

La belle Ukraine

French photographer joins long list of foreigners bewitched and inspired by local ladies

Iryna Ozymok

French photographer of Ukrainian ancestry Youry Bilak has recently opened his latest exhibition in central Kyiv featuring studio studies of naked and semi-naked ladies' backs. Dubbed 'Bilak's Backs', the exhibition is a titillating mix of the artistic and the suggestive, capturing the uniquely alluring essence of Ukrainian femininity and tapping into a subject which continues to trouble and bewitch many foreign men in Ukraine. However, Bilak's work is far from the latest example of the sepiat sensationalism which colours international interpretations of gender politics in Ukraine. Instead, his photo portraits seek to delve into the delicacies of Ukraine's raw and unreconstructed femininity while seeking to empower his subjects in a way that more erotica could never achieve.

Bilak is not the first foreign male to find his artistic muse in Ukrainian womanhood. He joins a long line of international arrivals stretching back to the likes of French author Balzac who have all been struck by the sensational sensuality and natural elegance of local ladies. Bilak's current photography collection will certainly draw admiring glances from many red-blooded males but it is merely the latest in a series of diverse photo projects that have collectively attempted to

challenge persisting negative international stereotypes about Ukraine. Previous focuses have included ethnic communities and folk traditions in Ukraine's more remote rural outposts, while he has also been involved in pioneering efforts to produce relief photos which allow visually impaired and blind visitors to 'touch and see' his photography. Bilak's first Ukrainian exhibition took place in Lviv in 2007 as part of the annual French Spring cultural project, and as well as exhibiting across Ukraine he has also participated in exhibitions and photo biennials elsewhere in Europe including Budapest.

Ahead of his latest exhibition opening Bilak took time out in order to explain to Iryna Ozymok how he approaches nude photo shoots and why he prefers to wait until he is invited to take a portrait.

What strikes you as the most dramatic difference between Ukrainian women and Western European ladies?

In general ladies here tend to be taller and more feminine because they do not always wear jeans and sports shoes as the majority of ladies in France



do. When I first arrived in Ukraine I remember being very surprised when I saw a stylish lady in a short skirt and high heels disembarking from a rickety old bus in a muddy, dreary Ukrainian village. In my experience Ukrainian ladies always want to look as feminine as possible. I believe that this is an essential element of Ukrainian culture. I am very much a fan of this trend, except for the large artificial nails that some ladies favour!

Was the idea of a series of nude portraits your idea or was it suggested to you by the subjects of your work?

I try to realize my fantasies in my works, but I think it is also true that every woman also harbors a desire, whether suppressed or not, to be photographed naked. For some it will always remain a kind of dream.

Can you remember the first Ukrainian lady who you photographed nude?

Of course! She was from Poltava and her name is Ksenia. Back then everything was different: we were forced to work in old premises and the quality of the facilities on offer was generally poor. But nevertheless that first photo session is comparable to my first love because it remains unforgettable. If a woman is taking off her clothes for you, she is presenting you with a very special gift. I don't like to simply take a photo - I like it to be offered.

What are the chief characteristics which attract you to a lady as a subject for your art?

She should be natural! There are no unsuitable women, only lazy women! I sometimes approach somebody on the street and ask for permission to take few pictures. But usually a meeting of minds should take place between photographer and model. Trust should be established in order to avoid any frustration.

How difficult is it to remain calm as a photographer when you find yourself studying a nude woman in front of you?

As a man of course it is a challenge, but I try to adopt a detached, technical approach. I find I can look carefully at the texture of the skin and make some final touches to the model's hair. When I am reviewing photos after the session I like to ask the model not to search for herself in the images but just to look at a beautiful woman! On two separate occasions ladies I have been photographing have seen their portraits and decided to cancel plastic surgery which they had planned to have. This is a wonderful endorsement of my work and very rewarding personally.

Is it difficult to convince ladies to pose naked for your photography?

Do not imagine that the ladies in my portraits simply come to the studio and take off their clothes off. We spend a lot of time communicating before the actual photo shoot and this allows the lady to open up and feel more comfortable with the idea of nude art. It is vital that she trusts the photographer. In many cases the photo session will begin with a sense of embarrassment, then the shoulders are exposed, then finally the entire back. I adore encouraging ladies to overcome their modesty and shyness in front of the camera - many of my models comment that they enjoyed being bolder and more courageous than they might usually be.

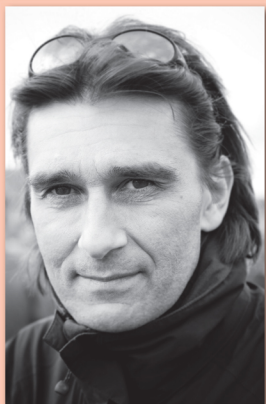
Have you experienced any cultural barriers to your work in Ukraine?

In all honesty I would like to do a series of nude portraits of female Ukrainian celebrities but I have found that in today's Ukraine this kind of art is still perceived by many in the mainstream as vulgar. However, every

day you can see blood and violence on Ukrainian TV which in my opinion is far worse than nudity.

How easy do you find it to persuade the ladies you photograph to open up their innermost secrets for you?

It is very important for my work that they are open and honest. Maybe it's akin to the familiar effect of passengers meeting on a train - some people find it easy in such circumstances to open up to a complete stranger than share their innermost thoughts with an old friend. I try not to judge but instead to take people as I find them. Sometimes I find models will stop in the middle of a conversation when they suddenly realize that they are already talking about something very personal. Ultimately when a woman takes her clothes off in front of an artist's camera she is not merely demonstrating her body but is actually exposing her soul. I am not a psychotherapist and I cannot solve people's problems but I can listen. In my experience my models appreciate being listened to as much as being photographed.



Bilak's Backs

Exhibition of portraits by Youry Bilak
Kamera Gallery
22 Prorizna Street, Kyiv
Until 10 April
Open: 15.00 to 18.30 daily (except Tuesdays)
Tel: 044 2795070
Free entry