**Somewhere under the rainbow**

**About Iliya Zhelev's paintings**

“When you look up at the sky at night, since I'll be living on one of them, since I'll be laughing on one of them, for you it'll be as if all the stars are laughing. You'll have stars that can laugh!”- Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, “The Little Prince”, 1943

The plethora of petite colorful squares remind of paintings within a painting and as if the comets and stars light up and perish on their way out of the canvas. What further grabs the attention are the archaic symbols in some of Zhelev's paintings, which not only give the picture a dynamic rhythm but also serve as points of reference for the abstract and storytelling compositions. When you take a peak into his kaleidoscopic universe, you discover a colorful space, filled with magical influence. Said influence can be sensed in most of the artist's creations and is intertwined with the mystical and story-like essence of his work.

In the small geometric shapes you are likely to discover a diverse assortment of fragments, including individual characters, couples, animals, rain, trees, the sun and also stars. The stars are not the only a metaphor in regards to their representation of the creation of the Universe, as there is also that of the profound reality of man, portrayed on canvas through boats, buildings, bikes, hearts and crosses. In his paintings, Zhelev proves his dominion over the conceptional and simplistic. His craftsmanship of the abstract allows 'readers' to discover a fundamental meaning in mundane object, as even religious symbols become a part of his narrative. Zhelev's canvases are universally situated in the wild, at home, in a city or in the countryside, but always caught in a moment, which seems to defy time and space. Specific objects always seem to be emphasized while somehow remaining part of the whirlpool that are his mosaic paintings. His combinations of colorful surfaces and figures can easily tell a story through a viewer's imagination and the sheer power of color symbolism. In a way, each and every object pertains to its own artistic cosmos, which the artist has generated with a characteristically emotional brush stroke. As a 'reader', Iliya Zhelev's small fragments provide you with the opportunity to enter a new and independent world of art.

The artist explains that he considers his mosaic structures as a whole and even though he thinks that they are a genuine representation of infinity, some of them are grounded in a balanced centrality. Some paintings exhibit a precise flow of geometrically-accurate colorful squares, intertwined with triangles, lines and rainbows. The composition results into a vivid homogeneous collection of separate pieces in different colors, shapes and sizes. Some of the squares in darker shades, located on the outer boarder of the canvas serve to 'frame' the piece and further separate it from the gray reality. In other paintings, you can see the various triangles merge into a combination of squares in the colors of the rainbow. Their spacial structures act as enigmatic energy sources, which pull you in and once again remind you of the nostalgic light of the stars. This integral part of Zhelev's artwork often reminds of poetry in its ability to turn a glance at the canvas into a memory, associated with the moon, the stars and occasionally even a feeling from a pleasant night or time of year. There are also pieces, such as the ones in his 'Rotation' cycle, which feature a flow of squares, focused at the center of the canvas. It is precisely these pieces that show the artist's ability to interpret the ornaments and create a 'story' through their sequence. This creates a pictorial richness and an intricacy, which could go unnoticed at first glance. The particular depth of the paintings is achieved through the actual painting of up to twenty layers of color. This provides the pieces with their characteristic color intensity, which creates the illusion of a multidimensional magnifying effect. Amongst his many paintings, there are some which are centered around the different shades of blue or red. In his more recent pieces, the two main colors are often complimented by gold and silver fragments.

“I don't want the mystery of the paintings to be unraveled with just one glance.”

“Each and every look at the separate elements should bring about something new and unresolved” - Iliya Zhelev

Zhelev's first, mostly abstract pieces exhibit separate details, such as signs, cyphers and symbols in a composition of colorful spaces. But without being too intrusive in his storytelling or too rich in information, he masterfully and playfully uncovers detailed, magical images, through the use of space and color. The upbeat naivety and simplicity of each and every detail of a painting are reminiscent of a child's drawing, prehistoric murals or symbols from the calligraphy of Eastern Asia. In his hierarchy of rows, you can see a ladder, a tree or even a mystical symbol. In regards to the search for a pure artistic spontaneity and expression, Iliya Zhelev remains faithful to the traditions of the Modern European Art from the 20th century. His works remind us of those of Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, Joan Mirò and Marc Chagall. Similarly to these forefathers of contemporary art, Zhelev connects tradition and innovation through the merging of abstract imagery, folkloric customs and cultural richness, all derived from the artistic history of his home country. He relies on folkloric artistry and the originality of imagination, which is something that could have been deemed lost in modern society. Simultaneously, his style also encourages creativity and artistic expression. Folklore-inspired images and ornaments bring Zhelev's artistry back to the traditional Bulgarian art of weaving. From the harmonic combination of colors and shapes, we can observe the inception of warmth, energy and vitality, which are unique to the European abstract art from the modernist epoch. This goes back to the unique color harmony, which is complimented by his sense of time, as well as nostalgia and rediscovery. All of these aspects come together to showcase his dominion over the colorful spaces, which compose an image, which can best be described as balanced and rich in content. We can also find the inspiration that Zhelev found in the abstract post-war era, known in France as “Ecole De Paris”, and mostly the colorful canvases of Serge Poliakoff, the Russian artist, who moved to Paris. His paintings, relying on the composition of several united colorful shapes, give off the impression of spacial depth. Even with the lack of variety in his color-scheme, his works carry a charismatic sense of embedded light. Despite its speculative character, it takes us back to the days of iconography and creates a meditative state, which allows people to contemplate themselves.

Zhelev is familiar with the tradition of abstract painting and does not attempt to hide his admiration for it. That is exactly where his characteristic artistic imagery is born and its roots lay in the specific harmony between the imaginary and the figurative. The merging of simplistic symbols, reminiscent of parietal art, and modernistic pictographs demonstrates Zhelev's ability to simultaneously draw inspiration from the current trends in art as well as from the modern interpretation of past ones. The ornamental character of his works is reminiscent of the artists from the 1900s, which discovered a love for detail and imaginary objects. What lays at the root of Zhelev's artistic expression, is the symbolism of the square and that of arranging the shapes in what seems like stratification. What contemporary art history teaches us, is that the square shape in the painting of Kazimir Malevich 'Black Square' from 1915, becomes a manifestation and radical statement of 'the absolute' in both abstract art in general, as well as in Malevich's “Suprematism”. When first exhibited, the painting was placed in a way, characteristic for Russian religious pieces — in the corner and high up, just below the ceiling. For Malevich, the square is the purest and most natural shape. When it spins, it become a circle and if it splits, it either splits into two triangles or into four smaller squares, which, when stuck together, resemble a cross.

Later on in history, the ever-present square of the German painter, lecturer at Bauhaus and main representative of abstract art, Josef Albers, is deemed an early example of the optically-psychological artistic device. That is also the concept of his thesis in 'Homage to the Square'.

Through the use of synthesized shapes, traditional and modernistic motives and narrations, Iliya Zhelev's works stand out with their vast artistic positioning. His pieces, whose structure often morphs, frequently differentiate themselves with their variety and visual spontaneity. They are highly dependent on the contrast between order and chaos, light and darkness, the city and the village, Earth and what lays beyond, calmness and worry, nature and art. The image forms with the dispersion of these 'poles' on the spectrum between the abstract and the specific.

In the Bulgarian artist's paintings we can identify a characteristic power of expression, which is emitted from the colors and the symbolism behind each object. Through the use of signs and ornaments, Zhelev encodes his understanding of life and a message, which urges us to focus on what is truly meaningful in life. He presents us with the opportunity to understand all this with the help of our own intuition. This type of expression is intertwined with the ideology and artistic interpretation of the forefathers of 20th century Modern Art. What it actually is, is a subjective view of the world, which does not necessarily correlate directly with reality and instead focuses on what it is in our imagination. Artists represent their personal Utopian truth in colors and shapes, and it offers us a glimpse into a world-view, which is specific from each one of them.

The contemporary world of art is a reflection of the current state of disfigurement of life. There we encounter entirely abstract works with transcendental orientation, such as the ones by Kandinsky and Malevich. We also take note in the blue cows by Franz Marc, the floating couples and colorful bouquets, which lack spacial decidedness by Marc Chagall. In their expressively- abstract paintings, the artists illustrate nature as a whole with the help of encoded visual messages and symbols. Their canvases demonstrate the strive for a more simplistic life, attributed to the people from the countryside.

In Chagall's world, rich in fantasy, we encounter visual narratives, written with the aid of rich colors and imagery. It almost feels like they transport the viewer to an alternate world with no gravity. That is also true of Iliya Zhelev's paintings, which are reminiscent of the surreal, whilst also remaining connected to the reality of the living world. In them you can often discover the night sky, at times starry, other times dark or brightly colored, but always offering the opportunity for the beholder to find his star or the Milky Way, or maybe touch the rainbow and come back to Earth.