

## Luba Lukova

*Luba Lukova is an artist and designer working in New York City. A native of Bulgaria, she studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Sofia. In 1991 she was invited to travel to Colorado where her work was on display at an international poster exhibition. Afterwards she stopped in New York and never returned home.*

*In her work Luba Lukova enjoys playing with metaphors transforming the human figure. This approach has gained her commissions from everything from the New York Times and Adobe Systems to the Archdiocese of Chicago. Her distinctive graphic art has been published in numerous national magazines and books. She has won many awards and in most recently her poster "Sudan" won the 2000 Icograda Excellence Award in Chaumont, France, and the gold medal at the International Poster Biennale in Mexico. Her posters are in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; Museum of Architecture and Design, Chicago; The Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Bibliotheque Nationale de France and Museum of Modern Art, Toyama, Japan.*

**Elizabeth Resnick:** You were born in Bulgaria. What do you remember about your early childhood there?

**Luba Lukova:** My grandmother was an artist. She encouraged me to study drawing when I was 5 years old. Even when I didn't want to draw, she would push me and make it look like play. When I was 7 years old I was enrolled in an after-school drawing program where the teacher introduced us to Picasso and Matisse and other western artists.

**E.R.:** Would exposure to European avant-garde art be considered unusual in a communist country?

**L.L.:** Yes it would. But perhaps this teacher was longing for some openness. He was expressing all these ideas to young children who barely understood anything. I remember the books he showed us were quite magical. I realized then I could not be anything else but an artist.

**E.R.:** Were your parents supportive of your idea to be an artist?

**L.L.:** My parents hoped I would be a mathematician. I was a good student and a good mathematician. But my mind was made up to be an artist and nothing could turn me in another direction. When it came time to apply to a university, I applied to the Academy of Fine Arts in Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria. I wasn't accepted, but I was accepted instead at the university to study engineering because of my high grades in mathematics. Engineering was a difficult program to be accepted in. In Bulgaria, when you are rejected from any school you can just apply the next year. You have to study in another university or work somewhere for 9 months. So I studied Engineering. The next year I applied again to the Academy of Fine Arts, and again I wasn't accepted.

**E.R.:** This second rejection must have been very disappointing for you?

**L.L.:** It was. I told my parents that I could not continue studying Engineering and Mathematics because it was making me crazy. But I knew that if I wanted to reapply to the Academy of Fine Art and I left

Engineering school, I would have to work somewhere for one year. My parents just couldn't understand my obsession with wanting to attend the Art Academy. They actually blamed my grandmother for instilling this obsession in me. When I left the engineering school, I was receiving really excellent grades in Mathematics and even won some prizes in student competitions.

**E.R.:** Where did you find work?

**L.L.:** My father, who was an engineer, had a friend who worked in a forklift manufacturing plant. At that time in Bulgaria every big industrial plant employed an artist who was responsible for the "propaganda". I was hired part-time to work in this factory while I prepared for my art exams. My parents were very worried by my decision to leave school and work in a forklift factory.

E.R.: What kind of "propaganda" did you do for the plant?

L.L.: My job was to stencil shipping addresses on to big wooden crates used to pack forklifts. In the communist union, each of the countries specialized in manufacturing different industrial equipment. Bulgaria was a manufacturer of forklifts. I worked there for 9 months.

E.R.: I hope you were finally accepted to the Art Academy after the third try.

L.L.: Yes I was, and I was accepted as number one. I finally became an art student and my hobby became my profession. I was extremely proud of myself that I overcame obstacles like my parents objections and the failing entrance exams to follow my heart.

E.R.: Who did you study with at the Art Academy?

L.L.: I spent 6 years studying with Alexander Poplilov. He was the biggest influence in my artistic practice. Besides being an artist, he had the gift of an actor. He knew how to present material to his students effectively. You just believed him. The fact that he was not a young man made him even more influential; in the way he spoke in a shaky voice, his gestures, he projected an image and the atmosphere around him was magnetic. I listened only to this professor because I felt he had something meaningful to say. He gave very harsh criticism although he was usually right in what he'd say. He was my strongest influence.

E.R.: Is he still alive today?

L.L.: Yes he is. Can you imagine he is almost 90 years old. He was the founder of the Bulgarian Graphic Design and Poster Art community. His main influences were from Germany. Artists like Kathe Kollwitz, Georg Gross, Bauhaus and art of the beginning of the century. When I started to work professionally I really needed his opinion and criticism. Now that I teach part-time I recall he used to say that "a teacher is a teacher and that's why you criticize always". He could make you feel that although your work was good, it could always be better. E.R.: In an earlier conversation we had you related the story of how you settled in a small town to work in a theater after you left the Art Academy.

L.L.: Even though I graduated the Art Academy with first place honors I wasn't allowed to work or stay in the capital city. You could not live or work in Sofia unless you were born there. This was the communist system. After you graduate the school administration alerts the police that you were not born in the capital. The police located my apartment and informed me I had two days to leave the city. What could I do? I just packed my stuff.

E.R.: Did you have a place to go?

L.L.: I had a musician friend who suggested I move to a small town where he and his wife were living. There was a theater in this town and I was hired to design their posters. Reaction to my work was good, as there were no other designers in this town. I was a design star and I spent three and a half years there.

E.R.: How did your work attract international attention?

L.L.: During the time I was designing theater posters, there was a union that still exists today, The Union of Bulgarian Artists, that was collecting design work from all over the country for poster biennials around the world. You could not submit your work directly to these biennials, you had to send it to the union. The union then made a preselection and they sent the work packaged with only their address on it. It was the bureaucracy and dictatorship. You didn't exist as an individual.

The union would send these packages often containing 150 posters to international competitions and very few of the posters would be accepted by the various biennials. My work was always accepted. But even though I was often the only artist from Bulgaria accepted, I was never allowed to attend the exhibitions or accept the awards in person. I remember when I was told my work was accepted in the Warsaw Biennial. I asked the union if I could see my work in the exhibition. "Oh you're too young to go, you've got to wait".

The union would send some APARATCHIK who would bring me back the exhibition catalogue. I hated them from the bottom of my heart. Even though I was stuck in a small provincial town I became well known in 1988 when Bulgaria sponsored an International biennial of theater posters and I won the Grand Prix. But despite getting much publicity nothing could be changed and I wasn't allowed to travel.

E.R.: It must be a very frustrating experience to be held captive in a small town.

L.L.: Absolutely. This little town was so small that when a soap opera was on TV, the theater canceled performances because no one would come. Public transportation would stop when there was an interesting movie on TV because the bus drivers would go home to watch the movie! I felt like I was in a cage. Only if you are really young and very energetic could a person endure. Many people were depressed. Many people just gave up and so many talented people developed mental problems. I'm lucky I only lived this for a few years. Can you imagine my parents generation? The communist regime lasted from 1944 until 1989, 45 years! Imagine your entire life could be controlled? In retrospect, I was lucky this situation ended but on the other hand I also feel fortunate to have witnessed this enormous injustice. You can't imagine how horrible it was. The people I worked with in the theater made jokes. Every production was a veiled parody of our situation. This gave us the power to survive and transform our angst into art.

E.R.: Can you describe the changes that occurred in 1989 in Bulgaria?

L.L.: There were all these changes in the air. When Gorbachev came to power in the Soviet Union a few years before, he made drastic transformations in the government. The Bulgarian communists were very scared that these changes would affect Bulgaria, and they did. It felt like a different wind was blowing from the Soviet Union and Bulgaria was so closely connected to the USSR. Communism collapsed.

E.R.: You were invited to send your work to the Colorado State Poster Invitational. How did this come about?

L.L.: In 1989 or 1990, there was a biennial in Brno and my work appeared with my own address. As a result I was invited by Colorado State to submit my work. Also in that year Bulgarians were given international passports which allowed us to travel abroad. This gave me the opportunity to travel to the U.S. and see my work displayed for the first time.

E.R.: What was involved in organizing your trip to see your work in the United States? Did you speak English?

L.L.: A little bit. I used to speak very good German so it was easy for me to learn English because there are a lot of similarities. But I had no money to go because my salary in Bulgaria was equal to \$20 or \$30 a month. What could I do with this salary, nothing! When I told my parents about my planned trip my father said "Oh my god, another adventure, where is she going? An artist, what is that?" He thought I was totally crazy. But my mother, who is a practical woman told my father "she must go, she

has never been to see her work, she must go." In order to get the money to go my mother called some well off relatives in Switzerland and they agreed to buy the plane ticket and send me \$200 in spending money.

E.R.: Did you plan to return to Bulgaria or take the opportunity to stay in the U.S.?

L.L.: The idea was that I would be returning to Bulgaria. This relative said to my parents "It is impossible for a single girl to go alone and stay in a foreign country. She must come back, it is very dangerous to be there alone." Everybody was expecting me to be coming back and I had no money except for this \$200.

E.R.: But you did stay.

L.L.: I had a two-day layover in New York City on the way back. My Swiss relative said she had a friend who lived in New York City and she would fax her and let her know I was coming. I didn't know who this woman was but when I arrived in New York City from Colorado I called her as instructed and the woman said "Oh yes I got a fax but I'm going to Hong Kong and I have no way of accommodating you. Do you have enough money to go to a hotel? So I told her "No I have only about \$100 left." She told me about a Turkish person who was from Bulgaria who owned a laundry on 83rd Street and that there were many Bulgarians who worked for him. She thought he might be able to help me. I remember taking a cab from the airport and meeting this woman at her apartment. She was packing for her trip. She was a designer of women's handbags, and was leaving for Hong Kong the next day to visit the factory.

She took me down to the laundry on the corner and introduced me to the owner. The owner said I could stay and help out in the laundry and I told him I only wanted to stay few days to have the opportunity to look around New York City. He thought I should stay in New York and see if I could find work. How, where, what? I don't know anything I told him. I asked him how I could find work. He said to check the New York Times as they have listings for jobs. That's how I got the paper and saw the drawings. I said to him, "listen, maybe I could work for the New York Times, they do drawings." "No, forget about that, that's not for you," he said. But I insisted, so he called the New York Times and they referred him to this person and that person. He found out how to submit my work to the art department. I had only 10 slides from Bulgaria and a current GRAPHIS Poster Annual book which had 4 of my posters in it. I left it the plastic bag with GRAPHIS and 10 slides in it at the reception and I was told to come back in two days to pick up my stuff. When I returned, the receptionist told me That the art director Janet Froelich wanted to see me. She was very friendly. I told her I was in New York for a week or two, and I just thought maybe...and then she said that I should see Steven Heller. After I met with him, he assigned 3 drawings all for one issue. Imagine in the laundry, the Turkish guy couldn't believe that I had drawings published in the paper! I was living in a small room in laundry at that time. I worked like this for a couple of months.

E.R.: Are you still doing drawings for the New York Times?

L.L.: Yes, I do illustrations for the OP-ED page. I like the intensity and fast thinking required to do newspaper. But I also like working on books and large installations where you can show a complete-vision, or have a long story to tell. And I love the posters. They have a secondary life, it is something that I can make exhibitions with, it's more art, it's not disposable.

E.R.: What do you see for yourself in the future?

L.L.: I like to see my images in a larger scale. I work at the moment on a design for a glass wall for a new church in Los Angeles. Also I enjoy creating installations with my prints. But no matter the size of the piece or the cost of the materials, the most important things for me are the concept, the message and the feeling. Two recent projects include the Alternative Pick book which I called *Human* and my exhibit at the Massachusetts College of Art *Humanizing Design*. I feel that is what is missing in design today is humanness. We speak with all these big words about business, clients, technology, but we forget the simple things. We forget that we are the same vulnerable human beings, moved by the same passions and ambitions as centuries ago. On a personal note I miss my family in Bulgaria. Phone contact is exhausting for all of us.

E.R.: Do you see yourself moving back to Bulgaria?

L.L.: After you live for such a long time in a different place, you get attached to the new place, too. You lose a lot of your contacts when you are not physically there. But I know that if I go back to Bulgaria I will find good friends and good souls.

E.R.: You can work from anywhere in the world now that you are well known.

L.L.: I can. But, it will be difficult to keep that kind of activity because of the communication. From here it is easy to communicate with Bulgaria, but from Bulgaria it is difficult to communicate with the rest of the world. I don't know if I ready for this. I would prefer to work as a bridge between here and there, especially for the younger people, because I believe there is hope in Eastern Europe, and the alternate doesn't have to be to leave the country to be able to grow in your profession. You could do a lot of things there. It's still Europe. Design and art in general follows the economy, and when the economy suffers so much the artists really struggle. Unfortunately I feel it will be another ten years before we can speak about openness there and some oxygen for the arts.

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