The collapse of the Soviet Union, and the rise of corrupt oligarchs following in its wake, has left Yelena Popova’s birthplace in the Urals largely unfazed: the settlement remains – as a Cold War centre for the production of weapons-grade plutonium – a closed city, one of the most polluted regions of the earth. Much of the worst pollution is radioactive and, by its nature, invisible. This is important in the reception of Popova’s work and practice. So too is the fact that she is part of Primary Collective, a co-operative group of some twenty artists occupying a red brick Victorian school in the centre of Nottingham (UK), where she is based. When two worlds meet, there exists an invisible community. This is where Yelena Popova’s practice resides and the concept provides a fundamental backdrop against which she negotiates the physical, economic and political articulations of painting today.

Popova explores the type of non-Euclidean geometry pioneered by Nikolai Lobachevsky in the early nineteenth century. She also attempts to deflate painting’s overstated status, presenting it as a prop or ghostly image breaking free from conventions of display and the constraints of the frame. Popova makes paintings, but also works with installation and video, her films and videos providing a wider context and detailed elaboration of the questions she brings to the mode of painting. Balance of Probabilities (2012) offers a configuration of Constructivist gestures where painting is supported with the aid of deconstructed pallets, studio furniture and even a strategically placed doorknob. Portrait Gallery Withdrawn (2012), shown at Eastside Projects in Birmingham (UK) marked an important moment of clarification and expansion in Popova’s practice. The display questioned what – or how much – one sees in addition? Painting as her favoured support of line, Popova wished an audience she had amassed of postcard reproductions of portraits held in major national collections, gathered together and, by extension, offered-up for consumption through museum shop postcards, to be an expression of wealth and power. Surrounded by a constellation of pale geometric abstractions on oval or circular linen supports, Popova’s portraits present an immaterial figure where there is no body of paint. There is a withdrawal from the painted image in these works, which render only a vestige or ghostly shadow in an installation where light is the agent in revealing the absence of a trace.

Popova’s most developed series of paintings to date are also her apparently least worked. In the Invisible Paintings (2014–ongoing), she embarks on an extended examination of the visibility of that which is largely invisible: labour and its value, not to mention the use, exchange and surplus value that labour creates. Untitled, Invisible Painting (2014) is made from a coarse upholstery linen sized with rabbit skin glue. The pigment, which forms an immaterial image of isolated circles, has been applied as distemper with a binder of rabbit skin glue. Akin to the resistance to the industrial, corporate and capitalist treatments of the stuff we eat through the slow food movement, Popova mixes her own pigments and eschews artists’ supply shops. ‘Ready-made paint is as evil as ready-made food’, she says with a peasant’s cunning. Her ‘Invisible Paintings’ and methods of labour are something of a slow antidote to the speed and overload of a digital culture and economy predicated on the image.

– John Slyce

YELENA POPOVA

Born 1978, Urals, Russia. Lives and works in Nottingham, UK.


YELENA POPOVA

Unidentified Painting, 2012

Mixed media on linen, dimensions variable

1. Untitled, Invisible Painting, 2014

2. Untitled, Invisible Painting, 2014

3. Untitled, Invisible Painting, 2014

Dimensions variable