

THE SELF-PORTRAITURE OF STANKA USHA TSONKOVA: BROKEN MIRRORS FIXED WITH DUCT TAPE

by Rafaelo Kazakov

I was very tempted to use the non-existent word "self-poetryture" in the title, not because photographer Stanka Tsonkova (everybody calls her "Usha") occasionally writes poetry—and very good one at that—but because the poetic impulse has been the driving force in her art. In a world of art (and photography in particular) in which the gimmickry of concept-driven cleverness so often passes for true creativity, Usha has persistently clung to the old-fashioned and risky notion that the work of an artist is the emanation of his or her soul.

An old Latin maxim states: "If you are searching for a treasure, look around yourself." Most sculptors, painters and other types of artists are aware of the truth in the saying; most photographers aren't. Owners of cameras all over the world fervently hope that the farther they travel, the better their pictures will be. Usha is one of the few wise ones who knows otherwise. For over 35 years she has lived out her belief that the longest journey one can undertake is the journey into the familiar. All her photographs (except those from two trips to Japan) have been created within a few hundred kilometers of her birthplace in Sofia, Bulgaria. She has always used friends and family as models in improvised settings, making do with inexpensive cameras, available light and black-and-white film. And within the jungle of mystery we naively call "the familiar surroundings", what more daunting and dark mystery than one's own self!? Self-portraiture figures very prominently in Usha's art and is central to entering her private artistic world.

I am not suggesting in any way that a photographer who turns the camera on himself or herself has any greater chance at arriving at hidden truths than those who go to shoot jungle creatures in Amazonia or pyramids in Egypt. The choice is one of expedience: one's own body and face are always available and make the solitude of artistic endeavor pleasantly dualistic. Oscar Wilde famously said: "I like to do all the talking myself. It saves time, and prevents arguments." This idea of monologue and dialog becoming one has been applied by photographers through self-portraiture from the very beginning of the medium.

Central in Usha's prolific body of work are two series of self-portraiture spanning over 20 years (1979-2000): one is called "My Marriages" and the other one is an untitled, less cohesive series of self-portraits and "self-nudes". A small-hand made book titled "What's Happening With Me Younger?" alternately ties up and unravels the themes of duality and yearning from the other two bodies of work.

The series "My Marriages" features the artist's face inserted in old-style wedding portraiture: a woman's visage has been scissored out, we imagine, and the artist gleefully takes her position in the vacated spousal spot... A fictional marriage has just been consummated and no humans have been harmed in the process! One can get only a step further, and the artist does: in one of those fictional wedding pictures she "marries" herself, her face made-up as male alongside her female self-portrait. These montages are deliberately crude and as with all of Usha's photography are hand-made in the darkroom with the various hues emerging on black-and-white paper through the application of photo-chemicals used against their intended purposes.

The extended self-portrait series features themes and motifs that are as varied as they are consistent: almost invariably the human figure is interwoven with scraps and ephemera that have entered the frame through multiple exposures of

the photo paper. There is an ongoing baroque density to the image plane: this artist surely does not believe in the simple differentiation between foreground and background that most photographers practice. Usha achieves something that is a rarity in photo-based work: every square centimeter of the surface plane is accounted for and there for a reason; no readymade fabric background here... Life rarely has a plain or pleasantly dappled background and in her self-portraits Usha practices what she preaches: true artists do not separate their life from their work. Her own life up to now has been far from easy and there is a corresponding intensity of emotion and a gut-wrenching twist that her self-portraits provoke. This creates a slight paradox in the perception of the work: while beauty is ever-present in the images, the intensity of personal feeling does not make them easy to look at or live with. Decorative these works can surely never be; heavy as a rock and light as a feather all at the same time they certainly are.

"What's Happening With Me Younger" is a small hand-made book that Usha self-published in 1994 in 200 copies. It contains poetry, drawings, collages and photographs all by the artist herself. The haiku-like poetic pieces in the book are alternately funny and sad and verbalize for a rare instance some of the themes in Usha's art: true love is nearly impossible, but if one does not try, one might as well be dead; the yearning of unfulfilled wishes is the fuel of the artist's creativity; all the crookedness and banality of daily life has a flip-side: you only have to see through the back of your eyes and you will be blinded by the luminosity and beauty of this hidden world...

The word "younger", which is in the title of the book is a coinage of the artist and doesn't mean "more youthful". With tongue-in-cheek wickedness—a hallmark of all her work—Usha takes the suffix "-er" to mean "a professional", a doer of something, as in "miner" or "waiter". Thus a "younger" is a professional agent of youth, a perpetual

youngster of sorts, and a candidate for lover who has the world on a platter for his damsel, yet somehow on the morning after he has lost it...

The poet covers the distance between the ridiculous and the sublime in a heartbeat: only someone who has lived through the third-world grime of Soviet-era communism in the Eastern bloc can fully appreciate the poem "LOVE AT THE TIME OF SQUALOR", where the frequency of the lovers' trysts is dictated by the alternating power and water outages in the two apartment complexes in the outskirts of the city where each of them lives... In another piece, after she makes a long list of all her physical shortcomings ("...I have bulky arms, and robust legs, and hefty nose...") the poet concludes: "Aw shucks, what I have is more than what I don't have." Humor pulsates in these verses, as it does in all of Usha's photographs. The power of dignity and laughter beats down self-pity every time. The truly wise know that there is no need to look for a treasure anywhere; it is already inside.

Rafaello Kazakov is a Bulgarian-born artist and writer who lives in Bogota, New Jersey in the USA

STANKA USHA TSONKOVA

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BROKEN MIRRORS FIXED WITH DUCT TAPE

"I paint self-portraits because I am so often alone, because I am the person I know best."

(Frida Kahlo)

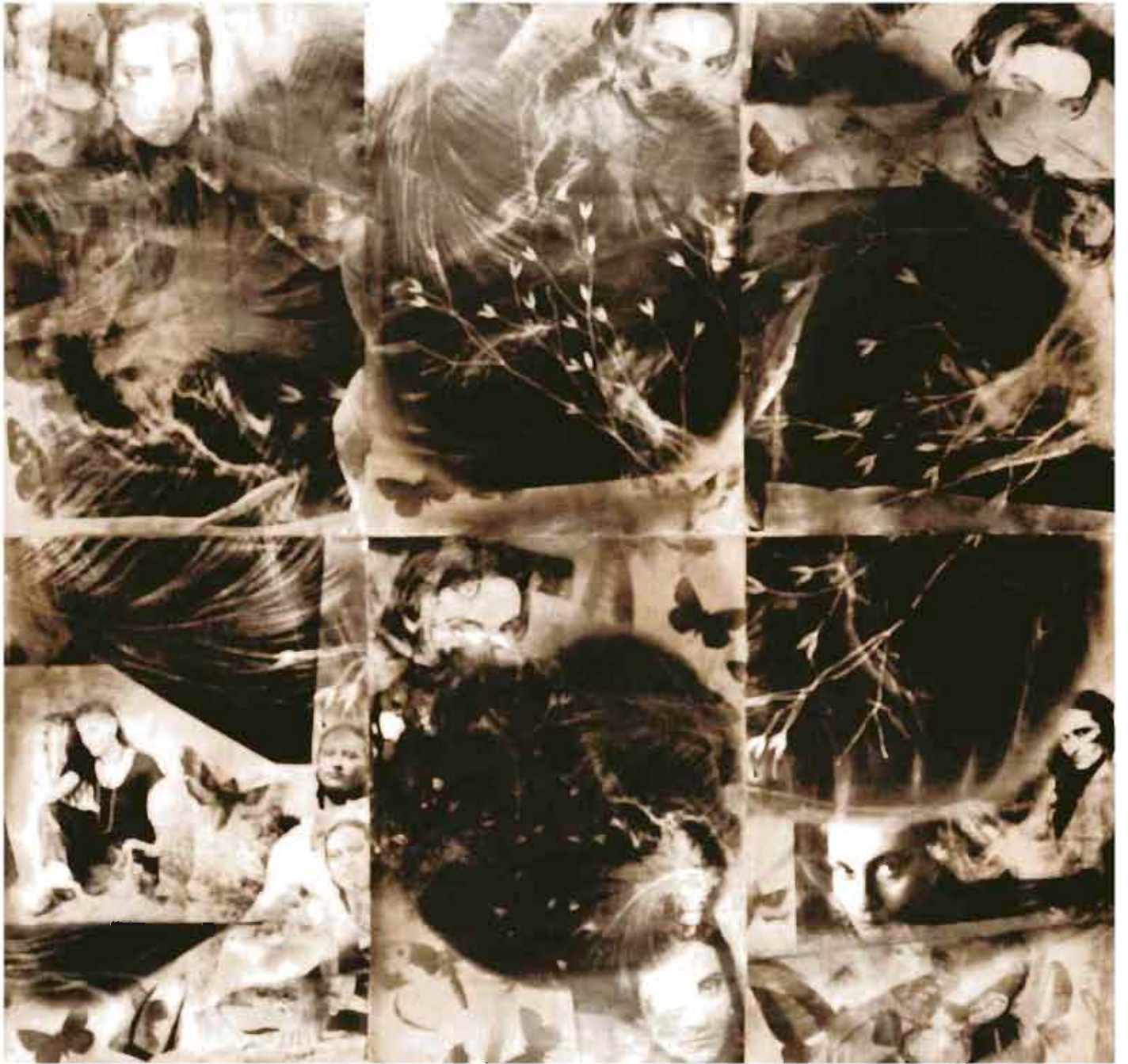


From the series My Marriages, 1994

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Selfportrait 40ies, 1994



Selfportrait, 1994

Selfportrait, 1994





Selfportrait, 1993



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Workbook of Love, 1990

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from the book "What's Happening With Me, Younger?", 1994



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RAFAELO KAZAKOV

STANKA USHA TSONKOVA

BORN: 1952, Sofia, Bulgaria

WORKING EXPERIENCE (SELECTED):

1985 – 88 - Bulgarian Academy of Science

1988 – 89 - Leader of the Sofia University Photo Club

1993 - Teaching: Experimental photography teacher in the National Secondary School for Culture - Sofia

1993, 97, 98, 2004, 05 - New Bulgarian University and National Academy of Theater and Cinema Arts

Since **2003** free lance artist, photographer

Collaboration with a lot of periodicals.

Currently lives in New York City.

■ <http://www.absolutearts.com/veselusha>

■ <http://www.artslant.com/global/artists/show/70934-usaha-tsonkova>



Selfportrait, 1990