

## About Face

By Mark Horiuchi

Walking into the room that contains Valentin Popov's *FACE* exhibit is an awe-inspiring experience. Portraits of people who have "touched the artist's life in various ways" cover the walls from floor to ceiling, three paintings deep and eighteen across. The effect is pure sensory overload. These oversized faces capture a range of moods, personalities, and feelings, evoked through certain expressions, colors, backgrounds, and objects. Each painting frames the subject through the lens of the Ukrainian-born, Oakland-based artist's life and brilliantly encapsulates their relationship with the artist. Despite being so overwhelmingly large-than-life, *Face* is a very personal, intimate experience.

The details of the portraits are what really make them exceptional. On some portraits Popov has written words and fragments of sentences over the painting. Some fragments include "true love," "where there," and "healing." Only when viewing the painting of the Dalai Lama do these fragments come into focus. "True healing happens where there is true love" is scrawled over the painting as the Dalai Lama looks off into the distance. One can only think that this quote describes the relationship between Popov and the people he has painted. Some of the people portrayed also have personal effects with them. Perhaps the most striking example of this is the painting that features a graying man looking very seriously at a skull. The painting evokes Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and one can only wonder how the tragic play factors into the subject's relationship with Popov. As they say, God is in the details.

But the paintings that truly caught my imagination were on the wall opposite the portraits. These three paintings, featuring what appear to be businesspeople in pools of water, are so full of mystery and intrigue that I plunged right into them, only resurfacing hours later. The first painting in the series, simply titled "Sun," features a crisply dressed woman floating in water. Her eyes squint up at the bright sun, her face twisted into an expression of pain and anguish, brow furrowed, her long black hair splayed out around her pale face in the water. Has she been drowned? Is she simply floating? Drifting? One can stare at the painting for hours and still find no satisfactory answers. The second painting, titled "From...to," implies movement not found in the other paintings. A man preparing to set out into the water is perched at the end of what appears to be a pool, his wet clothing clinging to his back in intricate patterns. The final painting in this series, "Mare," features a man, stiff as a board, floating in clear blue water. His tie drifts loosely by him, his face displaying absolute concern, worry, and fear. These three paintings are full of a quiet morbidity. But at the same time, they're almost peaceful, the bodies simply meandering along with the flow of the water.

Another series of paintings that grabbed my attention, albeit in a rather different way, features a man and his hairless cat. These paintings evoke feelings of discomfort, especially since they're sequestered away into their own little room. The man, who is shirtless, poses with his cat, the two sometimes wearing matching masks and visors. The skin of the cat begins to blend itself with the skin of the man until they start to look like one being. Popov imbues these paintings with a dreamlike and almost hallucinogenic ambience, due to his use of wispy, blurred brushstrokes. Viewing these paintings, in their own set-aside room, is an unusual, mind-bending experience. These paintings add a new ambience to the overall feel of Popov's work.

If you see but one exhibit at the de Saisset Museum, have it be *FACE* by Valentin Popov. You do have until June 30<sup>th</sup> to make it there. The paintings are at once larger than life and quietly intimate, and will draw you into Popov's world. You will find yourself spending hours trying to unravel the web of relationships between Popov and the people he paints. I know that I certainly did.