



**Why Are You Still Home?**  
oil on linen  
76x30 cm



**Contemplating**  
oil on linen panel  
20x20 cm

# Yelena Lamm

In her lively and engaging portraits of pets and farm animals, **YELENA LAMM** successfully captures their character and personality. Niki *Browes* discovers how

**G**ROWING UP IN SAINT PETERSBURG, RUSSIA, Yelena Lamm had access to some of the world's best art collections. Her mother, an engineer, had a deep appreciation, knowledge and interest in art and since Yelena's early childhood, was regularly taking her to the majestic State Hermitage Museum – the second largest in the world – to see its unrivalled collection of paintings. These included 16,000 canvasses by Masters such as Rembrandt, Picasso, Cézanne, Gauguin and Matisse. Weekend trips to city suburbs, famous for their parks and palaces was a tradition. "I was surrounded by beauty," she says.

At university, Yelena majored in art restoration. The goal was to have a practical trade-in hand while still utilising her artistic abilities. She

knew she wanted to be as close to art as possible but didn't believe she could become "a real artist." Still, the courses she was taking included drawing, painting, anatomy, photography, as well as in-depth painting techniques – all requirements for an art restoration specialist – but also very helpful to any artist. She graduated having a solid set of basic skills.

Her family decided to leave Russia in the early 90s. Relatives who had already settled in Pittsburgh, petitioned for them to join. They had no idea what to expect. "Coming to Pittsburgh was an accident but staying here was a choice, she says. "I'm glad fate brought me here."

She retrained as a graphic designer; working and raising her twin sons meant she didn't paint for another 10 years. Until the boys passed their driving tests. ►





*Moo-orning Glory*  
oil on linen  
40x50 cm



*Vanity Fair*,  
oil on linen,  
76x30 cm

#### That was in 2005.

All of a sudden, I had the evenings to myself. I retrieved boxes of oil paints which I shipped from Russia before we immigrated. But my sons hated the smell – I did not have a dedicated studio – and I temporarily switched to acrylics. Another reason why I changed medium was that I needed it to dry fast; I was selling my works on eBay. I painted flowers and small landscapes and even got some portrait commissions. I was happy to paint and, being able to sell my art even for a very modest price, was great.

#### I started playing with a more stylised approach around 2007.

I joined the Pittsburgh Society of Illustrators and was fond of artists like Tamara de Lempicka, Nathan Altman and Marc Chagall. I experimented with faceted shapes and bright colours, still keeping the imagery pretty realistic. Although my subjects were anything but animals, I was having fun with it. I had two solo exhibitions, was invited to speak before local art groups on numerous occasions and sold my art at local art fairs.

#### I've only had two cats in my life but they both played very important roles in my artistic career.

My childhood cat was named Matros, which means "sailor" in Russian. I was 10 years old when I painted his watercolour portrait. I think it was my first 'adult' painting. It became my mum's favourite, and she, half-jokingly, compared all my future works to it. "Almost as good" was high praise. The second cat is my now seven-year-old Maine Coon, Rio, the love of my life and the reason why I paint animals. The first portrait



*Father's Day*,  
oil on linen,  
60x50 cm

of him was my own art therapy painted after he was diagnosed with patellar luxation and hip dysplasia, a genetic condition his breed is, unfortunately, prone to. But it gave me an idea. I'll do pet portrait commissions to cover the cost of his treatment, I thought. I advertised on social media with zero results. However, a few of my friends saw how difficult I was finding it and ordered portraits of their pets — and up to this day I'm extremely grateful to them. Not least because the most amazing thing happened in the process. Something clicked. I was completely and totally hooked and in my element. I knew

I was going to keep painting animals.

#### Immediately, it just felt right.

Like I was doing something true, something real, something I did not need to invent and could not fake. I felt connected to my subjects; I was talking to them while painting. I wanted to get beyond likeness and paint their personalities. I enjoyed the results of my efforts, was excited about going to the studio and was enthusiastic like never before. The feedback was more than encouraging; one after another, people were saying I captured their pet's essence. Some





*Neighbors,  
oil on linen,  
76x30 cm*

even cried when they first saw the portrait. From a craftsmanship point, I knew I was shifting to the next level as a painter, and it was happening naturally. Painting animals gave me purpose and, at the same time, helped me set up my goals and a path for professional growth.

#### What's not to love about cows?

They are social and friendly. Cows' facial expressions are hilarious and very cute, they have beautiful eyelashes, the best hairdos and the softest ears. From an animal portrait painter's point of view, cows are a dream subject. Still, I had no idea they were going to become my most popular subject. After I painted all my friends' animals and several portraits of Rio, I turned to painting farm animals: goats, alpacas, pigs and, of course, cows. My very first two cows were sold almost immediately, and then a larger piece with four cows became an ARC (Art Renewal Center) finalist and also sold straight away. Several commissions followed, and more cow paintings were sold. I think I've painted and sold enough cows for a decent size dairy farm.

#### I do believe animals have their own souls.

As I mentioned before, I talk to my subjects when I paint them and I'm imagining what they may be thinking of. With commissioned works, I ask my clients to tell me stories about their animals. I need to learn and understand as much as I can about my subjects before I paint them. When working on my own pieces, I assign animals with characters and personalities, trying not to swivel into a chasm of anthropomorphism.



*Farm Girl,  
oil on linen panel,  
20x25 cm*



*Dialogue,  
oil on linen panel,  
28x35 cm*



*Soph and Raph,  
oil on linen panel  
28x35 cm*

## HOW I WORK HOW I PAINT

First and foremost, I love and respect my subjects.

**I can describe myself as a representational artist who paints mostly alla prima.**

I enjoy bold expressive brushstrokes while painting direct, and more tightly described details at the same time, so my work often combines both. I mentioned that I used acrylics for some time, but as soon as I got a dedicated studio space, I switched again to oils and never looked back. I'm trying to keep my painting schedule as Monday through Friday. Sometimes I need to spend a day or two doing design work. Sometimes I spend weekends painting. I only know that if for one reason or another, I'm away from my studio for too long, I'm anxious to be back.

**My studio is on the third floor of a rundown house we bought and split into apartments, mine is on the top floor.**

We opened up the space as it had a low ceiling and way too many walls. It became a 60 sq. meter room with a cathedral ceiling – and I absolutely love it. It's my happy place and I smile every time I walk into it. I furnished it with some office furniture (a design firm I was working for at the time closed their office right at the same time) and a vintage couch set I bought for \$50. I'm a night owl and often work late so I don't care much about not having a traditional north-facing window and use daylight LED lights instead. I installed the hardwood floors myself, which I'm very proud of it. It has a full bathroom, a kitchenette and a storage space; everything I need as an artist. And I don't pay rent. Quite the opposite; I collect rent from three apartments downstairs. Buying this house was insane but it turned out to be the best financial decision I ever made.

**Soon enough I realised that stylisation was a convenient way to cover up my lack of knowledge and technical skills in representational painting.**

Now my heroes are artists like Ilya Repin, John Singer Sargent and Joaquín Sorolla. When I get stuck and I'm not sure how to go about something I am working on, when I have questions, I look to how famous artists did it. I also took painting workshops from living artists whose work I admire: Joshua LaRock, Michael Timothy Davis, Jennifer Gennari and Anna Rose Bain. From each, I learned a lot. I kept adding to my own artistic arsenal, and I know this process will never stop. That's the real beauty of it.

**yelenalamm.com**