

ART WITH A HEART

Ana Tzarev's paintings, a joyous celebration of the wide and wonderful world, will showcase in Hanoi.

Tan Su Hui reports

CROATIAN ARTIST ANA TZAREV HAS travelled the world with her paintbrush. Her paintings, characteristically colourful and exuberant, tell stories of both joy and desperation, heartache and happiness from her explorations. They are unique images of universal emotions and express the rich flavour of different cultures around the world. In her latest showcase in Hanoi this September, her paintings will be displayed as part of a commemorative ceramic mosaic, adding a touch of colour to the city walls.

Her striking floral motif of the mosaic wall as well as the colourful depictions of the traditional local boats are a tribute to Vietnam's vibrant culture, in commemoration of the millennial anniversary of its capital city. The project, to be completed in October, will clothe the concrete dike of the Red River in a splash of colour, featuring works by artists from all over the world including Argentina, Italy and Denmark. For Tzarev, whose travels inspire

her art greatly, this seems to be the most apt home for her art.

Having launched her gallery and held her first exhibition only two years ago in New York, Tzarev could be considered by most standards a newcomer. Yet her eponymous self-funded gallery in the Big Apple has been making waves from the unorthodoxy of the project. Detractors were quick to dismiss the project for its apparent vanity but their claims that the

setting up of the gallery on West 57th street in Manhattan would compromise the credibility of the neighbouring galleries has been dismissed by the artist, who says, "I don't care what anybody thinks I do." If art is about individual expression, then Tzarev has got it down to a T.

For the artist, exhibiting her works in her gallery was the most sensible thing to do: Having designed many upmarket department stores she founded with her husband Robert Chandler, the artist had



Above: Ana Tzarev in Mali;
Opposite page: *Rabbit Mask Dance*, 2006

Travelling allows one to gain a deeper understanding of the many local traditions and ancient customs of respect for all forms of life





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Above: *Inca Artisan*, 2004; Opposite page: *Seduction of Malee*, 2006

developed a clear idea of how she would like her work showcased. “I want my work to be presented in a space that would encourage dialogue and understanding about different cultures,” she explains. Her endeavour raises fundamental questions about the role of arts in society, and also highlights the exclusivity in the art industry.

Although she has always been fascinated with images and drawing, Tzarev only devoted herself to painting in her 50s — and it has since become a love that is almost obsessive for her. The self-taught artist is refreshingly free from the traditions of art, though she acknowledges the influence of great artists and regards them as trailblazing teachers. Her distinct style of bold lines and bright colours laid heavily on a

large format canvas emphasises texture, particularly apt for the portrayal of colourful characters like Mayan lovers and saffron gatherers.

Tzarev explains that her explorations have become a major theme of her work because they present a constant enlargement of her concept of the world. She has the most extraordinary tales from her travels — from being crowned an honorary queen mother of a local tribe in Ghana to learning about the Koran alongside children from a village in Senegal. There are simply no boundaries for this traveller, who recounts her most memorable experience from her travels: “During my travels to Mali, I ventured into Sangha — a long jeep ride over dried-up river beds deep into the desert. There I witnessed one



Lovers, 2002



Six-piece Rose Sky, 2004; White Magnolias Sonata, 2002; Moonlight Sonata, 2002

The message that my art conveys to the viewer is to appreciate the incredible history and beauty that exists in traditional cultures, rituals and costumes



Top: Ana Tzarev Gallery, New York
Above: Chandler House, Hamilton, New Zealand

of the rarest spectacles on earth, the *dogon* dance, a masked dance of 40 native dancers, dancing in extreme heat with heavy wooden painted masks of animals over their heads and faces. As far as I know, my crew and I were probably the only western people to have experienced this remarkable event before it disappeared. I had the privilege to paint the dance in all its raw beauty and it will haunt me for the rest of my life.”

Social and cultural awareness appears to be a big part of Tzarev’s art. Some of her darker paintings seek to highlight the suffering of the disenfranchised and forgotten, such as the victims of war in Afghanistan. Despite the bright colours, there is melancholy in these paintings. Tzarev also puts her gallery to good use as a venue for charitable events. It is this appreciation of the fleeting beauty of the world that drives this artist to paint: She sees her paintings “as postcards for the future generations” so that the history of these cultures, many of which face extinction, can be remembered in their full glory. ■

Tzarev’s exhibition will run at the Hanoi Fine Arts Museum from September 24 to October 3. www.anatzarev.com