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Homage to Irina Ionesco

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“We once had a ‘fight’ for one or two years and one day she surprised me by standing at my door. She went and installed herself on the chair and then “La Papesse Rouge” was made, back in 1986.”

Gérard Beringer was born in 1947 in Saint-Etienne-de-Valoux, a small village in the Ardèche region of France. His mother is Italian and his father is from Luxembourg. Beringer studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Valencia in 1968, and moved to Paris after graduating. He has remained in the city since; the city where he met his long-term friend and muse Irina Ionesco. Beringer's works have been exhibited in the Grand Palais and the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, as well as in Antwerp, Rome, Budapest and Milan. In December, his book, *Irina*, will be published. It features only his paintings of Ionesco. Beringer lives and works in the Montmartre area of Paris.

ZOO Magazine: You and Irina Ionesco met during the filming of a documentary, is that right?

Gérard Beringer: That's right, it was a documentary called *Les Autres* by Jacqueline Plessis about Yves Hamon, a collector of art by independent artists in the seventies. Irina and I would make portraits of his choice. It was a documentary for France 3, the television channel. So, I met Irina during the filming and after that we never left each other.

ZOO: How does Irina inspire you? Is there a comparable style in your work and her work?

GB: Yes, that's undeniable. It's noticeable in the way we work with the model and in the relationship that establishes between the models and us, the artists. Our models always feel at ease; it's a reciprocal work. There isn't money that stands in between our models and ourselves, as we don't pay them. It really is a relationship that very quickly becomes a friendship. Irina works with models that she meets and that become friends. I'm like that too.

ZOO: You and Irina became close friends. How would you explain that?

GB: Most and foremost, we have our work in

common. It possesses us and unites us in a similar universe. Irina and I are very close and we're very alike. Like brother and sister, almost like twins. We're constantly in contact, almost as if we live together. But she lives far away from me and I'm too lazy to travel. Maybe we see each other a little less but we call a lot. I don't frequent a lot of artists. She is the only artist with whom I have a deep artistic relation. It's like family after all. I always was a little bit on the margins and I mainly worked. I never mixed much in the artistic movements. I'm marginal and independent.

ZOO: On a more personal note, what do you like about the real Irina?

GB: The real Irina does not exist.

ZOO: Are there any characteristics of Irina that you find more difficult?

GB: We try not to get lost in random labyrinths. Our work together suppresses bitterness and therefore we can have fun like crazy people or tell each other horrifying things.

ZOO: In one of your portraits of Irina, we see her with two different faces and a red stroke on her face. Does this have significance?

GB: This portrait is part of a series that was made in 2000 and 2001 to illustrate a text by Marquis de Sade called *120 Days of Sodom*. In this work, four prostitutes tell their story. For this painting, called *The First Day of Sodom*, Irina incarnates Duclos, one of the prostitutes and the narrator of the first day. She tells about her first sexual experience when she was still a child, hence the duality of the face.

ZOO: There is also this more figurative and literal portrait.

GB: Yes, that comes from a series in which Irina poses with different necklaces. All these portraits come from different times. She changed like everybody did. She still is a very interesting subject. She's an older lady now.

ZOO: Could you tell me more about the portrait called *La Papesse Rouge* (The Red Female Pope)?

GB: *La Papesse Rouge* is the first of a series of four female popes. Another one is yellow, the third one is white and the last is black. We once had a "fight" for one or two years and one day she surprised me by standing at my door. She went and installed herself on the chair and then *La Papesse Rouge* was made, back in 1986.

ZOO: What kind of tension is there between you and Irina when you paint or draw her?

GB: I'm in total submission to my model and I think that she is almost always right. Irina has a very important part in my story as an artist. When Irina comes to pose for me, she has a lot of décors and costumes with her. She tells me how she would like to look and I'm just there to make the portrait. But it's very easy to work with Irina. We have a very similar sensibility. If I was a photographer, I think I might have been Irina. I don't know if Irina would be me if she was a painter.

ZOO: Like Irina appeared in your work, you yourself appeared in her photos. Can you remember the first time you posed for her?

GB: The first time we had a shoot together was on the same day we first met, in 1974. She decided to make a ghostlike character of me and so we did.

ZOO: You've talked about Irina being your model for almost 30 years.

GB: I've said 30 years but it's closer to 40. There was never a last time we worked together; we still do. I made the latest portrait of her in 2011. The later oeuvres are more complex and laborious.

ZOO: There hasn't been romantic tension between you?

GB: We're not lovers. It's even better than that.