

Plaster Magazine

Bilkus, Izzy: *Sergey Kononov doesn't like to be rushed*

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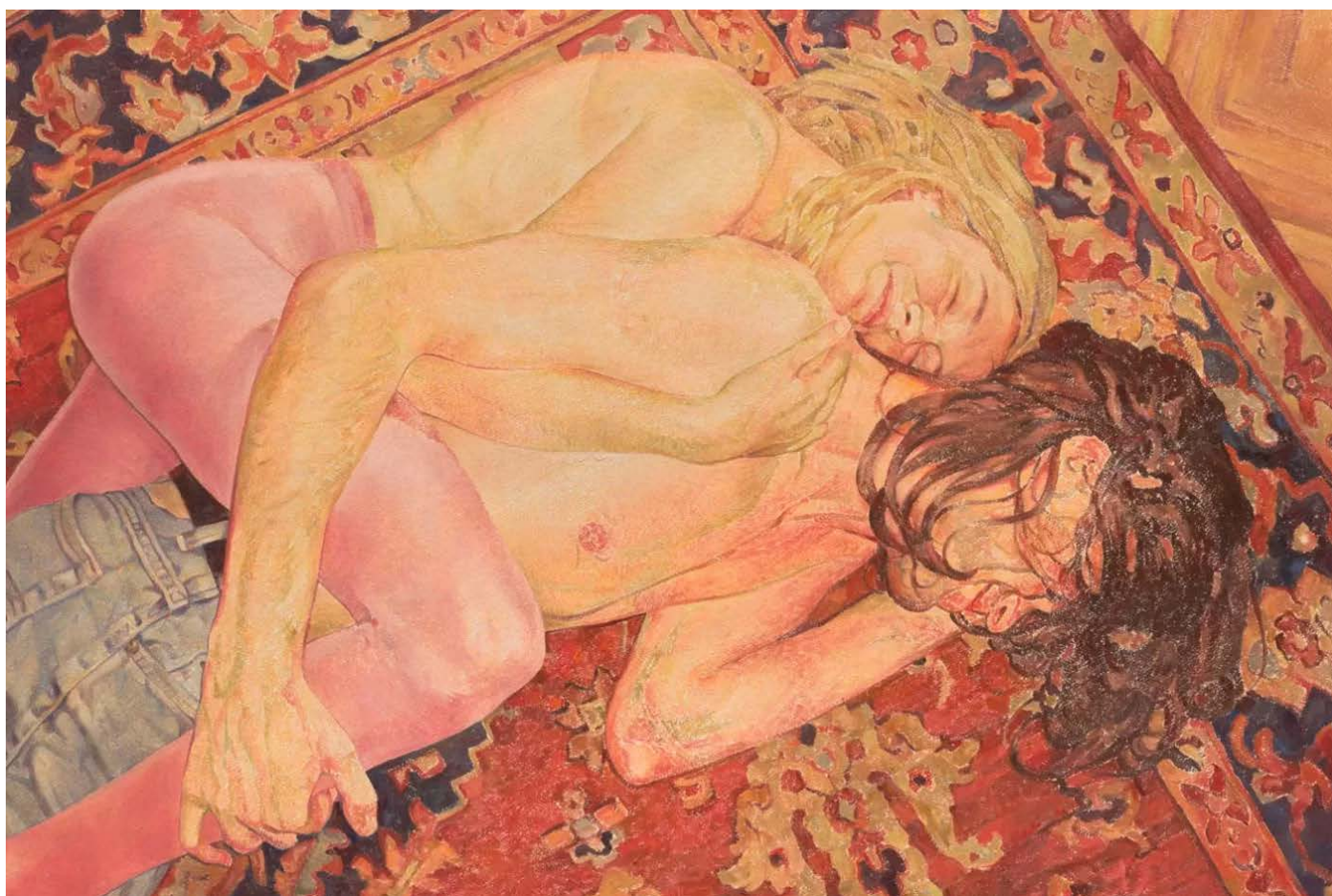
PLASTER

Sergey Kononov doesn't like to be rushed

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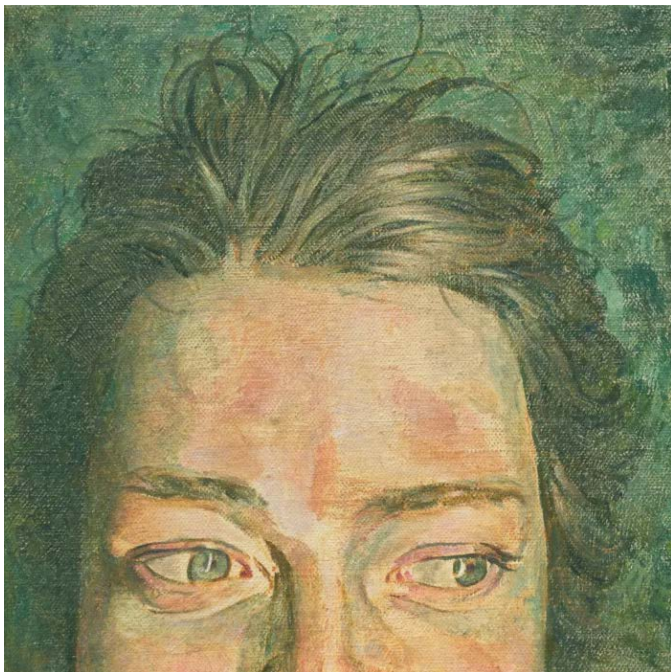
| Words: **Izzy Bilkus**

The Ukrainian painter's first UK solo show is a monument to friends, lovers and not rushing

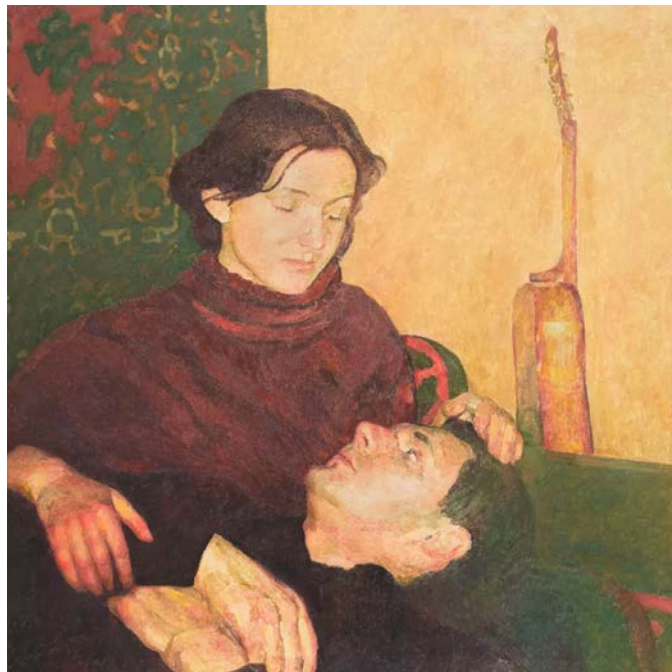


Sergey Kononov's work might feel familiar to you. Not because you've actually seen his paintings before, but because he captures a relatable tenderness in his subjects; bodies entwined in close embrace, resting or reveling in each others' arms; visions of friendship and intimacy that flood you with warmth and longing as though they were snapshots of your own life.

It's a bright September morning when I meet the 30-year-old painter at Jeremy Scholar gallery in Marylebone. The sunshine glaring through the windows echoes the subjects on the canvases: monuments to hazy summer evenings spent with friends and lovers. A couple lie spooning on the floor, a woman lies asleep in crumpled sheets, a man looks into his partner's eyes as he rests on her lap. Each scene emerges like a quiet whisper from the past. Kononov's work is a fusion of personal relationships, photography and the constant search for the "perfect light". Speaking with him, it becomes clear that his work is as much about eternalising his own personal connections as it is about the painting itself.



Sergey Kononov, 'Untitled', 2023, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and Jeremy Scholar



Sergey Kononov, 'Untitled', 2024, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and Jeremy Scholar

Kononov was born and raised in Odessa, Ukraine. His creativity was nurtured from an early age. "I was really lucky," he says. "My family supported me in pursuing art. My parents never pressured me to follow a specific path." His mother worked as a nurse and his father sold shoes, but he found mentorship in a local painter who, after nearly a decade of weekend painting lessons, became like a godfather to him. "He taught me everything."

Kononov has lived in Paris for the past decade. "I'm surrounded by the Impressionists and all the artists from the 20th century who loved to work with light," he says. Light, it seems, is the thread that ties everything together. He speaks of it almost reverently, as if it holds the key to unlocking his subjects' inner lives. "It's important for me to capture a luminosity," he explains. "I want to recreate the look of old films – that grain, that warm light – which I've loved my whole life."

The subjects in Kononov's paintings are typically people he's close to. It's these connections that lend his work a quiet emotional charge. "It's a pleasure when people ask me to paint them, because I know that they'll be able to pose relaxed and freely." His process is collaborative, built on trust. He uses a digital camera to capture his subjects, snapping hundreds of photos within minutes. "I scroll through all the photos on my phone and almost by chance or instinctually, one will stand out to me. It's like magically, mysteriously, I know which one will work." The result is a body of work that feels both fleeting and timeless, as if his figures have been plucked from a memory and suspended in an ethereal light.



Sergey Kononov, *Untitled*, 2024, oil on paper mounted on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and Jeremy Scholar

“ I love the idea of being able to leave an unfinished painting in the corner of a room for half of the year. ”

Kononov's relationship with his studio is just as intimate. He speaks of it like a sanctuary, a space where light and time shape the rhythm of his days. "My studio has huge windows – it's all I need to work, to be honest," he says. "If I travel somewhere and want to paint, I need to check where the best windows are." Light, for him, is more than a technical necessity, it becomes a crucial factor in how he experiences new places. He recalls a recent trip to Lisbon: "I was there for two weeks so I brought all my painting supplies, but when I started I found that the light was so different. Do you know those Instagram filters, like *Los Angeles*, *Paris* etc.? They're real! I used paint mixes I was familiar with, but they looked so saturated, so it was impossible to paint. Especially in hot countries, it's much more intense."

Kononov often works without a clear vision, allowing the process to unfold naturally. This was especially true for this show, 'Companions', held in Jeremy Scholar's private showroom. "I like how small the space is. I didn't work with a strict goal or idea of what I would be making exactly," he admits. "I didn't think about a specific story to unite all these pieces together. I was really just chilling and working on them."

Though rooted in the traditions of classical and 20th-century painting, Kononov's style has evolved significantly over the years. In his earlier work he embraced the immediacy of aerosol spray paint, mixing it with oil paint. "I used the spray to create some generalisation of form," he says. "It had this transparent effect." But over time, he found the limitations of spray paint too restrictive and shifted towards pure oil paint.



Sergey Kononov, *August 2021, 2024*, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and Jeremy Scholar

Looking ahead, Kononov remains characteristically unhurried. He's preparing for a show with Ortuzar Projects in New York, but there are no hard deadlines. "If I don't have enough time, the show will be postponed," he says with a smile. This sense of freedom, of not being rushed, is his preferred way of working. "I love the idea of being able to leave an unfinished painting in the corner of a room for half of the year."

For Kononov, painting isn't just about the finished product, but about the quiet moments of contemplation, the emotional power of light and the ever-shifting relationship between artist and subject. "You can complete a painting," he says, "but there might be a little part of it that destroys you completely. That can happen a lot when painting faces. If you fuck up and have to erase it from the canvas, you can end up ruining the whole piece." It's a delicate balance - capturing the essence of a subject while battling inevitable imperfections. Speaking with Kononov is a reminder that the act of painting is fraught with struggles.

Kononov's paintings, much like the fleeting moments they capture, seem to linger just out of reach, suspended in a quiet glow. Whether it's the light filtering through his studio windows or the connection he shares with his subjects, everything he touches seems imbued with warmth and care. And perhaps that's the magic of his work: in a world filled with rushing, it invites you to pause and find a fragment of your own life embedded within the scenes.



Sergey Kononov, *The Dream*, 2024, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and Jeremy Scholar