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Art Imitates Art: A Novelist Duo Finds the Perfect Canvas

by Michele Alperin

Perhaps only fate could have brought together novelists Virginia DeBerry and Donna Grant and Bulgarian artist Vesselin Kourtev in an exhibition opening Thursday, April 2, at the Alfa Art Gallery in New Brunswick. The tale of the convergence of their life paths is a two-stage story, first of how DeBerry and Grant became a writing duo producing New York Times bestsellers, and second of how they met up with Kourtev.

DeBerry started her working life as a high-school English teacher in Buffalo, and Grant in the advertising department at the New York Daily News. The two women eventually became friends as models at a New York plus-sizes agency and together created for themselves careers as writers and novelists. Kourtev left his home in Bulgaria to live in New Jersey in 2002 and met DeBerry at a New Year's Eve party ushering in the year 2010.



Virginia DeBerry and Donna Grant

That New Year's Eve celebration took place at the Alfa Art Gallery. As DeBerry and Grant were completing their latest book, "Uptown," DeBerry was asked by a friend to the party. "I was looking to start the decade doing something I'd never done before," she says. "I wanted it to be a different kind of next 10 years."

At that party, DeBerry, Kourtev, and his wife, Galina Kourteva, who is also the gallery's assistant director, hatched the idea of trying to tie together DeBerry and Grant's new book with Kourtev's upcoming solo exhibition. After DeBerry went downstairs for a look at the paintings, she realized that their combination of abstract color with indistinct figures opened up a variety of interpretations, and it took only a short leap to think about matching Kourtev's paintings to chapter titles from "Uptown."

The combination works because Kourtev's paintings are not really representational, but impressionistic, and the new novel deals with a swirl of conflicts, personal and professional, around a proposed real estate development in Harlem. "The underlying theme is about success and what people will do to achieve success," says DeBerry. "It is about family confrontations, secrets, lies, scandal, truth, and forgiveness."

Kourteva, whose English is better than her husband's, describes two of his favorite combinations of chapter title and painting. For chapter 18, titled "None of His Private Parts Were Private Anymore," the painting is of a man behind the head of a bull. Kourteva describes the painting in this way: "It is a great composition of colors, and it seems like the man was able to calm down this animal. You see the power of the man over this animal, known as one of the strongest around the world." Then she offers her husband's take on this work: "If you wanted to describe the fight between good and bad within everybody, from one side you see a beautiful, strong man and on the other a dangerous animal. He wanted to bring to our attention that there is always inside us a kind of fight between our good side and our bad side."

For chapter 14, titled "A New Day Always Dawns," the painting depicts a man and a woman who are standing very close to each other with a stream of different colors related to a very bright spot that looks like the sun. Kourteva describes her husband's thoughts about the painting: "What is the driving will that will be able to reach a better life? Light is always bringing happiness and fulfillment of our feelings."

Perhaps it was a similar will that pushed DeBerry and Grant to ultimately find fulfillment with words, so important to both from an early age. "I have always loved words, stories, and books, and I loved writing," says DeBerry. Although she majored in English at the State University of New York at Buffalo, graduating in 1972, largely because she enjoyed writing and was good at it, she never contemplated writing as a career. "I never thought about it as real job," she says, adding that she did not know anyone who wrote for a living. "When I was growing up,"



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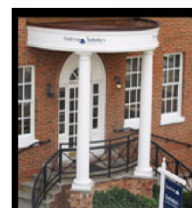
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she says, "writers were mostly dead people."

After college DeBerry did what many English majors do — she became a high school English teacher in Buffalo, which she did for nearly a decade.

Grant has also been an avid reader for as long as she can remember, as a child writing stories and poems and starting a class newspaper in the fifth grade. She also served as an editor on her high-school newspaper. Unlike DeBerry, however, she did see writing as a potential livelihood. "I knew words were supposed to be involved somehow in what I did," she says.

After spending two years at Barnard College, Grant decided to try to make good on her desire to become a writer. She got a job in advertising at the New York Daily News with the hope of moving across the aisle to the editorial side.

What finally brought together DeBerry and Grant was a career that neither, in her wildest dreams, might have imagined.

After 10 years of teaching, DeBerry was ready to move on. "It was never really a thing I wanted to do," she says. At about that time a friend of the same age was working in a new industry, plus-size modeling, and told DeBerry she should join up. Her only credential, she jokes, was that she wore clothes. "I had no background, no modeling school, and no dreams of being on a runway," she says. "It was really a lark."

Eventually DeBerry caved in to her friend's nagging and joined her at Wilhelmina Models. "I moved to New York City at age 32 to pursue a career as a fat model," she says. "I left a job with security, vacation, and a retirement fund."

Eventually DeBerry was working for the BBLW agency, where she met Grant. But she found she did not love modeling and only did it for about three years. "I didn't do well at being told what to do," she says. "I was a school teacher — I was a teller not a tellee."

What she especially disliked was having to audition for every job and being selected for the way she looked. "It rubbed me the wrong way," she says. "I was raised to focus on being smart, kind, and doing the right thing." In her job, however, none of these mattered; everything was based on what you looked like. So after three years she moved to the business side as an agent, ending up as a vice president.

If DeBerry's entry into plus-size modeling was mildly random, Grant's decision to try it was on an impulse in response to a dare from some coworkers. It was 1981 and an article in the paper had featured this new industry. "The idea was that stores and manufacturers would actually show clothing on women who represented the size of the people who wore them," says Grant.

She applied and got the job, and in the first two weeks had a spread in Ebony, then soon after one for Lane Bryant. Eventually she switched to part-time evenings and weekends with the paper, and after a couple of years left the Daily News, where she had worked for seven years, to pursue modeling full-time. In 1982, a year after she started modeling, Grant went back to college at New York University, graduating in 1985. She modeled for about 15 years.

Grant and DeBerry met soon after DeBerry came to New York, when they were working at the same agency. "We saw each other sometimes at the office, but often at castings, where we were both cast against each other," says Grant. "We were both black models, and the castings were specific in that way." But even though they would find themselves at the same clients as competitors, they quickly realized they had a lot in common and enjoyed each other's humor and became friends.

The next career step for the writing duo started when DeBerry was a spokesperson for Hanes queen size pantyhose. She suggested to the company the idea of a quarterly fashion newsletter distributed free to customers. Hanes was interested, and of course DeBerry and Grant became the honchos, with DeBerry as fashion editor and Grant as celebrity focus editor.

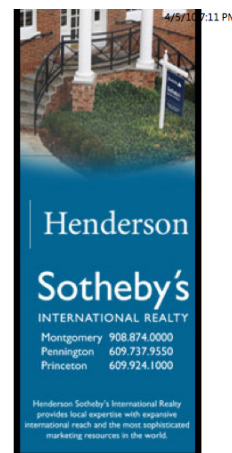
Based on the successful newsletter, some investors approached DeBerry and Grant with an opportunity to create a fashion and lifestyle magazine for women sizes 14 and above, which they called Maxima. After a year and a half, with two issues published and the bridal issue just put to bed, they got a phone call from their backers. It was on New Year's Eve in 1987, not long after the October Wall Street crash, and DeBerry and Grant knew they were in trouble when the call began, "It's been really great working with you."

The backers no longer had the disposable income to support the magazine. The two women were devastated. "We were pretty much living on savings, working toward an equity piece of the project," says DeBerry, "and at the end of the year we got a percentage of nothing."

Realizing they wanted to continue working together, they tried to think of legitimate job, but found it hard to be sensible, says DeBerry. Recalling how they used to laugh and joke about how anybody could write a romance novel, they decided that, whether it was true or not, they would give it a try. For \$2.95 they purchased "How to Write a Romance and Get It Published," by Kathryn Falk. "We read it and said, 'Oh, yeah, we can do that,'" says DeBerry, and in 1990 they published their first book, "Exposures," through the Popular Library Lovestruck series from Warner Books.

They did get a lucky break, thanks to a literary agent that Grant knew. When she gave the agent a call, and shared their idea of a book about a fashion photographer, the agent asked for an outline and sample chapters. When she was satisfied with what she saw, she offered them a contract with Warner, with the caveat that the book had to be completed in four months, to replace a book slated in the publisher's schedule that had not delivered.

Although Grant had just gotten married, they worked around the clock, side by side, with Grant always on the left and DeBerry on the right, as they always do. "We feel very off balance otherwise," says DeBerry.



When they write, they start by carefully plotting the book and developing characters with very specific attributes. Then they sit at the computer together and write.

Grant grew up in Brooklyn, where her mother was a forms analyst for an engineering firm back in the days when applications and technical forms were created by hand with graphing lines and type. Her father was not part of her life. DeBerry's mother was a Buffalo school teacher, who taught sixth grade for 10 years and then second grade for another 25, and her father was a bricklayer.

Whereas the pair of novelists both have their roots in New York and went through other careers before becoming authors, Kourtev has spent his entire life as an artist, mostly in Bulgaria. He grew up two blocks away from his wife in Gourkovo, a city where many well-known artists lived, including relatives of Kourtev. His parents both acted in local theaters and did traditional folk dancing. Careerwise his father was in human resources; his mother was primarily a housewife, but was very involved in community life.

Kourtev went to a specialized high school in Kazanluk that focused on art. He graduated in 1978 and then moved on to the faculty of fine art at the University of Veliko Turnovo, where he graduated in 1985. From 1989 to 2002 he taught in the National School of Stage and Film Design in Plovdiv, Bulgaria.

Throughout his career Kourtev has been active in the country's artistic life, participating first in national and regional exhibitions and competitions and eventually in international ones.

Kourteva notes that the Bulgarian communist government supported art, but did not limit artists to any particular style. Kourteva describes her husband's style as surrealistic: "His major interest is what is our inner world — going deeper into our feelings and our sensitivities — and what is the meaning of the personal relationships between people."

Solo Exhibition, Alfa Art Gallery, 108 Church Street, New Brunswick. Friday, April 2, 7:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. Opening reception for works by Vesselin Kourtev in collaboration with the release of Virginia DeBerry and Donna Grant's new book, "Uptown," where the title of each painting correlates to a chapter in the novel. On view to April 21. On April 9, at 7 p.m., DeBerry and Grant will do a book talk and signing at the gallery. 732-296-6720 or www.alfaart.org.

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