

LIBERAL ARTS ROXBURY

Vera Iliatova

Nowhere Near

May 29 - August 29, 2021

The figures of young girls inhabiting Vera Iliatova's canvases seem to exist in a state of perpetual psychological absorption. Their expressions are elusive—disinterested or unaware of the gaze of the viewer. They engage in amorphous activities with one another, or are seemingly fixated on a view of the landscape outside of the painting which remains unseen. Often walking and talking together, their voices are just out of earshot.

Iliatova's girls—who are psychological self-portraits of sorts—are indeterminately young and their clothing is from an indeterminate era. Their presentations exude the tensions of liminality; the beginning of a narrative that may spiral in numerous unknown directions. The narratives layered within Iliatova's images produce the feeling that they are consistently present, but with the arcs unmapped and tentative. Her characters remain just beyond reach, framed by the surrounding composition of leaves and flowers that threatens to dominate the picture plane. The perspective of the foregrounded foliage is intentionally left unclear, leaving the viewer to interpret its entry as either mid-way through a dissolve between two distinct images, or physically positioning the viewer behind and hidden, voyeuristically observing the distant subjects.

Iliatova's work is highly influenced by cinema. The approach of the dissolve may signify either the beginning or the ending of a scene. The interstitial space her compositions provide imply a stasis: a singular moment in time. The muted tones of her palette—the blacks, whites, and gray underpainting—allude to early photographic overpaintings. The distance between the viewer and the figures is accentuated by the intimate scale of the canvases, which double as a perspectival tool, extending the viewer's approach to the artwork, like a long corridor. The confluence of the formal gestures in Iliatova's canvases, with their truncated narrative qualities, engenders feelings of remoteness and disconnectedness in the viewer.

Before the advent of film and its suspension of disbelief, Dennis Diderot—the godfather of art criticism—described a theory of absorption in 18th-century French painting. Establishing a meticulous relationship between the viewer and the work of art, Diderot proposed that the pictorial world of a painting should be closed to its viewer. He describes dramatic absorption as a figure's refusal to recognize the position of the beholder. The quiet and the solitude of the composition mirrors the figure's absorption within the viewer of the work.

From a Diderotian perspective, Iliatova's most crucial figures are those who nearly acknowledge the viewer's position but do not reveal it through their gaze. They instead stare past the viewer into the distance. Their so-called "thousand-yard stare" alludes to experiences which brought them to be viewed from behind the foliage in an undisclosed setting. The possibility that they recognize the viewer is suspended, yet its accompanying feelings of apprehension are not. Michael Fried, analyzing Diderot, calls for the psychological disappearance of the beholder's body as they enter a work and become absorbed by it, what he referred to as the "supreme fiction." Just as the viewer is out of earshot of the girls' conversations, the beholder is just out of sight of the figure's gaze.

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Vera Iliatova
Does She Know?, 2019
Oil on canvas
16h x 18w in
40.64h x 45.72w cm



Vera Iliatova
End of Days, 2020
Oil on canvas
16h x 16w in
40.64h x 40.64w cm

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Vera Iliatova
Untitled, 2018
Oil on linen
16h x 16w in
40.64h x 40.64w cm



Vera Iliatova
Cold Spring, 2019
Oil on linen
12h x 16w in
30.48h x 40.64w cm

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Vera Iliatova
Central Park, 2007
Oil on panel
10h x 10w in
25.40h x 25.40w cm



Vera Iliatova
Magic Mountain, 2017
Oil on canvas
20h x 30w in
50.80h x 76.20w cm

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Vera Iliatova
Major in a Minor Key, 2013
Oil on canvas
30h x 26w in
76.20h x 66.04w cm



Vera Iliatova
Aure Multifoliata, 2015
Oil on canvas
40h x 50w in
101.60h x 127w cm

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