



# Varvara Shavrova

## Inna's Dream

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Text by Verena Platzgummer

Inna is an invented name for Varvara Shavrova's mother. She was a witness to events that relate to her uncle, let's call him Vladimir Shavrov, and is both a narrator and protagonist. Shavrov was a gifted tinkerer and a tireless, meticulous inventor. A dreamer, for sure, but one that made a dream come true. In the 1930s, he designed the first Soviet amphibious aeroplane. He did this in the comfort of his own room in a communal apartment. Named after Shavrov, the Sh-2 was the first Soviet mass-produced flying boat capable of carrying two crew members as well as one passenger. A light, simple and reliable design. Shavrov was a man of many interests. In addition to his studies and research, he was also a collector of insects, with a comprehensive set of bugs that he examined down to the finest detail.

But who are the other protagonists? There is Alexander, Inna's father and Vladimir's brother. He was a military pilot and the first to test the Sh-2. He was arrested and sent to the Gulag where he died. *Inna's Dream* is not only about the ingenuity of an invention. Shavrova's project tacitly implies the relationship between two brothers whose destinies evolved in distinctly different directions. And then there is Inna. She's the one dealing with the trauma of the survivor, a moderator on her own quest for truth who keeps control of the strands of the stories; the real stories and those invented, the whitewashed transmissions and also the well-kept secrets.

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In Varvara Shavrova's fourth solo presentation at the gallery, the USSR-born artist is re-enacting a major installation. Initially presented as part of her Masters project for the Goldsmiths MFA Fine Art Degree Show in 2019, *Inna's Dream* is a continuation of Shavrova's ongoing confrontation with her family's history, asking persistent questions about power, authority and representation – of the male and the female – as well as the interface between individual and collective history.

Installed in the semi-domestic setting of Patrick Heide Contemporary Art, the project returns to its origins having been designed in a comparable environment and thus enabling the viewer to directly experience the absurd idea of building

an aeroplane in an apartment – as a theoretical, unrefined concept, an actual object or the proverbial elephant in the room. Varvara's version of the Sh-2 is scaled down and re-made as a three-dimensional textile body, but it has not lost any of its magnitude and complexity. The hand-tufted set of individual components takes on proportions of 7 by 5.5 meters and is completed by a site-specific wallpaper drawing – a reminder of Shavrov's apartment as the birthplace of this first Soviet amphibious plane. Presented alongside the installation is a series of scroll-like drawings on wallpaper that feature the technical specifications of the aircraft, portraits of Shavrov and images of insects.



Unlike its first iteration, this time the installation is not fully comprehensible. The aeroplane seemingly bursts out of the gallery space and its domestic setting and leaves the visitors with a feeling of unease and misplacement while having to assemble the individual sections of the plane in their imagination.

The decision to replicate the original aeroplane in carpet and not in plywood, or even paper, relates to certain parallels with the story of the flying carpet. A mission impossible, a fantasy and a recurring element in literary traditions, from the Middle Eastern *One Thousand and One Nights* to Russian folk tales and collections of fairytales from other cultures. Always a source of fascination, this magical object satisfies the human desire to become the ruler of nature with the warmth and comfort of a domestic object. Shavrova uses these opposing elements and joins them together: the carpet, which suggests female attributions of softness and warmth in the domestic sphere; and the design of a plane, which displays the predominantly male attributes of military and technological pursuits.

Textile art works as well as techniques such as embroidery, weaving and knitting are a regular resource in Shavrova's work that enable her to comment on the

female role and its relations of power and dominance. The artist herself stands at the loom, piecing the threads of past histories together and in doing so she touches on urgent and relevant questions of our time. The results are beautiful and nostalgic objects made of thread, yarn and fabric. In *Inna's Dream* the carpet does not lessen the fascination with the aeroplane and its elegance. The material stands up as something powerful and admirable; a sign of strength and vulnerability at the same time. In its new guise, the domesticized version of an obsolete military machine also echoes the collapse of the Soviet dream while becoming a symbol of capitulated militarism undermining the core symbols of masculinity and power.

Another aspect that Shavrova's work examines is the question as to how personal histories and memories can be relevant to a broader audience, a collective history. The connection between personal and collective memory – the two are naturally intimately linked – and history have of course been a topic of interest across many disciplines, from psychology and sociology to philosophy and anthropology, with fluid transitions between these disciplines. However, there is a clear difference between history and collective memory: "A goal of history broadly is to provide a comprehensive, accurate, and unbiased portrayal of past events. This often includes the representation and comparison of multiple perspectives and the integration of these

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perspectives and details to provide a complete and accurate account. In contrast, collective memory focuses on a single perspective, for instance, the perspective of one social group, nation,

or community. Consequently, collective memory represents past events as associated with the values, narratives and biases specific to that group."<sup>1</sup>

So how can an individual family history, which most certainly has been tinged and blandished over time, at all have relevance as a historical fact? In sociological and historical terms it would need a broader examination. However, in artistic terms memory, nostalgia and reflection are

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Shavrova's strategy to mirror pressing issues of our times through past events and at the same time to give current validity to history. Taking the detour of a personal drama, complex relationships or difficult life circumstances, Shavrova offers an alternative way of commenting on comparable crisis experienced universally today: poverty, wars, global migration, refugee crisis, redefinition of borders, redistribution of world power and creation of new dominant geo-political order.

*Inna's Dream* is like a journey into the future with stations in the past and the present. In Shavrova's words, empathy is the means of materializing the past into the present. A manifestation that becomes a physical experience in space and time in the form of tangible, aesthetic objects and installations.

Varvara Shavrova studied at Moscow Polygraphic Institute and at Goldsmiths College, University of London, and lived and worked in London, Beijing and Dublin. She had many public exhibitions, amongst others at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, the Espacio Cultural El Tanque in Santa Cruz de Tenerife and the Gallery of Photography, Dublin as well as across several institutions in China. Her works are held in selected public collections worldwide, including Museum of the History of St. Petersburg, Ballinglen Arts Foundation, Department of Foreign Affairs, Ireland, Minsheng Art Museum, Beijing/ Shanghai and MOMENTUM Collection, Berlin.

<sup>1</sup> Wertsch, James V.; Roediger, Henry L. (April 2008). "Collective memory: conceptual foundations and theoretical approaches". *Memory* (Hove, England). 16(3): 318–326.