

Polina Barskaya: *Still*

By Andrew L. Shea



Polina Barskaya, *Waiting for Spring to Start*, 2021. Acrylic on canvas, 19 3/4 x 27 1/2. Courtesy Monya Rowe Gallery, New York.

Polina Barskaya's newest paintings, 11 of which are on view at Monya Rowe Gallery through November 12, take lockdown-looking as their subject. As in her two previous solo exhibitions at the gallery, these are intimate, domestic scenes, derived from photographs that are acted upon and subtly distorted through the process of painting. Self-portraiture plays a meaningful role in each work, and most also include one or both other members of her family, a husband and newborn daughter.

Made with acrylic on canvas or panel, the paintings are small, never exceeding 40 inches to a side. They are set in rural towns in Italy and Croatia, where Barskaya and her family moved and traveled after the pandemic began in spring 2020. One senses that they were nice places to spend the months. The rental houses, cafés, and hotels in which the artist places her family tend to evoke a sort of shabby-chic, decorative luxury.

But don't expect to find Barskaya on the travel brochure: these are frosty, willfully modest, vulnerable paintings. The artist's facial expressions range from blank to bored to mildly vexed. Those of her husband and her daughter are similarly blasé. In nearly half of the paintings (which are all dated 2021), the figures are naked; many lie on beds or soak in bathtubs. Familial love is communicated through physical closeness and psychological distance. Not exactly Hallmark moments.

This quarantine ennui, however, isn't absolute, nor is it one-dimensional. In a way, realism—pictorial or psychological—doesn't seem to be the concern at all. Barskaya's uncooperative facture and her palette of specific, muted grays invoke Morandi's metaphysical elusiveness. Indeed, in isolated moments, Barskaya's colors break free from the overall fridity, pulsating with a warm, weird, internal energy that's reminiscent of the taciturn Italian

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Modernist. But these moments don't happen everywhere, and they can be hard to get to. You need to find them.

In other words, Barskaya isn't after spectacle or quick consumption. The paintings ask their viewer to chill out, look closely, and stay a while. They are poetic and mute objects that unfold slowly to the viewer over time. For this reason, they translate poorly in reproduction. The way that Barskaya's austerity pushes up against coloristic delight can only be appreciated in person.

The paintings, which appear hermetic at first sight, sometimes venture out to art historical reference. Given Barskaya's impulse toward confessional intimacy, it's impossible not to think of Alice Neel. And though Barskaya's muted manner doesn't necessarily seem "French," certain flashpoints of Gallic modernism kept wafting in and out of mind. *Waiting for Spring to Start* (2021), in which the artist sits in a chair on a grassy hill, her husband and daughter reclining on the ground to the side, seems an obvious *Dejeuner sur L'Herbe* moment—though everyone's wearing clothes. As in Manet's landmark painting (1862–1863), an uncanny synthesis of fullness with flatness, of tactile sensuality with emotional distance, provides essential drama.

Elsewhere, a "found-as-it-is," snapshot sensibility takes over. Certain of Barskaya's unkempt vignettes relate to the way Bonnard hides important subjects and scatters forms along the edges of his canvases, disorienting traditional optics and allowing the picture to unfold gradually to the viewer. Consider *Sunlight in Kurili* (2021), a straight-ahead

view of Barskaya and her daughter sitting at a picnic table next to the gray side of a house. A log column runs straight along the entire length of the canvas's right edge. The house's cerulean door, its windows, and the picnic bench all recapitulate the canvas's verticals and horizontals at unpredictable interludes.

These geometries contrast with the organic quality of the picture's largest and closest form, a cascading blob of green ivy which hugs the contour of Barskaya behind it. A Naples Yellow light—late afternoon, perhaps—illuminates the entire scene, casting an intricate array of shadows onto the exterior wall. Barskaya handles this interplay of light and dark with evident pleasure and painterly interest. More pleasure and interest, perhaps, than even that seen in the figures themselves, who often seem to recede into the distance, despite their central positioning and frontal postures.

In a statement that accompanies the exhibition's press release, Barskaya writes: "Time has passed very quickly these last 19 months ... We watched our baby grow and I slowly made paintings." Routines like the daughter's nightly bath are described in titles as "rituals," things that ensure constancy and re-orient our actions according to natural, organic time. The paintings, in their concession to slowness, stasis, and change, seem to ask: what might it mean to relinquish the mechanical intervals of the clock or the social intervals of a busy calendar, and instead to live by the light of day and night, by the obligations of fatigue and hunger, by the ineluctable growth of a newborn child?



Polina Barskaya, *Bathing in Florence*, 2021. Acrylic on canvas, 19 3/4 x 27 1/2. Courtesy Monya Rowe Gallery, New York.