



## KSENIA TERESTCHENKOVA INTERVIEWS YULIA PINKUSEVICH

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Yulia Pinkusevich, who was raised in the former USSR and came to America at a young age, has a body of work that reflects the impact of change. The perspectives preoccupying Yulia's work act as a first hand witness account of an ongoing cultural exchange that began early on in her life. I was intrigued by Yulia's work and its raw cinematic quality. Like something out of a post apocalyptic Tarkovsky film, Yulia's work contains no recognizable figures and is instead guided by the sensation of a conceived presence, perhaps our own. The play on time, or rather the lack thereof, coupled with Yulia's steady bend of visual perception, lifts the viewer out of the familiar and into an advanced, abstracted way of contemplating space and time.

During the process of putting together the show, Ksenia Terestchenkova had the chance to talk with Yulia about her arrival to New York, the development of her artistic approach and the process behind her work.

**Ksenia Terestchenkova:** *What were the conditions in Ukraine at the time you were leaving? Where there any restrictions regarding departure, what did your parents have to do in order to move to the U.S.?*

**Yulia Pinkusevich:** Conditions were poor, food was scarce, money was very tight, and my family shared a tiny one-bedroom apartment for a family of 4. I had chronic tonsillitis/bronchitis due to malnutrition, but I still see my childhood through those eyes. In retrospect it's easy to see how rough we had it but at that time it was normal. I think I was a relatively happy kid. My paternal grandfather immigrated to the US two years ahead of us, upon his arrival he applied for "refugee status" for my family. We were granted refugee status and left Ukraine just a couple of months before the USSR collapsed. En route to the Moscow airport, I recall seeing military tank imprints in the asphalt. Everything was in a state of flux.

**KT:** *When you came here, did your family settle in a particular community to help you get acclimated? What was it like first trying to adapt to a new understanding of your surroundings?*

**YP:** Upon our arrival to the United States, my family settled in Brooklyn in a small gated community at the edge of Coney Island called Sea Gate. This place had a “beach town” feel to it. Being at the end of a peninsula, Sea Gate was surrounded by ocean on 3 sides and a gate on the 4th. It was fairly secluded for being in NYC and certainly a much different landscape than I was used to. It was a culturally mixed community including Hasidic Jews, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, Russians and Ukrainians among many others. Just outside of Sea Gate, in the heart of Coney Island, large public housing projects loomed over the boardwalk. We were strongly discouraged to go outside the gate as kids, which we of course did in defiance of our parents.

**KT:** *A great baseline of your work is the discrepancy between Ukrainian culture & American capitalism. How did you first approach this disconnect, both conceptually and formally? Was there perhaps a singular inspiration?*

**YP:** It’s hard to pinpoint a moment in your life that shapes who you are. I recall as a foreigner noticing many discrepancies in the education material when arriving in the US and beginning my American education. Although I believe education plays a key role in acquiring a broader world-view, institutional education alone can be a seductive illusion. What history regards as facts is inevitably influenced by the purported truth of the victors, while commonly omitting the true complexity of events. What I was taught in the USSR and what I was taught in America often conflicted in terms of historical facts. Due to these opposing belief systems, I feel I am able to carry a dual perspective on the world (to some degree). Of course many people with similar stories or backgrounds experience this but I think it makes a person more compassionate towards those who are different and the general acceptance of the “other.”

**KT:** *What was your experience with education prior to starting school in New York City?*

**YP:** I was educated in the former USSR until 2nd grade where I recall quite clearly, we were taught that the proud, noble Soviets were the first people to go to into space. We were also taught that the Soviet army was responsible for ending WWII. When the German army got caught in the blistering cold of Russian winters just outside of Moscow the Soviets pushed on. Hitler was defeated by the great Soviet Union. I do not recall other allies mentioned at all at that early stage of my education. We were told over and over again and made to repeat that ours was the greatest nation in the world and that anyone believing or saying otherwise is a traitor to Grandpa Lenin’s revolution and the nation. For all the wonderful things communism had brought us, we must put our country first, even before family. As a child, I had no reason to question these facts. Only by listening to my parents I began to see the discontent of the state of the USSR. Having to question my loyalty to my parents before my country seemed odd, but how can I express these feelings at the age of 7? I could not have realized then we were being taught only part of the truth.

**KT:** *How did that change upon your enrollment in the American education system?*

**YP:** I was in for a real surprise when I started to attend public school here. The math we were learning was about 3 years behind what we were taught in USSR, so it was a known fact in Russia that “American education was poor.” The history lessons we learned were mainly about the formation of the 13 colonies. We learned about slavery and civil rights, and then again back to the 13 colonies. I wondered if they taught us the same history over and over because America is a young country; I recall having 3 consecutive years of history repeating the same things. I was taught that America is the best nation in the world and that we have amazing freedoms that everyone else wants. We had a lesson one day about how America was the first nation to put a man on the moon. The teacher never mentioned the great Soviet hero Yuri Gagarin and the famous dog Laika, who was truly the first earthling in space. This was frustrating and puzzling. I thought “What can I do?” I am the student and they are the teachers. I am not in a position to challenge these statements, what do I know? Then we learned that Hitler was defeated because the US decided to join the war efforts against Germany, the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and this action alone had stopped World War II. I was stumped again. It was then that I began to realize that history is not universal as one might like to think, but that it varies significantly, contingent on geographic location and the biases of the person delivering the history to you. With this thought, my true dichotomy of identity began to grow inside of me.

**KT:** *Do you feel that your work has ultimately benefited from growing up while trying to understand such contrasting ideals?*

**YP:** Certainly, my work mostly deals with questioning systems, structures, and the “way things are.” Through my work I wish to expand the way we look at time, focusing on certain moments that can be seen from new perspectives.

**KT:** *A lot of your subject matter deals with conservation, (especially the project at Recology). Is this something that began to flourish upon your arrival to San Francisco, or is it equally influenced by your background and a reaction to the increased globalization you have witnessed in your travels; which began upon your arrival to the states?*

**YP:** I often work with found materials. This conscious decision to reduce the work to its essential element and use materials that are low cost and easily accessible came just after my undergraduate education when I was working for Christie’s Auction house. I think being a young artist at the time and working for one of the wealthiest art corporations in the world during the big boom of ‘06-‘08 made me see the complex inner workings of the secondary art market. I watched paintings sell for 73 million dollars which left a strong impression on me. At that time, I came to realize that art which sells is not always good, and art that is inherently good does not always sell. This led me to make work that is overtly against the market. For a while I stopped creating objects and made art that was experiential and temporary in nature using commonplace materials like paper, charcoal and beeswax. These wall drawings and installations existed only for a short time and were destroyed after an exhibition. This helped me free my work from market pressures. At this time in my life I was also moving often and had no studio space and no fiscal resources to put towards the work. I had the desire to make large scale, immersive works but not having the space or means to make large permanent objects I turned to the site as medium and my body as the tool.

**KT:** *As an artist that is developing right now, is there a particular current global mentality that you hope to bring forward in your work that you haven't seen elsewhere?*

**YP:** I think this is a question for an art critic to address. I am too close to my own work to speak about it with any relevant distance. I can say that I am not interested in zombie abstractionism and always strive for my work to have an underlying concept and strong mood. This is very important to me.

**KT:** *Working in academia and having a particular interest in architecture, are you influenced by a lot of Soviet era work or literature? Has there been a particular artist or historical group that has continued to impact you?*

**YP:** I cannot help but be drawn to Soviet Era Architecture and that bold graphic aesthetic. In the early days of the USSR, the leadership was smart in the way they employed avant-garde artists and designers to create art that would fit their political agenda. So I think people like El Lissitzky, Natalia Goncharova, Kazimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin and many more, contributed to the Constructivist aesthetic and movement, which led to modernism. Out of that developed Brutalist architecture, which is what I grew up surrounded by. This aesthetic still fascinates me because of its unapologetic focus on function. I am also drawn to industrial sites and massive machines. Paul DeMarinis, a mentor and former professor from Stanford once said to me, that he finds artists from the Soviet Union naturally gravitate towards sci-fi aesthetics and concepts without doing so consciously. It must be in our heritage. Perhaps my personal history and background attracts me to the unexplainable things in life. I am intrigued by looking at things from a different perspective and imagining a world through alternate realities. ■