

Artist to Collect

Michael Cheval





previous page, *Discord of Analogy*, oil on canvas, 20" x 24"

above, *Hack-a-Shaq*, oil on canvas, 24" x 24"

## How Absurd!

written by Lorie Lee Steiner

Fiction flirting with reality; the puppet master controls the illusion, changing rules as he goes along using strokes of oil and genius. "It's all a game," says Russian artist Michael Cheval of his award-winning paintings. An alluring game indeed... chess-like in complexity, conceived in absurdity with eternity at its end. A challenge plotted on canvas with equal measures of logical precision and designed abandon that holds viewers mesmerized by the sheer wizardry of it all.

Michael was born in 1966 in Kotelnikovo, a small town in the Soviet Union with a rich and ancient

cultural history. Before the 1917 revolution, the region belonged to the Don Cossacks – all of Michael's ancestors were Cossacks and inherent artistic talent was passed down through the generations. "In our family it was common to paint, to play a musical instrument, compose poems. My grandfather was a professional artist and sculptor. He and my father from an early age instilled in me a love for the arts. They taught me to draw, to build a composition, understand how to use colours and shades. When I was 10, my father gave me an artist's box full of oil paints and brushes. Since then, I cannot part with oil paints."

Michael's youthful imagination flowed in lyrical proportions; infusing everything he painted, from landscapes and still lifes to portraits of family and friends. He illustrated the books he read and penned his own stories. Though he grew up as "a



*Dodocycle II*, oil on canvas, 24" x 20"





regular kid" playing soccer, skating, swimming in the river with school mates, for Michael, art was the ultimate game. "In my childhood, I asked a friend of my father to draw me a horse. The big man told me that he does not know how to draw. I was amazed by his response, I could not understand how this man does not know how to draw. It's so simple!!"

In 1980, the Cheval family made a pivotal move to East Germany. A teenager at the time, Michael embraced the change on many levels, graduating from high school with a cache of memories that would profoundly influence his future life. In 1983, it was back to the Soviet Union and recruitment in the Soviet Army. Even then his art skills came into play. "In the army, one day I was doing a huge

#### Acclaimed On Land & Sea

Appreciation for Michael's particular style of surrealism was not forthcoming. He recalls, "In the 1990s, Russia looked like America of the 'wild west' time and the art was not claimed." Modern day America, however, proved ideal for his signature brand of absurdity. So much so, that in 1997 he immigrated to New York. Days working as an engraver and designer in jewelry companies gave way to evenings and weekends of unrestrained painting. The results were refreshingly clever and complex – Old Masters meet Lewis Carroll – and Michael soon found an appreciative audience of gallery owners and patrons. In 1998, he became a member of the National Arts Club in New York and in 2000 earned the Club's prestigious



previous page, Art of Diplomacy, oil on canvas, 24" x 36"  
left, Enigma of Generations, oil on canvas, 48" x 36"

above, Europa, oil on canvas, 24" x 90"

billboard at 20 degrees below zero. It was so cold it froze the paint brush to the metal billboard." After serving 2 years in the artillery division, Michael relocated to Turkmenistan, where his true calling as a professional artist began to take shape.

"I worked in the theaters and created illustrations for books and magazines," he recalls. "When I painted billboards for movie theaters, the most successful and beautiful billboards someone stole at the night. When I was 24, I got an offer from the State Museum of Fine Arts in Ashgabat to do a solo exhibition, from which the museum bought 4 of my paintings. Recognition at this level very much inspired me." Michael graduated from the Art Academy in Ashgabat and returned to Russia full of dreams. Unfortunately, settling down in his homeland was not an option.

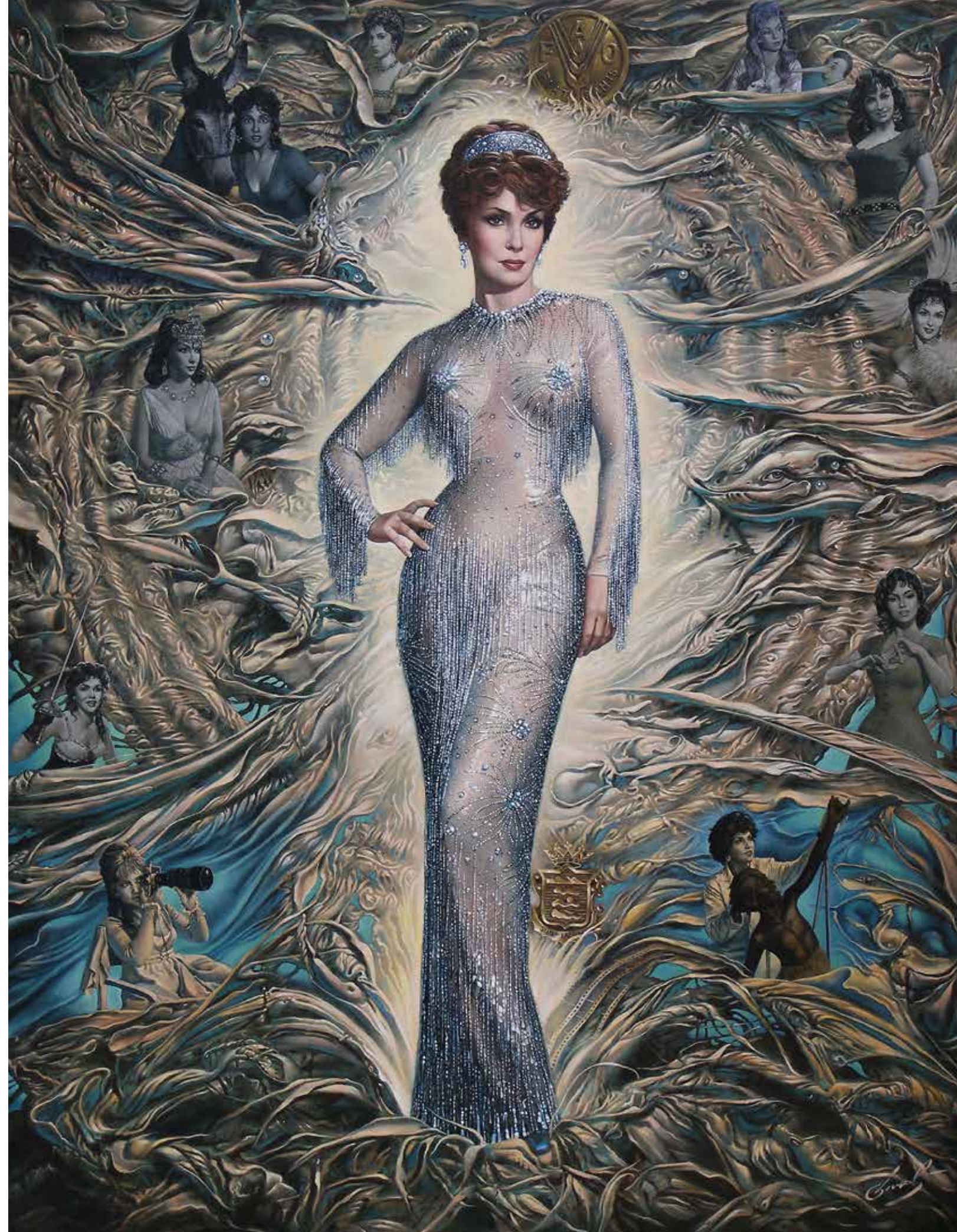
Exhibition Committee Award.

Since that time, his enchanting works have received rave reviews in galleries around the globe, through international projects such as ArtExpo and exhibitions organized by the visionary Society for Art of Imagination (London). Also included in his diverse portfolio, two exceptional art albums: "Lullabies" and "The Nature of the Absurdity." The year 2009 was a banner one in Michael's artistic journey. Not only did he and his wife Beatrice open their namesake company, Cheval Fine Art, but Michael also won Germany's "Palm Award" First Prize (gold medal). And he has been nominated again this year for the 2013 award.

Michael Cheval is now an artist in high demand, doing shows on the US East Coast from New York to Florida, and the West Coast from Los Angeles to



above, Guardian Angel, oil on canvas, 24" x 36"



right, Gina Lollobrigida, oil on canvas, 70" x 55"

San Francisco. In addition to land-based venues, his serendipitous works are commanding attention on the high seas in galleries aboard two of the world's largest cruise ship lines – the Princess and Royal Caribbean. Brilliant! Passengers puzzling the absurdity of goldfish jumping through playing cards; becoming one with 'the game' as they, themselves, seek to escape reality.

#### Love, Lullabies and Lollobrigida

Michael admits his unique artistic perspective has been shaped by the people he's encountered. "I have met good ones and bad ones. And they both had an impact on me as an artist and a person. Good and honest people gave me advice and examples to show the way in art. Bad and dishonest people have taught me not-less-important lessons, without which my career probably would not take place. But most of all I am grateful to my family. They taught me to listen and understand people, to see the beauty in completely ordinary things. From them I learned to delve into the meaning of things, to love music and poetry. They taught me how to love, and this quality is perhaps the most important thing in art. Also a huge impact on my life was meeting my wife. Beatrice believed in me, giving me strength and the 'wings behind my back'."

Growing up, Michael watched with the inquisitive mind of a child as his grandfather copied paintings by famous artists. "I saw all the stages of work on the classical paintings; European and Russian art ranging from Leonardo Da Vinci and ending by Gustav Klimt. All important schools of painting, all the great masters of the Renaissance and Baroque have been an example for me."

Studying the works of Dali, Magritte and Max Ernst, Michael realized that he too wanted to "talk" through his paintings, to broadcast ideas by providing a philosophy. "The most striking influences were technically virtuosic Dali and profound philosopher Magritte. These two artists represent for me one whole piece. Later, getting acquainted with the life of Picasso, I admired his great talent to turn his work into a commodity. So I made a painting "Lullaby of Uncle Magritte" where I gathered together at one canvas three artists that have shaped my life in art." Today, artists Sergei Aparin, Adam Scott Rote, Gil Bruvel, Tristan Schane, Odd Nordrum and Sorin impress Michael with their originality and technical skill.

Once in a lifetime, a dream commission comes along. For Michael, being asked to paint a portrait of the gorgeous Gina Lollobrigida was a surreal experience all its own. "Three times she came to my studio and we discussed the details of the portrait. Gina is a very interesting person and a



left, Time To Be A Queen, oil on canvas, 30" x 24"  
below, Stairway to Heaven, oil on canvas, 30" x 24"

above, Lullaby for Desdemona II, oil on canvas, 30" x 36"  
below, Tea For One II, oil on canvas, 30" x 24"





fascinating conversationalist. During that time, we became friends. Now, whenever she comes to New York, we meet, dine in restaurants. Last year my wife and I were honoured to be invited to her house in Rome. It was a great pleasure to visit her villa and enjoy authentic Italian food cooked personally by Gina Lollobrigida!"

Michael also admits to a very complicated relationship with the Russian government, declaring, "After I made two critical portraits of President Putin, I have difficulties to enter Russia."

says the most important thing is to be 'set up' to receive. Inspiration comes like a radio wave but you need to have an 'antenna.' Music most definitely fuels the muse. In his studio there are 7 guitars within reach – Michael loves to play when he takes a break. While painting, he listens to everything from classical to hard rock, depending on the stage of work. Heavy and fast at the beginning; closer to the end, soothing jazz or classical works by Chopin and Liszt.

A true art-aholic, Michael works even when



left, Mirror Asylum, oil on canvas, 30" x 24"



above, Nature of Absurdity (triptych), oil on canvas, 40" x 86"



#### The Studio Within

Over the years, Michael's studio space has gone from incredibly tiny (barely enough space for an easel, chair and small table) to huge – the size of a hangar – where he occupied a small corner with the same table, chair and easel. The remaining space was littered with canvases, boxes and what have you. "The studio had no effect on what I'm doing," says Michael. "I can find a comfort everywhere. Even now, making presentations in galleries and on cruise ships, I can quite happily work on my painting when dozens of people watch from behind me and ask questions. So I can say for sure, my studio is inside of me."

Ideas, on the other hand, are everywhere. Books, music, theater, cinema... a conversation with a stranger on a street or in a bus. Michael

eating or sleeping. "Someone said that the artist works when he's just looking out of the window. And it's true. You cannot turn off this 'machine' inside of me, this is my 'power plant.' I think if I turn it off, I'm going to die right away."

Not unlike Alice spiraling down the rabbit hole, Michael's paintings are an epic tumble through absurdity. The creations of a Renaissance master with a mischievous urge to invert reality, give it a shake and see what falls out. Viewers of his work are advised to be patient. "In my work are enough keys with which to find meaning. If you do not understand something, come back later. Read about surrealism and absurdity, watch movies of Bunuel, Fellini, Peter Greenaway. Then come and look at my work again. If you do not understand all the sooner, it does not matter, then it's not your art."

#### Performance Art

To a serious artist like Michael, tools of the trade deserve the utmost respect. "I like quality brushes, easels, canvas, oil, lacquer. Working with them, I feel physical pleasure, as a musician who picks up a Stradivarius violin."

While quite capable of working in pastel, gouache, watercolour, pen and ink, pencil and acrylic, Michael loves the infinite possibilities available with oils. He describes his technique as

Sometimes a painting is done like "one breath" in a few days. Others take a month or even years. The operation is similar to a theatrical performance, with Michael acting as director, costume designer, stage set designer, makeup artist and light engineer. "First I make a basic picture without small details. Details appear on the canvas. But even working on a canvas, I continue to make sketches. I almost never add random items that should not be in the composition. The



above, Bunfight Confidential, oil on canvas, 16" x 30"

"very simple, oil on canvas." Of course, it's anything but simple working in the techniques of old masters like Vermeer, Ter Borch, Lucas Cranach. Such a complex, multi-layered painting process requires perseverance and patience, even for an artist 'home-schooled' by a gifted grandfather. Michael has spent 20 years learning and practicing, and continues studying to this day. "It's a huge world of tremendous opportunities to create the illusion of reality on the canvas, to create it so the audience believe that it actually exists. I want the painting to be a kind of window into another world. But a viewer does not have to know the 'kitchen' of the artist. That must remain behind the scenes."

details in this picture are clues to the plot, clues to the viewer. So, the creative process is mixed with the mechanical. An interesting action, in which there is a flight of imagination and routine work. I get carried away, sometimes I work late, forget to eat and can not sleep. Completion of work is associated with two opposing feelings – joy and relief on the one hand, and sadness that the work is finished. It's like raising a child, which in the future will live his own life."

#### Absurd Awakening

Michael Cheval's paintings are cleverly conceived games of the imagination – all ties carefully



right, Imagine, oil on canvas, 30" x 24"





Love Is Blind II, oil on canvas, 30" x 24"



above, Nostalgia, oil on canvas, 18" x 30"

below, Rapunzel, oil on canvas, 24" x 30"





left, Pledge of Coexistence, 24" x 20"

above, Harbor of Hope, oil on canvas, 36" x 48"

chosen to construct a literary plot. For viewers, casual browsing becomes double-take, followed by intense scrutiny and an urge to linger. The pleasure of pondering 'whatever does it mean?' coupled with a feeling of confused well-being. We love what we're looking at, we're just not sure what we see.

Like his provocative surrealist predecessors, Cheval's paintings combine technical precision, subtlety, fantasy and extraordinary wit. They function like puzzles to be solved or codes to be broken, in order for their meaning to be revealed. There isn't one 'correct' or 'official' interpretation – each viewer is encouraged to arrive at a unique understanding of the 'absurd' art, shaped by his or her personal experiences, imagination and consciousness.

In the artist's words: "Absurdity" implies everything that lies outside of common rules

and boundaries. "Absurdism" is an attempt to understand our life the way it truly is. Without propaganda, ideology, politics and imposed tastes. Life in its pure state is beautiful, full of logic and meaning. But combined with the above, it is absurd, illogical. The majority of people became accustomed to such life and they do not notice this. That is why it is useful, once in a while, to turn everything upside down, in order to wake them.

For more insight into the magical art of Michael Cheval, contact the artist by email: [mkcheval@gmail.com](mailto:mkcheval@gmail.com), 201.773.4980 or visit [www.chevalfineart.com](http://www.chevalfineart.com).

Galleries representing Michael Cheval include:

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