

THE ROMANCE OF YELENA YEMCHUK

HAVING SUCCEEDED AS A PAINTER AND A DIRECTOR OF MUSIC VIDEOS, SHE'S NOW CHANNELING HER STORYTELLING INTO FASHION SPREADS FOR MAGAZINES AND ADS. BY SARAH COLEMAN

YELENA YEMCHUK COULD BE CALLED the accidental fashion photographer. At 35, the Ukrainian-born shooter has had a remarkably eclectic career path, with notable successes as a painter, documentary photographer and director of music videos. Her current focus began in 2001, when a friend persuaded her to try a fashion shoot for fun. Since then, Yemchuk has contributed to Italian and Japanese *Vogue*, the *New Yorker* and *W*, and has shot advertising campaigns for Kenzo, Cacharel and Dries Van Noten. If she's hit the A-list in record time, she says, it's probably because she brings something different to the table: her dreamy work offers a marked contrast to the slick, airbrushed look that's characterized recent fashion imagery. "People who hire me know I'm not just interested in pretty dresses," she says. "They want me to tell some kind of story."

Take the shoot she did in spring 2005 for the New York-based lifestyle magazine *Absolute*, called "Berlin Diaries." A model, dressed in retro 1950s clothing, moves through a landscape of equally retro concrete buildings. Gliding down a staircase or waiting pensively behind a door, the woman could be a heroine from a Hitchcock movie, symbolically trapped in the city's grids and diagonals. "I'd never been to Berlin, and I was so excited by the architecture there," Yemchuk says. "I decided that's what I wanted to focus on."

"There's something intensely cinematic about her pictures," says Andy Whalen, managing editor for Japanese *Vogue*. "She's a genius at taking a story about red dresses and building a narrative, creating a woman, telling a story. It's always chic and sophisticated, mixed with some mystery and passion, very real and believable." Given her gift for storytelling, it comes as no surprise that some of Yemchuk's biggest influences are from movies—her favorites of all time being the visually sensuous, lyri-

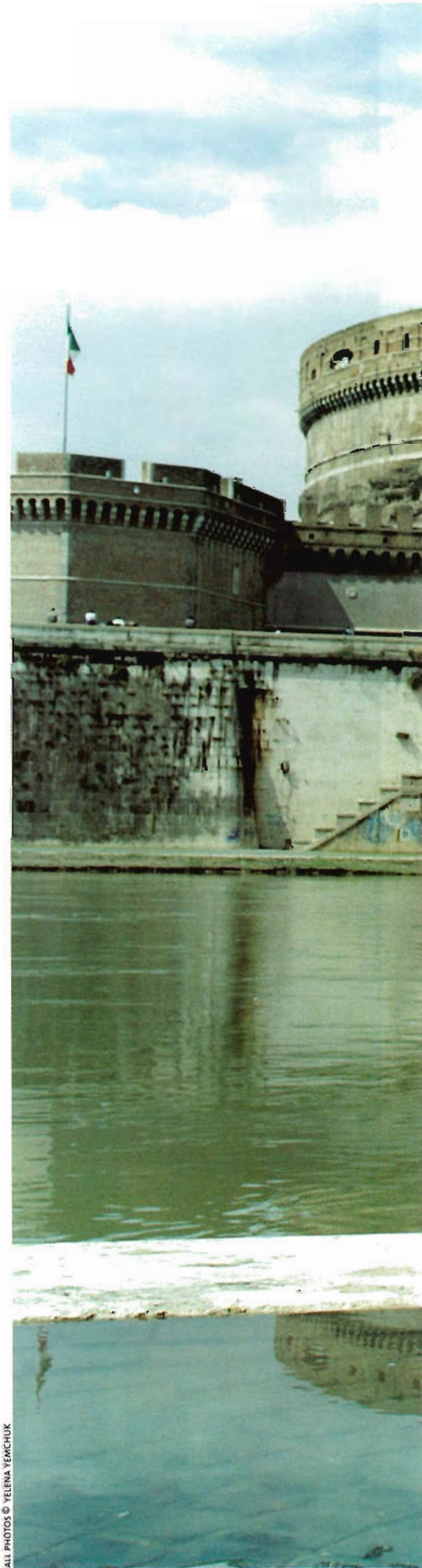


COURTESY YELENA YEMCHUK

cal films of Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky.

Yemchuk's life story has its own elements of romance and mystery. For starters, there's the marriage of Ukrainian and American cultures—one full of earthy folk tales and Communist severity, the other bursting with shiny pop icons and capitalist excess. Born in Kiev, the only child of an athlete and a teacher, she came to the United States with her parents when she was 11. She couldn't speak the language, but rather than being alienated, she picked up a 35mm camera and started shooting what she calls "weird Eighties snapshots" of her schoolmates. Soon, she was practicing for her future career by shooting for the school yearbook.

After attending Parsons School of Design in New York and the Art Center in Pasadena, California, Yemchuk didn't know exactly what direction she wanted her photography to take. But luck was on her side: an agent who liked her work sent her book to Virgin Records, where she was picked to shoot publicity photos for the up-and-coming alt-rock band The Smashing Pumpkins. The job proved fruit-



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Right: An image from a story for Japanese *Vogue*, taken across from the Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome. Above: Yelena Yemchuk.



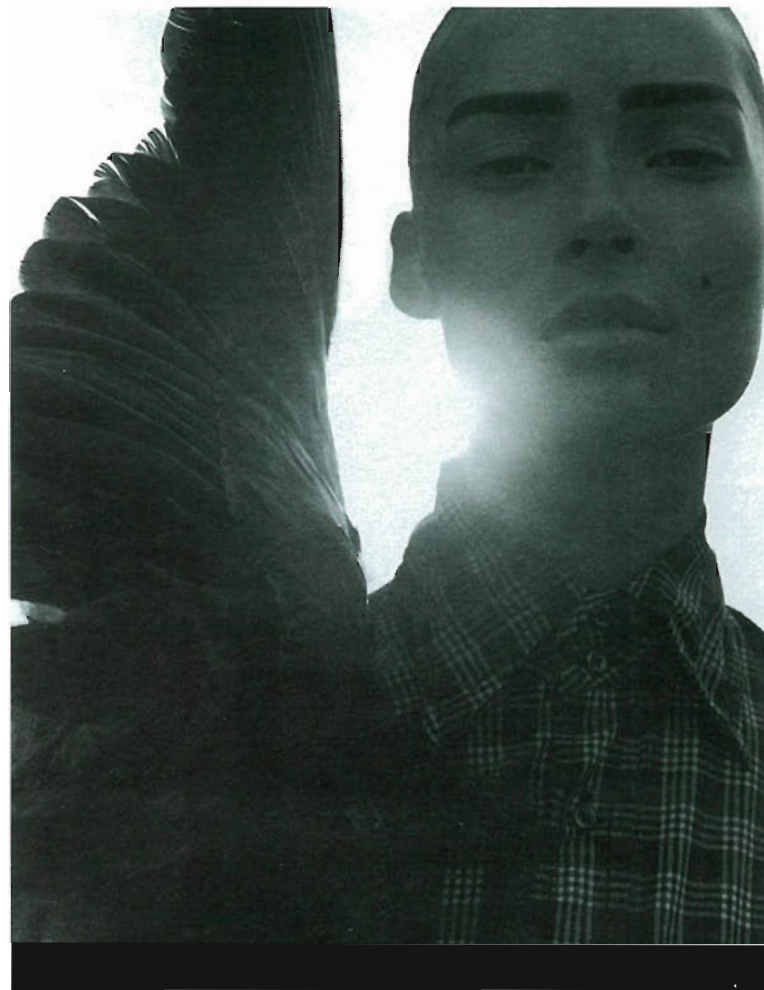
FOCUS ON FASHION + PORTRAITURE

ful in more ways than one: Yemchuk became romantically involved with lead singer Billy Corgan and worked on all kinds of projects for the band, from photographing album covers to directing the acclaimed 1996 stop-motion video "Thirty-Three." For several years, she traveled the globe with Corgan and the band, enjoying all the privileges that come with international fame and success.

But in 1998, when internal fighting was beginning to destroy the band and her relationship with Corgan, Yemchuk found herself longing for something simpler. She went back to the Ukraine and spent the next four years going to her old neighborhoods, using her Leica to document characters and stories she remembered from childhood. It was an interesting moment in the Ukraine, she says: "People were starting to open up, they'd talk to me and give me food. I was the girl with the camera."

Fashion photography beckoned in 2001, when Yemchuk, fresh from the Ukraine, was looking for more commercial work. Her friend, stylist Tabitha Simmons, suggested that the two do a fashion shoot for *Dazed and Confused*, and Yemchuk jumped at the chance. The quirky, unconventional shoot taken on Yemchuk's 8 x 10 Deardorff camera, using Polaroid film, featured shots of a model in a black-and-white striped dress, in motion. "Movement pictures on a large-format camera—what was I thinking?" she muses now. But the 10-page story piqued the interest of several agents, and led to more jobs from fashion editors. "They see me and think, 'she's an art photographer doing fashion,' so they cut me a bit more slack," she says.

A breakthrough job came in 2003, when Yemchuk got the chance to work with Laurie Goldstein, a stylist known for her work with Steven Meisel and Annie Leibovitz. "A woman working at Japanese *Vogue* sent my book to her and she loved it," Yemchuk recalls. The two conceived a shoot inspired by



Left: An image shot by Yemchuk for Japanese *Vogue*.

Above: From a story for *V* magazine.

1930s Czech collages in which, says Yemchuk, "the woman's head would always be replaced by something—a sea shell, insect or flower." To emulate the look, she and Goldstein obscured the model's face with a wig, mask or butterfly and posed her, in corsets and suspender belts, against giant photocopies of plants. The effect is whimsical and surreal, as though a wax doll were acting out secret desires.

"Everything Laurie put on the model was an inspiration," Yemchuk remembers. The shoot took place in a single day at New York's Industria Superstudio, and the whole experience gave her a new enthusiasm for fashion work. "You rarely get to do those kinds of projects and get them published. I remember thinking, 'Wow, I'm working with someone really cool. So I'm doing fashion now: I'm a fashion photographer.'" She sounds a little tentative, as though she's still trying to convince herself.

Yemchuk doesn't fit the stereotype of the 21st-century fashion photographer. For one thing, there doesn't seem to be an arrogant or vain bone in her body. Sitting at an outdoor table at a café in downtown Manhattan, dressed elegantly in black without makeup or jewelry, she comes across as thoughtful, intellectual, a bit too shy to be truly comfortable in the fashion world (though paparazzi shots of her with Corgan suggest she might have a wilder side).

Then of course, she's still shooting almost exclusively in film, mostly on her Mamiya RZ 67, with occasional work on the Deardorff. "I don't like a very clean, crisp, retouched image, and I just love the way film looks," she says. Though she acknowledges that she might lose out on certain "big" jobs because she's not shooting digitally, she doesn't plan to make the switch anytime soon.

Luckily for Yemchuk, the fashion industry is experiencing a moment that's in tune with her style. Moving away from its obsession with chiseled perfection, the industry is moving toward a more romantic, personal mood, which meshes perfectly with Yemchuk's artistic sensibility.



FOCUS ON FASHION + PORTRAITURE

When Yemchuk went to Vietnam to shoot Kenzo's current advertising campaign, which features models in narrow bamboo boats on a calm river, she arrived after a 36-hour trip from Belize with one thing on her mind: bird flu. "It was the height of the epidemic. Every paper I'd been reading on the plane had headlines about it, then we arrived at the river and the first thing I saw were wild ducks." The shoot was challenging in other ways too, she says: "I was in a boat, the model was in a boat; I'd get the perfect composition and then the boat would start moving."

None of this is evident in the images, which are languid and peaceful, the color palette a soothing mixture of earth tones. For the shoot, Yemchuk used her Mamiya RZ 67 and NC 400 film with available light, going for substance over style. "It's the way I shoot," she says. "In advertising work, there's a lot of creative compromise, but with Kenzo, I don't feel like I'm doing ad work. Nobody's standing behind me saying, 'We can't see that button on the dress.' They're completely respectful—they're going for the image first."

Though her schedule is pretty busy these days, Yemchuk continues to go back each year to the Ukraine to shoot personal work. She's particularly excited about a recent weeklong project she did at Gitro Park, Kiev's equivalent of Coney Island. "It was a Communist paradise in the 1970s, and now it's



Folklore and fantasy. Above: A recent photo from Yemchuk's portfolio. Left: An image, taken in St. Petersburg, Russia, as part of a story for Japanese *Vogue*.



changing so much," she says. "In a few years, it will be all private clubs and fancy stores." Eventually, she says, she'd like to do a book of the images.

And then there's her painting, which is something altogether different. Three years ago, she was staying at a friend's house in Tuscany and, feeling bored, went out to buy some acrylic paints and paper. The paintings she made featured pairs of odd little animals acting out aggressive rituals. "They're sort of about relationships and breakups, filtered through old Ukrainian folk tales," says Yemchuk. In 2004, a show of the paintings at the Dactyl gallery in New York was hugely successful: 75 percent of the work sold.

It's clear that Yemchuk is interested in work that stretches her artistically, and, although she's enjoying her current success, that she doesn't live and breathe for fashion. She recently started working on a new series of paintings, in which groups of humanoid animals act out fantastical stories, and she still wants to make films.

But her first love will always be photography. "I can't imagine not taking photographs," she says. Even when sleeping, she's making images in her dreams. "I'll be in the middle of a place where there's lots of activity, like a circus, and wherever I look around, there are fantastic photographs waiting to be taken," she says, a happy sigh escaping her lips. "Those are the best dreams ever." □