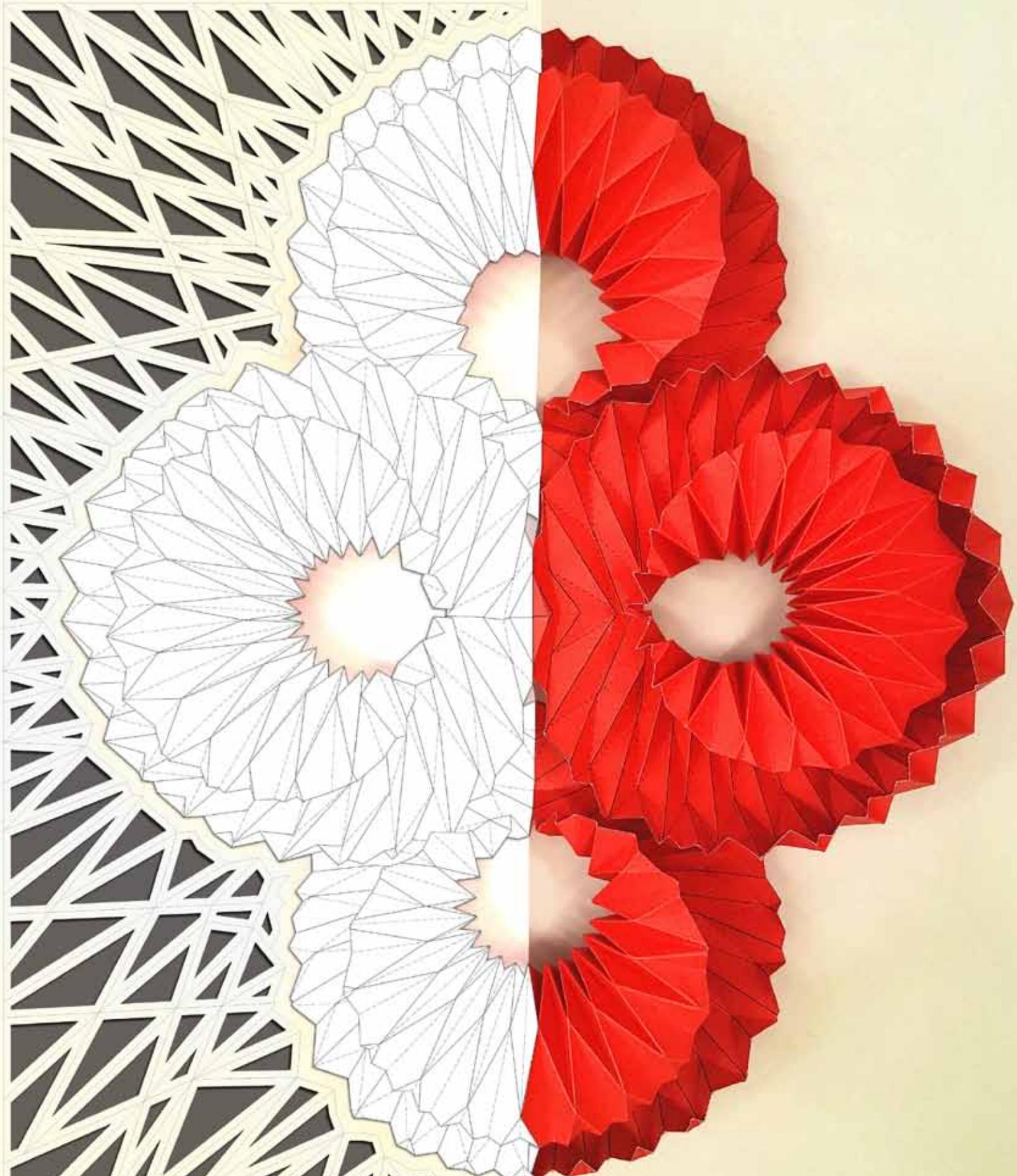




ARTS ILLUSTRATED





Breathtaking Moments

Ukrainian photographer Yelena Yemchuk's body of work that traverses photography, painting and film-making, is a curious mix of surrealism and realism, and a revelation of how that same principle can work for a variety of purposes

PRAVEENA SHIVRAM

I recently attended a series of lectures on the fascinating world of embryology. It was like the American science fiction movie *Fantastic Voyage* (1966) where a submarine with a group of agents and doctors is shrunk in size and injected into the body of a scientist to remove a blood clot in the brain. I felt tiny too, listening to stories of cells and organs and their awe-inspiring destinies, and saw distinct images of proliferation and differentiation in my mind, like a slowly turning bioscope – static images that were yet finding meaning in movement. I also felt a paradox – a part of me was outside this experience watching these life-giving entities as inanimate objects in a bad animation film, and the other part of me was feeling incredibly alive, like the animation merged with life itself with Avatar-like precision.

That paradox is the only way I can explain Yelena Yemchuk's

images. Or as author Ben Spivey once said more eloquently and less obliquely, that 'there is a beautifully lifeless quality' to her photographs. And in that apparent lifelessness you sense the vibrancy of life. Her images are arresting, speaking a secret language of stillness and fluidity, like the subject of her images held their breaths for the duration of the shot in order to better portray the potent force of life. This ability, surprisingly, cuts through all aspects of her work, as if each image simply changed its form and functionality based on the medium. 'Each medium I feel uses a different part of me. When I paint, it's a solitary moment; it's just me and my ideas. I love this time and I get to do anything I want because it's just me and my imagination. Film, I think, is my Achilles heel! I truly love it and wish I could do more of it, but the production always terrifies me. And with photography that is at this point

such a big part of who I am, it just feels like the most natural way to express myself. Sometimes I notice a face that intrigues me and I am drawn to it; sometimes it's an action that makes me stop and want to capture it and other times in could be a form or a colour. Basically, I think it's instinctual. Something triggers you and you want to capture it,' she says.

I have been writing to Yelena since April last year when I first came across her work, and it feels now, even that process of intermittent e-mail interaction was designed to lead to this moment, to this particular issue, as if even our words had to hold their breaths to make this interview happen. For, much like Yelena's work, it is always in the patterns between two breaths that the image – form and colour, story and word, person and personality – rests.



Alisa Ahmann for Porter Magazine.



Photograph of Gidropark, Kiev, Ukraine.



From the book *Ten Years After* (A Book collaboration with Antonio Marras shot in Sardegna).



From the book *Anna Maria*.

Excerpts from the interview

Your collaboration with music bands especially are interesting because it seems like that sweet spot where the aesthetics of sound and art come together. When you work on album covers, for instance, how does the language of photography change for you?

Actually, it's been so long since I worked on an album cover. When I finished art school, I was not sure which direction I wanted to go in as a photographer. I was obsessed with Fellini and Tarkovsky, and I wanted to make images like them. I travelled after school and when I got back to the United States, I had a show of my new work, after which I was signed on by Propaganda Films. It was never my intention to work in music but it just happened and it was a really fun way to start my journey in photography. And always, the music dictates the story. When you listen to a song you start seeing images – whether real or surreal – and then you go from there. Also, working with musicians is a collaboration. You work together and you find how to bring out in an image what represents a particular song or album, and what it is they (the band) want you (the viewer) to see.

In the video 'Thirty-Three' for Smashing Pumpkins, you used photographs to make the video and in an interview you talked about how it was challenging to not fully know how they would be when put together. As a photographer, how do you fill the gaps created by the unknown, the unexpected?

We took a big chance on *Thirty-Three*. What we did had never really been done before and we didn't really have time to test it. We just went for it with photography. To answer your question, when you are shooting with film, especially, there is always space for the unknown. I feel it has been slowly removed by the digital era and with it that mystery I love. That's why, even today, I try to shoot in film as much as possible.

When you begin to design the vision of your images, how conscious is the process?

I would like to think I start consciously (haha!). Then I hope for my unconscious to take over. I think all my best ideas stem from there. I love the unplanned accidents. If you are too much in your head and over-thinking, you tend to miss these things that I cherish and feel make for a more unexpected image.

Between your book collaborations with designer Antonio Marras to commemorate 10 years of his design journey, and the one titled Anna' with



Still from the music video *Thirty-Three* with Smashing Pumpkins.

Anna Maria, which one was harder as an artist to achieve – the objective look at someone's body of work or the subjective look at deep friendships?

We did *Antonio Marras* in two days in Sardinia, two very long days. On the other hand, I have been shooting Anna Maria for 25 years, so yes, two totally different things. Though, I think, *Gidropark*, a book on the park in my city of childhood, is the hardest book I have done so far. It was challenging to show the place I love and grew up in and make it an interesting book. To have empathy and a sense of humour and make a good image... that's always the challenge.

Because of how technology intersects with our lives so much today, how much of it do you take into account when you work on an image? How much of the image happens during a shoot and how much after it is done?

I do very little post-work. I am very lucky to work with an amazing re-toucher, who has the lightest touch. We almost don't retouch at all, but we do spend time on colour.

As a medium, do you think photography works best in isolation or in collaboration? What do you find more powerful?

I am never really alone because I mostly photograph people. But I do love walking around on my own looking for a picture. I also like working with teams and creating something fantastical, so both are good.

And, finally, do you think photography essentially lies in the intersecting space of the twin worlds of design and art or is it something that borrows heavily from both worlds to create something of its own?

I think photography is a very unique thing. There is a sense of nostalgia that you get from looking at an image, whether it's one year old or 40 years old, and this you can only get from looking at a photograph. And this is truly unique to the medium.



From the editorial *Eastern Ballad*.



From the editorial *Bohemian Rhapsody* for Porter Magazine.

