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## New Yalta

By VITALY KOMAR FEB. 18, 2017



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The first time I saw the [famous photo](#) of the 1945 Yalta Conference, I was shocked and enchanted. It seemed like a work of conceptual eclecticism, a collage, for those men were such different figures: Churchill, a servant of her majesty; Roosevelt, a democratically elected president; and Stalin, a bloody dictator.

I had this vision when Donald Trump was elected. In the old Yalta, there was a big difference between Stalin and the other two: He cared only about his power. Now I see these leaders — Mr. Trump, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping — and they all seem to care only about their power. This has united them, finally.

**Vitaly Komar is a Moscow-born artist who has lived and worked in New York since 1978.**

A version of this op-ed appears in print on February 19, 2017, on Page SR7 of the New York edition with the headline: New Yalta. [Today's Paper](#) | [Subscribe](#)

# Vitaly Komar's "Allegories of Justice"

RONALD FELDMAN FINE ARTS, New York

March 28–May 2, 2015

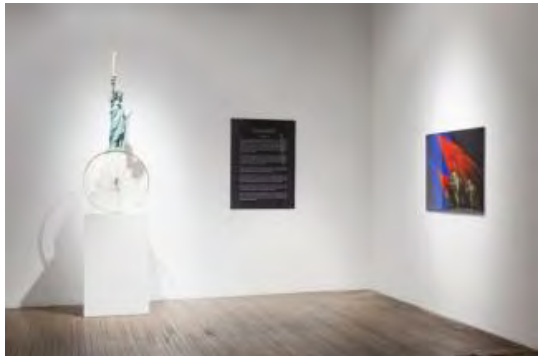
by KIM LEVIN  
May 18, 2015

Vitaly Komar, formerly half of the illustrious team Komar & Melamid, which split in 2003, continues to paint in a **style he has dubbed "New Symbolism."** For more than a decade, his virtuosic paintings of the proverbial scales of justice, tiny birds of truth, hulking Russian bears waving red flags, and circular serpents biting their own tails have been going through their allegorical paces, wrapping religion in history and spirituality in cosmic swirls. Melamid, meanwhile, has kept a lower profile.

Komar's recent exhibition at New York's Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, "Allegories of Justice," which includes a few earlier works by the former team, raises a number of questions. What happens when an artist duo splits up, as Komar & Melamid did? What happens when the context of **any artist's production**—in this case conceptual sociopolitical work satirically skewering both Soviet ideology and American consumerism—vanishes into thin air, as the Soviet system did, leaving them and other Soviet artists without a framework? And how do they continue to make art in the context of the internal void of a suddenly collapsed culture? Also, in the case of Komar & Melamid—who left Moscow in 1977 and moved to New York the next year—how was their work affected by the external disruptions of emigration to a diametrically opposite society?



Vitaly Komar, *Victory over the Sun*, 2010–2015.  
Tempera and oil on canvas. 36 x 108 inches.



View of Vitaly Komar, "Allegories of Justice,"  
Ronald Feldman Fine Arts. New York. 2015.

Komar & Melamid were among the Soviet Union's best nonconformist artists: they founded "Sots Art"—a merger of Socialist Realism, politicized Pop, and Conceptual art—and called their first joint show back in 1967 "Retrospectivism." In 1974, they were arrested during an outdoor exhibition in Moscow that has come to be known as "The Bulldozer Exhibition," because the government used bulldozers to destroy the artworks. (1) Their first US show, in 1976 at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, consisted of smuggled works.

As emigrés, they expanded their conceptual critiques—establishing a corporation to buy and sell human souls (Warhol donated his), and making allegorical portraits of Reagan and self-portraits as Lenin and Stalin. They had scientific polls taken in 11 countries of the "most wanted" and "least wanted" paintings for their series "People's Choice" (1994–97), and produced those banal paintings, only to conclude that "looking for freedom, we found slavery." For a project titled Ecollaboration (1995–99), they went to Thailand to teach elephants to paint; paintings by Renee, the elephant-painter, auctioned by Christie's, helped save other endangered Thai elephants. Their final joint project, a series of paintings titled "Symbols of the Big Bang" (2001–2003), involved abstraction, spirituality, and cosmic dualities, pointing the way, as it were, to Komar's recent work.

Among the symbolic replays and elaborations of scales, swords, and bears brandishing red flags in "Allegories of Justice" is one intriguing, atypical canvas: *Pushkin's Cat* (2010–15). It pictures the expanse of an indigo-blue night sky with a central starburst and an indistinct whirlwind of green lettering. Down near the lower edge, an unsmiling cat on a chain peers out at the world. This wise cat is the storytelling narrator of a long epic poem by Alexander Pushkin, "Ruslan and Ludmilla," a Russian classic dating from 1817. In the poem, the cat—bound by a golden chain "to a green oak by the sea"—walks slowly round and round the tree while retelling ancient Russian folktales and legends, and dreaming sadly of better days gone by. *Pushkin's Cat* sums up the mood of Komar's recent work. The familiar symbols and allegories seemed to have grown distant, generic, and nostalgic. Could it be that the artist, like Pushkin's cat, is chained to his own painterly past?

According to Komar's 2009 description of New Symbolism, symbolic allegories may well be "conceptual signifiers that coexist seamlessly with painting's reverie." They can arguably be interpreted, as the press



(Left) Vitaly Komar, *Victory over the Sun*, 2010–2015. (Right) Vitaly Komar, *Pushkin's Cat*, 2010–2015.



Vitaly Komar, *Pushkin's Cat*, 2010–2015.2015.



Vitaly Komar, *Bear's Justice*, 2010–2015.

release suggests, as a “reflection on the current international political situation.” Or could it be that what’s lacking in Komar’s recent work is the biting satire and critique in the work of the former team? It has become apparent that while Komar may be the better painter, it is very likely that Melamid is the more conceptual and skeptical artist. If only they could bury whatever hatchet caused their breakup and join together for one last body of work to aggressively confront the current economic and **sociopolitical situation in Putin’s weird post-Soviet Russia** and in a chaotic post-Bush world of failed states, degraded environments, and hyper-capitalism gone berserk.

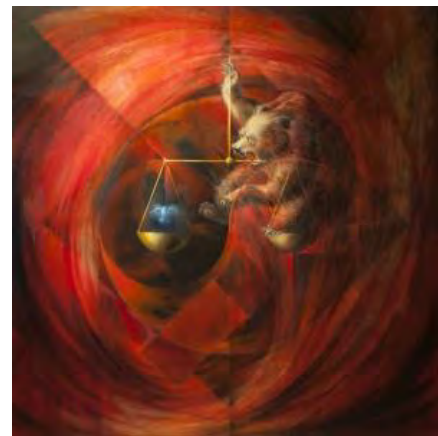
Beyond the ideologies of production and consumption, past a century in which two former superpowers needed each other for balance, our geopolitical urgencies and planetary anxieties are now unilateral. Together Komar and Melamid might find a way for their art to reflect on our global Sixth Extinction and the environment in the epoch of the **Anthropocene. That’s a tall order but if anyone can tackle it, together they might.** Their swirling painterly flourishes and acerbic critiques, leavened by a dose of cynicism, would at the very least provide a glorious cap to their career.

(1) “The Bulldozer Exhibition” of September 15, 1974, an illegal exhibition, apparently had no other recorded name. It took place in the Belyaev area of Moscow.

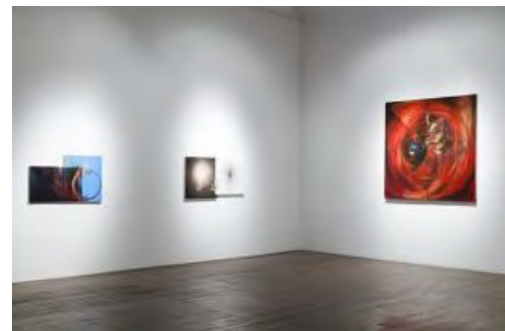
Kim Levin is a widely published art critic and curator of museum exhibitions in Eastern and Western Europe, Asia, and the US.



Vitaly Komar, *Liberty as Justice*, 2010–2015.



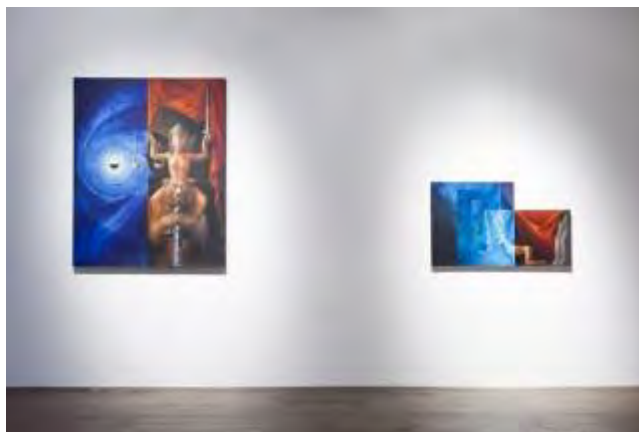
Vitaly Komar, *The Tiny Bird and the Bear*, 2010–2015.



View of Vitaly Komar, “Allegories of Justice,” Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, 2015.



Vitaly Komar, *Project of a Monument to the Bulldozer Show No. 1*, 2010–2015.



(Left) Vitaly Komar, *Bear's Justice*, 2010–2015.  
(Right) Vitaly Komar, *Sentence to the Hunter*, 2010–2015.



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Bavilsky, Dmitry. "Vitaly Komar: 'I Am an Eclectic Conceptual.'" *The Art Newspaper Russia* No. 3 Issue 32 (April 2015): 36-37.

# Виталий Комар: «Я концептуальный эклeктик»

Текст Дмитрий Бавильский

*В нью-йоркской галерее Рональда Фельдмана открылась выставка «Аллегии Правосудия» (Allegories of Justice), на которой классик соц-арта показывает новые работы*

Соц-арт, как известно, был придуман двумя людьми, Виталием Комаром и Александром Меламидом, еще в 1970-е годы. С тех пор много воды утекло, изменились целые страны, а соц-арт, ставший одним из самых важных и авторитетных художественных стилей конца XX века, жив, целехонек, и ничего ему не делается. Воспользовавшись как поводом выставкой, на которой Виталий Комар (с 2003 года художник работает без Меламида) показывает цикл *Аллегии Правосудия* (*Allegories of Justice*), *TANR* расспросила классика о жизни в иммиграции, одиночном плавании по миру искусства, его старых и новых проектах.

Один художник мне рассказывал о том, что перед своим отъездом на Запад вы разрешили картину, являющуюся копией работы Роя Лихтенштейна, на несколько частей и раздали людям, которые были на вашей отъездной, с тем чтобы потом собрать эту картину — если, конечно, случится встретиться вновь. Боюсь, что память подводит вашего художника. Серия, в которую входили версии работ американских поп-артистов, называлась *Постарт* (1973–1974). Концепция ее заключалась в показе знаменитых картин современных художников такими, какими они станут выглядеть в будущем, после природных и атомных катастроф и работы реставраторов. Своего рода «помпейские фрески» — современность, ставшая древностью.

Сделанные в размер оригинала версии были не разрезаны (!), а обожжены паяльной лампой для газовой сварки и затем покрыты темным лаком с микрокракелюрами и патиной времени. Эти работы вместе с другими работами соц-арта и концептуальной эклектики были вывезены на Запад и в начале 1976 года выставлены в галерее Фельдмана, почти за два года до моего отъезда. Также версию работ Лихтенштейна и Уорхола я выставлял после Бульдозерной выставки, в том же 1974 году, на разрешенном властями однодневном показе картин неофициального искусства в Измайловском парке.

Понятие «неофициальное искусство» возникло ведь именно после этой выставки?

Ровно наоборот. После Бульдозерной выставки, начиная с 1975 года, 40 лет назад, «неофициальное» искусство Советской России приобрело своего рода «официальный» статус. Как вы знаете, со стилистической точки зрения соединение «официального» и «неофициального» было инновацией нашего соц-арта.

Понятия «неофициальное», «подпольное» или «нонконформистское» субъективны и многозначны. Более бесспорным для историка искусства является термин хронологический, а именно «послевоенный авангард» (70 лет). Понятие «послевоенный авангард» прижилось и признано повсеместно, однако интересно, что возник он в странах Восточной Европы, изначально в Югославии.

Какой вам запомнилась Бульдозерная выставка?

Она стала драматической кульминацией истории искусства не только Москвы, но и всего послевоенного авангарда. Когда я увидел бульдозеры, я окаменел. Как во сне я смотрел на цензоров в штатском, которые ломали наши работы, били и арестовывали тех, кто оказывал им сопротивление. Но, когда они толкнули меня лицом в осеннюю грязь и стали вырывать из моих рук мой *Двойной автопортрет с Меламидом в виде Ленина и Сталина*, страх исчез. До этого они уже исковеркали несколько работ нашего соц-арта, но этот автопортрет был мне особенно близок. В тот момент, когда один из них наступил ногой на оргалит и хотел сломать его, я представил себя не в виде Ленина или Сталина, а в виде Толстого или Ганди. Я поднял голову и тихо, с доверительной интонацией, сказал: «Ты что? Ведь это шедевр!» Наши



«В мастерской у меня нет ни Интернета, ни кухни. Когда я там живу, то не готовлю, выхожу в кафе или в один из рестораников»

## Виталий Комар

Советско-американский художник

До 2003 работал в соавторстве с Александром Меламидом. Дуэт Комар и Меламид считается основателем направления «соц-арт»

Год рождения 1943

Образование Московское высшее художественно-промышленное училище (б. Строгановское)

1974 участвовал в Бульдозерной выставке, на которой был уничтожен *Двойной автопортрет*, написанный им в соавторстве с Александром Меламидом

1978 эмигрировал сначала в Израиль, затем в США. Сотрудничает с Галереей Рональда Фельдмана, Нью-Йорк. Более 60 персональных выставок и ретроспектив. Работы находятся в Государственной Третьяковской галерее, Москва; Государственном Русском музее, Санкт-Петербург; Музее современного искусства, Нью-Йорк; Метрополитен-музее, Нью-Йорк; Музее Соломона Гугенхайма, Нью-Йорк; Музее современного искусства, Сан-Франциско; Музее Виктории и Альберта, Лондон; Стеделик-музее, Амстердам; Музее Людвиг, Кельн; Музее Израиля, Иерусалим; Национальной галерее, Канберра, и во многих других

глаза встретились, и между нами возник какой-то необъяснимый, «иной» контакт. Ожесточение сошло с его лица. Может быть, при слове «шедевр» он вспомнил что-то важное, но давно забытое? Не знаю. Но эту работу он не сломал, а просто бросил в кузов грузового автомобиля. Он выполнил приказ не допустить выставку не без лишнего усердия.

Минутой позже, все еще лежа в грязи, я проводил глазами удаляющийся в историю грузовик с мусором, и неожиданно глупая улыбка расплылась на моем лице. Может быть, это был мой звездный час? Может, каждый художник втайне или неосознанно мечтает о такой уникальной реакции зрителя?

Вы помните, как уезжали из СССР? Много ли удалось вывезти картин?

Подробностей вывоза я не знаю, никогда этим не интересовался, так как с нашего согласия этим занимались отъезжавшие на Запад друзья наших друзей. Помню только, что одно не натянутое на подрамник полотно состояло из цветных точек и было разрешено к вывозу как скатерть. Почему распался ваш дуэт с Меламидом? Причины нашего с Аликом начала индивидуальной работы были разные: психологические, материалистические, идеалистические и так далее. Со временем некоторые субъективные причины стали казаться более важными, а другие — более эфемерными и символическими.

Проявления инстинкта саморазрушения — одна из самых больших загадок. Именно он заставляет китов выбрасываться на берег, альтруистов — идти на смерть, защищая родных и близких, или принимать смертные муки во имя идеи, но одновременно этот же инстинкт может превратить людей в безнадёжно эгоистических алкоголиков и наркоманов.

До Захера-Мазоха и до авангардных попыток разрушить старые профессиональные суеверия психологи фокусировались только на двух основных инстинктах — самосохранения и размножения.

Предшественники авангарда, русские нигилисты видели в Пушкине старомодного врага и не увидели самих себя в строчках из *Пира во время чумы*: «Все, все, что гибелью грозит, / Для сердца смертного таит / Неизъяснимы наслаждения...»

Инстинкт саморазрушения свойственен не только романтикам?

Вспомните крайне авангардный жест позднего Марселя Дюшана — декларирование «права художника ничего не делать».

Подобная концепция может дать художнику ощущение эфемерной свободы, независимости от своего «бренда», от коммерческого диктата художественного рынка.

Смерть автора не означает его «развала». «Комар и Меламид» остались в истории искусства. Остался «бесконечный конец» нашего соавторства. Осталась легенда. Остались работы. Но, кроме этого, каждый из нас получил невероятную возможность прожить еще одну жизнь. Вы пошли на этот разрыв несмотря на то, что разрушили бренд, убили курицу, несущую золотые яйца.

Увы, в своем одиночестве я не одинок. «Комар и Меламид» всегда со мной. Очевидно, смерть нашей курицы стала нашей реинкарнацией. Я продолжаю работать в соавторстве с историей искусства. А что касается золотых яиц — неожиданно они стали дороже.

Как вам работаете в одиночестве?

Я понимаю соавторство максимально широко и метафорично. После появления «параллельного мира искусства», после массового распространения репродукций, стало невозможно работать «не в соавторстве». Но авторский нарциссизм поддерживает иллюзию собственной исключительности и блокирует признание очевидных влияний.



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С другой стороны, нужно, наоборот, спрашивать, каково это — работать вдвоем?

Однажды очень талантливый молодой художник показывал мне свои работы. Когда я спросил: «Кого вы считаете своим соавтором?» — он удивился и ответил: «Никого! Таких не было и нет!» — «А мне кажется, — сказал я, — что вы работаете в соавторстве с абстрактными экспрессионистами, например с де Кунингом». Он обиделся: «Наверное, в России вы не знали, что де Кунинг давно умер!» Мне пришлось объяснить ему, что я считаю высшей формой соавторства участие в том или ином исторически сложившемся, коллективном стиле, независимо от того, кто из них и как давно умер или продолжает жить...

Как у вас устроен творческий процесс?

Я ночую в мастерской в тех случаях, когда хочу продолжать уже начатую работу ранним утром, почти сразу после того, как проснусь. Дома я делаю (как правило, на бумаге) небольшие подготовительные эскизы к работам и текстам, а в мастерской избранные мною эскизы увеличиваю (на холсте или дереве) и там же продолжаю и заканчиваю.

В мастерской у меня нет ни Интернета, ни кухни. Когда я там живу, то не готовлю, выхожу в кафе или в один из ресторанчиков. Иногда я работаю над эскизами большую часть своего времени. Раньше я их никому не показывал, но в последнее время стал выставлять и эскизы.

Какая тема у вас сейчас в разработке?

Я заканчиваю серию новых работ *Аллегорий Правосудия* (*Allegories of Justice*) в нью-йоркской галерее Рональда Фельдмана. Я выставляюсь у него с 1976 года (почти 40 лет)...

Переход от одной работы к другой — это удивительно волнующее приключение. Я не спешу, получаю удовольствие от процесса. Году три назад я начал серию *Аллегорий Правосудия*. Атрибуты аллегорий связаны с визуальными символами, эмблемами и, шире, знаками.

Один из древних европейских атрибутов правосудия — весы. Меня очень увлекла идея соединить образ весов с восточным символом инь и ян. Получился новый символ евразийской эклектики.

Идея и образ этих работ — в двойственном видении мирового баланса. Нарушение этого баланса я вижу в разрывах хаоса — как природного, так и социального. В моих *Аллегориях Правосудия* образ гибрида весов и инь и ян — это символ вселенского баланса, и в природном, и в социальном космосе. Западная эмблема правосудия, весы, впервые соединяется с восточным символом инь и ян. Этот концептуальный «диптих» становится «триптихом», когда в разных работах в роли олицетворения правосудия показаны медведи, бабочки, кот, олень (Актеон), Уроборос, птицы и так далее.

Что такое для вас быть современным?

Откровенно говоря, я не понимаю смысла слов «быть современным» вне контекста.

Вопрос производит впечатление незаконченной фразы. Быть современным журналистом? Современным юристом? Современным историком искусства? Современным зрителем? Современным мужем? Современным мужчиной? Современным европейцем? Азиатом? Евразийцем? Христианином? Евреем? Эклектиком? Гражданином России? Американцем? Русским американцем? Просто современным человеком?

Любой человек, художник он или нет, совпадает со своим временем или не совпадает. Время, в котором мы живем, может нравиться, а может приносить дискомфорт и желание из него выпасть, как это сейчас делает вся наша страна. Я задаю этот вопрос вам как актуальному художнику, так как, во-первых, художники опережают время, формируя ментальные образы и структуры, а во-вторых, в деятельности своей художники должны соответствовать логике момента, постоянно проверяя себя, постоянное ли они делают искусство. Я люблю думать, что иногда изображение предшествует слову, может обогатить словарь новым словом. В первобытной древности некоторые изображения на камне или песке могли стать объектами называния, причиной возникновения новых слов, которых до этого в языке не было. Например, изображение треугольника могло предшествовать слову «треугольник». Так мы вступаем в безнадежную бездну семантики, начинаем говорить о переводе языка визуального



*«Проявления инстинкта саморазрушения — одна из самых больших загадок. Именно он заставляет китов выбрасываться на берег, альтруистов — идти на смерть, защищая родных и близких...»*

1, 2, 3, 4.  
Из цикла  
*Аллегория  
Правосудия*.  
2014–2015



## Как был придуман соц-арт

Знакомая жены Меламид нашла для нас возможность заработать, достала заказ на юбилейное оформление пионерского лагеря. Начали в декабре 1971-го. Стоял жуткий мороз. Мы работали и жили в дощатом летнем клубе. В щели задувал ледяной ветер. Согревали нас два электрических рефлектора, водка и надежды на гонорар. В один незабываемый вечер, согреваясь всеми этими способами, мы сидели за столом, ругали себя и каялись: вот и мы стали халтурщиками, из-за денег работаем и мерзнем, как продажные собаки... А что, если в каждом из нас скрывается такой чудак-художник, который мог бы делать это вдохновенно и искренне? Наверное, такой гений писал бы советские лозунги и цитаты как свой идеал, как крик души. Изображал бы родных, жену и детей в официальном стиле вождей и героев. Засыпая, я думал: «Нет, этого не может быть!» Утром я понял: то, что мы нашли, — это не просто новый персонаж, это «персонаж-течение». А два человека — это уже течение. Вот мы и начали обсуждать его имя.

на наш с вами родной язык, «великий и могучий», печатный и непечатный.

В 1973 году я работал над многостилевым полиптихом *Биография современника*. Когда я увидел перевод названия в *ArtNews*, я достал словарь и задумался. В английском слово «contemporary» не созвучно слову «time».

Поэтические созвучия сильно влияют на восприятие смысла. Вероятно, быть современным художником или писателем без английского так же затруднительно, как во времена раннего Средневековья быть богословом без греческого или латыни. И шире — без хорошего знания истории разных стран и народов.

Желание совпадать (или не совпадать) со своим временем — важная мотивация для творческого человека.

Попытки понять причины своей любви к искусству приводили меня в разное время к разным представлениям. Причем все они не заменяли друг друга, а сосуществовали и сосуществуют. Мой соц-арт быстро стал частью концептуальной эклектики. Я концептуальный эклектик. В детстве я любил вспоминать и изображать свои сны. *Диптих времени сна и времени бодрствования* был моим первым шагом к эклектике.

В юности я открыл Фрейда и увлекся его интерпретацией мотивов творчества. Позднее я открыл для себя Юнга, затем Фромма и Лакана. Все эти разные видения мотивов творчества сосуществуют в моей голове, как разные овощи в миске с салатом. Может быть, это и есть отражение нашего времени? Мы перестали видеть принципиальную разницу между синтезом и эклектикой.

Кто вам ближе со своими теориями: Фрейд, Юнг или Лакан? В моей «миске с салатом» перемешаны либидо Фрейда, архетипы Юнга, социальное Фромма, язык Лакана и быстрое шрение. Концептуальная эклектика — миролюбивое смешение правильного и неправильного. Один из моих самых любимых ваших проектов — эпохальный «Выбор народа».

Идея проекта *Выбор народа* вполне соц-артистская. С самого начала в своих застольных беседах с Аликом часто возвращались к главной идее соцреализма:

«Искусство должно служить народным массам, а не декадентским вкусам буржуазной элиты». Например, министр культуры мог говорить: «Товарищ Сталин, массы хотят видеть ваши портреты!» И товарищ Сталин не спорил и только добавлял, что и другие достойные советские герои тоже заслуживают быть изображенными. Но как мы можем это проверить? Какую картину хотят видеть массы? В СССР правдивая статистика была государственной тайной.

И только в Нью-Йорке мы узнали о существовании на Западе общедоступных компаний и центров опросов общественного мнения, которые за известную плату научными методами проводят общенациональные опросы на любые темы. Нам оставалось только найти спонсоров и вместе с ними составить опросник на тему «Какую картину хочет видеть большинство населения?».

Вопросов было много: ваш любимый цвет, формат, стиль, жанр? Вплоть до таких: как часто вы бываете в музеях и на выставках? Хотите бы вы, чтобы ваш сын или дочь стали мужем или женой художника? По результатам верхних цифр (вкус ботаники) мы делали детальный эскиз «наиболее желанной картины», а по нижним цифрам (вкус меньшинства) — эскиз «наименее желанной». Сделать оригиналы по нашим эскизам мы поручили художникам той страны, в которой проводился тот или иной опрос.

Интересно, что *Выбор народа* в США и в РФ был весьма сходен: «наиболее желанная» картина — пейзаж с преобладанием голубого неба и голубой воды, а «наименее желанная» — абстракция с остроугольными геометрическими фигурами с преобладанием оранжевого цвета.

После того как мы с Аликом начали работать индивидуально, одним из моих первых проектов стал *Мой выбор*. Я ответил сам себе на все во-

просы вопросника и в результате получилась эклектика — как из пейзажа, так и из геометрических фигур. «Наиболее желанная» народами картина совместилась у меня с «наименее желанной». На Московской биеннале 2005 года этот полиптих выставлялся в галерее Марата Гельмана.

Есть ли у вас планы выставиться в Москве?

Да, 24 марта откроется групповая выставка *Современники будущего. Еврейские художники в русском авангарде* в Центре толерантности при Еврейском музее, где будут и мои работы из российских коллекций. Об этом мне сказал один из кураторов выставки Иосиф Бакштейн. ●

## ГАЛЕРЕЯ РОНАЛЬДА ФЕЛЬДМАНА

Знаменитая нью-йоркская галерея была основана в ноябре 1971 года Рональдом и Фрейдой Фельдман на пересечении 33-й и 74-й улиц. Через десять лет, значительно расширившись, галерея переехала в Сохо. Художники галереи участвовали в более чем 2 тыс. национальных и международных выставок. Галерея Фельдмана показывает современную живопись, скульптуру, установки, рисунки, печатные издания и перформансы, являясь одним из наиболее последовательных пропагандистов и проводников русского искусства. Среди художников, с которыми сотрудничает галерея Фельдмана, — Виталий Комар, содружество «Комар и Меламид», Александр Бродский (в одиночестве и в соавторстве с Ильей Уткиным). Здесь выставлялись Вагрич Бахчанян, Йозеф Бойс, Марсель Дюшан, Илья Кабаков, Энди Уорхол. В этом сезоне в галерее прошла большая выставка Роя Лихтенштейна.





## Chimpanzee's Polaroids Expected to Fetch Big Money at Auction

by Allison Meier on May 16, 2013



*Mikki the chimpanzee learning to use a camera with Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid (all images courtesy Sotheby's)*

While staggering auction record peaks were summited this week by some talented human artists, a more amateur representative of an underrepresented artist species is expected to gain some auction attention of his own. Photographs by Mikki the chimpanzee that show blurry views of Moscow are estimated to fetch between \$75,000–100,000 at Sotheby's.



*Mikki posing in Red Square*

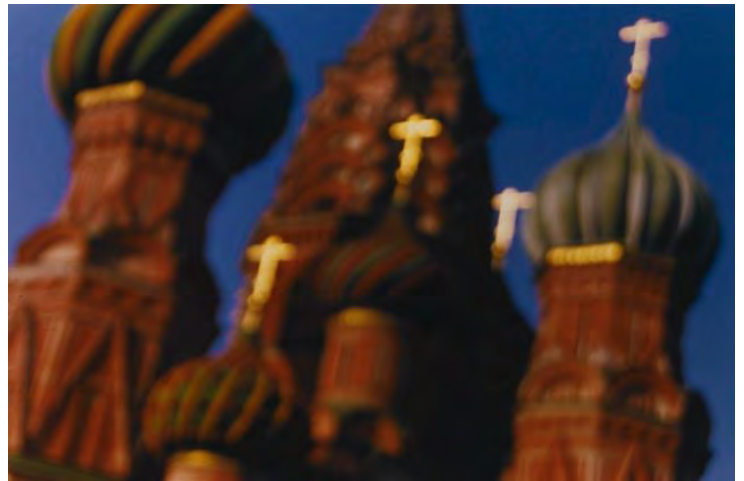


The lot of 18 photographs is part of the June 5 “Changing Focus — A Collection of Russian and Eastern European Contemporary Photography” auction in London. They include both Mikki’s clarity-challenged captures of Moscow’s Red Square and other city sights, as well as documentation of Mikki learning to use a polaroid, analogue, and antique large-format camera with Russian-born American conceptual artists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid. Called “Our Moscow Through the Eyes of Mikki,” the 1998 collaboration between human and simian was part of Komar and Melamid’s broader ongoing project of collaborating with animals. Back in 1987 they worked with a dog named Tranda to “draw” with paw prints canine-friendly subjects like the outline of a bone, and in 1995 they painted busts of George Washington with an elephant named Rene at the Toledo Zoo in Ohio. They even tried out gnawed wood sculptures with beavers in 1998. Komar and Melamid reportedly first encountered the chimpanzee Mikki at the Moscow Circus, according to *Metro*. While chimpanzees have similar vision to humans, including bifocal sight, depth perception, and distinguishing the variations in colors, it’s hard to say whether Mikki could really conceive of the idea of capturing what was before him with these strange devices. However, Suad Garayeva, the curator of contemporary art at Sotheby’s, told *Metro* that “Mikki got quite excited with the results.” These results, the fuzzy views of the spires and people of Russia, may not have much in the way of control, but there are plenty of surprising angles and a dislocation from the expected in their frames.

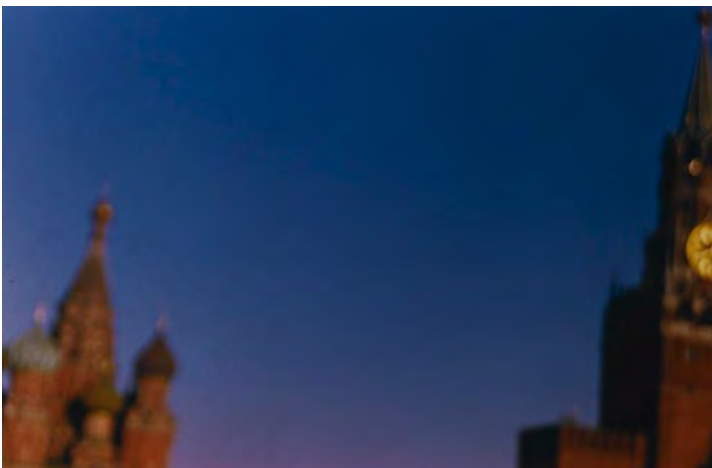
Below are a few of Mikki’s shots up for auction.



*Mikki’s photograph of curious spectators*



*Red Square photographed by Mikki*



*A blurry Moscow view by Mikki*



*An interesting capture of light in one of Mikki’s photographs*





*A long exposure of the sky and Moscow architecture by Mikki*

*Photographs from Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid's "Our Moscow Through the Eyes of Mikki" are up for auction in "Changing Focus – A Collection of Russian and Eastern European Contemporary Photography" on June 5 at Sotheby's in London.*



# French Museum Shows America's Most Wanted Painting (As Painted By Two Russians)



The Most Wanted Paintings, September 5, 1995. A project by Komar + Melamid commissioned by Dia Art Foundation. Courtesy of La Panacée.

Forty-four percent of Americans prefer the color blue. Sixty-four percent like traditional art more than modern. Eighty-eight percent prefer pictures that show outdoor scenes, in which wild animals such as deer are preferable domestic cats by twenty-four percentage points. Humans should be historical figures or ordinary people, depicted fully clothed. (Only three percent of Americans admit to preferring nudes.) And the ideal dimensions of a painting? The size of a dishwasher or a nineteen inch television.

All of these statistics were collected in 1994 by Marttila & Kiley, a polling firm hired by the Russian-American artists Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid, who had the notably American ambition of making **America's most wanted painting**. (The result is pictured above.) Komar and Melamid also painted **America's least wanted** (a mélange of maroon and gray triangles), and they subsequently created the most and least wanted paintings for countries including Holland, China, Kenya and their own mother Russia. The results are currently on view at La Panacée in Montpellier as part of Electric Conversations, the museum's inaugural group show on the theme of art and social interaction.



The sort of social interaction sought by Komar and Melamid was deceptively simple, and disarmingly sincere. **“Whether it’s the President or the artist, there’s a border between us and the people,”** Melamid explained in a 1994 interview with *The Nation*. **“There are some channels for communication between the classes but very few, because socially people are almost totally separate.”** Through the political quantum of dialogue – the telephone poll – the two artists were expressing the public aesthetic will, and if the painted results were farcical, that merely illustrated the folly of polling as political feedback. (If ***this*** is America’s most wanted painting, just imagine what laws the President and Congress think you want passed.)

Komar and Melamid are often called satirists, and their work is described as ironic, but neither of those designations is right. The truth is that they reflect the absurdity around them, just as they did when they were dissident artists in the Soviet Union. And although they no longer work together, the most wanted painting series is a rousing reminder that Komar and Melamid are two of America’s most needed artists.

## Vitaly Komar: Exploring the Lines Between Us

By Susan Edwards



*Questions New York-Moscow-New York*, collaboration between Douglas Davis (right) and Komar & Melamid (left), 1977. Both signs ask, "Where is the Line Between Us?"

In a recent talk [at the Getty Research Institute](#), artist Vitaly Komar described himself as a man of duality. Born in the USSR in 1943 and living in the U.S. since 1978, he identifies as half Russian and half American. He sees Russian culture as something between Asia and Europe, between Christianity and Islam. And most of his artistic career has been as half of a duo.

From the 1960s through 2003, Komar worked with artist Alex Melamid as the artistic duo Komar and Melamid. Together, they founded the Sots Art (Soviet Pop and Conceptual Art) movement in Russia, which co-opted the visual language of official Soviet state-sponsored art and propaganda.

In their work, Komar and Melamid often explored ideological and aesthetic dualities with the aim of uncovering the invisible lines that both join and divide humans. In their 1977 collaboration with artist Douglas Davis, *Questions New York-Moscow-New York*, a thick black line bisects photographs of the artists. From each side of the line, they hold signs that ask "Where is the line between us?" Here, the line becomes a symbol of the political division between Soviet Russia and the U.S. during the Cold War, but also asks us to consider ways that the two countries are bound to one another.





*Skyscraper With Stalin Bust* (from *Anarchistic Synthesis* series), 1986-87, Komar and Melamid. Tempera and oil on canvas, six panels, 107.5 X 48 in. overall

Such lines also appear in Komar and Melamid's diptychs and polyptychs. The panels are painted in radically different styles—socialist realism in one, abstract expressionism in another. The result is a juxtaposition of styles and images that asks us to consider the nature of visual representation itself. In his talk, Komar said the lines between the panels join them in a dialogue about the ideologies these stylistic modes represent.

To Komar, even abstract images are allegories, as they conjure up stories and meanings from the past. For example, in Russia a black square evokes the Suprematism of Kasimir Malevich. In Russian, the word for "beautiful" is closely related to the word for "red," which is heavy with meaning in communist ideology.

Komar took us back to his childhood to explain how a particular kind of duality was expressed in Soviet imagery. The Soviets banned avant-garde art, but also absorbed its elements for their own ends. This image from his elementary school is dominated by a giant head of Lenin in the style of socialist realism. But behind the head is a solid red triangle that evokes modernism—abstraction that co-exists with realism.



Example of a typical installation of the bust of Lenin in soviet schools.

In Russia, Komar reminded us, art was supposed to be made for the masses. But how did artists know what the masses wanted to see? When they came to the U.S., Komar and Melamid decided to ask. With the help of the Dia Art Foundation, they hired an ad agency to survey people around the world about what kind of colors, subjects, and styles they wanted to see. The result was the People's Choice project (1994–1997). From the data ([which is all available here](#)), Komar and Melamid were able to create canvases that represent the most wanted (and unwanted) visual imagery for each country.

*America's Most Wanted* is a realistic landscape of blue sky and blue lake featuring a figure of George Washington. Russia's most wanted? A similar landscape of blue water and sky—but instead of George Washington, Jesus. And instead of adults at leisure, children at work.



*America's Most Wanted* from the *People's Choice* series, 1994, Komar and Melamid

In the least-wanted images from both the U.S. and Russia, we find more common ground: both countries deride abstract compositions of red triangles. In this project, Komar and Melamid managed to translate attitudes about taste and style into visual forms that characterize a nation. The result invites a conversation about what unites and divides these nations, and about the visual languages we use to communicate with one another.



## Viešnage

# Švari sąžinė - prastos atminties pasekmė

Lietuvoje vieši pasaulinio garso menininkas **Vitalijus Komaras**, vienas iš dueto "Komar & Melamid" narių. Dabar jis kuria vienas, tačiau sako: "Mano bendraautorai - meno istorija ir mokytojai."

MINDAUGAS KLUSAS

**P**akanka žvilgtelėti į internetą, jog suvoktum, kokio ryškio žvaigždė lankosi Lietuvos pašangėje. V.Komaro (g. 1943 m.) ir jo bičiulio Aleksandro Melamido (g. 1945 m.) kūrybinė biografija turtinga ir intriguojanti. Būsimieji nekonformistinio meno kūrėjai mokėsi Maskvos dailės mokykloje, baigė Stroganovo meno ir dizaino institutą. Po 1967-ųjų pasigarsino sudarantys kūrybinį duetą. Pirmoji jų paroda įvyko "Mėlynosios paukštės" kavinėje Maskvoje. V.Komaras ir A.Melamidas kūrė "socarto" (angl. "Sots Art") stilių, kuris apėmė socrealizmo ir dadaizmo elementus. Nekyla abejonių, jog pasaulinę šlovę V.Komaras ir A.Melamidas nusikalė šmaikščiai, ironiškai ir meniškai perkūrę sovietų "ikonografiją". Linksmų reakcijų, juoko netrūko ir per V.Komaro paskaitą, kurią Vilniaus žydų viešojoje bibliotekoje jis pradėjo antrašte "Švari sąžinė - prastos atminties pasekmė". Šios minties ir paskaitos turinys daugiau nebuvo gretinami. Tiesiog V.Komaras rusiškai tariama anglų kalba papasakojo apie savo ir bendraautoario A.Melamido kūrybą.

### Naikino buldozeriais

Labiausiai bičiulius išgarsino vadinamoji buldozerių paroda, vykusi 1974 metų rugsėjo 15 dieną Maskvoje po atviro dangumi. Daugumą ekspozicijos darbų ideologijos prievalzdai sunaikino buldozeriais. "Tai buvo tikrasis palaiminimas ir pripažinimas. Tačiau antumet to nesupratau, išgyvenome staubingą depresiją ir atskirį", - persisitikimą su kūrybinio rašymo dirbtuvių "Summer Literature Seminars" dalyviais teigė V.Komaras. Vis dėlto po kurio laiko menininkams konceptualistams leista ekspozuoti savo darbus. Jie du buvo pirmieji, kurie surengė bendrą JAV ir Sovietų Sąjungos menininkų parodą. Tais metais sovietai ir amerikiečiai pradėjo bendradarbiauti kosmoso tyrimų programoje. 1977-aisiais, kai Leonidas Brežnevas pasirašė tarptautinę sutartį dėl šeimų suvienijimo, V.Komaras ir A.Melamidas išvyko į Izraelį, 1978-aisiais persikėlė gyventi į Niujorką. Pirmoji "Komar & Melamid" paroda JAV vyko Ronaldo Feldmano galerijoje.

Laisvajame pasaulyje menininkai įgyvendino spalvingiausius savo projektus: pirkė Andy Warholo sielą ir pardavė ją už 30 rublių, sendino jo "Campbell" skardines, tapė kartu su Tallando dramblių, vienuolikose valstybų samdė visuomenės nuomonės tyrimų agentūras, norėdami sužinoti, kokius vaizdus dauguma nori matyti paveiksluose. Bičiulių keliai išsiskyrė 2003-aisiais, po 36 kūrybos metų. Interviu LŽ Niujorke gyvenantis **Vitalijus Komaras** trumpai paaiškino, kodėl taip įvyko.

### Stačiakampių pasaulis

- Vilnius - bene pačiose pirmosiose jūsų kūrybinės biografijos eilutėse. Regis, ir šis tas daugiau jus sieja?

- Gyvendamas Maskvoje apie Vilnų girdėjau daug. Žinojome apie Lietuvą, istorinius ryšius. Mes, maskvičiai dailininkai, jutome, kad Vilniuje



"Gyvename stačiakampių pasaulyje", - ši mintis prieš keturiasdešimt metų atviliojo dailininką V.Komarą į Vilnų. | Fot. Jurgis Čiurbauskas



Šis darbas pavadintas "Kryžius ir pjautuvus".

daugiau kūrybinės laisvės, kad lietuviškas menas artimesnis europietiskam. Pagrindinis socrealizmo meno šūkis buvo toks: "Forma - nacionalinis, turinys - socialistinis". Meno stiliumi respublikoms leista šiek tiek skirtis nuo centrinio - maskvietiško - kumertono. Studijavau Stroganovo Institute. Regis, 1965 ar 1966 metais Lietuvos dailės institutas rengė studentų mokslinę konferenciją. Labai apsidžiaugiau, kai man pasiūlė dalyvauti. Su bičiuliu A.Melamidu konferencijai sukūrėme pirmą bendrą darbą. Mane kuris laikas domino viena tema - kompozicija apskritime. Atkreipkite dėmesį, gyvena-

me stačiakampių civilizacijoje. Senoji apskrita populiarioji kultūros forma liko tik monetose. Primityvūs menas nepripažino geometrijos - urviniai žmonės tiesiog palė ant sienų, kūrinių neturėjo ribų. Rėmai atsirado vėliau - apskriti, stačiakampiai. Ratas buvo rojus simbolis, o stačiakampis, kvadratas - žemės. Nes tai stabili, patogiai orientuoti: pietis, šiaurė, rytai, vakarai. Kur kitur studijavosi apskritą kompoziciją, jei ne senuosiuose medalluose? Iš pradžių Ermitaže su Aliku stebėjome italų protorenesanso medallus (pavyzdžiui, Pisanello), jų kompozicijos kitimą. Renesanso kom-

**I Niujorko galerijas dabar susirinko visi dabarties ir istoriniai meno stiliai. Lyg Paskutinio teismo dieną.**

pozicijos buvo labai įvairios, baroko - spiralinės, klasicizmo - trikampės, ampyras mėgo vertikale. Tad apskritoje kompozicijoje išsiskleidė visa stilių istorija. Šia tema ir buvo sukurtas darbas. Net liko nuotrauka, kurioje stoviu Šv. Onos bažnyčios fone. Po to susituokiau su Anna (psichologe Anna Halberstadt, - aut.), vilniete. Matote, kokia mistika. Viešnage Vilniuje paliko pačius geriausius įspūdžius. Apskritai pasijutau esąs Europoje. Maskva labiau azijietiškas miestas.

### Sovietinė eklektika

- Teko lankytis 2009 ir 2011 metų Maskvos šiuolaikinio meno bienalėse. Jūs, regis, dalyvavote joje 2007-aisiais, drauge su kinų menininkais?

- Maskva darė didžiulę įtaką kinų "socartui". Mao Zedongo laikais nemažai kinų atvykdavo studijuoti į Maskvą. Ji jiems reiškė tą patį, ką man Vilnius - Vakarus. Vakarų kultūra kinams buvo Maskvoje, jie mokėsi realistinės XIX amžiaus vaizdavimo manieros. O mes Vilniuje matėme vakarietiško ekspresionizmo pavydžius. Rusų avangarde ekspresionizmo elementų buvo itin mažai, čia karaliavo Kažimirus Malevičius, suprematizmas. Todėl Vilniuje man buvo labai įdomu.

- Tūrbūt save laikote postmodernistu?

- Žinoma, postmodernizmas labai artimas "socartui", Maskvos (ir apskritai visam) konceptualizmui, po-

partui. Manau, postmodernizmui būdinga savirefleksija ir konceptualioji eklektika. Tad mūsų "socartą" galima vadinti postmodernizmo rūšimi. Eklektika buvo ir socialistinė kultūra. Ji atsiskleidė stilistine sovietinių respublikų meno įvairove. Manau, jog ir sovietinė ideologija buvo eklektiška. Šis tas paimta iš Karlo Marso, tačiau Leninas prieštarauja. Nikita Chruščiovas išvis - oportunistas. Tad gyvenome labai eklektiškoje kultūroje.

### Šeimos verslas

- Kodėl išsiskyrė jūs ir Aleksandro keliai?

- Mums atrodė svarbu viską pradėti iš naujo. Sutikite, pradėti naują gyvenimą - unikali proga. Tačiau po kurio laiko suvokiau, kad bendros autorystės neįmanoma išvengti. Iš tiesų visi menininkai turi bendraautojų. Manieji - meno istorija ir mano mokytojai. Jauni menininkai dažnai nesuvokia, jog irgi jų turi. Niujorke sutikau labai talentingą abstraktaus ekspresionizmo kūrėją. Klausiau jo: "Ar kada dirbait duetu?" Atsakė: "Ne, niekada, esu vienišas." O aš jam sakau: "Man regis, tu dirbi su Willemu de Kooningu." Nustebo: "Juk jis miręs." "Tiesa, bet tu tęsi jo darbus", - atsakiau. Taip išsina, kad bet kurios meno srovės atstovas yra tarsi tos šeimos narys. Tai - šeimos verslas. (Juokiasi.) Atsirado pozūris į kultūrą kaip į šeimos reikalą. Tarkim, Pablo Picasso ir Georges'as Braque'as - panašūs kaip broliai. Bet kartu ir individualūs. Svarbu suvokti, jog egzistuoja kolektyvinis, istorinis stilius, tačiau jo "viduje" gali būti itin savitas menininkas. Kai kuriu realizmą, jis - mano realizmas, kai abstrakciją, ji - mano. Koks didžiausias postmodernizmo atradimas? Galite imtis bet kurio kolektyvinio stiliaus, tačiau išaugoti savo individualumą. Man tai pati vertingiausia dabarties koncepcija. ●



## Black Hole

by Rebecca Mead November 15, 2010

It is to William Makepeace Thackeray that the English language owes the colloquial use of the word "snob"—a formerly obscure term that the novelist popularized in a series of satirical essays published in *Punch* in the mid-nineteenth century. In them, Thackeray—who went on to write "Vanity Fair"—attempted a taxonomy of the type, ranging from the Military Snob ("With his great stupid pink face and yellow moustachios") to Sporting Snobs ("Those happy beings in whom Nature has implanted a love of slang") and the Dinner-giving Snob ("a man who goes out of his natural sphere of society to ask Lords, Generals, Aldermen, and other persons of fashion, but is niggardly of his hospitality towards his own equals"). "I have (and for this gift I congratulate myself with a Deep and Abiding Thankfulness) an eye for a Snob," Thackeray wrote. "You must not judge hastily or vulgarly of Snobs: to do so shows that you are yourself a Snob."

This last observation has been taken as a motto by *Snob*, a Russian-language magazine that, having been launched in Russia and Europe, has just been rolled out in the United States. *Snob*, which is being funded by Mikhail Prokhorov, the Russian billionaire who recently acquired the New Jersey Nets and an interest in a big chunk of Brooklyn real estate, looks like a cross between *Tatler* and *The New York Review of Books*, printed on the kind of paper stock usually reserved for royal invitations. It features articles by Gary Shteyngart and Salman Rushdie, photography by Ellen von Unwerth and Francesco Carrozzini, and an alarming cover price of eight dollars. It is aimed at international Russians—those successful, educated cosmopolites who might live part of the time in London or New York but who, the folk at *Snob* like to say, think in Russian.

A launch party was held the other night to celebrate the magazine's American début, at 200 Eleventh Avenue, the not yet completed residential tower designed by Annabelle Selldorf, in a penthouse apartment that was rumored to belong to Nicole Kidman. Perhaps twice as many guests had come as Kidman might ever be advised to invite, and as a result the party brought to mind Thackeray's characterization of the festivities offered by the Party-giving Snob: "Good Heavens! What do people mean by going there? What is done there, that everybody throngs into those three little rooms? Was the Black Hole considered to be an agreeable *réunion*, that Britons in the dog-days here seek to imitate it?" Most of the throng were not just thinking in Russian but also speaking in Russian, shouting in Russian, elbowing in Russian, snaring the last piece of truffle-grilled cheese from the waiter's decimated tray in Russian, and trying to squeeze their way to the bar for a cocktail in Russian.

Among those present was Mikhail Prokhorov, who, being six feet eight inches tall, had the advantage of occupying a more congenial elevation. "I'm just a guest," Prokhorov said, waving off further conversation as he stood in a corner, surrounded by diminutive satellites in suits. (The current issue of *Snob* features him in more voluble mode: in an eight-page Q. & A., he reveals that he does not know how to use a computer, that he is not interested in politics, and that he likes New York. "It's perhaps the only city in the world where the energy reminds me of Moscow," he says. "In all other major cities, I generally fall asleep.") Prokhorov's reputation as the playboy of the Slavic world preceded him, and while some guests were disappointed at the lack of conspicuous concupiscence—one guest muttered about the absence of caviar being eaten off naked models—there were quantities of anonymous high-cheekboned lovelies in attendance. There were various international Russians of prominence as well, including Alexander Melamid and Vitaly Komar, the artists; Keith Gessen, the novelist; Anastasia Kuznetsova, the model; and Aliona Doletskaya, the former editor of Russian *Vogue*. Also making an appearance was Cassandra Wilson, who had been hired on short notice to sing a few tunes, at a fee said to be thirty-one thousand dollars; she did so, valiantly if not entirely successfully countering the hubbub.

Vladimir Yakovlev, who founded the Russian newspaper *Kommersant* and is the editor-in-chief of *Snob*, said that the magazine's name has different connotations for a person who thinks in Russian than it does for one who thinks in English. "In Russian, it is a little bit softer than it is in English," said Yakovlev, who was wearing a slim suit and fashionable glasses. "It is not a compliment; on the other hand, it is not an insult. We think there is a little bit of snob in each of us, though most of us would not like to admit it." Yakovlev went on to say that it was appropriate for the magazine to take its inspiration from a nineteenth-century English novelist rather than from one of the Russian greats of the era. "The entire project is about the relation between Russian and Western culture, and between an ability for people to belong to Russian culture and also to belong to Western culture," he said. Besides, he added, "I don't think Dostoyevsky wrote about snobs. It's a bit more about an axe." ♦



Donohoe, Victoria. "Moving symbols of fragile unity." *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 8, 2010.

## **Moving symbols of fragile unity**

### **Vitaly Komar's exhibit at Gershman Y links personal, global healing.**

By Victoria Donohoe

For The Inquirer

Much about Vitaly Komar's exhibit, "Three-Day Weekend," at Gershman Y has the force of a public statement. And the ability to move us is truly present.

It's not hard to see the urgency behind the message conveyed in this cycle of imaginative recreations by Komar, an internationally known Russian artist living in New York since 1978.

What will undoubtedly astonish you, as it did me, is the very direct and achingly real way that Komar links painful experiences of family separation during his early childhood with a compelling need for healing on a global scale in our own day.

Komar picked his utopian "Three-Day Weekend" title as a symbol of peaceful coexistence among different peoples and different ideas of faith and spirituality. He was thinking of Friday for Muslims, Saturday for Jews, and Sunday for Christians - with persons of all other faiths joining in, along with atheists.

Rather than have such people stand idly by, he thought like-minded members of his Three-Day Weekend Society could dedicate themselves to love, to family, or to creativity, or might even start up small family-type businesses - no threat certainly to big corporations.

Essential to Komar in getting Three-Day Weekend moving is his attempt here to create very easily understood symbols. They've evolved for him out of mandala drawings and paintings he has made that are graphic symbols of the universe. These symbols take the shape of universal mandalas by joining ancient symbols of spirituality with historical and personal images.

Three-person images have special poignancy for Komar. Not until the 1980s in New York did Komar first see the photo of the three Allied leaders at Yalta - Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin - an image banned in the Soviet Union.

That picture haunted him. And gradually he began to see it interchangeably with his own favorite family photo, showing him at age 6 with his father and mother.

That picture had been taken shortly after World War II, and just before his Christian father, a Moscow military man, divorced Komar's Jewish mother. The child never saw his father again.

The main reason for the divorce was that his parents' separate religious traditions could not coexist peacefully.

So, for Komar, the two photos - Yalta and his old family picture - became a symbol of a fragile unity. The Yalta image stood for the Allies' unity just before the Cold War. The family photo captured a cherished moment not long before the breakup of Komar's family.

These two pictures put him back in touch with his old dream of a happy family and with his longing for peaceful coexistence among peoples, ethnic groups, and religions.

The work featured here is some of what Komar calls "art for the soul." This fascinating and profoundly inspiring show isn't lacking in creative contradictions and imaginative oppositions, and it has a real audience outside the "art world" itself.



Vitaly Komar, "Fragile Unity," mixed media on paper

Also at Gershman Y, Chrystie Sherman is a photographer with broad social concern who has located and photographed people in five ancient Jewish communities scattered in India.

Her exhibit is called "Lost Futures: Journeys Into the Jewish Diaspora - Photos of Jews of India."

Persons she photographs singly and in small groups seem to perch with confidence and wonder on the edge of the known, the almost known, and the not yet known. Sherman's attitude toward these subjects is a key element, her handling intimate, personal and fresh, and she evokes rather than analyzes.

Her accent on the typical is the mark of a documentary approach, and yet several photos have the casual atmosphere of an oversize sketch.



## **Politics, Power and Passion**

*Do the lives of Gandhi, Solzhenitsyn and Mandela tell us more about the future than those of Stalin, Hitler and Mao? Several prominent world-watchers tell us what they think.*

**Vitaly Komar**

**Russian artist and founder of the Soviet pop art movement**



Mel Rosenthal/Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

In Soviet Russia, my artist friends and I were called nonconformists and dissidents. Our art was referred to as unofficial and underground. We called the Soviet authorities "them." The prisons, army and police belonged to them, as did all banks, art collections, museums, galleries and clubs. During Brezhnev's reign, we dreamed of coming up from the underground.

To overcome our isolation, we organized Soviet Russia's first open-air exhibition. On Sept. 15, 1974, we brought our art to Moscow's Belyaev park. The exhibition was the sensation of the year. All the Western newspapers and magazines wrote about it.

Suddenly, bulldozers appeared, heading toward us. Plainclothesmen began to destroy our paintings. I saw that when they came up against resistance they were overcome by the passion for power. Not only did they beat the artists, but viewers as well. One tried to grab my Double Self-Portrait with Melamid as Lenin and Stalin. This painting was particularly important to me. I held it tight and ran.

He caught me, shoved me, and I fell face down in the mud. I saw his boot step on my work. I saw enraged passion on his face; suddenly I imagined the portrait not as Lenin and Stalin, but as Tolstoy and Gandhi. In a quiet, confident voice, I said: "What on earth are you doing? This is a masterpiece!"

Our eyes met and a different kind of contact arose. His eyes widened in surprise; then his face changed and passionate anger yielded to compassion. He didn't destroy the work but simply threw it in the back of a dump truck.

A minute later, still lying on the ground, watching the truck drive off, I smiled. It was my hour of triumph. People weren't indifferent to my art. I savored the compliment. I had created a unique, ephemeral work, which for one moment had changed the face of power. I saw the fleeting surprise that connected passion with compassion. —*Translated by Jamey Gambrell*

Odynova, Alexandra. "Art Ban Puts Louvre Exhibit in Doubt." *The Moscow Times*, September 28, 2010.  
<http://www.themoscowtimes.com/print/news/article/art-ban-puts-louvre-exhibit-in-doubt/417307.html>.

*The Moscow Times*

## **Art Ban Puts Louvre Exhibit in Doubt**

28 September 2010

By [Alexandra Odynova](#)

[e-gallery.guelman.ru/authors/ter-oganyan/](http://e-gallery.guelman.ru/authors/ter-oganyan/)



A stab at censorship by the Culture Ministry may derail a high-profile exhibition of Russian modern art in the Louvre, with artists lining up to boycott the event after works were banned from going to France as "too provocative."

The ban covers the works from the 2004 "Radical Abstractionism" series by Avdei Ter-Oganyan, who reported the incident on his blog late Sunday.

The works in question are simplistic abstract art pieces with notes by the author saying that they incite religious hatred and promote prostitution and various other crimes.

The pictures were to be featured at the exhibit "The Counterpoint: Russian Modern Art," which is to run in the Louvre from Oct. 14 to Jan. 24. Works by 15 artists and art groups, including Blue Noses and Andrei Monastyrsky, are also to be on display.

The "Radical Abstractionism" series has been freely exhibited in Russia, with the latest show staged this summer at Moscow's Garage venue, run by Daria Zhukova, girlfriend of billionaire Roman Abramovich.

A number of Louvre participants, including Yury Albert, Andrei Monastyrsky, Igor Makarevich, Vitaly Komar, Vadim Zakharov, Yury Leiderman and Valery Koshlyakov, will boycott the show if Ter-Oganyan's [works](#) are banned, prominent art critic Marat Gelman said Monday.

"Unfortunately, Russian officials don't understand that they are tarnishing the image of the whole country," Gelman told *The Moscow Times*.

The Culture Ministry did not reply to an inquiry by *The Moscow Times* on Monday, but a senior official [told RIA-Novosti](#) that the exhibition would not be canceled because the artwork has already been shipped to Paris. Louvre representatives said they were not aware of the scandal.

It remained unclear Monday when the ban on Ter-Oganyan's work was introduced and who ordered it. But Mikhail Mindlin, head of the State Center of Contemporary Art, a co-organizer of the show, confirmed the ban [in an interview](#) to OpenSpace.ru on Monday, saying the works were ruled "unfriendly" and "provocative."

Ter-Oganyan [said on his blog](#) that he initially accepted the offer to exhibit reprints of his works in the Louvre but later backed down because he wanted to protest increasing censorship in Russia.

"Through my refusal, I want to attract attention to the relationship we have between culture and the authorities, or, more precisely, to cause this absurd conflict to escalate," he said. "My artwork was actually created for this purpose, and they serve to vividly demonstrate the idiocy of idiots."



He added that he also has tried to protest the prosecution of fellow artist Oleg Mavromatti, who fled to Bulgaria to escape charges of inciting religious hatred — punishable with up to four years in prison — after a 2000 performance where he was nailed to a cross in an impersonation of Jesus Christ.

Ter-Oganyan himself was the first artist to flee the country because of his art in post-Soviet Russia. He went to the Czech Republic after a performance where he smashed Christian icons with an ax in 1998 prompted authorities to open a case against him.

The scandal is not the first of its kind. The Culture Ministry withdrew modern art pieces by Blue Noses from an exhibit in France in 2007, also ruling them “too provocative.” The artwork depicted two male policemen French kissing.

**reviews:** new york

## Vitaly Komar

### Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

Now almost seven years after Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid dissolved their partnership of more than 30 years, the indefatigable Komar continues his love-hate relationship with art, politics, and religion. This latest exhibition of paintings revisited many of the artist's touchstones: there was a bust of Stalin, as well as a number of works featuring Lenins, Christs, and figures drawn from art history and religious mythology; the compositions were dominated by complex geometries.

What is new is that Komar, who is now in his 60s, has declared himself the herald of a new art movement, which is called New Symbolism. According to the artist, New Symbolism should "point to a new direction for the avant-garde."

It has never been easy to know when Komar is being altogether serious. When he and Melamid sparred with Soviet bureaucracy and then with the power structures of the art world, there was always a delightful slipperiness to the meanings of their works.

But the assumptions of artistic practice not only caught up with Komar; they seem to have left him behind. Whether he imagines that there is still such a thing as an avant-garde—let alone that it might move in any one direction—his mix-and-match iconography looks quite routine today, some 40

years since the implosion of modernism left commentators grasping for terms like "pluralism" and "post-movement art." The irony is that Komar was one of the artists who helped create the need for such terms. Consequently there is a genuine poignancy to the failure of even his most wide-ranging iconographic pil-laging. *Goddess of Love* (2007–9), for example, drags together the Venus de Milo, Christ on the cross, Leonardo's Vitruvian Man, and Shiva, and sets the amalgam atop a classical column against a background suggesting heaven and hell. The result is simply odd.

—Robert Ayers



Vitaly Komar, *Goddess of Love*, 2007–9, tempera and oil on canvas, 48" x 48". Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.



"A Dozen: Vitaly Komar."  
*Myninjaplease.com*, August 28, 2009.

## A Dozen: Vitaly Komar

Search no further- we now present to you an interview that MNP had with Vitaly Komar. On November 7th, 2009, Komar will be opening his new work, *New Symbolism* at the Ronald Feldman Gallery, NYC. You can read about *New Symbolism* right below the painting (*Landscape with Ouroboros*)- and then the interview commences. Thanks to Vitaly for taking part!



Landscape with Ouroboros

New Symbolism is intended to suggest a movement. Even if it remains one artist's movement, it may work toward restoring a sundered connection between art and certain historical and timeless myths. In New Symbolism, symbols akin to mandalas and heraldic emblems are conceptual signifiers that coexist seamlessly with painting's reverie.

Its images are visions of a yet unborn, unpronounceable word. They're related not only to the art of the Pre-Raphaelites and 19th-century Symbolists but, to a greater extent, to syncretic symbols that, thousands of years ago, unified the origin of written language and art. These works may be termed conceptual symbolism or proto-symbolism.

With this project, I would like to approach the near-absurd syncretism of state symbols. I recall walking to UN Plaza to watch the removal of the Soviet flag. It was the fall of 1991 and leaves were falling in New York, but as I looked at the hammer and sickle I saw instead the old symbols of vanity and life's evanescence: the hourglass and the skull. I stood for a long time under those flags and canvases at an installation juxtaposing abstract and figurative images, political heraldry and transcendental mandalas.

The consequences of world wars, of social and scientific breakthroughs, have eroded the connection between fragments of what once was a continuous experience of the world. In these conditions I turn to visual symbols and their mysterious quality of bringing together unrelated images and concepts. Today, this magical gravitation gives me a feeling of lightness and hope that art may yet resist the universe's scientifically-proven tendency to expand the phenomenon that someday will bring about a starless sky, with all of its unproven consequences for the soul.



Lenin with Crown

*How would you define your art?*



You know my definition of course changed- people changed and my art change. I understand my art in two different parts. First in the old view point of view- what art means for me and second what my art means for spectators. For myself, I believe my art is a kind of visual representation of the moment of contact between irony and admiration of visual enigmas. It may sound too philosophical but my art became more philosophical, more metaphysical. For the spectator, I make a hermit- to mediate, to become a hermit for a moment, a moment of contact. It is not necessarily in my art or in other artist's works, but these are my two definitions that I can say now.

*You have lived in the US as long as you have lived in Russia- do you still feel Russian (or American)?*

You know it is impossible to change identity in the depths of your heart, if you were born in some place it is like marks on your body, it is impossible to avoid, if you try to eliminate this it could cause cancer. I'm against any flat definition, we live in a 3-dimensional world, 3 is the magic number- in three forms. I think I don't define myself as a Russian or American separately- I believe this falls into a 1 dimensional way of thinking. I view myself as a 3-dimensional person- Russian, Jewish, American. I don't like to view myself as 1 dimension it make me flat. I prefer the 3 dimensional view.

*How has your work changed now that you work alone?*

My work has always changed even when I worked in collaboration. I still work in collaboration, now I work with art history, especially with the first brilliant artists that created the original symbols years ago- those that created writing, etc. But I still work in collaboration, it is very important. For example, if you are a young artist, not well experienced, are you working in collaboration or are you working on your own? 99.9% will say I'm a lonely artist- in the first moments they will mention the artists that they admire, but you know if you look at the works of this artist you will see abstract expressionism, this makes it very clear that they are working in collaboration, but they just don't recognize it. They are collaborating with the early developers of the style- any type of moment is a work in collaboration- its a type of family business for me.

*What themes are most difficult to visualize in your paintings?*

It's difficult to say. Everything is sometimes difficult- but I enjoy the process of painting. I spend hours mediating on a painting, which is very enjoyable for me when I can find something to fix. I enjoy the process even it is slow. So this is a difficult question for me to answer.

*What would your advice be to a new artist?*

I understand that many artists have lost connections and enjoyment of the knowledge of their family history- a kind of genealogy. Many young artists simply do not enjoy the contact and time that you spend in museums in contact with art that was created many, many years ago. They lost the enjoyment of being the art spectator- they are more art

creators. I believe this a dangerous loss with mythology and the enjoyment of artifacts of the past. For me it is quite enjoyable when I visit a museum and see a not very well known masterpiece. If I discover in a very small museum a masterpiece I feel great. I can spend the same amount of time that people spend in front of a computer or screen in front of a painting. I can mediate for hours on a painting. People usually look at a painting for one or two minutes- you know to see something easy to catch, not mediate. I remember this was typical for many young artists because I studied art with artists who belonged to traditional and classical art and modernism- I mean some old survivors, the ones that were teaching at my art school. In Soviet Russia an old style academy coexisted with some avante garde tradition.

*What styles of painting are you most attracted to?*

I really love all art history. For me it is a type of dictionary or ABCs. It is difficult to say which words you love more or what letter or character of the alphabet you love more. In the beginning of the seventies I tried to use all styles together as a type of alphabet to create new words that had yet been articulated in the universe. The most attractive contemporary style for me is abstract art and particularly Cubism, especially some kind of transitional moment between Cubism and abstract art or some abstract images of the Cubism and Futurism. A representation of the world as a kind of vision through diamonds. From the classical, the old art, I really like 17th Century art. What I'm doing now is I am trying to combine old art and futuristic contemporary art in my latest work, which I call New Symbolism. In Russia it was attracted by two styles, classical art and by Russian Avante Garde art. In my latest work I present this is some type of tradition Cubism and Futurism which coexist with traditional art.

*Who would you like to engage with your art?*

It is difficult to say, but I hope the spectators of my art are the people that spend more time, not looking for something easy to catch in the painting and are able to mediate on the image. Usually these are people who are not in a rush- people who have not their abilities. I remember your mother actually gave me a great lesson- the Poetry of Sound of Australian artists: what is life if you don't care, if we have no time to stay and stare? Maybe this is naive now, but I really love the concept. We really have no time to stay and stare. My favorite spectators are the ones that can really spend the time- are not cheap with spending time. Somebody who really treasures time and become a hermit for a minute.

*How do you view painting and its relationship to film/video?*

I believe film and art belong to contemporary media or art. I can divide these on two different branches. One branch is when you see the presence of the operation of the artist's hand. Sometimes you can see it in brush strokes or etching and printing and even the scratching of metal in etchings represent the highly personal vibration of the artist's hand. It represents like an electric cardiogram of the heart beating or the life of our eternal soul or world or psychology. And in different other types of art that usually don't



represent this type of vibration its executed through the assistance of something. Assistance is important in great art, in architecture and design especially. In architecture you don't build brick by brick, but with assistance from a sketch, or calculation in some type of celestial joining of mathematics. But in this type of fine art, closer to design, when artists just give the image, installation, or production of the object done by machinery; along with photography or video art done by machinery, it could represent the beauty of the object, but it doesn't represent of the beauty shaking hand (or vibration). I love both styles actually, but it is really important to represent contemporary art by these two different approaches. I love the representation of this vibration of the artist's hand during creation, as a kind of representation of time that artists spent on the art object. An art object by definition is the freezing of time, or a moment. In this moment, with the presence of vibration or shaking, time is represented by the frozen moment of eternity spent by the artist.

*When do you feel a piece of work is finished?*

Usually I work on a painting for a couple of hours then meditate on the painting- just stop and look at the painting. I see I have to change this and that, then meditate and make another change. When I cannot see anything to change, in this moment of course, art is finished. But sometimes I look at my old paintings in my studio and suddenly I feel that I have to change that and that. This doesn't often happen, since paintings sell, but the ones that I keep for myself I continue from time to time.

*How do you like the New York art scene?*

It gives me a wonderful feeling. I don't know many places, maybe only London, Paris, or even Berlin, which provide such an intensity for the artistic life.

*Where do you think has the best emerging art movements?*

Of course many people think about London and the young British artists, and it's really true because many interesting emerging artists appear in London. We can say there is a very close connection between the London art world and the New York art world. A very close comparison can be made with their respective stock markets. Now we can take a computer of plane and cross this divide in a few hours- symbolically it is one state, London New York. Apart from their language similarities that exist, a British Empire still exists, just with the United States. Berlin is interesting because the real estate is relatively cheap for a capital with such a nightlife. Having a nightlife is an important definition for "capital + art world." Gallery openings usually don't end until the evening or even in the morning as part of the traditional 19th Century Bohemian style. I noticed that some young artists live in Berlin, because everyone speaks English there- the Latin of the 20th Century. For example, when a Japanese boy meets a French or Puertorican girl they are speaking English. There is no language barrier anymore. Berlin offers inexpensive rent that allows you to have a big space while being in the Center of Europe- and now Europe can be known as the "global tourist village."

*What plans do you have for the future?*

I will continue to work on “New Symbolism.” Young artists have been asking me to learn about the way of symbolist art, so maybe I’ll make a free school at my studio for an open session, once a week, anybody can come and we’ll speak about art. It wouldn’t be a practical school covering how to mix color or which brush you could use, but a conceptual school. The most important thing is vision to get the concept of painting. Technical things are technical things, but how to develop a symbolist vision of this life is what I would be getting at. Life of the contemporary world is in ruins- the traditions of the world as whole in the 19th Century now remain in ruins because of revolutions, social revolutions, world wars, scientific revolutions, technical and sexual revolutions; we are living in ruins. Symbols have a magic ability to combine these ruins, to nurture these ruins in a type of mysterious gravity. We can learn how to live in these ruins, how to make these ruins our home and how to create a beautiful mosaic from these ruins. I believe this is one of the functions of symbols, to remain in a mysterious gravity and to combine visual symbols that are far apart from one another.

*How would you define your art?*

You know my definition of course changed- people changed and my art change. I understand my art in two different parts. First in the old view point of view- what art means for me and second what my art means for spectators. For myself, I believe my art is a kind of visual representation of the moment of contact between irony and admiration of visual enigmas. It may sound too philosophical but my art became more philosophical, more metaphysical. For the spectator, I would want him or her to become a hermit for a moment – to meditate for a few moments of contact with my work. It is not necessarily in my art or in other artist’s works, but these are my two definitions that I can say now.

*You have lived in the US as long as you have lived in Russia- do you still feel Russian (or American)?*

You know it is impossible to change identity in the depths of your heart, if you were born in some place it is like birth marks on your body, it is impossible to get rid of them, if you try to eliminate them it could cause cancer. I’m against any flat definition, we live in a 3-dimensional world, 3 is the magic number- like in 3 primary colors, 3 forms of time- past, present, future. I think I don’t define myself as a Russian or American separately- I believe this falls into a 1 dimensional way of thinking. I view myself as a 3-dimensional person- Russian Jewish American. I don’t like to view myself as 1 dimensional, it would make me disappear. I prefer a 3 dimensional form of existence.





Landscape with Lenin's Tomb (Triptych)

*How has your work changed now that you work alone?*

My work has always changed even when I worked in collaboration. I still work in collaboration, now I work with art history, especially with the first brilliant artists that created the original symbols years ago- those that created writing, etc. But I still work in collaboration, it is very important. For example, if you are a young artist, not well experienced, are you working in collaboration or are you working on your own? 99.9% of them will say: "I'm a lonely artist" – after having a conversation with me they first begin to understand that they are working in collaboration with their favorite artists whose style they admire and try to continue or develop. For example, if you look at the works of an artist who admires abstract expressionism, you will see that he or she works in collaboration with the creators of abstract expressionism, but most artists just do not recognize it. They are collaborating with pioneers and early developers of the style- any art movement is work of participating artists in collaboration- it's a type of family business for me. For example, all Futurists' work looks very similar, as if made by siblings.

*What themes are most difficult to visualize in your paintings?*

It's difficult to say. Anything could be sometimes difficult- but I enjoy the process of painting. I spend hours meditating on a painting, which is very enjoyable for me when I can find something to continue. I enjoy the process even it is slow. So this is a difficult question for me to answer. The concept and vision come to me simultaneously- come people think that a theme comes first, and then the artist tries to visualize it. This is not so in my case.

*What would your advice be to a new artist?*

I think that contemporary lost its connection with images and poetry of ancient mythology, legends and history. I recommend to try to reconnect with them. Unfortunately, in art schools, art history classes have no connection painting and drawing practice. It would make me happy if they spent no less time in a museum department of ancient archaeology than in front of Marcel Duchamp paintings. I would like to open a free school of symbolism where I could share my experiences with any artists interested in that.



Last Days of Job

*What styles of painting are you most attracted to?*

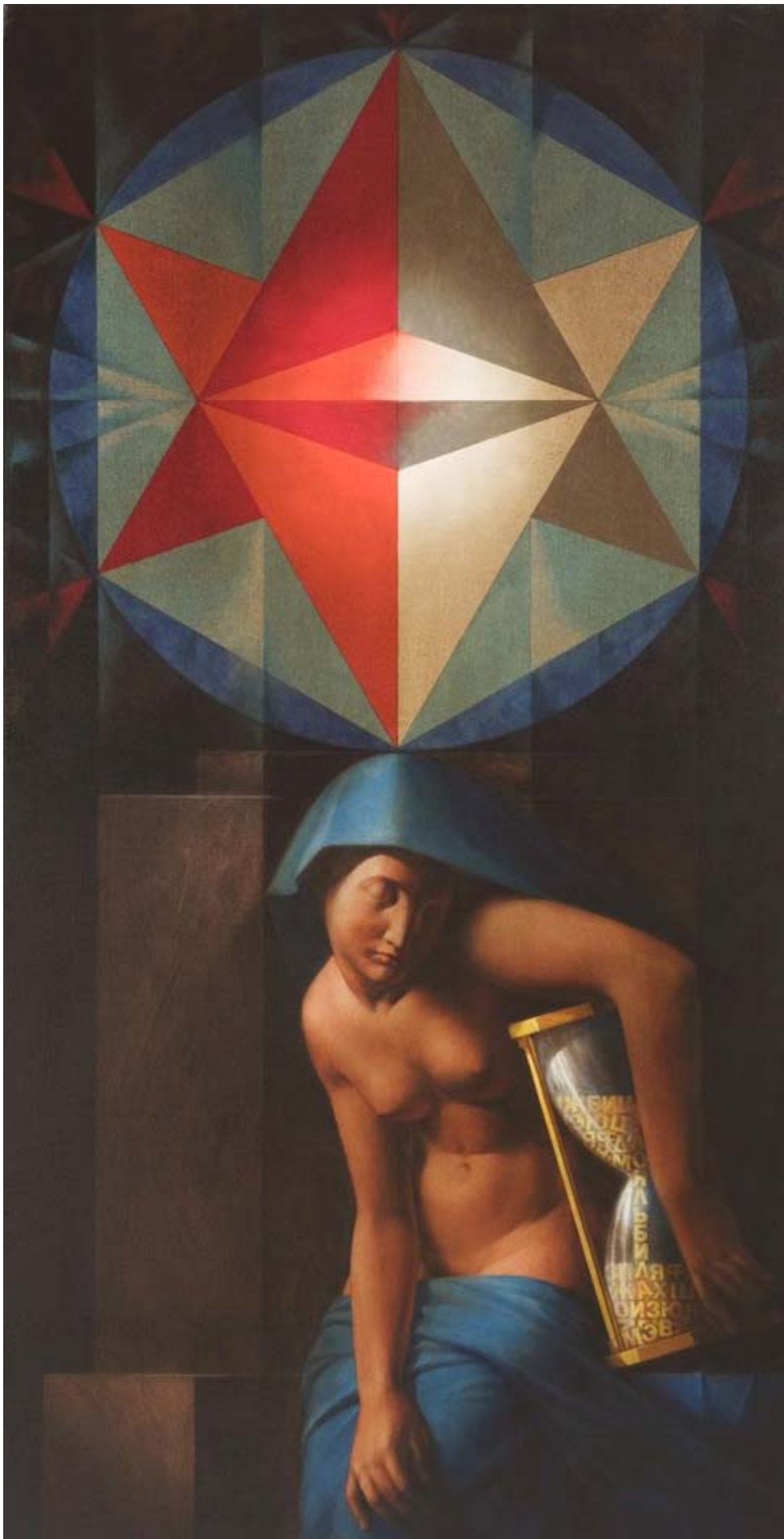
I really love all art history. For me it is a type of dictionary or alphabet. It is difficult to say which words you love more or what letter or character of the alphabet you prefer. In the beginning of the seventies I tried to use all styles together as a type of alphabet to create new words that had not yet been articulated in the universe. The most attractive



contemporary style for me is abstract art and particularly Cubism, especially some kind of transitional moment between Cubism and abstract art or some abstract images of the Cubism and Futurism. A representation of the world as a kind of faceted vision through a diamond. From the classical, the old art, I really like 16-17th Century art. What I'm doing now is I am trying to combine old art and futuristic contemporary art in my latest work, which I call New Symbolism. In Russia I was influenced by two styles, classical art and by Russian Avante Garde art. In my latest New Symbolist work I invented conceptual eclecticism as coexistence of futurism and classical old masters' tradition.

*Who would you like to engage with your art?*

It is difficult for me to express myself in my English, but I hope the spectators of my art are the people that spend more time, in front of a painting, that are not looking for something easy to catch in the painting and are able to meditate on the image. Usually these are people who are not in a rush. I remember your mother actually gave me a great lesson- the Poetry of Sound of Australian artists: what is the life if full of care, we have no time to stay and stare? Maybe this is naive now, but I really love the concept. We really have no time to stay and stare. My favorite spectators are the ones that can really spend the time- are not cheap with spending time. Somebody who really treasures time as life, not as time as money and can become a hermit for a minute.





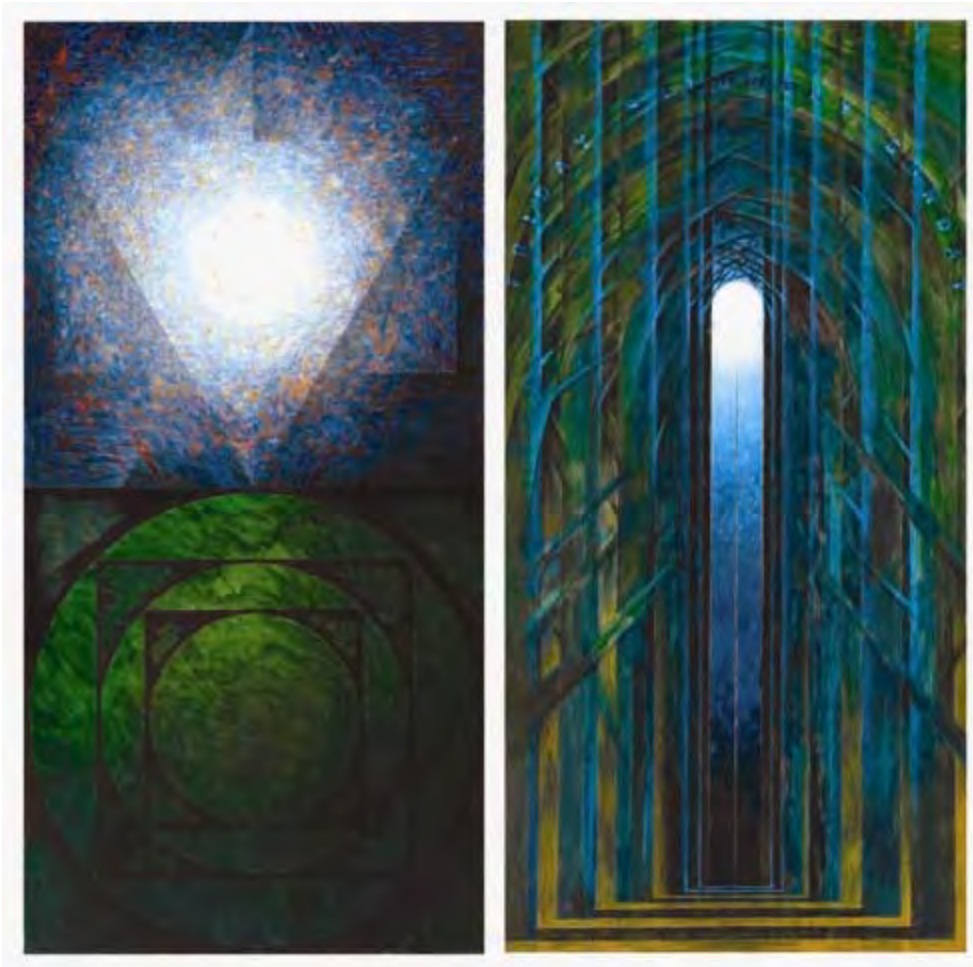
## Russian Alphabet in an Hourglass

*How do you view painting and its relationship to film/video?*

I can divide contemporary art in two different branches. One branch is when you see the presence of the operation of the artist's hand. Sometimes you can see it in brush strokes or etching and printing and even the scratching of metal in etchings represent the highly personal vibration of the artist's hand. It represents artist as a cardiogram of the heartbeat. The other branch is represented by artist's ideas executed by assistants, using contemporary technologies- industrial design, photo and video labs. Assistance is important in great art, in architecture and design especially. In architecture you don't build brick by brick, but with assistance from a sketch, or calculation in some type of celestial joining of mathematics. But in this type of fine art, closer to design, when artists just give the image for an installation, or production of the object done by machinery; along with photography or video art done by machinery, it could represent the beauty of the object, but it doesn't represent of the beauty OF unsteady artist's hand. I love both styles actually, but it is really important to represent contemporary art by these two different approaches. I love the representation of this vibration of the artist's hand during creation, as a kind of representation of time that artists spent on the art object. An art object by definition is the freezing of time, or a moment. In this moment, with the presence of vibration or shaking, time is represented by the frozen moment of eternity spent by the artist.

*When do you feel a piece of work is finished?*

Usually I work on a painting for a couple of hours then meditate on the painting- just stop and look at the painting. I see I have to change this and that, then meditate and make another change. When I cannot see anything to change, in this moment of course, art is finished. But sometimes I look at my old paintings in my studio and suddenly I feel that I have to change that and that. This doesn't often happen, since paintings sell, but the ones that I keep for myself I continue from time to time.



Sky and Earth. Forest as a Temple

*How do you like the New York art scene?*

It gives me a wonderful feeling. I don't know many places, maybe only London, Paris, or even Berlin, which provide such an intensity for the artistic life.

*Which do you think has the best emerging art movements?*

Of course many people think about London and the young British artists, and it's really true because many interesting emerging artists appear in London. We can say there is a very close connection between the London art world and the New York art world. A very close comparison can be made with their respective stock markets. Now we look at the web and cross this divide in a few hours- symbolically it is one state, London New York. Apart from us speaking the same language, the British Empire still exists, ruling the world with the United States. Berlin is interesting because the real estate is relatively cheap for a capital with such a nightlife. Having a nightlife is an important definition for "capital + art world." Gallery openings usually don't end until the evening or even in the morning as part of the traditional 19th Century Bohemian style. I noticed that some

young artists live in Berlin, because everyone speaks English there- the Latin of the 20th Century. For example, when a Japanese boy meets a Puerto-Rican girl in a Parisian club, they usually speak English to one another. There is no language barrier anymore. Berlin offers inexpensive rent that allows you to have a big space while being in the center of Europe- and now Europe can be known as the “global potemkin village.”



Cross and Sickle

*What plans do you have for the future?*

I will continue to work on “New Symbolism.” Young artists have been asking me to share my unique experience of living in two worlds- east and west, so maybe I’ll start a free school at my studio for an open session, once a week, anybody can come and we’ll speak about art of visual symbols. It wouldn’t be a practical school covering how to mix color or which brush you could use, but a conceptual school. The most important thing is not to separate concept and vision. Life of the contemporary world is in ruins- the



traditions of the world as whole in the 19th Century now remain in ruins because of revolutions, social revolutions, world wars, scientific revolutions, technical and sexual revolutions; we are living in ruins. I'm fascinated by visual symbols and their mysterious quality of bringing together unrelated images and concepts. Today, this magical gravitation gives me a feeling of lightness and hope that art may yet resist the universe's scientifically proven tendency to expand- the phenomenon that will someday bring about a starless sky, with all of its unproven consequences for the soul.

*:: all images courtesy of Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York ::*

## where is the line between us?

interview with vitaly komar

julia tulovsky



1.

**Julia:** Vitaly, when you, an underground artist in the Soviet Union, came to the U.S. in the late 1970s, you found yourself in the very midst of the world of artistic life. Did your ideas of New York as the capital of world art agree with what you saw?

**Vitaly:** I was rather well prepared for what I saw because, at the Stroganov Art School, where my co-author, Alex Melamid, and I received our education in the 1960s, the library subscribed to many Western art magazines. Besides, we got magazines such as *Art in America*, *Art News* and *Art Forum* from our foreign friends who came to Moscow. There were exhibitions of U.S. art in Moscow, including American Pop Art. So many of my friends and I had a fairly good idea of what was going on. I wouldn't say anything came as a big surprise when I moved to the U.S. What surprised me was perhaps the intensity of artistic life. A single magazine carries about ten reviews. I didn't expect New York to have thousands of exhibitions going on at the same time, while only a small percentage get reviewed.

At the personal level, I was amazed that artists, just like many representatives of the world of art, have a special attitude toward clothes. In Russia, an artist didn't care what he put on. It was an expression of a special philosophical detachment not to pay any attention to your clothes. It was fashionable to think that great philosophers were absolutely careless about their appearance because their thoughts were elsewhere, in another dimension. In New York, artists have a much keener sense of style, especially in clothes worn at exhibition openings. Critics have always dressed fashionably, but artists could get away with almost anything. I remember going to a reception and the invitation said "black tie". I knew an artist could do without a tie. But it turned out that artists didn't need a tie only at exhibitions and art receptions, and here I found myself in the company of prominent politicians, even senators. The man at the door wouldn't let me in at first...I unlaced one shoe and tied the string around my neck instead of a tie. The guard laughed and let me in.

**Julia:** As you got to understand New York's world of art, were there any surprises in store for you?

**Vitaly:** Yes. What surprised me most was the fact that art critics have practically no influence upon the art market. By the time I came to the U.S., the art market had become independent and the high and mighty critics

had disappeared. Way back in the 1950s, it was sufficient for Greenberg to appear at an exhibition and say, "flat, flat" and it virtually meant the end of the artist's career. Beginning with the late 1970s, the art market gained great power. Even the formal difference between traditional and experimental art was gone, that is, experimental art began to sell at very high prices. I think this is what struck me most here – that critics were unable, to be exact, absolutely powerless, to influence the art market any longer.

**Julia:** Why do you think there is a chasm between the critics and the market?

**Vitaly:** Critics played a major role in the 1950s when there was still a disparity between modernism and popular art. At that time, critics seemed to be aware of the secrets of modernism and the intellectual European elite. You know that because of Hitler, the majority of the intellectual elite fled Europe. A kind of hothouse for great artists emerged here. Of course, the U.S. had modernists of its own, but they were not held in great esteem. It was realists who always played first fiddle. In the 1930s-1940s, a kind of intellectual social realism was blossoming here, painters like Ben Shahn and Raphael Soyer. The latter had, for example, as many as four personal exhibitions in Whitney, more than any other painter either before or after. Even the leftist public regarded left-wing art as socially oriented. So at some moment, critics began to explain to the public how badly the U.S. was lagging behind European modernism. This campaign against backwardness led to the destruction of some magnificent buildings in New York. From a European point of view, they were pompous and tasteless. There was a clash of different ideas. Buyers and gallery owners suffered from an inferiority complex that made them fear that they didn't fully understand the elite's intellectual art life, so the views of the critics carried great weight. The critics were regarded as philosophers, prophets, who pointed to new paths. But somewhere after Pop Art, the Americans understood that they shouldn't be ashamed of their provinciality. On the contrary, they should play it up because it was a style in its own right. Pop Art is a purely American phenomenon. It was then that art gallery owners, people involved in the art business and people working with buyers and investors in art became independent. There was nothing the critics could tell them that they didn't already know.



2.

1. Douglas Davis with Komar and Melamid, 1976, Questions New York Moscow New York Moscow, Photo offset poster, 60x50, collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York  
2. Onward to the Victory of Communism, 1975, Paint on cloth, 50x184, private collection, Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

How has the role of critics changed now that their influence on the world of art has diminished?

I think that the most talented critics, critics with a vision, and even philosophers, take up curators' jobs now. This brings in a better income, too. Even small exhibitions pay quite decent money, enough to live on for a year or two. Previously, curators and critics were not the same people, and it made a world of difference. Now, critics get their revenge over the art world by turning into curators. They unite artists and become meta-artists. They not only describe reality, they make it because curators' exhibitions are an alternative to commercial galleries. Of course, curators' exhibitions can take place in commercial galleries, but gallery owners are usually not in the habit of sharing profits with curators. Their world is a bit different. So curators and critics went to the alternative world of non-commercial exhibitions, installations, conceptual and ephemeral art, and video, that is art that hasn't yet become part of the art market and investments.

Vitaly, you belong not only to the U.S. art community, but also to the Russian art scene. How do you evaluate the changes in the art scene in Russia during the last few years? Is it in any way similar to the situation in the West?

No, the situation in Russia is different. My dream is to see Russia a prosperous country, in the artistic sense as well. Of course, I'm behind the times in many ways. The last time I was in Russia four years ago on the occasion of my exhibition in Marat Gelman's Gallery. So I have no clear idea of what's going on. But according to Russian art magazines, some people jumped to the conclusion that we have caught up with the West and will soon leave it behind. This idea is wrong. Sometimes a horse that is a lap behind everybody seems to be first to an outside observer because it is a couple of meters ahead of the others. And I think the feeling that we have suddenly become first is a misconception that is very dangerous for Russian art. Gone is the healthy, self-critical attitude of our day and this can only hinder further development.

So in what way is Russia backward? Is it the underdeveloped art infrastructure or the backwardness of art itself?

It is not a matter of an underdeveloped art infrastructure or the backwardness of art itself. It's about the

backward mentality and self-esteem. I'm speaking about a special attitude toward the West, a strange feeling that Russia is taking part in a socialist competition with world art. Naturally, artists, individual people compete with one another. But the very idea that a country can compete with world art is, in my opinion, absurd. A country can take such an attitude to world culture and, in particular, to the West when it doesn't consider itself to be part of it. I made a comparison with racing, but it was within the framework of the genre. In general, I'm against comparing the development of art history to races. This is not about racing. I used the comparison to parody the attitude to art history development as a kind of race between different countries. To be a full-fledged member of an art community, a country doesn't need either a superiority or inferiority complex. The sooner one gets rid of these complexes, the better it will be for Russian artists in the West.

Doesn't Russia have very successful artists?

Of course there are successful artists in Russia. But some of the most privileged painters in Russia don't exhibit their work at major international art exhibitions and don't participate in international publications. I am speaking, for example, about artists who have museums of their own in the city center. This is a unique phenomenon that doesn't exist in any other country. It is a purely Russian phenomenon and it speaks for itself. But I'd like to repeat that I'm not very knowledgeable on the subject. I don't know much about what's going on in Russia today.

Vitaly, you were one of the first people to collaborate with U.S. artists. Please tell us about your experience.

As you know, I took part in the Bulldozer Exhibition. After the exhibition, many reproductions of our work (I mean myself and Alex Melamid) as well as those of other participants were published in Western magazines. So Douglas Davis, the art critic and pioneer of video art, came to Moscow to write about the artists whose works had been destroyed at the Bulldozer Exhibition. Douglas Davis and I decided to collaborate. He had his photos taken in New York, and Alex Melamid and I, in Moscow. Douglas Davis made spliced photographic montages where we were divided by a line. Each of us held a canvas with a certain text both in English and in Russian, for example, "Where is the line between us?" This work is now part of the Metropolitan Museum's collection, which makes me very happy. As far as I know, it was the first ever experience of collaboration between Russian and U.S. artists. Incidentally, it was the time of the first joint flight of U.S. and Russian astronauts. I remember I was amazed when Douglas Davis came to our first meeting in Moscow in a red corduroy suit. Later, in New York, I asked him, "Why did you wear a red suit of all things?" He said, "I thought that this was a Communist country and the color red would make a good impression." But everybody took it as an eccentric gesture and did not connect it in any way with the color of the Soviet national flag. We also collaborated with the U.S. artist and musician Charlotte Moorman, a member of Fluxus, the famous U.S. Dadaist group. Later, when working at the Souls Project, we set up a company, We Buy and Sell Souls, through which we purchased souls of many celebrities or accepted them for sale on a commission basis. One of the people who sold us his soul was Andy Warhol.

How much was Andy Warhol's soul?

We got it free of charge. Warhol put a zero on the contract form. After that, it was sold for 30 roubles in Moscow. It probably costs much more today. I used to work with Andy Warhol before, too. He attended our first exhibition at the Ronald Feldman Gallery when I was still living in Russia. Feldman told us Andy was greatly interested in



the ideas of Sots Art. He spent a long time examining our Post Art and looking at his soup can. Incidentally, this work anticipated post-modernism. As Robert Morgan put it in his *The Delta of Modernism*, it was in this work that the term "post" was first used in reference to modern art. It featured a masterpiece of world art, the famous Warhol soup can as it will look in the future – as a Pompeii fresco, burnt, chipped, dark and cracked. Feldman remembered that Andy's face went green. He could never imagine his work in such a historical perspective. It was just another vision of his art. After the exhibition, to show his respect, he sent a book to me in Moscow with a drawing of a soup can enclosed – a light drawing made by pen in the style of a sketch.

Both you and U.S. pop artists work with a system of myths functioning in society. What is different about the American approach to the deconstruction of social myths?

Pop Art and Sots Art are very similar phenomena, they have the same structure, but different forms. Both of them use irony as a weapon of iconoclasm. U.S. idols are consumer goods put on a pedestal by advertising. In Soviet Russia, it was ideological propaganda. I believe that official art contained not only official figurative socialist realism, but also official conceptualism. It found expression in slogans. The art of slogans has existed since the Russian avant-garde. It was unnoticed, though slogans were everywhere. Nobody collected them because they were an ephemeral art of visual propaganda everybody was already sick of. We were the first to pay attention to them, we understood that we are surrounded with conceptual culture. So we took the slogans and signed our names under them. Marcel Duchamp did the same with the urinal. And now museums have in their collections only the slogans Alex Melamid and I signed. Slogans were also advertisements, but they advertised ideology, not goods. In general, both of them have a lot to do with a certain myth, they are like incantations: "More electric energy to the people", "Let's build Communism" in Russia or "Buy soup" in the U.S. The aim of incantations is to influence people in some mysterious ways. Their function is deeply mythological. In the Soviet Union, they were based on ideological conceptualism, and in the U.S., on advertisements. U.S. society is a consumer society, it's not ideological. When you examine works of U.S. Pop Art, it is very important to understand that they don't depict consumer goods, they depict advertisements of consumer goods. Andy Warhol portrayed a soup can ad, not a soup can, and here lies a fine distinction between Pop Art and New Realism. Take, for instance, Roginsky's *Primus Stove*. From my point of view, it's not Pop Art because it is an image of a primus stove, not a primus stove ad. In Russia, goods didn't need advertising, people grabbed them anyway. It was ideology that was advertised in Russia. So the Russian version of Pop Art was Sots Art, visual propaganda and slogans. If Pop Art was the result of the overproduction of goods and their advertisements in the capitalist world, Sots Art was the result of the overproduction of ideology in the socialist world. Thus, one can say that Sots Art is the conceptual Soviet Pop Art.

How has the atmosphere of artistic life in New York changed since you settled here in 1979?

I remember walking in Soho, at the time the haunt of many artists and the venue of many galleries. The artist Arakawa, a friend of mine, pointed to one of the bars and said, "This is where all pop artists used to meet, but no longer do". True, there are no such places as Paris cafes of the 19th century where all the Bohemians could meet. Many things have changed. In the New York of the late 1970s, they wouldn't even put tables and chairs in the street because there were a lot of loonies and vagabonds who behaved

rather aggressively towards people and waiters had a hard time getting rid of them. Only somewhere in the 1980s did the situation return to normal. Today's New York is a much safer and respectable city than in the late 1970s when I came here. This is just one of the things that has changed. The same happened in Soho where a great number of posh shops have opened while most of the galleries moved to Chelsea. This doesn't mean that Chelsea is a new district. Years ago, it had the famous Chelsea Hotel where artists used to stay. But later, somewhere in the late 1950s, when synthetic fibre became fashionable, many factories making cotton fabrics – and New York and Soho in particular had a lot of them – closed down. As a result, there appeared large empty spaces – the so-called lofts, which were quickly occupied by artists. At that time, one could buy empty houses

#### KOMAR AND MELAMID INC. NEW YORK, N.Y.

WARHOL ANDREW  
Burchi sell my immortal soul! to Komar and Melamid Inc.  
for 100 USD NEW YORK  
I likewise authorize the resale of said soul.



3.

3. Andy Warhol giving his soul to Komar and Melamid, February 6, 1979

Photo: Fred W. McDura, private collection,  
Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

for a song. So when I came here in the late 1970s and in the 1980s, Soho was the center of artistic life. Of course, prices were higher than in the 1950s-1960s. There were galleries everywhere, crowds of tourists in the streets, in cafes and restaurants. Artists were the first to discover Soho, followed by gallery owners who were in turn followed by collectors or just rich parents' children who rented these lofts and lived a Bohemian life: they drank, smoked and played at being artists. Well, it was an extremely joyful place. Later, in the 1990s, all the galleries and most of the artists moved to Chelsea. But this time, things happened in a different way. If it was artists who first settled in Soho, followed by gallery owners, in Chelsea, gallery owners came first. They bought dilapidated derelict buildings, restored them and turned them into a kind of art supermarket – each storey housing a gallery. Finding themselves abandoned, artists moved there, too. This situation is highly symbolic and it means



4. "Fine Quality Souls for Every Taste"  
from *We Buy and Sell Souls*, 1978–83  
Photo offset poster, 60x50, private collection.  
Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

4.

that nowadays an artist is an appendage of the art world. If earlier an artist could influence gallery owners and lord over them, if he was at the center of the altar, in the center of the art shrine, now the center of the altar is occupied by priests of art and people related to the art business. Artists have become only misty images of saints, while it is priests who are in charge of everything. This is the difference.

■■■■■ In comparison, what is the status of gallery and art districts of Moscow?

■■■■■ I have no idea what's going on in Moscow. I don't think Moscow has such artists' quarters with cafes where artists settle and gather. The thing is that, in the U.S., real estate dealers use artists to their own advantage. When artists move somewhere, rich collectors follow in their footsteps and prices for properties go up. But I don't think it matters in Russia – there are different mechanisms of price hikes and artists do not contribute to them. In New York, artists are the real estate avant-garde. I've always said jokingly that once I was the avant-garde of intellectual and cultural life and now artists are the avant-garde of real estate.

■■■■■ So what is the role of the artist in the social life of society?

■■■■■ In general, I regard the work of a contemporary artist and his exhibitions as kinds of theatre sets on the stage where a certain way of life is played out. When you come to an exhibition, you become a member of a theatrical performance, a part of the theatrical way of life. Usually people attend exhibitions not for the sake of paintings, but

to appear in public and have a look at other people, talk to them, say "hi" to friends. Exhibition openings are a form of social contact. Paintings that are obstructed by other people's heads are only part of the scenery. So one of the main functions of art today is its social function. Art has turned into design, into stage props for social life. But again, that's just my own point of view. Art probably also has commercial value. It is a kind of stock to invest money in.

■■■■■ So what is fashionable in New York in the field of art today?

■■■■■ It seems to me that all flowers are in bloom now, so to speak. Installations, realism, super-realism, abstract expressionism, video art, conceptualism, photography...

The number of galleries has increased. There are about a thousand of them in New York now. So about 5,000 personal exhibitions are going on during one season. Paris, Berlin or other cities can get nowhere near this figure. I'm talking only about the galleries that exhibit advanced art and claim to hold events. They alone number a thousand. I don't include galleries selling engravings or antiques. When you live in this muddle, it's difficult to single out some major trends from the cosmic point of view. For me personally, Fra Angelico's exhibition in the Metropolitan last year became a much more significant event than any own personal shows. Last year, I had four one-man shows, two in London and two in the U.S. But Fra Angelico's exhibition made a greater impact on me than all the exhibitions of contemporary art in New York or London or Germany.





## Andrew Weinstein

### ***Irony and Mystery: Vitaly Komar's Three-Day Weekend***

For thirty years, Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid, the pioneers of Soviet nonconformist pop/conceptual art, ribbed the art establishment (and just about everyone else) in art projects made with a smile. When, for example, Komar and Melamid began working collaboratively with elephants in 1995 or advocating *The Healing Power of Art* in 1997-99 — Rubens for liver problems, Seurat for pimples — it looked like a joke. But the irony never suggested a cynical rejection of the value of art. For these artists, reared in the Soviet Union on the traditional craft of painting, the inspiring force that they felt in the company of masterworks was real. Through irony, Komar and Melamid acknowledged that some things are so awe inspiring that they confound comprehension.

Since 2003, when Komar chose to work alone, his art has seemed more serious and spiritual. But Komar's strange mandalas — graphic symbols of the universe inspired by Hindu and Buddhist tradition — which, at the same time, unify symbols associated with Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, are in the deepest sense ironic, for the artist makes no claims about their worth. He even pokes fun at his seemingly New Age project by posing visitors to his exhibitions for snapshots behind a painted plywood mandala that mimics classic amusement park kitsch. The mixed-media pieces in the *Three-Day Weekend* cycle invoke religion not as a source of simplistic fundamentalist answers about purported "truths," but instead as a fundamental mystery that Komar, the perennial ironist, neither cares nor dares to resolve.

The *Three-Day Weekend* project began with a personal epiphany. Upon the chance discovery of a long-forgotten family photo, Komar suddenly understood his strange attraction, some twenty years earlier, to the famous photo of Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin at Yalta, a picture he saw for the first time when he immigrated to the U.S. in 1978. The family photo, his favorite when he was a child, shows six-year-old Vitaly posed between parents shortly before his Christian father divorced his Jewish mother because of religious differences and disappeared forever. What connected the family and Yalta photographs in Komar's mind was that

each comprised a brief triadic unity, with a central figure between what would soon be foes. In this way, Komar believes that he had subconsciously projected himself into Roosevelt's position. This explained why he turned F.D.R. into E.T. in Komar and Melamid's collaborative 1982 tempera and oil painting, *Yalta Conference*; after all, E.T. (whose film debuted in 1982) not only conjured childhood but was an alien in the U.S. like Komar himself. On specially made graph paper, *Fragile Unity with E.T.* essentially charts this phenomenon, showing in a humorous way how public history helped reveal and reconstruct Komar's fragmentary understanding of his private history.

Times were tough for young Vitaly and his single mother, and neither Soviet ideology nor its symbols of community could blunt the pain. In *Between Darkness and Light*, Komar substitutes his missing father with the patriarch he knew, Josef Stalin. A lack of symmetry speaks to a child's world out of balance, where Manichaeon forces battle for the boy and his mother, oppressed in a grim Hades. Overhead are the fragments, a circle, a triangle, and a square, that only hint at the spiritual fulfillment embodied in *Four Moons as Part of a Snowflake* with its Islamic-inspired crescent moons, Jewish Stars of David, and Christian crosses. The symbols of the three religions invoke the holy Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays that the artist proposes as a "three-day weekend," a time to pray or, for that matter, to play, so different from the one-day Sunday weekend of Stalinist times that caused enormous hardship for Komar's Jewish grandparents. At a time of arrogance and intolerance expressed through nationalism and religious fundamentalism both in the U.S. and abroad, *Four Moons as Part of a Snowflake* literally provides an artistic blueprint for a better world.

Is Komar serious? I believe that he is — it's a vision inspired by *tikkun olam*, the Judaic hope for "repairing the world." But by characterizing his Utopian world as a snowflake, Komar acknowledges, with an ironic wink, the fragility and impermanence and maybe also the impossibility of his dream,

In just this spirit, Komar invites like-minded people to join his "Three-Day Weekend Society." To judge from *Triple Yin-Yang*, it seems he has already recruited his mother and even Stalin to the cause. Here too, at long last, the artist reveals his grown-up self, the offspring of the worlds of both old photographs, positioned at the bottom of an inverted triangle that diagrams his history like a family tree. Visitors to Komar's exhibitions

can become official members of Komar's society by posing behind the same plywood mandala for a photo I.D. portrait. Yet Komar calls this invitation his most ironic gesture; unlike his works on paper, which attempt to inspire meditation, Komar's interactive photo prop aims to amuse visitors. Ultimately, Komar pokes fun at himself with the mock earnestness of his Three-Day Weekend Society, revealing how he is far from certain about the value of his symbols and mandalas.

The *Three-Day Weekend* cycle destabilizes the meanings of the Yalta and family photographs by placing them in a range of contexts. As their meanings multiply, the irony creeps in: the photos seem to have no fixed identity. This uncertainty removes them from the reality of the everyday world that we tend to assume we understand. With the irony comes a measure of mystery and, in turn, humility and respect. At the same time, through his imaginative recreations, Komar blunts the power that these two old photos hold over him. This helps explain his repetition of them, for even the most disturbing images lose their potency when seen over and over. To master his past, Komar takes a kind of ironic control, affirming the healing power of the artist to salve his own wounds and maybe, just maybe, those of a fractious world.

These remarks are adapted from an essay that appeared in *Vitaly Komar: Three-Day Weekend* on the occasion of the autumn, 2005 exhibition of the same name at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, New York.

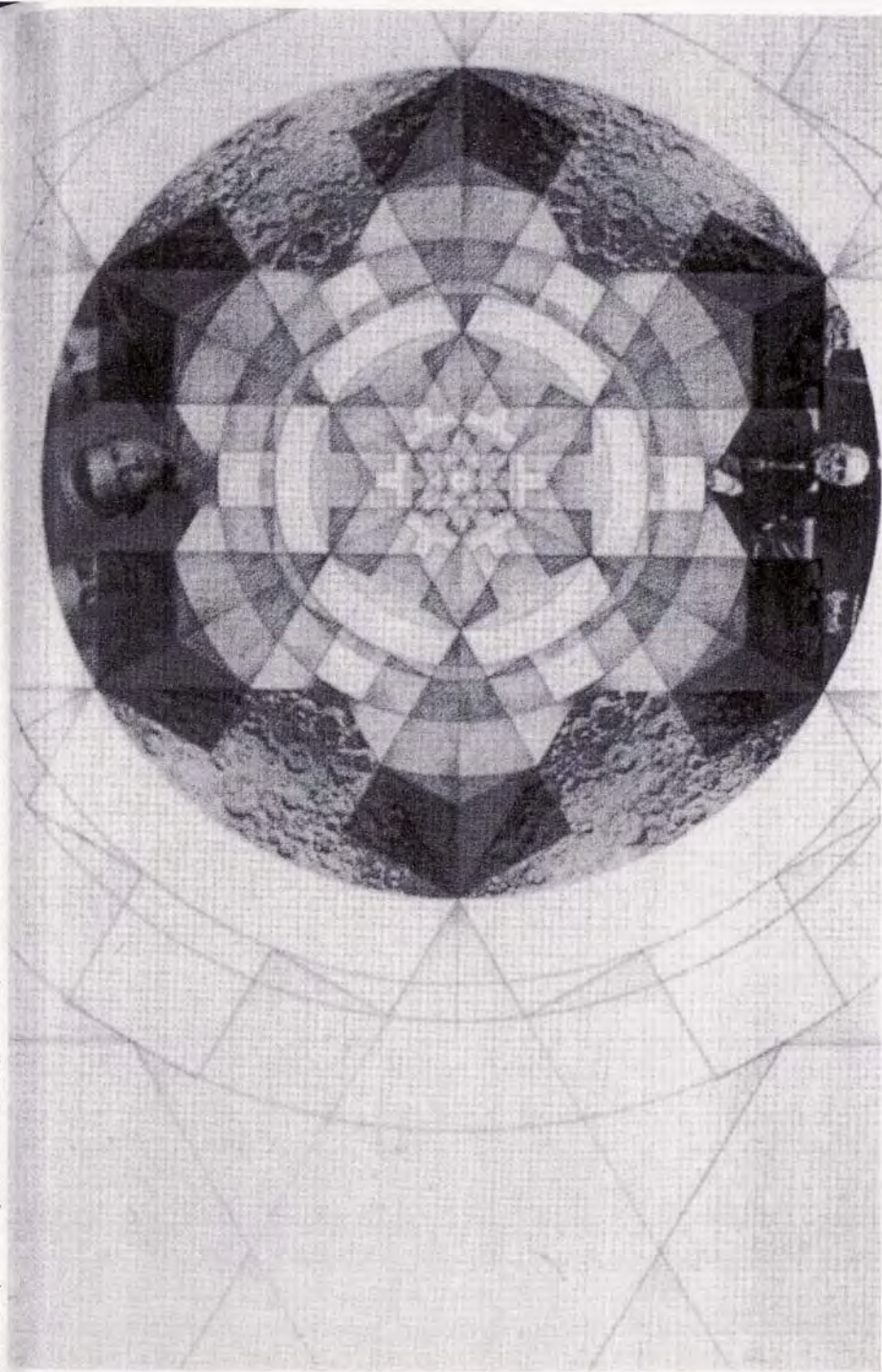
Reproduced on the following pages are four works from Vitaly Komar's *Three-Day Weekend* series: *Fragile Unity with E.T.*, *Between Darkness and Light*, *Four Moons as Part of a Snowflake*, and *Triple Yin-Yang*. All works are mixed media on paper, 40 x 30 inches, 2004-05. At the artist's request, all photos of the works are details: the specially made, uniform background grid, which the artist considers "something between a mat and a frame, a kind of environment," is cropped to allow for larger reproduction of the images themselves. Photos: Alan Zindman/Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.















AUGUST 24-31 2005 | **TIME OUT LONDON 57**

## Vitaly Komar

Matthew Bown *West End*

By combining the days of rest celebrated by Muslims, Jews and Christians (Friday, Saturday and Sunday) Vitaly Komar proposes to create a three-day weekend, not only to make the work-

ing week shorter but also to encourage the peaceful coexistence of different faiths (yes, that should do it). To that end, he has made a series of 'Universal Mandalas' – forms based on ancient spiritual symbols – by collaging together historical and personal images. In one picture, a photograph of himself as a child with his mother (a Jew) and father (a Christian) partly conceals a picture of Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill at the 1945 Yalta conference. Composed of interlocking circles, another image has a painting of an ET-like creature at its centre.

It's not hard to see where this work is coming from. Komar's parents split because of religious differences; he is a Soviet emigré living in the States; his long and fruitful artistic partnership with Alex Melamid came to an end last year. Clearly, he's wearied by all these divisions. What's missing here, though, is the satire that was central to (for example) the 'Most Wanted' and 'Least Wanted' works, which Komar and Melamid painted after conducting international polls in which they discovered a depressingly universal predilection for bucolic landscapes. Or the pastiche encapsulated in his early painting 'On Reading Shvarts' (also on show here), which depicts a hero riding out to do battle, waved off by his damsel.

*Martin Coomer*



**"Later I understood why the photograph of the Yalta Conference had attracted me"**

July 1, 2005

## Art in Review; Vitaly Komar

By KEN JOHNSON

Three-Day Weekend  
Ronald Feldman  
31 Mercer Street, SoHo  
Through July 29

At least for the foreseeable future, the long and fruitful partnership of the Soviet dissidents, emigrés and United States citizens Komar and Melamid has come to an end. Vitaly Komar's first solo venture involves the ingenious play with political and cultural symbols that characterized his collaborative work with Alex Melamid; it is more personal, but, disappointingly, it is not as anticly absurdist or satirically biting.

The title "Three-Day Weekend" invokes a utopian dream of ecumenical harmony in that it includes the three days of worship for Muslims (Friday), Jews (Saturday) and Christians (Sunday). To promote the "Three-Day Weekend Society" Mr. Komar has created a mandala-type painting with a triangle in the center and an actual hole into which viewers can insert their heads for Polaroid photographs.

He has also created two large stained-glass mandalas with round central windows opening onto mirrors in which viewers can see themselves. And he has made numerous intricately patterned mandala drawings on graph paper; collaged into them are photographs of the artist as a boy with his mother and father -- a Jew and a Christian who divorced when he was young -- and photographs of Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin at Yalta.

At the heart of all this is a yearning for wholeness -- psychological, familial, political and religious -- in a world of endless conflict. This is poignant in light of the Komar and Melamid breakup; but any reference to that remains conspicuously absent, which is perhaps why it feels as if a certain vital energy is missing. KEN JOHNSON



VITALY KOMAR, formerly of the Soviet Union and now of New York, is a foremost contemporary artist and one of the winners of the 2004 Ben Uri International Jewish Artist of the Year Awards. He explains the origins of his latest work, to be seen in London this summer.

## THREE-DAY WEEKEND

The Three-Day Weekend, for me, is a symbol of the peaceful coexistence of different peoples and different concepts of faith and spirituality: Friday for Muslims, Saturday for Jews, and Sunday for Christians. The idea to create ecumenical symbols in the form of Universal Mandalas originated in childhood dreams. It continues the search of the nonconformist art of my youth. In these mandalas, I unite ancient symbols of spirituality with historical and personal images.

My imagination unites images and concepts that are distant and seemingly opposite. I first saw a picture of the Yalta Conference, an image that was banned in the Soviet Union, in the 1980s in New York. Afterwards, for many years I could not understand why I was so haunted by it. Back then, I made several paintings on this theme. In the first, I transformed Roosevelt's face into the face of ET – a child and alien in America who is from another planet and possibly a different political system.

Two years ago, while looking through old family photographs, I rediscovered a portrait of me with my mother and father that was my favorite in childhood but which I have long since forgotten. My father is dressed in his military uniform. It was taken shortly after the end of the Second World War, and it was the last time that the three of us were together. I was six, my parents would soon be divorced, and my father would shortly leave Moscow. I never saw him again.

When I saw this portrait, I suddenly thought about the image of Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill. Placing these two photographs side by side, I realised that the picture of Yalta had haunted me because unconsciously I saw in it a forgotten picture of my family. In the depths of my memory, these two trinities had become superimposed. I understood also that the image of ET in my old painting was a self-portrait; it was me – a Russian Jew, an alien from a different world.

The main reason for my parents' divorce was that the Jewish traditions of my mother's family could not coexist peacefully with my father's Christian ones. For me, these two photographs became a symbol of a fragile unity – the unity of the Allies just before the Cold War, and of my family not long before my parents' divorce. An old, naïve dream of a happy family, of peaceful coexistence between peoples, ethnic groups and religions, came back to me through these pictures.

During my Soviet childhood, a weekend lasted only one day – Sunday. This caused a great deal of hardship for my

symbols that united heraldry and mandalas, irony and spirituality, symbols that would genuinely represent the peaceful coexistence of peoples and religions, something that the state emblems—the hammer and sickle, the various state eagles—did not actually accomplish. Unfortunately, *Paradise*, which was housed in my father-in-law's apartment, was dismantled on the orders of state authorities.

We were constantly surrounded by Soviet pop culture – state-sponsored official art and visual propaganda. Publications, exhibitions, and sales of art

### This idea could have united people more effectively than Marxism

Jewish grandparents, who had difficulty obtaining permission to move their free day from Sunday to Saturday. After Stalin's death, the government instituted a two-day weekend. I was a teenager then, but even now, the two-day weekend – Saturday and Sunday – seems to me a symbol of the peaceful coexistence of Judaism and Christianity. Wouldn't it be great, I thought, to add one more flower to this bouquet – Friday – to include Abdul, my Tartar classmate, whose Muslim family lived in our building?

These visions and dreams were typical of our small circle of non-conformist artists, the friends of my youth. We would drink, recite poetry, and talk about Sots Art (Soviet pop/conceptual art) and *dukhovka* (spiritual questions) until sunrise. Sots Art was a kind of ironical iconoclasm, whereas *dukhovka*, a slang expression of Moscow's bohemia, expressed a dream of an ecumenical mysticism. I've always loved Gogol's cocktail of irony and mysticism.

At the beginning of the 1970s, in a multi-stylistic installation called *Paradise*, Alex Melamid and I tried to combine Sots Art and *dukhovka* in one, synthetic work. I dreamed of making

were controlled by the Soviet government. Under these circumstances, pursuing money and fame meant selling your soul to the devil. Out of principle, many of us chose to make our living as something other than artists. We made art 'for the soul', during free time at the weekends. The two days seemed so short that I dreamed of having at least one more 'creative day'.

My utopia of the three-day weekend was dangerous. This idea could have united people more effectively than Marxism. The idea of the peaceful coexistence of different ideologies was viewed by the government as anti-Soviet propaganda. The common enemy of totalitarian atheistic fundamentalism united us with various dissident groups. I think that Hitler, the common enemy, united the superstars of the Yalta conference in a similar way. In the future, friends, not enemies, must bring us together.

The search for spirituality in art, begun by Kandinsky during the flowering of the Russian avant-garde, was interrupted first by Stalin, and later, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, by the advent of the capitalist free market. I never imagined that my artist friends and I would



be transformed from the so-called avant-garde of spiritual and intellectual life to the avant-garde of real estate. At the beginning of the 21st century, both in Russia and in the West, we have gained much, but have forgotten much too, just as I had forgotten my childhood photograph.

Nostalgia for the nonconformist art of my youth made me return to its unfulfilled dreams and experiments. The painting of ET was part of the Nostalgic Socialist Realism series, made with my old friend Alex. But when I began uniting symbols of spirituality with childhood photographs of me and my parents, I embarked on a deeply personal work. Today, I understand the concept of artistic collaboration very broadly. I continue to collaborate with art history, with the nonconformist art of my youth.

At some point during work on these photographs, a face – mine or one of the others – appeared in the centre of some of the mandalas. These accidents gave me the idea of making painted and stained glass panels with a hole or a mirror in the centre of the mandala. Visitors who'd like to participate in this project can place their faces in the opening of certain mandalas, or see their reflection in the mirror in the others. In this way, spectators can establish a personal connection with eternal symbols of spirituality and the concept of the Three-Day Weekend.

The exhibition already held at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in New York and this coming one at the Ben Uri are the initial steps in the creation and promotion of a not-for-profit Three-Day Weekend Society.

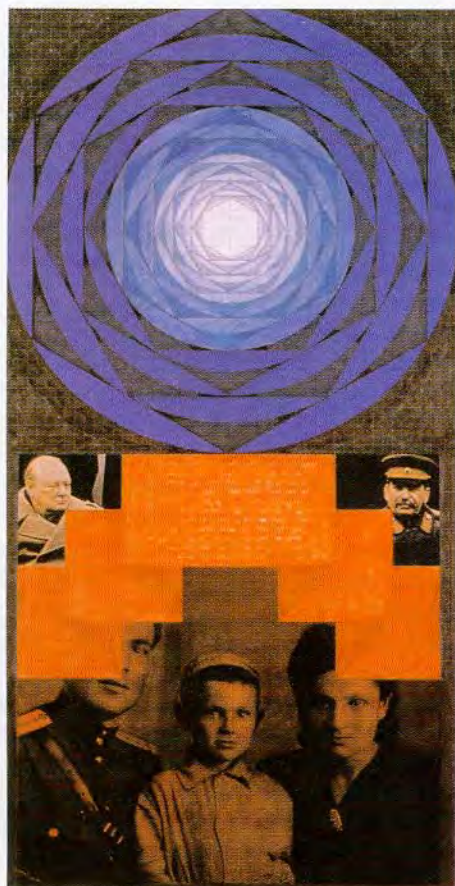
Vitaly Komar's *Three-Day Weekend* will be shown at the Ben Uri Gallery, The London Jewish Museum of Art, from 7 August - 4 September as part of the 2004 Ben Uri International Jewish Artist of the Year Winners Exhibition. The other artists whose work will be shown are: Yaki Assayag, Dalya Moss, Suzy Hug Levy and Noam Edry

See WHAT'S HAPPENING page 23 for details.

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Below left: *Blue Tunnel*, detail, 40 x 30 inches overall  
 Below: *Fragile Unity #1*, detail, 40 x 30 inches overall  
 Bottom: *Symmetrical Landscape* 30 x 40 inches overall  
 All mixed media on paper from *Three-Day Weekend*, 2004-5  
 Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

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## Vitaly Komar at Ronald Feldman

Artists worked in secrecy and the weekend fell on Sunday in Stalin's Soviet Union. The observation of this "free" day of rest was a matter of tradition, an attachment to the Gregorian cal-

endar. The young Vitaly Komar could only dream of a two-day weekend during which his Jewish mother could observe the Sabbath on Saturday. With the government's extension of the weekend after Stalin's death to include both Saturday and Sunday, the teenage Komar then imagined a three-day weekend, adding Friday in respect for Muslim tradition. "Three-Day Weekend," Komar's first solo exhibition without longtime collaborator Alexander Melamid, followed a narrative line in which the number three appears as a key symbol in his life and work.

Komar presented a series of 29 mixed-medium works on large sheets of 40-by-30-inch graph

Leffingwell, Edward. "Vitaly Komar at Ronald Feldman." *Art in America* no. 11 (December 2005): 137-138.

Roosevelt and Stalin at Yalta and a family photograph of Komar at the age of six seated between his Christian father and Jewish mother, shortly before their divorce. *My Family Photograph as a Butterfly* is a disassembled copy of the portrait elegantly played by drafting equipment and laid out in overlapping arcs and circles across the grid. *Study for Three-Day Weekend Stained Glass* transposes the cutout Stalin to Komar's father's place in the family group. A drawing on black grid paper, *Fragile Unity Triangle #2*, shows the family in a circle with young Komar in the center and the men of Yalta lurking in three corners. In another, the boy is replaced by an image of the lost extraterrestrial E.T.

Sharing the exhibition's title, the stained-glass works, one roughly 4 feet square and the other 7, consist of four interpenetrating Stars of David, four crescents and a cross. The two pieces were situated on opposite walls of the front gallery; circular mirrors at the centers of each work caught the other's reflection across the expanse of the room.

In the back room, Komar invited "everybody" to "establish a personal connection with eternal symbols of spirituality" by means of a Polaroid portrait. Visitors placed their heads in a cutout circle at the heart of a 4-foot-square wood support for *Mandala for Photographs #1*. The resulting portraits were placed in a grid directly on the wall and mailed to the subjects

at the exhibition's close. As to the state of his relationship with his former partner, Komar nicely observes that he has come to understand collaboration in the broader sense, as a continuing relationship with art history and the nonconformist art of his youth. [*"Three-Day Weekend"* is on view at the Cooper Union until Dec. 11.] —Edward Leffingwell



Vitaly Komar: *Fragile Unity Triangle #2* (from *Three-Day Weekend*), 2004-05, mixed mediums on paper, 40 by 30 inches; at Ronald Feldman.