ALMINE RECH

Francesco Vezzoli
OLGA FOREVER!

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A dancer with the Ballets Russes before becoming Picasso's wife, Olga Khokhlova also loved to do embroidery. This was a crucial element for Francesco Vezzoli who, from the beginning, has devoted himself to the lives of women icons who expressed their suffering through the solipsistic practice of embroidery. The tears which the artist has been embroidering obsessively on these faces over the past 15 years represent the other side of glamour.

"Olga weeps for all the ballets she never danced out of love for Picasso", explains Francesco Vezzoli, who has now turned his attention to a legendary love story that began in early 1917. Picasso had travelled to Rome with Jean Cocteau, who introduced him to the Russian impresario Sergei Diaghilev and his Ballets Russes. It is on this occasion that Picasso met, and fell in love with, Olga Khokhlova, one of the company's dancers. On 18 May of that same year, Diaghilev's new show, *Parade*, premiered in Paris, with costumes and sets designed by Picasso, the libretto by Cocteau and music by Erik Satie.

This was the last ballet Olga danced in before leaving the company for Picasso. On 12 July 1918, they got married in a Russian Orthodox church on Rue Daru in Paris, where Cocteau, Guillaume Apollinaire, Max Jacob and Valerian Svetlov acted as their witnesses.

Their love for one another is captured both in photographs of everyday life, but also in Picasso's masterpieces, such as *Portrait of Olga in an Armchair* (Montrouge, autumn 1917), a painting which Vezzoli is particularly fond of and in which Picasso depicts Olga in a Spanish dress, seated on an armchair which she herself had embroidered.

Exceptionally, and thanks to the Fundación Almine y Bernard Ruiz-Picasso para el Arte, Francesco Vezzoli has had access to these thousands of family snapshots kept in the Olga Ruiz-Picasso Archives, which are jointly managed by the children of Paul, the son of Olga and Pablo Ruiz-Picasso. Drawing on these precious yet until now inaccessible archives, the Italian artist has selected 19 black-and-white portraits of Olga in chronological order – as he had done, for instance, for La Vie en Rose, a series of 19 embroideries portraying Edith Piaf between childhood and old age.

Vezzoli has used the same method to produce oil paintings inspired directly by the photos of Olga at different ages, before rearranging them, using collages and embroideries. Various scenes and characters from the Ballets Russes are depicted in her tears, as are cubist motifs. This is where the past and present, the regrets and longings of Olga Khokhlova -Picasso come together.

Painting and collage are techniques of Picasso's that Vezzoli uses to put Olga back in the limelight. He thus declares his admiration for this woman who was a member of the Ballets Russes, one of the twentieth-century's major artistic experiments and one that has come to occupy a lot of room in the artist's work. Indeed, his fascination with the company led him to devote a performance to them in 2009 on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Los Angeles. Inspired by his hero Diaghilev, Vezzoli's *Ballets Russes Italian Style* (*The Shortest Musical You Will Never See Again*) brought together Lady Gaga, Miuccia Prada, Baz Luhrmann, Frank Gehry, Damien Hirst and the Bolshoi Ballet.

"*OLGA FOREVER!* is a biography", explains Francesco Vezzoli. "Through this work I am paying homage to Olga, who embodies my sensitivity and obsessions".