Decorations in the Dark:
Adding Color to a Gray World

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For many people around the world, art can represent an array of things such as thoughts, emotions and experiences. Many individuals use their art to sometimes express or convey the ideas or messages they cannot put into words or say aloud. Whether art is the voice of an entire movement or the therapy of a single soul, history has shown that art is fundamental. From Basquiat to Bob Ross, art has had a great impact on the ways we see ourselves and the world around us. Art is political, cultural and, last but not least, prideful.

Oleksandr Balbyshev is a 35-year-old artist who uses male sexuality and sensuality to express his innermost feelings about reality and self-reflection. Although he began doing art as a profession back in 2016, he has been an artist for far longer than that. According to Balbyshev, he had been drawn to the visual arts for as long as he could remember. When he was only at the tender age of eight years old, he asked his parents to buy him oil paints to go along with art materials he already owned such as watercolors, gouache paints, pastels, pencils, and felt-tip pens. However, oil paints specifically stood

out to Balbyshev, even at such a young age. He states, "The technology of oil painting was practically unknown to me, but the process seemed almost something mystical and mysteriously majestic. There are good reasons why many of the great paintings of the past are oil painted. It seems to me that the oil steals a piece of soul from the portrayed. And in that way, the artwork becomes alive."

In 2012, Balbyshev received his bachelor's degree in architecture. He graduated from the Prydniprovska State Academy of Civil Engineering and Architecture—a very prestigious academic institution located in Dnipropetrovsk, Ukraine. Despite originally wanting to work in architecture and design, Balbyshev did not enjoy the field that he chose. This, along with the major changes that started to happen in Ukraine, was the catalyst that made him change the path that he was on and decide to become a full time artist instead.

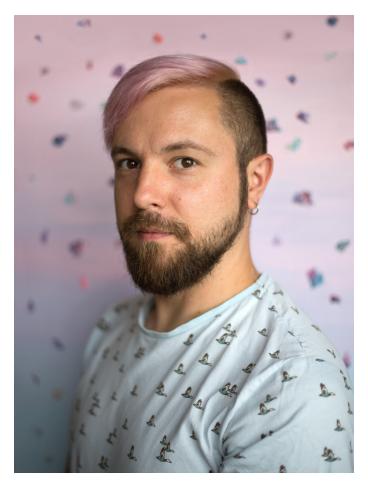2014 was the year the Ukrainian Revolution occurred. During this period of time, civil unrest

and tensions flooded Ukrainians streets. Back in November of 2013, Ukraine's president at the time, Viktor Yanukovych, decided against signing off on a deal that would have integrated the country with the European Union. This deal, known as the Ukraine-European Union Association Agreement, would have established a political and economic association between Ukraine and the EU, as well as making sure that both parties encouraged a gradual unification of the EU's Common Security and Defence Policy and European Defence Agency policies. As a result of the president's decision to not sign the deal, mass protests and demonstrations, both peaceful and violent, sparked across all of Ukraine.

This had a massive impact on many people around the country, especially people like Balbyshev. "After I received my bachelor's degree in architecture in 2012, I worked quite successfully as a designer. But two years later, in connection with the revolutionary events in my country, a serious financial crisis began," Balbyshev expressed. "My work ceased to bring in an acceptable income, and I decided to change activities. So I became an artist, for which I will always be grateful to fate."

When it comes to inspirations and influences, Balbyshev draws his creativity from many different figures. Some of his favorite painters include the likes of Vincent van Gogh, Yayoi Kusama and David Hockney. When it comes to major influences, he cites Andy Warhol, an openly gay, American painter who was known for his profound work in the 1970s and 1980s. Warhol is best remembered for being a monumental figure in the visual movement known as "pop art." This movement started in the 1950s and took its ideas from commercial culture through things such as ads, comic books, and other popular images.

Seeing Warhol's art touched Balbyshev in a deep way, even prompting him to follow a similar creative process as Warhol himself. "In his work, I was attracted by the brave borrowing of daily figures to create bright and attractive works of art. Therefore, I have adopted Warhol's creative method. I am very attracted to the kitsch aesthetics of Jeff Koons and his bold work with images of mass culture. Like Michael Borremans and Neo Rauch, I try to bring into my canvases the understatement and mysticism of what is happening."
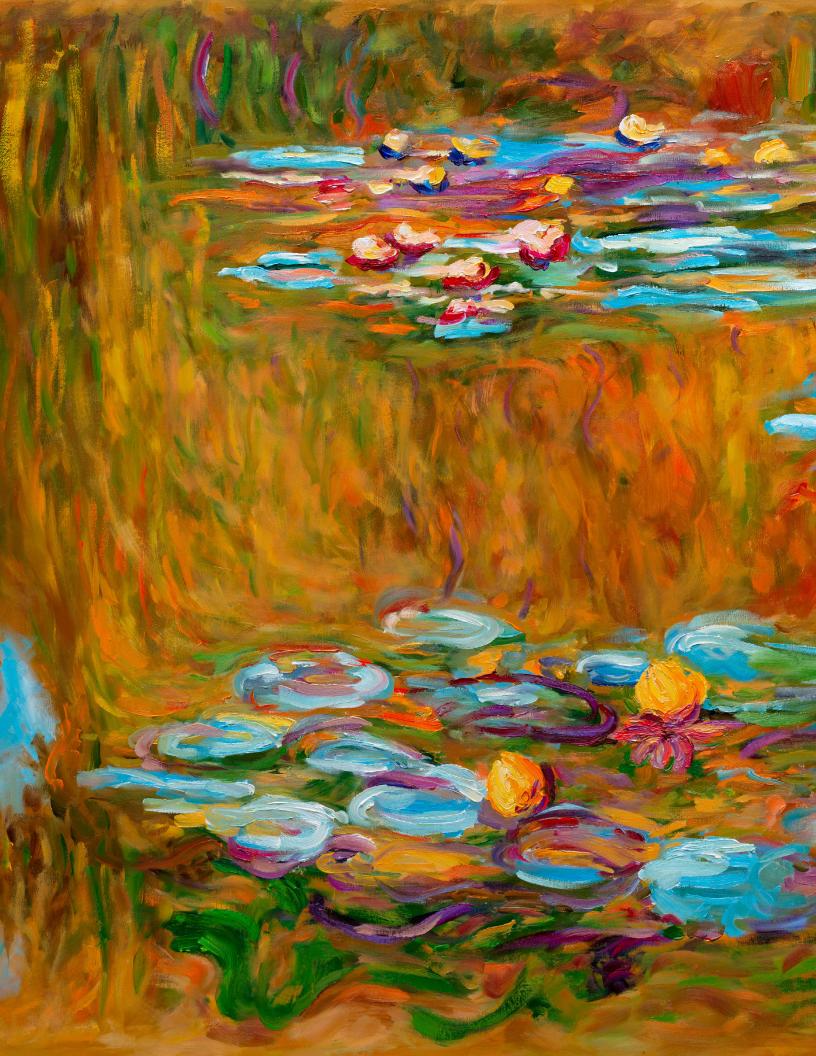
Being from Ukraine himself, much of Ukrainian

culture has had an affect on Balbyshev and the way he portrays his work. He says he is inspired by the excessive decorations and embellishments that his people are famous for. Since ancient times, Ukrainians have often chosen things like funny drawings and color embroideries to decorate their walls and clothes with. Balbyshev says that back in the day Ukrainian women would wear wreaths with flowers, flashy ribbons, and many colorful, decorative things. Even Cossack warriors, who were extremely formidable and intimidating during their day, were also very fashionable.

"During peacetime, they wore clothes made of brocade and silk with gold or silver threads and their accessories were abundantly decorated with embroidered ornaments," Balbyshev explained. "Cossacks considered that looking dressy is a matter of honor. Ukrainian icon painting was also different from the ascetic and grim Russian icon."

He says that now, bright and beautiful is what Ukrainian people usually go for. Therefore it isn't surprising that he is attracted to the same and that it is reflected in his artwork. This is the reason for his many bright colors and why he has "a craving for decorativeness" and uses ornaments in his artwork. As a gay man, things have never been easy for Balbyshev while living in a country such as Ukraine, as much of the LGBT community there deals with discrimination, violence, and unfair treatment. He says that the rejection of who he is by Ukrainian society has a very strong influence on both his personality and his art. Under such hostile conditions and a harsh environment, Balbyshev struggled with accepting himself and who he was. He says that toxic masculinity was something that he felt all around him and that it dominated so much of his life that indelible marks were left in his soul.

"I still feel a deep-seated guilty feeling that I am not like anyone else. Perhaps this shame can be seen in my paintings. This shame is holding me back and depressing. However, there is something good also in this situation. This constant opposition pushes me forward to improve myself. The hostile atmosphere made me stronger and I learned how to succeed in a toxic environment."

A vast majority of his artwork can be found on the artist's website, Balbyshev.com, where his creations are categorized in seven different galleries to choose from. People can view these online galleries and see his story told in each different painting or sculpture. When it comes to his aspirations for his work, the goal is simple. "I seek to create art that I would like to buy and hang on the wall in my house. It should be a beautiful art," Balbyshev explained.

He quotes the Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky, who once said that beauty will save the world. The way Balbyshev sees it, Dostoevsky was referring to inner beauty. Inner beauty was what artists were searching for throughout the entire 20th century. They did this and often tried to avoid outer beauty. He also quotes the French painter Marcel Duchamp, who once said, "The danger to be avoided lies in aesthetic delectation!" —Balbyshev disagrees with this statement, saying that he personally believes that truth is somewhere in between, as always.

"Humanity has forgotten how to see what has always been in sight while searching for profound meaning for more than a century. The world is beautiful and there is nothing wrong with enjoying this beauty. Moreover, I truly believe that beauty can change the human soul to the best."

One of Balbyshev's overall themes in his work is the male body. Male figures seem to make up a vast majority of subjects in his portraits. This is not a coincidence, as he wants to incorporate masculine

sensuality and beauty that a lot of times is not seen in art. Balbyshev says that he is saddened by how little male nudes are represented in art. He mentions Guerrilla Girls, a group formed in 1985 in New York City. The group is an anonymous group of female artists whose ultimate goal is to fight sexism and racism in the art world. When the group did research to find out the ratio between male and female nudes in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, they discovered that male nudes make up only 15% of the total number of artworks. Today, that number is just about the same.

Balbyshev hopes to change this. "On online galleries where I sell my art, male nudes are about 20%. The roots of this phenomenon, in my opinion, are very deep in our culture and require additional study. I want to make my contribution to the correction of this injustice and to the process of elimination of harmful gender stereotypes and other factors that made the current situation," he said.

Many of Balbyshev's pieces are bright and vibrant to look at. He uses a generous amount of different shades of pink across many of his canvases. For him, pink holds a special place in his palette. It is associated with lightness and carelessness, something not usually seen in art that features male figures. These bright and saturated colors take away from the problems of a gray, daily routine.

"It is like a breath of fresh air before diving into the abyss of serious things and important problems. It seems to me that this breath can give you strength and can help to look at things from a new angle or maybe making problems a little bit easier."

Oleksandr Balbyshev conveys his innermost messages and emotions into art that encapsulates how he feels in a world that turns a blind eye to who he is. Through his many pieces and artwork, he exhibits pride in a society that tries to hold him down and suppress his identity.