

## Western Promises

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To a large extent, the history of non-conformist art in Russia, or that work considered which was considered out of favor with government-sanctioned art, remains widely unknown in the United States for a variety of reasons that are beyond the scope of this essay, language among them. Suffice it to say, its long and unorganized history began with Stalin's imprisonment of artists in the 1930s and continued in various guises and circumstances until the 1970s with the onslaught of détente and a relaxation of tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union.

That is the subtext of this exhibition. By no means comprehensive in scope, it does capture the essential spirit of artists, writers, and musicians who formed communities in New York and New Jersey that finally allowed them to express themselves free from censorship and imprisonment.

At first, the American art world had no idea how to react to their works. Some of them seemed regional or from a much earlier era, or they contained cultural references that had little concrete context for local audiences. One needs to recall that American contemporary aesthetics had taken aim at consumerism, the gallery system, political corruption in Washington, and the Vietnam war. Nixon was seen by Russians as a hero who facilitated détente. But I remember Russian youth rechange in the 1970s accusing America of vilifying Nixon's persecution of a communist-friendly agenda, completely unaware of his role with Roy Cohn and Eugene McCarthy who had headed the House Committee on un-American affairs and destroyed the prospects of many artists, writers, and filmmakers, just as Stalin had.

So, on top of everything else, this wave of Russian immigration, the so-called Third Wave, had to rediscover the complexities of their new surroundings, and visa-versa, and divided by an uncommon language did nothing to improve matters. But thanks to the tenacious efforts of the artists and a few visionary dealers, things began to evolve in the mid-1970s. Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in SoHo, still the center of New York's art world and who worked with Josef Beuys, Andy Warhol, Leon Golub, and other "tough artists," mounted, and exhibition of painting by Vitaly

Komar and Alexander Melamid in 1976 (two years before they were allowed to emigrate). Their works satirizing Soviet icons juxtaposed with American consumer characters (like E. T.) couched in the language of traditional Western History painting was both immediately accessible and transcended cultural differences. In a sense, they laid the carpet of understanding for Emilia and Ilya Kabakov ten years later, when they began showing at Feldman making conceptual installations that were nostalgic of Soviet museums and youth Culture. Americans had now been treated to a steady diet of conceptual work, which they had become accustomed to study if not attempted to understand, so this work did not seem so foreign.

The other artists in this exhibition had to overcome a bias of mainstream taste, accomplished by exhibitions the artists mounted themselves and by certain dealers like Eduard Nahamkian and later Anatoly Bekkerman. These were people who could move between Russian and American circles and facilitate the understanding of the expressive still-lives of Vitaly Dlugy, The quasi-surreal figures of Oleg Tselkov, which were now not a far cry from Ed Paschke merged with Fernand Botero. Likewise, Yuri Kransy strikes a familiar chord with the works of Richard Linder and Botero. I am not trying to ascribe influence in any way; I think the point rather is the gap was closing and assimilation was occurring. On the other hand, who else working at that time could emulate the ornate and magic realism of Igor Tuiupanov, one of whose very great masterpieces is included here? It is unparalleled in its wit, detail, precision, and imagination.

While he did not immigrate to New York, Oscar Rabin was such a seminal and influential painter of non-conformism, and his work was much discussed, so we include two examples. And though we could not secure paintings by him in time, Bagrich Bakhanian was so forceful and expressive a figure in Noviy Amerikanetz that a group of powerful sketches represent his dynamic personality. And the drawings of Marina Temkina, which are rare and animated, are accompanied by the typewriter of Joseph Brodsky as a reminder of their collaboration.

And the work of Henry Khudyakov stands out with his shocking impasto and color, painted on everything from canvas to clothing. Garish, frenetic, and beautiful,

that have the aura of Folk or naïve art rather than the trained eye, but the skill belies a greater truth.

While many of the photographers might not aspire to the level of fine arts status, they nonetheless convey the Zeitgeist of the period in the same way that Duane Michals and others captured the spirit of the moment. Combined with photographs, newspaper clippings, and informal images, we want the spirit of the historic and almost largely forgotten moment in time to reanimate the joy and enthusiasm that dominated their activities for 20 some years. With so many of them present here with us to celebrate, we are truly grateful and express our deepest gratitude to the numerous lenders who made this endeavor possible