

## Fall Into the Strange, Sensuous World of Artist Nicolas Tolmachev

Written by Douglas Greenwood / November 08, 2018

**A** goose rests its beak against a woman's bare inner thigh. The blood from an arrow wound seeps from a beating heart into a china teacup. A fleshy pink rosebud gets a phallic reinvention. With his deceptively soft and sensual watercolor paintings, Nicolas Tolmachev laces the familiar with a morbid sense of absurdity. And with the projective power of Instagram, it's earned him his reputation as one of the most subversive and challenging young European artists of the moment.

"The starting point, for me, is always beauty," the Ukrainian-born 24-year-old tells *Playboy*. "I don't think of macabre things at all, but it's true that I like ambiguity; [the idea] that there can be beauty in everything, even the strange or the tragic." That ambivalence is a bizarre thing to reckon with. Tolmachev's paintings don't only make viewers feel something, but his work seems to invoke two conflicting emotions at the same time, stuck somewhere between unease and enchantment. It is the complex sense of sadness that ties it all together. "You can unearth more intense, more true emotions in melancholia rather than in its opposite," he insists. "Beauty hides everywhere."

Beauty hid in strange places in Tolmachev's hometown of Brovary, famed for being the shoemaking capital of Ukraine and birthing several of its most prolific Olympic athletes on the outskirts of Kiev. A few miles further, and you reach the rural countryside where Tolmachev lived for most of his childhood. Away from the intensity of inner-city life, Tolmachev grew up indulging in books, cinema and history, soaking in nature and listening to the tales his grandmothers told. "They were practicing Orthodox Catholics," he reminisces, "and I was marked by their folkloric stories about witches and mysticism. I read a lot of classical Russian novels too, and spent a lot of time outside of school imagining what living in the past eras, or understanding what the aesthetics of the past, were like."



That love of bygone times and a skewed version of reality have managed to stick with him throughout the years. Change, too, plays a pivotal part in the culture he was raised on. Even now, Tolmachev still has vivid memories of watching Sally Potter's movie version of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, about a Elizabethan nobleman who faces scrutiny after transitioning to a woman later in life. It's strange to think that, despite having such a rich artistic upbringing—watching Virginia Woolf adaptations and reading prolific Russian fiction—Tolmachev, "like most kids", still wanted to be a veterinarian when he was young. "I'd always been a creative child: drawing, painting and making sculptures, but I guess I realized art could become my main activity when I turned 16 or 17," he says, carefully plotting his path to his real creative breakout. "I was attending a theater school at the time and there were courses during which we made sketches for stage decoration. There, I suddenly understood that I could draw."

It's a talent that's lead him down a path that's evolved so much over the last five years of his life. In 2013, after the former president Viktor Yanukovich was ousted from his position, causing waves of unrest to envelop much of Tolmachev's homeland, the idea of creative conformity in Ukraine flew out the window. Almost out of necessity, the then-20-year-old—who had been working as a graphic designer in publishing—started dwelling on the more expressive side of things. "I drew a lot of caricatures dealing with Russia as I felt the need to express my emotions related to the news," he says, referring to the crisis in Crimea. "It became clear to me that I was more interested in translating emotions rather than ideas, [and] so I started painting in a style that I'd describe as 'symbolist!'"



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Perhaps it's the way it reaches so many, through a democratized platform like **Instagram** rather than the shyly visited walls of an art gallery, that has caused so many to be incensed by Tolmachev's work. "For centuries, people have associated sexuality with sin, which leaves marks in our minds," he adds, paying no mind to the scattering of doubters in his sea of 66,500 followers. "I guess there are still narrow-minded or fearful people."

It's up to artists like Tolmachev to help change their minds. But nowadays, as nothing seems singular, all he can do to shift their attitudes is use the skills and inspirations he's accumulated to create an image that feels fresh and unseen. "So many beautiful things have been done over the course of art history that I find it difficult to find your own way or vision of the world," he stresses, accepting that innovation is an alien concept to anyone—especially artists born on the cusp of the new millenium. "Staying fresh and unique," he thinks, "seems almost impossible."

So if everything has been done before, how does an artist like Nicolas Tolmachev—a provocateur and, regardless of what he might say, a true innovator—strive for uncharted territory in 2018? What might this 20-something's next goal in life be? He smirks at the question as if he's come armed with the answer: "Having my face on the cover of *Playboy!*"



That discovery forced him to move from the place he'd grown up in and called home for **so long to Paris**, so he could flourish in new, more boundless ways. "It was a life-changing experience," he smiles. "I lived on my own for the first time and immersed into this foreign culture that was so new to me. I met a lot of interesting people, and being surrounded with artists made me feel very much an artist myself, and so I became more professional and more committed to my work." He claims it's given him "more confidence" than he had before.

Forget the swathes of adjectives that are listed next to his work (Romantic? Maybe a while ago, but that's "not [his] primary aim at all" these days): what Tolmachev does now is create art so aesthetically absurd that it forces us to look closer at it. With each new look, another element of it becomes more apparent, until that stark painting of a drooling white foal titled "Smile, my dear" (2017) becomes a coded statement, in this author's eyes, on who holds the reins of power, purity and agency when it comes to a woman's sexuality.

Be it the aforementioned image of phallic flora (a piece titled "Rose") or "Cupid", a watercolor painting that sees the gouged-out eyes of an angel hang low from their sockets, cradling his penis like they're testicles, Tolmachev's obsession with sexuality might be considered vulgar to those who can't see through his creative lens. "I'm very open about sexuality, so it can be difficult for me sometimes to understand that not everyone feels the same," he concurs. "It seems like the most natural thing in the world: like eating or breathing. So when I create a piece that deals with it, I don't try to shock people. I don't even feel like I'm doing something provocative or forbidden."