

VOICES FROM A SUITCASE

By Kate Reeve-Edwards

'In England, I became Russian,' says Katya Granova. On moving to London for her MA at the RCA, Granova felt 'othered' in a way she hadn't experienced before. She missed societal queues, Russian stereotypes were placed on her and she felt suddenly out of sync with the people around her. It was the first time she had really felt her identity, like an uncomfortable second layer of skin.

'I started thinking a lot about my identity and culture in a way I hadn't before. Where did I come from, what did I bring with me? How am I different and why?' Inspired by her grandmother's archive of photographs, she began to sift through her family history, sinking into memories of growing up in a new Russia and unlocking her family's experience of living in the USSR. 'My family had different ideas about the soviet era. My parents feared and disliked it, but my grandmother revered the communist regime.' She explains the whole country is cloaked with this disparity of opinion, yet there has been no public discussion of the soviet period. Everyone has had to drag their political baggage with them, silent and unremarked upon, into a new era of turbulence. There remains a disunity, each person looking back on history with an independent, often unspoken point of view.

Much of Katya's work is to try and close the gap between individual experience. For her, each mark set down on canvas represents a voice. Often these marks are in conflict, expressive sgraffito against gentle sweeps, cool deep blues against fleshy reds. She allows this discord to exist, to give each mark space, before adding something which calms the clash. 'A third mark, between two conflicting ones, can often create resolution.' It is more which is encouraged, not less. Granova's work creating a patina of conversation, layers of voices rising to a cacophonous democracy of mark-making.

Granova begins with photographs. Initially, it was family photographs which inspired her work. Images which depicted bodies in motion, instead of posed snapshots: 'I feel like candid photographs get to the truth of the situation; you can read an honest atmosphere in them.' Now she will forage flea-markets to find old photographs of strangers. Her work goes beyond the experience of the soviet regime but seeks to reveal the historical baggage we all drag with us, saying 'every country has an uncomfortable past.' She will project or transfer these images on to canvas, often blowing them up to a large scale.

The first strokes on top of these black and white images are intuitive. They are a bodily response to the context of the photograph, the large scale allowing her to use a full range of motion, resulting in expressive marks. These brush strokes are the first colours on the canvas. The hues flow out of Granova without conscious thought, a visual representation of the atmosphere emanating from the images. Her palette is naturally drawn towards reds and pinks, inspired by images of surgical procedures she remembers from her father's practice and by the rosy skin of Baroque painting, which is a significant inspiration. The paintings development is not covered or transformed; its layers remain exposed to the viewer. The rawness of the marks reveal how she creates a moment in paint, how she physically responds to the source material. Her images are not representational, not clean or veiled but raw and open like a wound.

Although her paintings are based on real people, Granova is more interested in atmosphere than specific figures. 'When I see a photograph, everything has equal importance: a shoe, a face, a tree. They are all moments of the past: it is this I am trying to transpose.' This contemporary impressionism allows Granova to distance herself from soviet propaganda paintings. She does not focus on one central character, instead everything is equally present. She is thinking about time, treating images of her mother or a stranger in exactly the same way. They are both vessels of past occurrences that haunt the present. She is listening to the voices in her suitcase, plucking them out and layering them on her canvas. Through this cacophony of mark and opinion, Granova can see the truth of experience.