

MARO GORKY prefers life in the hills of Tuscany to the noise and chaos of the Capital, although her London home is in fact a quiet garden square just north of Hyde Park. In Italy, Maro and her husband, **Matthew Spender**, can work in splendid isolation on their painting and sculpture, and Spender can get on with his literary works unimpeded. They have been together for over 50 years, sharing a similar background of the intellectual privilege (some might say curse) of the famous parent syndrome. In Maro's case, her fate was to be the daughter of one of Abstract Expressionism's most complicated – and tragic – luminaries, **Arshile Gorky**.

The extraordinary childhood of Maro and her sister **Natasha** recently came to notice by way of a fascinating familial film documentary, made by her daughter **Cosima**⁽¹⁾. Whereas tracing their early years and the run up to Arshile's suicide⁽²⁾ proved emotionally exacting for her sister, Maro appeared much more sanguine about the realities of life with a father she now thinks had clear symptoms of madness.

'I'm the clown of the family, I make people laugh. Appearing in Cosima's film was no problem for me. I'm optimistic, it's my nature. That's why my husband has been with me for 51 years, because he is rather gloomy and tormented himself. My sister Natasha is a retiring violet – she has been squashed by the family tragedies and so is very involved with Buddhism today. I'm more of a transcendental pantheist...'

Although there seems to be a lot of documentary footage of Arshile Gorky himself in the movie this is, in fact, simply the result of clever editing:

'...in fact there was only four minutes cine film of my father at home. But there was a very good feature article in *Life* about the Sherman house with still photographs. I actually prefer the stills.

'He *wanted* to me to be a painter. I would have liked to have been a doctor but I didn't read until I was seven because my father didn't believe in formal schooling. And I was a dutiful elder daughter. My mother [**Agnes 'Mougouch' Magruder**, later Gorky] was much more conventional and when she later married an upright Bostonian, he immediately put us into school. She's 91 now and has got lung cancer following a lifetime of rolling her own cigarettes – she does it all through the film if you notice.

'She was upper middle class and she could not take the reality of bohemian life. It was simply too hard for her. She never went to the Cedar Bar. **Willem de Kooning** told us he was jealous when Gorky married my mother because she stopped him seeing his old buddies (even though it was de Kooning who introduced them). She preferred people

of her own background type, what de Kooning called "those Connecticut Puerto Ricans". Both Matthew and I knew so many people because of our parents. I remember **Arthur Koestler** hopping around our drawing room. I met Matthew when I was 18 and he was 16. I think our mothers were similar insofar as they both married highly creative people but were not so themselves. Although Matthew's mother,



▲ Sarah Anne Johnson in home space



▲ Sarah Anne Johnson in home space

RHYTHMS OF TIME

Maro Gorky has been fearless in her pursuit of Art, Spirituality and Domination over a painful legacy.

TEXT: MIKE VON JOEL | PORTRAIT: ED SYKES

Natasha Spender, was, in fact, a concert pianist at one point. All our friends were in the same situation, **Georgina** [Barker] and **Bimba** [MacNeice] and **Moggy** [Empson]. It was a sort of parallel universe. We were privileged in one way – we were passing out peanuts to **Freddie Ayers** and to a room full of famous people. I went to the *Lycée Français* in London and then the *Slade School of Art*.'

For over 40 years Maro has been renovating a house in Tuscany, now a much loved family home reminiscent of **Charleston Farmhouse**, the East Sussex retreat of the

Bloomsbury Group. It is inspirational and offers the spiritual solitude she demands: 'There is immense value in painting. It is mystical and magical. I get a funny tingling feeling in the palm of my hands when I look at raw materials. I do make portraits but they don't sell. A lot of my landscapes are informed by our house in Tuscany – we have been there since 1968 – it is 500 metres above sea level. Mathew



▲ Sarah Anne Johnson in home space

has made all the furniture and I painted the genuine frescos. Every three years I exhibit with **Long & Ryle** and did have a show in New York recently with **Salander-O'Reilly Galleries** – where I got a very good review by **Roberta Smith** in the *New York Times*...'

By an unfortunate matter of timing, Maro Gorky became involved in a cause célèbre in New York's art world. Following protracted litigation by collectors and artists, **Laurence Salander** pled guilty to 29 felony counts of grand larceny and on 3 August 2010, was sentenced to 6 to 18

years in prison. In 2003, the **Salander-O'Reilly Galleries** had reportedly been described as 'the best gallery in the world' by a **Robb Report**.

'...Unfortunately the man, **Salander**, was a crook and I was defrauded. Then when I had a show in Los Angeles, it was a success but the woman had a brain tumour and her husband claimed to know nothing about my work! Artists like me simply do not go to lawyers and sue people as a rule.

'**Roberta Smith** did say my portraits were like **Tamara de Lempicka**. Unfair! Because my daughter **Cosima** actually looks like a **Lempicka**. Women painters do not have an easy ride. My father thought **Lee Krasner** was a really good artist, but of course she was the wife of 'Mr Famous' and devoted herself to supporting **Jackson Pollock's** career.

'Being old is rather cosy. We are just the froth on a cappuccino. Experience must count for something? The older you get, the more people take you seriously; they think you keep doing the same picture which, of course, I do not! I do *serials* when I yearn for a certain colour. I hate doing commissions and hate working towards an exhibition. I understand the world through my painting and I would like to communicate what I feel about my life and experience to other people through painting. It's a form of prayer. I do lead a pretty solitary life and maybe that's because my ancestors were at a monastery in Van in Armenia.

'A few critics think my father is hot but the wider world doesn't know much about him. Did you know he hero-worshipped **Ingres**? Financially, I am very lucky – thanks to the sufferings of my father. And maybe one day I'll be able to support myself through my own work...'



▲ Sarah Anne Johnson a debilitating automobile accident, and marital troubles led the depressed Ar

NOTES

1. *Without Gorky*. A film written and produced by **Cosima Spender** and **Valerio Bonelli**

2. A fire in his studio, a painful operation for rectal cancer, a debilitating automobile accident, and marital troubles led the depressed **Arshile Gorky** to commit suicide on 21 July 1948 at **Sherman, Connecticut**.

Long & Ryle London Art Fair Islington Stand 18 16-20 January 2013

'Her stained-glass colour, crisp shapes and compositional majesty instil her syntheses of previous art with the force of an individual intently focused personality. You can't ask much more of art.'

ROBERTA SMITH *New York Times*

