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VISUAL ARTS

The artist hitting her stride at 82

Despite earlier years taken up by domestic work, Maro Gorky's creative vision has been bold and constant. **Florence Hallett** sees a retrospective of a painter finally getting recognition - and still finding joy in life and art



Iwish I'd done a bit more painting and a little less housework", says Maro Gorky as she surveys her career retrospective, currently on show at London's Saatchi Gallery.

The 20 large canvases are about evenly divided between portraits and landscapes, all of them distinctive for their bold use of colour and line, dancing in happily decorative fashion across

the painted boards. The earliest is dated 1980 and the most recent - so recent, in fact, that the paint is barely dry - are a pair titled *Autumn Vines* and *Spring Vines* (2025): vibrating distillations of colour and form inspired by the Tuscan landscape that, along with family and friends, has been her most constant subject.

At 82, Gorky is well placed to assess the shape of her career, which over the past 45 years has

included a string of international exhibitions and inclusion in important collections such as those of Jacob Rothschild, Bernardo Bertolucci and Gilbert de Botton.

Since her 80th birthday she has come to greater prominence, with public and private collections looking to acquire her work - which is finding recognition among a new generation of curators. Now, her life and work is being celebrated not just in this

selection of oil paintings, but in a companion exhibition of works on paper at Long & Ryle Gallery, a stone's throw from Tate Britain.

Looking back, Gorky might justifiably be struck by the constancy of her vision over the decades, through which she has weathered the major, antithetical movements of minimalism and conceptual art.

Today, the "thread of colour" of the exhibition's title remains as persistent and rapturous as ever

- even while Gorky's expression grows bolder, her shapes simple and emphatic.

Though wry in part, her remark about housework will strike a chord with many women, for whom child-rearing and associated domestic duties present an obstacle to creative life. For Gorky, the birth of her two daughters in the 1970s necessitated a hiatus of at least a decade when, she has said, "my paintings were few, distant and floral", her artistic talents diverted into making clothes and toys for her children. She was always an artist, though: born in New York in 1943, Gorky's earliest memories are of spirals of wood falling from a pencil sharpener, and hearts and diamonds and clover shapes cut from coloured paper. These are echoed now in the springing curls and ample forms of rampant nature presented in the *Vines* paintings.

The eldest daughter of the Armenian-American painter Arshile Gorky (c.1904-1948), Maro says in a film made for the exhibition by her daughter, Cosima Spender, that "I decided to be a painter early on to please my father".

Arshile Gorky's early biography is somewhat hazy, but he arrived in the United States in 1920 as a refugee from the Armenian genocide. By the time of his premature death, by suicide, he was one of the most influential figures on the New York scene and a mentor to Willem de Kooning and Mark Rothko.

Despite the early loss of her father when she was five, his influence was evidently immense, not least as "a great painter who did a lot of housework". While her mother, the American Agnes Magruder, came from a naval family too grand to care much about chores, her father's origins as an Armenian peasant made him "anal about cleanliness", says Gorky inside the gallery.

"He used to scrub his studio floor before painting. Everything was spotlessly clean, scrubbed and scrubbed. It didn't do him any good, because he killed himself - but he had a very clean floor."

Maro Gorky's paintings - which, like the woman herself, are direct and to the point - are a record of how she has felt and seen things,

and make clear her continued joy in life and work. The pleasure of a sweeping line, continuing until the brush runs dry, is one we can experience with her - most easily in smaller works, such as the curving leaf blade in *Autumn Flowerbed* (2013). *Spring* (2014), with its extravagantly luscious colour combinations, captures the fleeting intensity of blossom and green shoots in sunshine.

She achieves something similar, if melancholy, in the earliest painting of the exhibition: a double portrait of her friend Emanuela Stucchi with her boyfriend - "a complete cad" who left her by fax soon after the portrait was painted. Evocatively titled *The Last Act* (1980), the painting is disarmingly clairvoyant: Emanuela gazes into the distance, dreaming of a future life never to be, and on her wrist a snake bracelet points directly to "the cad". He looks directly at us in an unwelcome moment of complicity - only Emanuela remains ignorant of what is about to happen.

Perhaps it is her ability to see and preserve moments that allows Gorky to be sanguine about the passage of time. Though she can no longer paint for eight hours at a stretch, she seems remarkably untroubled by age, continuing to paint every day, and on a large scale.

"We don't know what happens after we die - it's probably the big exam," she says. "Maybe we disintegrate, and become molecules again. Who knows - I don't believe energy is lost. It's pretty exciting, if you can avoid too much pain."

After her father's death in 1948, the family moved to Europe. Gorky went to schools in France, America, Italy and Spain, and eventually to the French Lycée in London.

She met her husband, the sculptor Matthew Spender, when they were teenagers; he is the son of the late poet Stephen Spender,

"We don't know what happens after we die... It's pretty exciting, if you can avoid too much pain"



Earthly pleasures
Gorky plays with natural forms in the new paintings 'Spring Vines' and 'Autumn Vines', left, and 1980 work 'The Last Act', below
LONG & RYLE



and their parents mixed in the same bohemian circles. Their shared experience of this strange and gilded world bound them together. "We understood each other," says Gorky.

She went to the Slade School of Art for five years, graduating in 1965. Spender was allowed to hang around and take occasional classes: though never officially a student, he was still taken more seriously than Gorky by her tutor, Thomas Monnington - an "old fuddy duddy" who asked her why she bothered painting when she could become a nurse instead. "They were such male chauvinist pigs in those days," she says.

The exception was the figurative painter Frank Auerbach, her teacher for two or three years and by far the best she had. To begin with, she tried to paint like him, imitating his characteristic accretions of paint until he told her to stop, encouraging her to pursue her natural affinity with colour. Gorky's work might have reminded Auerbach of his own teacher, the pioneering modernist David Bomberg, whose mastery of colour as form peaked in his late portraits and landscapes.

Though Gorky has travelled widely, the Tuscan landscape is her central, recurring subject, painted from every window of the

farmhouse she has shared with Spender since 1968. It is tempting to think that the shifts she charts are those of nature cycling through the seasons, but Gorky points out that the landscape has changed considerably since she and her husband arrived. It underwent a brutal transformation as terraced smallholdings were bulldozed to make vast industrial vineyards.

Instead of lamenting the lost past, she chooses to see these changes as the latest shift in a landscape shaped by farmers over hundreds, even thousands, of years. Traces of the Etruscans, the ancient civilisation indigenous to central Italy - especially Tuscany, parts of Umbria and Lazio - between the 9th and 1st centuries BC, surface in her paintings as much as in the landscape itself. Her "map" of the ancient spa town Saturnia is a curious fusion across time, as cultivated fields radiate like flower petals around the extinct volcano.

In portraits of her pregnant daughters, vigorous lines and powerful animation evocative of Etruscan art give the women a primal connection to the landscape, but also, crucially, to Gorky herself. As the daughter of a painter, with a mother who loved the company of artists, there were plenty of interesting visitors to the family home, and her friends, relations and acquaintances make a catalogue of 20th-century bohemian. One of Gorky's favourites was Francis Bacon ("He was adorable"), who said she looked 2,000 years old, her dark eyes and strong features reminding him of "a Minoan fresco".

There's a peacefulness that comes from this sense of history as a steady backdrop to the small scale of daily life, which for Gorky begins afresh each day. "We always tidy up before going to bed: dishes, art, clean table, everything - then it's a fresh start in the morning."

'Maro Gorky: The Thread of Colour' is at the Saatchi Gallery in London until 8 June, with a pause from 13-23 May (saatchigallery.com). The supporting exhibition, 'Maps of Feelings', is at Long & Ryle until 16 May (longandryle.com)

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18 APRIL 2025

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