPRESSED BY THE CULTURE OF A LARGE AD AGENCY, BUT IS NOW FREE TO EXPRESS HIS OWN CREATIVE IMPULSES THROUGH HIS OWN COMPANY. LET FREEDOM RING.

9 THE AMERICAN PROSPECT IS A CRITICAL, OPEN-MINDED, AND PROGRESSIVE MAGAZINE. THIS WAS THE COVER ON AN ENTIRE ISSUE DEVOTED TO THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE ABORTION ISSUE. MANY OF THE STORIES RECOUNTED THE SUFFERING OF WOMEN AS THE RESULT OF BLIND ADHERENCE TO RELIGIOUS DOGMA. LUKOVA SCULPTED THE COAT HANGER AND PHOTOGRAPHED IT HERSELF.

10 AEROBLUE IS A CALIFORNIA COMPANY THAT SELLS REPLICA ACCESSORIES, APPAREL, AND OTHER NOSTALGIA FROM THE 1930S AND 1940S. THE COMPANY IS BASED ON A FICTIONAL TALE OF TWO LOVERS, AN AMERICAN PILOT AND A FRENCH GIRL, WHO MEET AT A JAZZ PIANO BAR IN PARIS ON THE EVE OF WWII. THE OWNER OF THE COMPANY COMMISSIONED ARTISTS TO EXPRESS THE FICTIONAL STORY IN A POSTER. LUKOVA’S IMAGE WAS NEVER USED. “I FOUND THE STORY MOVING BECAUSE IT SPEAKS OF THE LOVE OF A MAN AND A WOMAN WHO WERE UNITED THROUGH THEIR LOVE OF JAZZ BUT WERE FATED NEVER TO MEET AGAIN, EXCEPT THROUGH THE MEMORIES THAT THIS MUSIC EVOKED,” SHE SAYS.

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