

The Darkly Comic Art of Sanya Kantarovsky



Sanya Kantarovsky has just finished a painting. When I visit him in his Brooklyn studio, he tells me that the night before, he had been struggling with a piece he'd been working on for two weeks, and then, all of a sudden, around 4:00 a.m., he had a breakthrough. He painted over it and made a new one. It's called Bud 5, and it shows a distressed man—one oversize hand held out in a “stop” gesture, the other pointing a pistol at the ceiling. “Bud” is R. Budd Dwyer, Pennsylvania’s state treasurer in the 1980s, who was convicted on bribery charges and shot himself in the mouth at a televised news conference. Kantarovsky, 37, was too young to be aware of the news at the time, but a friend later told him about the incident, and he watched the suicide on YouTube. His painting is based on a photograph of Budd that became famous in the aftermath of this death, in which he is reaching out to calm the bystanders who panicked when he pulled out the gun. “I love the contradiction of this guarding, tender, safekeeping gesture,” he says, “while he wields an instrument of death.”

Bud 5 is not in the show that opened this spring at New York's Luhring Augustine—Kantarovsky's first with the gallery—but it is indicative of the kind of contradictions at the center of his recent work. In one painting, a group of adults looks down on a naked, headless baby who is dancing and playing the accordion. "They're mesmerized by and indifferent to this decapitated future," Kantarovsky says. In another, called *On Them* (also the title of the show), a man with a ski-jump nose, wearing an orange shirt and standing in a pool of water, looks skyward as he twists the neck of a ghostly victim.

Kantarovsky, black-haired and soft-spoken, is a storyteller whose stories resonate with dark humor and unearthly situations. A wild patchwork of influences runs through his work—surrealism and symbolism; Gauguin, Chagall, Ensor, Matisse, and Blue Period Picasso; also folktales and cartoons and children's books; figuration and abstraction. The offbeat comedy of his work does not resemble what you find in Roy Lichtenstein and Philip Guston, or in Carroll Dunham, George Condo, Lisa Yuskavage, or any number of other contemporary artists. Kantarovsky's humor doesn't make you laugh out loud. It's rooted in Russian and Eastern European aesthetics, the corrosive, embarrassing, upside-down, melancholy strain that you find in Kafka, Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (Kantarovsky's favorite novel), and, for that matter, in the early-twentieth century Soviet satirical magazine *Krokodil*. "Humor is central to my work," he says. (The title of the only monograph on his work so far is *No Joke*.) "Art has never been about morality or about the pure and clean and correct. It's always been about the grime and pain and totally unfair contradictions of being alive—and humor, very much so, is a kind of pressure valve."

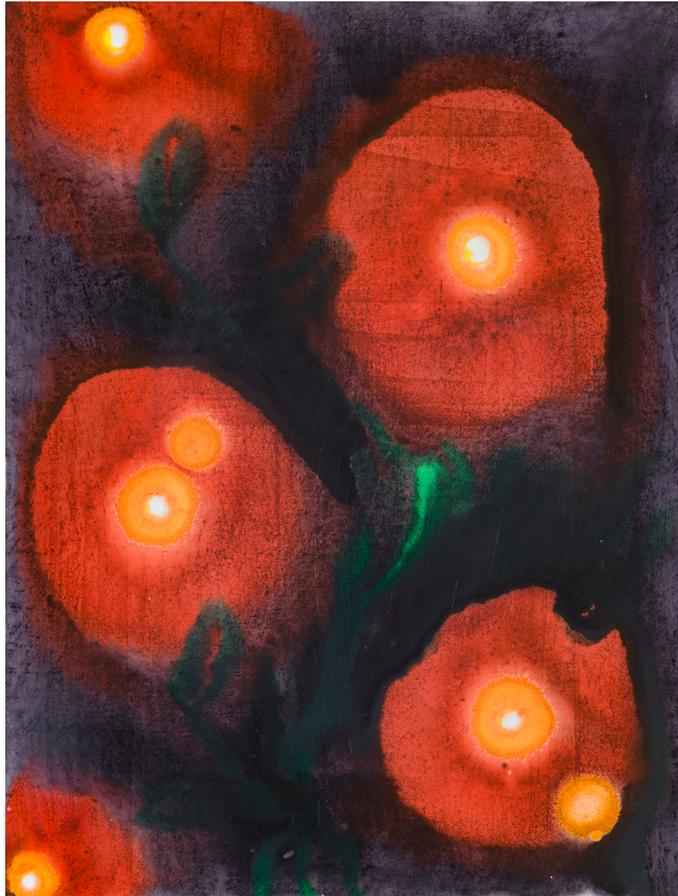
Born in Moscow in 1982, Kantarovsky was raised by his single mother (who was 22 when she had him) and her parents, whom he adored. They lived in a book- and object-filled apartment next to a medieval monastery not far from the center of Moscow; his grandmother had resided there since she was two years old. His mother and his grandmother taught literature—both beginning their careers when they were just nineteen—and his grandfather was an engineer. "My grandma and my grandpa were like my second parents," he says. "They were intellectuals, but with no pretension or social ambition. They were really magnetic, and a lot of wonderful people crossed their path and would come over for dinner or just to drink tea and smoke cigarettes in the kitchen." (Kantarovsky gave up cigarettes when his daughter was born, but he's a cartridge-a-day vaper.) His mother promised him that if he read unabridged translations of *Huckleberry Finn* and *Tom Sawyer*, she would take him to the first McDonald's to open in Moscow. He did, and even though he stood in line for six or seven hours, it was a "totally sublime and magical experience." By the time he was eight, he was reading Victor Hugo, Jules Verne, and Tolstoy.

In 1992, a few months after the collapse of the Soviet Union, ten-year-old Kantarovsky moved to Providence, Rhode Island, with his mother, stepfather, and younger brother. (His mother's best friend had left Russia much earlier to study at Brown University.) Leaving Moscow, his grandparents, and his friends was a "huge rupture, and still the central trauma of my life," he says. "So I go to a fancy Jewish school because I'm a Jewish refugee," he remembers, "and it's a really intense experience. We have no money, we're on welfare and food stamps, and I wear hand-me-downs from kids in my class." His English was virtually nonexistent. In Russia he'd been a ham, and when he learned enough English to be able to make people laugh, it was a "moment of triumph," he says. "You know you've mastered a language when you can make somebody laugh, not at you but with you."



In high school he sat in on art classes at the Rhode Island School of Design and literature classes at Brown and, afterward, ended up going to RISD. As soon as he graduated, in 2004, he headed straight for New York. There he worked for a woman who painted covers for romance novels and made Venetian plaster murals for apartments. Off-hours, she gave him a corner in her midtown studio to work on his own paintings, which at that point were leaning toward illustration. This led to freelance jobs at advertising agencies, well-paid work that he could do with the back of his hand. In 2008 he returned to school—the graduate art program at UCLA. He’d been rejected by Yale, Columbia, and the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam. “I only get into places where they don’t have to see me,” he says, chuckling. “No one interviewed me for UCLA.”

Now Kantarovsky and his wife, the performance artist Liz Magic Laser (her real name), live with their two-year-old daughter, Vera, in a Brooklyn town house. He’s the cook and the decorator, the one who does “all the things that women usually do.” They go 50-50 on child-care duties. He also gave Vera her name (with Liz’s approval)—partly after the Russian social-realist sculptor Vera Mukhina, who made what Kantarovsky describes as Moscow’s version of the Statue of Liberty: a huge man and woman, holding aloft a hammer, that have stood, with a few interruptions, at the center of Moscow for close to a century. “Having kids teaches you how to be selfless,” he says, “but ultimately it’s the most selfish thing you can do, right? To procreate. It was quite difficult for both of us to manage time in the beginning, but we’re getting the hang of it.” Having a nanny helps, and Vera is already in preschool. “Vera was far more interesting to me than painting, and she still is in many ways,” he says. “And now I have all these weird Jewish-proletariat genes that are like” —in a jokey Yiddish accent—“ ‘I gotta provide, she’s gotta go to school, what do I do?’ ”



A Rousseau-like mural of a fantasy jungle fills one wall in Vera’s bedroom. It was painted jointly by Kantarovsky and the Swiss artist Nicolas Party—trees and landscape by Party, birds and animals by Kantarovsky. Party met Kantarovsky in 2017, when Liz and Party both had solo shows in Edinburgh. “What I like the most about Sanya’s work,” Party said, “is his ambition to make every single part of the painting, every single mark, have a function, be essential to the existence of the painting.”

On a gray day in late January, Kantarovsky and I are looking at the Fayum portraits at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He visits the ancient paintings every time he goes to the Met, which is at least once every couple of months. (“I go when I get stuck,” he says.) He remembers loving the Fayum portraits in Moscow’s Pushkin Museum, when his grandmother or mother would take him there. The Met’s portraits are in the ancient Egyptian galleries, a dozen realistic, life-size faces, looking right at you, that date from the first to mid-third centuries a.d., soon after Ancient Egypt was colonized by the Roman Empire. Placed on mummy wrappings, each one represented the upper-class person inside. “What I find so bizarre,” Kantarovsky says, “is that these faces have dated less than some of the Italian Renaissance and Dutch portraits, and even stuff from the nineteenth century. The most fascinating part of painting for me is that it’s rooted in the idea of continuity—the desire to convey the lived experience of another person. That’s what these portraits do.” We stop in front of Portrait of a Man with a Mole on his Nose. “It’s 130 years after Jesus died,” he says. “It’s insane how fresh they are.” Leaning in close to another portrait, he says, “This guy looks a lot like my former gallerist.”

Kantarovsky's breakthrough moment came in 2014, with his New York debut at the Casey Kaplan gallery. In the three years since he graduated from UCLA, he'd had a few gallery shows on the West Coast and in Europe, but his work had become "boring" to him. The eighteen paintings at Kaplan marked a change of course into bold primary colors, larger scale, and narratives involving more than one person. The humor was still there, and the man with a ski-jump nose (the same nose he'd been drawing since he was a kid), but the paintings were not as cartoony as before, and they were much weirder. In *Speaking His Language*, a red-haired woman, with her green dress pulled up to expose her bare legs and backside, bends over to converse with a seated man. (The painting is propped against a table in his studio, the only one in the show that he kept.) It is aggressively perplexing and demands attention. Artforum called the show "huge in ambition and gratification . . . a real shot in the arm." For Kantarovsky, "being able to make such a strong shift in public, and for it to be successful, was a big vote of confidence."

In his show for Luhring Augustine, Kantarovsky is still working out new directions that surfaced at Casey Kaplan. Meanwhile, interest in his work has been building here and abroad. Although he has dealers in London, Berlin, and Tokyo, he's scathing about the art market's current euphoria.

Elena Filipovic, director of the legendary nineteenth-century exhibition hall Kunsthalle Basel, gave him carte blanche to make work for a solo show there last year. "He believes more in the utter necessity of painting than nearly anyone I've ever met," she tells me. "And in our accelerated, post-digital moment, it was incredibly intriguing to think about what he would do, working for a little more than one year, to make his largest show to date—with all new paintings." Kantarovsky filled five galleries with 20 paintings and 25 works on paper, and called his show "Disease of the Eyes." A critic for the French newspaper *Libération* deemed the show "at once tender and cruel, a deviant and reassuring exhibition."

Soon after his Basel opening, Kantarovsky, Liz, and Vera spent a month in Japan, where he worked with a traditional woodcut workshop on prints that he will show at a gallery in Tokyo this November. Some of the imagery that influenced the prints—ghosts, demons, and grotesque human actions—has also crept into the paintings he's done for Luhring Augustine.

"I could never roll with a specific way of working for my whole life. I become too excited about different things and different directions. An artist like Alex Katz has a declarative practice. His whole body of work is predicated upon the notion that he knows what he's doing. My work, at least in my eyes, is predicated on the fact that I don't know what I'm doing. I'm searching, cycling through things that are perpetually fascinating and important to me in painting, literature, film. I'm this weird arbiter, putting what's around me into these physical things."