

THE ART NEWSPAPER Number 240, November 2012

EXHIBITIONS *United Kingdom*

The Russian artists who fled

Saatchi's shows of contemporary Russian and Soviet-era works reveal the country's artistic exodus

RUSSIAN ART

London. Since 2008, Charles Saatchi has used his collection of contemporary art to stage a series of exhibitions from emerging art scenes: first China, then the Middle East, India, Germany, Korea, and now Russia. This month, the gallery opens two Russian art shows simultaneously, "Gaiety is the Most Outstanding Feature of the Soviet Union", composed of Saatchi's own holdings, and "Breaking the Ice", with "non-conformist art" made during Soviet-era Russia.

The director of the Saatchi Gallery, Rebecca Wilson, says that organising a contemporary exhibition has been made possible by the recent proliferation of private Russian museums "giving greater opportunities for the two-way flow of artists". In reality, though, only half of the 20 artists included are based in Russia. "There is not one school or any kind of group that they form, partly because many artists from Russia and the former Soviet Union left to study or work elsewhere," Wilson says.

Among the emigré artists are the Moscow-born painter Dasha Shishkin, now a New York resident, the recent Royal College of Art graduate, Yelena Popova, and the Vienna-based painter Tamuna Sirbiladze, widow of the recently deceased artist Franz West. In *Case History*, 1997-98, the Berlin-based



Boris Mikhailov, *Case History*, 1997-98

photographer Boris Mikhailov documents the lives of those left homeless in the town of Kharkov following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Organised by the foundation of London-based financier Igor Tsukanov, "Breaking the Ice" brings together works by many of the most important artists to have defied the enforced Socialist Realism, with around two-thirds of the work coming from Tsukanov's collection. The remaining works are on loan from ten private collectors as well as two museums, The Russian Museum in St Petersburg and the Zimmerli Art Museum in New Jersey. There is work by Oscar Rabin, who was arrested after organising the 1974 "Bulldozer Exhibition", so-called because the police destroyed the outdoor show, and by the Sots Art (Soviet Pop Art) originators Komar and Melamid, who also participated in the 1974 event. Like some in the contemporary show, these artists have long since left Russia and many of their works are in collections in the US, France and the UK.

Toby Skeggs

• *Gaiety is the Most Outstanding Feature of the Soviet Union*, 21 November-5 May 2013, and *Breaking the Ice*, 21 November-24 February 2013, Saatchi Gallery, London

• For Russia focus, see *The Art Newspaper* 2, pp15-25

Can a Picasso Cure You?

By CHARLES McGRATH

The Russian-born artist Alexander Melamid is by nature an ironist, so adept at serving as his own straight man that it's hard to tell how seriously he means to be taken. He may not know himself.



Mr. Melamid and Vitaly Komar, a fellow Russian émigré, were for years a highly visible Conceptual art duo in New York. They were known for monumental paintings, including one of Stalin killing himself in a New Jersey motel, in the style of Socialist Realism, and for teaching elephants in Thailand how to paint like Abstract Expressionists.

Their most famous project was probably "The People's Choice," in which they polled people about their preferences in art and determined that what everyone really wanted to look at was a landscape with lots of blue, some animals and a historical figure or two. A painting they did according to this recipe — the ideal painting for Americans, they maintained — featured George Washington and some present-day picnickers by a bucolic lake with a hippo in the background.

In 2003 Mr. Melamid and Mr. Komar parted ways, and since then Mr. Melamid, always the more outgoing, has been on his own. For a while he was painting large, Velázquez-like portraits of rappers and Russian oligarchs. His most recent project, though, is something called the Art Healing Ministry, a storefront clinic at 98 Thompson Street in SoHo, where people can come in by appointment and be treated, by means of exposure to fine art, for a variety of physical and psychological ailments.



According to labels on the wall, these include bulimia nervosa, angioedema and urticaria, premenstrual dysphoric disorder and benign prostatic hyperplasia. (Mr. Melamid loves medical terminology, he said, because it reminds him of art criticism.)

Various art-healing tchotchkes are for sale: candles; shoe insoles printed with a van Gogh self-portrait; glass flasks for "charging" liquids with the emanations from paintings

by Raphael, Botticelli, Picasso or Lichtenstein that have been reproduced on the inside of the glass; and prayer cards, one for Picasso, patron saint of motorists, and one for Georges Seurat, patron saint of clear, youthful, radiant skin. You can also arrange for a little robotlike gadget bearing reproductions of paintings by van Gogh and Warhol to visit your apartment and scuttle around on the floor for a while, ridding it of impurities.



"We all know the power of art, its power to galvanize, fortify, stimulate, rouse, soothe and enlighten," Mr. Melamid wrote in a statement announcing the creation of his clinic. In person recently, he explained: "I was always told that art was good for me, but until recently I didn't know what it was good for. What is good? What is good in the U.S.A. is health and health products."



How the art-healing process works is not entirely clear, but it may involve invisible particles called creatons. "The creatons are everywhere, and they go into the human body," said Mr. Melamid, who is small and animated

and has a nimbus of white mad-scientist hair. “If the creations are used properly and nicely, they can enhance your body functions. They will help you to live happier and will also get rid of impurities. They enter through your kundalini and also into your eyes.”

The clinic officially opens on Wednesday, but last week a middle-aged man complaining of work-related stress dropped by for a preview treatment. He looked warily at a vitrine displaying something called an “Art Infuser,” which appeared to be an old VHS tape connected to an enema bulb. But Mr. Melamid reassured him that rectal infusion was now obsolete and instead led him to the back of the clinic, to what looked like a dentist’s chair, with a computer screen and a small projection device.

While the patient reclined, Mr. Melamid sat in a chair under a portrait of himself and took notes on a clipboard. He wanted to know specifics about the patient’s malady, and about any museums he had visited recently. Told that the patient had been looking at a lot of Whistlers, he nodded and said, “Not enough masterpieces.”

After a moment, he said: “This anxiety of yours is a very typical problem of modern man. And woman. And everything in between. My function is to help you see the right things.”

He went on to explain that a lot of visual information was bad for the patient. “So when you go to a museum,” he continued, “you have to be very discreet. You don’t want overexposure — that’s as dangerous as to take too many medicines. Art needs to be taken in moderation and according to a specialist who can prescribe the right dosage.”

Clicking through a series of paintings on the small computer screen, he stopped at a Cézanne and said: “If you have hay fever, you go to see Claude Monet, that’s for sure. For your problem I would recommend Paul Cézanne. When you go to the museum, don’t look around much. Go direct to Paul Cézanne. It’s very powerful painting, but in a way it’s also pacifying.”

For some additional, on-the-spot relief, Mr. Melamid zapped the patient right on the forehead with a projection of one of Modigliani’s reclining nudes. “Close your eyes,” he instructed. “Naked girl, beautiful girl. But will not arouse your emotions, because it’s elongated.”

He added: “You understand this is not the full session,” explaining that a complete evaluation takes 20 minutes and costs \$125, and that ideally, as with psychiatric treatment, art healing would go on indefinitely.

“I’m not for money. I’m for health,” he said. “But I have to support my family and now my grandchildren.”

Afterward the patient said he didn’t necessarily feel better, but he certainly felt no worse.

“The question is whether I will step over and become real,” Mr. Melamid said. “Whether I will stop being an artist or a conceptualist and become a real healer. That’s what I want to do. I know I’ll never do it, but that’s what I want to do.”

Speaking of his clinic, he said: “Besides being a great idea, it’s something everyone can relate to. It takes art a little bit off the pedestal. You can art-charge your water or your vodka, you can buy an art candle. And it’s funny. I discovered five years ago that the truth is funny. Not everything that’s funny is true, for sure. But whatever is not funny is not true. That’s why truth has never been revealed, because scientists don’t understand that the end product needs to be funny.”



Komar and Melamid, *Air Superiority*, 1997, Tempera and oil on canvas, 66 x 66 in. (167.6 x 167.6 cm), Photo: Zindman/Fremont, Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York / www.feldmangallery.com

KOMAR and MELAMID

Russia, 1943/45–

Artist team (Vitaly) Komar and (Alex) Melamid were both born in Moscow in 1943 and 1945, respectively. They studied together at the Moscow Art School and Stroganov School of Art and Design, graduating in 1967, the same year as the first showing of their collaborative work. The pair immigrated to the US in 1978. By 1972, they had founded the Sots Art movement, which was Soviet Pop and Conceptual Art based on Socialist propaganda and mass culture. The works were largely portraits in the style of propaganda posters with social leaning slogans. They also created Conceptual installations that included paintings, photographs, found objects and sound. These pieces centered around ideas such as their struggle to gain permission to immigrate to the US, the totalitarian rule of their homeland and artistic censorship. After decades of successful partnership, the artists ended their working relationship in 2003-04. Some of the public collections that house their work are the Museum Ludwig, Cologne, MoMA and the Met. Their awards include an NEA grant in 1982, the first Russian artists to do so. They were visiting artists at Cooper Union and University of California, Berkeley. Ronald Feldman Gallery was the first to show their work in the West in 1976 (which Soviet authorities denied them permission to attend) and continues to represent their work. The Wadsworth Atheneum staged their first solo museum show in 1978; 1985 saw their first traveling exhibition in Europe. They were also the first Russian artists to exhibit in Documenta in 1987. Phillips London sold their most expensive piece at auction in 2010: a 1972 painting realized \$1,010,653, almost five times the high estimate of \$230,000. –MJP

Soviet Union's forbidden art unveiled

St Petersburg's first private art museum opens, showing Soviet underground and Russian contemporary art

By John Varoli | From [issue 214](#), June 2010

2 Jun 10



Anti-fascist fantasy: Yalta Conference: the Judgement of Paris, by Komar and Melamid, 1985-86

ST PETERSBURG. A private Russian collector is due to open St Petersburg's first private art museum on 4 June. Novy Museum, the brainchild of Aslan Chekhoev and his wife Irina, is devoted to Soviet underground and Russian contemporary art. The museum is centred on the Chekhoevs' collection of nearly 300 paintings, works on paper and photographs assembled over the past five years.

The couple has spent E1m renovating three floors in a 19th-century building on the historic Vasilevsky Island, not far from St Petersburg State University and the Russian Academy of Fine Arts. The collection features works by 69 artists—including Yevgeny Rukhin, Evgeny Mikhnov-Voitenko, Komar and Melamid and Oscar Rabin—and the inaugural exhibition features a sample work by each artist.

When asked why he embarked on this project, Chekhoev said: "We see this as something for history and for St Petersburg, because around 70% of our collection is comprised of important Moscow artists whose works are not well represented in our local museums."

Chekhoev will rotate the exhibition around three times a year, and he also wants to collaborate with other collectors. The Chekhoevs have been active buyers at major European and US auction houses, spending around E5m to build the collection. Their most notable purchase was Komar and Melamid's Yalta Conference: the Judgment of Paris, 1985-86, which they purchased at MacDougall's in London in November 2007 for £184,400. The three-metre-wide canvas depicts the conference that divided Europe during the second world war in the guise of Greek mythology. The painting shows Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin as Greek goddesses and Hitler as the shepherd-prince Paris.

"Russian art of the second half of the 20th century is truly unique, but it is not appreciated in Russia and abroad," said Chekhoev. "Underground art arose in extreme situations of dictatorship; never mind the censorship and repression, it was simply difficult to get materials. While this slowed them down, it also forced them to be more creative and resourceful, and this spurred an incredible level of originality."

“‘La contrepoin’t’ controversy breeds contempt.”
RT.com, September 27, 2010.
http://rt.com/Top_News/2010-09-27/ter-oganyan-louvre-controversy.html.

“La contrepoin’t” controversy breeds contempt

27 September, 2010, 11:02

An exhibition of Russian art due to take place at the Louvre in mid-October is at risk of failure as a result of a dispute over controversial works by a cutting-edge Russian artist, Avdey Ter-Oganyan.

Leading Russian art dealer Marat Gelman told Ekho Moskvyy radio station that seven artists have refused to take part in the large-scale exhibition in protest against Russia's Ministry of Culture and the Federal Surveillance Service for Compliance with the Law in Mass Communications and Cultural Heritage Protection.



They are excluding works by Avdey Ter-Oganyan from the display at the Louvre.

“Le contrepoin’t Russe” exhibition to be held in the framework of the Russia-France Cultural Year is expected to feature some of brightest lights of Russian contemporary art, including Ilya and Emilia Kabakovs, Pavel Pepperstein, Eric Bulatov, Aleksandr Brodsky, Komar and Melamid, and the Blue Noses, among others.

Avdey Ter-Oganyan's avante-garde creations can be found in the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow's Museum of Modern Art and the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg.

Back in 1998, Ter-Oganyan created a performance “A Young Infidel”, which he presented at the Art-Manezh exhibition. It featured the 37-year-old artist from the South of Russia cutting reproductions of famous icons with an ax.

The performance was cut short and the artist accused of inciting religious hatred. He subsequently migrated to the Czech Republic, where he was granted political asylum.

His “Radical Abstractionism” series of works have been excluded from the list due to their alleged “*call for a violent change of Russia's constitutional order and inciting religious hatred.*”

Meanwhile, the head of the arts department of the Ministry of Culture, Maria Sparzhina, told RIA news agency that the exhibition will take place despite the scandal.

She was quoted as saying that they have received “*no formal notice from the artists concerning their withdrawal from the exhibition; their works are about to reach Paris.*”

A similar incident happened three years ago when two of Russia’s most provocative artists, known as [the Blue Noses](#), had their work banned from a Russian political art exhibit in Paris. “The Era of Mercy” photograph, showing two policemen kissing, was described as an “*erotic picture*” by Russia’s Culture Minister and excluded from the display.

Art exhibition lays bare Russia's 'Shattered Utopia'

Works reflect changes as the Soviet Union fell apart in early 1990s

*By Amber Baker
Loveland Reporter-Herald*

"Shattered Utopia," an exhibition that promises to be a revelation to viewers, runs until Jan. 2 at the Fort Collins Museum of Contemporary Art.

The exhibition traces the major developments of the Russian nonconformist and Sots art (a contraction of socialism and art) movements from the late 1960s to the present, says executive director Marianne Lorenz, and includes works by key figures in the movements such as Oleg Tselkov, Ilya Kabakov, Erik Bulatov and Michail Chemiakin.

Lorenz adds that the exhibition is the first of its kind to be shown at the Fort Collins Museum of Contemporary Art.

"It allows viewers a comprehensive view of how visual artists responded to the rapidly changing political, social and artistic atmosphere of Russia just before, during and after the fall of the Soviet Union," she says.

"A particularly impressive example of nonconformist art," says Lorenz, "is the large-scale paintings by Oleg Tselkov."

His painting "Meal" depicts a man sitting in isolation with a menacing knife and fork in front of a meager meal.

"Tselkov was an artist who, contrary to accepted Soviet socialist realism practice, insisted on the freedom to express his unique vision of the world. Tselkov's isolate subjects are disturbingly beautiful and scary," she says.

Vitaly Komar and Alexandar Melamid, Moscow artists who were born during the last decade of Stalin's regime, invented Sots art, which is based on American pop art, explains Lorenz.

"Sots art is an art of undermining received images of the Soviet social and political structure in a way that robs those images of their meaning and power," she says.

"Leonid Sokov's painting of Joseph Stalin and Marilyn Monroe sitting at a table and toasting one another is an example of how Sots artists deconstruct Soviet and American political and commercial icons in a humorous, satirical manner."

The works come from the extensive collection of Wayne Yakes, a Denver-area collector and Russian art enthusiast. Parts of the collection have been shown in a Denver museum, but this is the first time his entire collection has been shown, Lorenz says. A fully illustrated catalog accompanies the exhibition and will be available for sale.

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." ♦

Oral History: Tibor Hirsch and "Shoah"

Richard Brody

In 1984, I was hired by a remarkable man, a TV commercial director named Tibor Hirsch, to be his researcher on a documentary that he had long hoped to make and to which he was about to devote a great deal of time, energy, and money: a film about the liberation of a concentration camp in Germany (at the time, in East Germany), known both as Ludwigslust and as Wöbbelin, by American soldiers in the last days of the war in Europe—and also about his own liberation, and that of two of his closest friends, from that camp. My job quickly expanded beyond textual and telephone research; I travelled the country to meet veterans of the 82nd Airborne who took part in the liberation and to interview them on videotape. (The trunk of video equipment with which I travelled was so heavy that it had to sit in the center aisle of the propeller plane I took from Kansas City to Lincoln, Nebraska, in order not to make the aircraft unsteady.) I also attended reunions of Holocaust survivors and spent lots of time in oral-history archives to find others who had been interned in and liberated from the same concentration camp, and joined Tibor in recording interviews with many of them, mostly in the New York area.

Tibor was a man of great courage and ability, firm principle, and mordant humor (he called himself an "alumnus" of Auschwitz—one of the many camps he had survived). After the war, he returned to his native Hungary, where he intended to become a filmmaker in order to document on film what he and others had endured at the hands of the Germans, but, now living under the Soviet yoke, he could only, for political reasons, find work in radio. He took part in the 1956 uprising against the Soviet occupiers, and his knowledge of German—learned in the camps—proved useful to the movement: he was sent to Vienna in order to gather news from the outside world about what was really going on in Hungary. When he radioed in with what he had learned, his fellow partisans told him, "Don't come home, it's over, we're done for." He made his way to the U.S., where he soon became a cameraman and then a director of commercials, but never lost sight of his cinematic master plan.

The project for which Tibor had hired me grew daily in scope, and soon I was working out plans for him to travel to the former concentration-camp site along with two fellow survivors, a trio of American soldiers who were among their liberators, and a film crew. But before these complex arrangements could be finalized (the East German authorities didn't make it easy for Americans to travel in the country, let alone to film there), work on the film was brought to a halt: before committing vast resources to the film, Tibor wanted some outside encouragement that it might have a life in the industry, and a retired news executive of his acquaintance to whom he presented his project offered cold comfort. As a result, Tibor abandoned the film of his lifelong ambition, but he quickly got me started on research toward another film—a documentary about the Soviet émigré artists Komar and Melamid, whose work he collected. Here, too, much footage was shot (including an interview with Andy Warhol), but his business commitments made it hard for him to devote the needed time to the film, and he abandoned this project, too. Several months later, Tibor was diagnosed with a brain tumor, and lived only a few weeks longer.

This long reminiscence is spurred by a single grain of memory. When Claude Lanzmann made "Shoah," the idea of a film about the concentration camps featuring interviews with survivors and with others who came into connection with the camps wasn't as common as it has since become—it was really quite unusual, as this anecdote suggests. When news about "Shoah" emerged, in 1985, some of my parents' friends called with congratulations—they assumed it was the film I had been working on.

It pains me that Tibor didn't make his film—and also that he didn't live to see “Shoah,” which, I think, would have affected him profoundly. He died, as I recall, several weeks before it was shown here. Tibor lived with the drive to bear witness; so did a number of survivors of concentration camps interviewed by Lanzmann. In one of the most profoundly shattering moments in the film, Filip Müller, a Jewish man who was in a detail that removed bodies from the gas chambers to the crematorium, enters a gas chamber with a group of Jews who were about to be killed; he planned to die there too. Müller told Lanzmann (I quote from the published transcript of the film):

One of them said: “So you want to die. But that's senseless. Your death won't give us back our lives. That's no way. You must get out of here alive, you must bear witness to our suffering, and to the injustice done to us.”

Lanzmann himself was driven to bear witness too, and the result is a masterwork of the cinema that transcends the cinema.

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Skewering Soviet Dogma and Consumerism, Too

A Neuberger Exhibit Marks a '70s Russian Rebellion Against State-Approved Realism

It's a tribute to the richness of the Neuberger Museum of Art's collection that a random visit to an exhibition focusing on part of its permanent collection yielded splendid results. In fact, "Komar and Melamid: Super Objects — Super Comfort for Super People," though a relatively small show for this museum, couldn't be more rewarding.

ART REVIEW

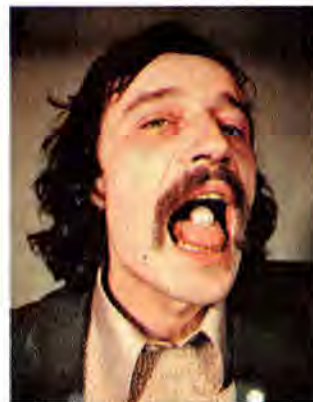
BENJAMIN
GENOCCHIO

The exhibition returns us to a vital, memorable moment in the early 1970s, when a few brave contemporary Russian artists began to rebel against the tradition of Socialist Realism, a style that promoted Soviet political ideology. These artists often turned to conceptual art in defiance of the authorities, their work exhibited secretly in underground clubs and apartments.

Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid were two Russian conceptual artists who worked collaboratively between 1972 and 2003 under the name Komar and Melamid. Like their peers, they were both trained as painters in the tradition of Socialist Realism, but became increasingly disenchanted with the direction of Russian society and began to re-evaluate their commitment to making art in the service of the state. They became dissidents.

Among the first Soviet experimental artists to receive international art world attention, Komar and Melamid were invited in 1977 to have an exhibition at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York. They proposed a conceptual art print portfolio combining photography and text, "Super Objects — Super Comfort for Super People," but the negatives for the project had to be smuggled out of Russia and the photographs printed in the United States because the Soviet authorities refused the artists permission to attend.

"Komar and Melamid: Super Objects — Super Comfort for Super People," Neuberger Museum of Art, 735 Anderson Hill Road, Purchase, through May 4. Information: www.neuberger.org or (914) 251-6100.



Today "Super Objects — Super Comfort for Super People" is widely admired as a seminal art project by these two pioneers of the Moscow conceptual art movement, who migrated to the United States via Israel in 1978, the same year their first museum exhibition opened at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford. Since then they have become famous for a variety of conceptual art stunts, including teaching elephants in Thailand to paint abstract art. In 2000, Christie's held an auction of 50 paintings by the el-

ephants; all of them sold, one for as much as \$2,100.

But back in 1977 the artists had larger world issues in their sights. "Super Objects — Super Comfort for Super People" consists of a portfolio of 36 small color photographs and accompanying English-language text panels describing fanciful Soviet consumer products and devices. Laid out as a playful parody of American home shopping catalogs supplied to the artists by friends living in the West, the consumer prod-

ucts were also divided into 10 categories suggesting some type of self-improvement or self-enhancement.

The importance of this project is perhaps not automatically apparent when you enter the gallery here, a cramped auxiliary space in which only a dozen pieces from the original project are hanging. Space constraints prohibited the curator, John Everett Daquino, from putting out the full contingent of the prints, but it doesn't really matter, for what is here is enough to convey the



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JIM FRANK

AGAINST THE GRAIN

Komar and Melamid's defiant conceptual art, exhibited secretly in the Soviet Union, got international attention in the late '70s. Top left, "Alton," bottom left, "Olo," and "Charog-15."

artists' knack for cutting social and political commentary.

A particularly arresting photograph shows a young woman with a concave barbecue grill wrapped around her face. This is the "Charog-15," a bizarre-looking item listed under the category of "Defendibles" and designed, as the adjoining descriptive panel tells viewers, to protect "the purity of your thoughts" and provide "security against mass hypnosis." Here the artists openly satirize the aims and means of Soviet-era political ideology.

Another product, "Olo," is a tongue ring with a pearl that is meant to act as a "language ornament," helping to ensure that nothing but positive words issues from the mouths of its users, implying, of course, that people in the Soviet Union need to be careful of what they say.

Other products poke fun at capitalism, including a pedestal designed to provide users with an enhanced sense of self-importance. Called the "Alton," it is a block of wood in the shape of a house brick with a pair of ribbons attached. It is designed to "free you from the foolish scramble up the ladder of social success." According to the accompanying wall text, the device comes with silk or synthetic ribbons and in a variety of rare woods.

It's safe to say that none of these products were ever manufactured or sold. They are jokes, the artists employing a sly wit to satirize both ideas of mass consumption in the West and the repressive social, cultural and economic situation in Russia during this period.

But also underlying this project is a broader message, one cautioning viewers living under all political systems to be wary of rhetoric, whether in the form of the seductive jargon of mass consumer advertising or political ideology.

Komar and Melamid
'Symbols of the Big Bang'

Yeshiva University Museum
15 West 16th Street
Flatiron District
Through Feb. 23

The dissident Russian-born artists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid became celebrated in the 1970's for mocking Soviet social realism through satirical paintings, drawings, installations and conceptual works. Immigrating to the United States in 1977, they continued their commentaries on art and life, among other feats teaching elephants to paint and chimps to take Polaroid photographs.

But in their latest show — really the brainchild of Mr. Komar — they are up to more cosmic matters, exploring age-old symbols of universal origins and mysteries. Four big oil-and-tempera canvases and 60 mixed-media drawings and collages on graph paper play cleverly

Glueck, Grace. "Komar & Melamid: Symbols of the Big Bang." *The New York Times*, Friday, January 3, 2003, p. E42.

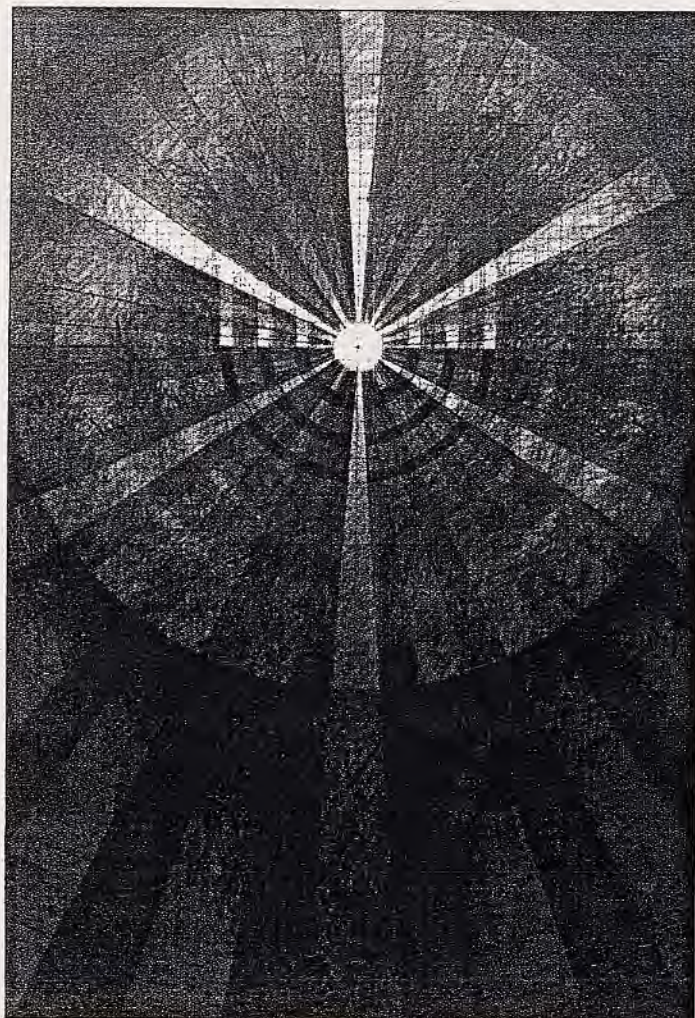
with emblems like the Star of David, yin and yang, the swastika, the serpent Ouroboros, spirals and Kabbalistic spheres, among others.

The symbols, connected in Mr. Komar's fantasy with the Big Bang of the world's creation, are imaginatively rendered and elaborated, with particular attention paid to the Star of David. The star sometimes makes intricate connections in this show with the swastika in configurations that represent the struggle between good and evil.

Mr. Komar has discovered that almost any visual symbology can be packed into the star's confines: intertwined serpents, a heart pierced by a triangle, the face, beard and crown of an ancient king. One even takes the form of six skulls in a sort of ark, topped by an hourglass and a jester's crown.

Done in the multiplicity of styles, from abstraction to realism, that have characterized Komar and Melamid's paintings over the years, the symbols are sometimes murky and unfathomable, suggesting a wearisome trip through a heraldic encyclopedia. At their best, they radiate a passionate energy. "The cocktail of mysticism and science" that Mr. Komar says they represent, however, is not a very potent drink.

GRACE GLUECK



"Symbols of the Big Bang," 60 graphical interpolations of ancient icons, illuminate Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid's attempts to create art with the power to heal.

Star Gazers

Vitaly Komar, clad in all black, huffed up the stairs of the Center for Jewish History with a reporter in tow. "I like this place," said the one half of an internationally known Russian artist team. "It's like a club house, not white and antiseptic like most museums that can feel like a hospital."

By the time Komar rounded the mezzanine overlooking the modestly sized atrium and passed through the glass doors into the Yeshiva University Museum gallery displaying his latest drawings and paintings, it becomes clear that hospitals weigh heavily on his mind. The current exhibition of nearly 60 intricate graphical interpolations of ancient icons, titled "Symbols of the Big Bang," illuminate Komar and his longtime friend and collaborator Alexander Melamid's attempts to create art with the power to heal.

This investigation, an earnest departure from the duo's past iconoclastic and Dadaistic art, is a highly personal, idiosyncratic effort to fuse spirituality and science. In felicitous concordance with Tobi Kahn's recently opened show "Microcosmos" (also at YUM) and the Albert Einstein show at the American Museum of Natural History, this exhibition raises some important questions about how Jews represent the divine through abstraction.

"I couldn't trust it if I saw the face of God in a Michelangelo. No one can depict God, no one can understand it.

That's why we use symbols," Komar says. "They're something in between."

The series, which Komar, 59, envisions someday illustrating the Book of Job or rendered in stained glass in a synagogue, was sparked by his harrowing treatment with electroshock for heart problems three years ago. When he regained consciousness he imagined he was in the hospital in Moscow where he was born.

"I am not joking, but something miraculous happened with my memory after that. Suddenly I remembered that previously forgotten first flash of light when I was born and first opened my eyes. That was my 'Big Bang.' While lying in the hospital for more than a week I thought a lot about all beginnings and endings," Komar says in an interview with curator Reba Wulkan printed in the exhibition catalogue.

That primal flare, he told *The Jewish Week*, looked in his mind very much like a six-pointed star. The moment opened a window to lost memories from his childhood, including his early desire to become an astronomer to his grandfather's reminiscences of losing seven siblings in the Holocaust. But Komar wasn't sure how to first approach the daunting project of making images to connect personal and universal beginnings.

Continued on next page

Art world's
merry
pranksters
Komar and
Melamid
present new
visions of
ancient
symbols.

Daniel Belasco
Special to The Jewish Week

VISUAL ARTS

Star Gazers

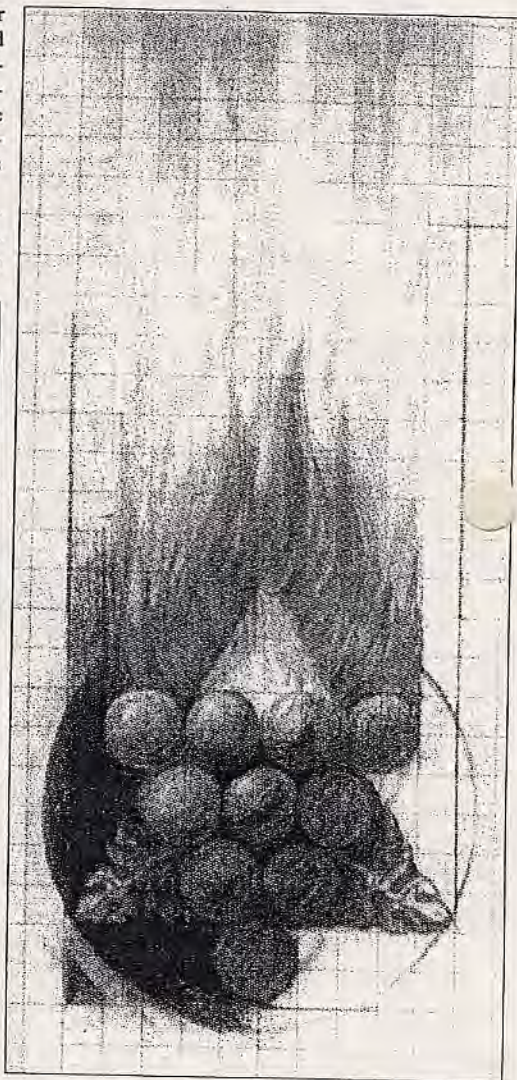
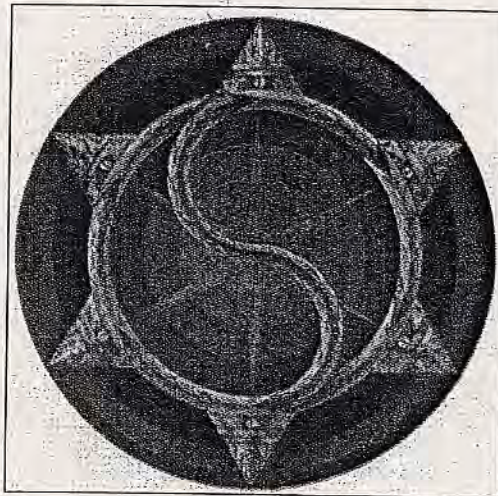
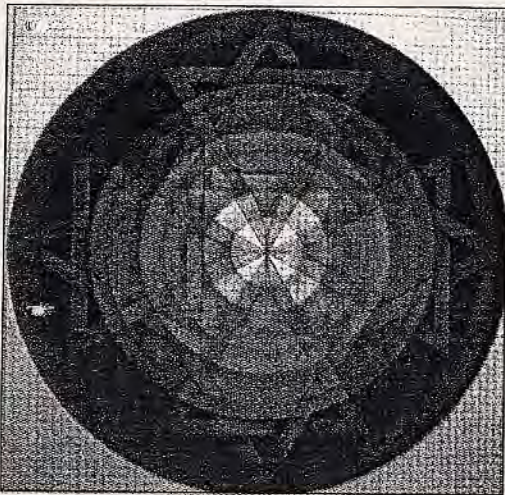
Continued from preceding page

"I didn't know how to represent pictorially such a sophisticated subject," Komar said. So he talked with Berkeley physicists and spent a month in the library at the Israel Museum researching the earliest Jewish use of the six-pointed star.

On large sheets of printed graph paper, Komar and Melamid began to toy with the architecture of this ancient symbol, blending it with images of the hourglass, Ouroboros, yin-yang, dove, and skull. Even the swastika. This shocking fusion of what Ko-

Since their student days in Moscow in the late 1960s, Komar and Melamid have been known as idol-smashers. They founded the major 1970s dissident movement Sots Art and had numerous works destroyed by the Soviet authorities. Since emigrating, first to Israel in 1977, and then to the U.S. a year later, they've not lost their sardonic humor, making art ranging from lush paintings of Stalin in parodic Socialist Realist style in the early 1980s to ongoing collaborations with elephants and chimpanzees.

The catalogue argues that Komar and Melamid have entered a new, reverent phase, yet a strong element of spirituality has often commingled with irony. In 1978, they



mar considers icons of good and evil, a theme which is developed over a number of drawings, might confuse viewers not fully aware of Komar and Melamid's belief that the fusion of opposites has the potency to heal, much like Moses' brass snake.

Curator Wulkan says she tried to play down the presence of the repugnant Nazi symbol. "We did avoid using the word 'swastika' in the introductory panel," she says. "It's really the idea of a spiral, not a swastika, and the generalities of good and evil." The swastika, of course, has its origins in many ancient cultures before Hitler appropriated it to legitimate his Aryan pretensions.

"The swastika's sublime form wed to its wicked function has stimulated considerable inquiry into its origins and its future," graphic designer Steven Heller observes in his recent book "The Swastika: Symbol Beyond Redemption?"

commemorated their exodus and arrival in the Promised Land with a performance piece on a Jerusalem hilltop, where they ritually burned their suitcases under a steel temple topped by a five-pointed Soviet star and read from their newly penned addition to the Bible, "The Book of Komar and Melamid."

On Dec. 25, Komar and Melamid will lead gallery tours at noon and 2 p.m. In addition, on Jan. 30, 2003, they will be giving a slide performance about "The Art of Collaboration." While most of the experience essential to this new series belongs to Vitaly Komar, the work bears their co-authorship, "like Smith and Wesson," Komar says. □

"Komar & Melamid: Symbols of the Big Bang" runs through Feb. 23, 2003 at Yeshiva University Museum, 15 W. 16th St., Man. (212) 294-8301. Tue.-Thu. and Sun., 11 a.m.-5 p.m. \$6, \$4.

Six-pointed stars often appear in Komar and Melamid's work, blended with other images like the yin-yang in the center picture. Photos courtesy of Y.U. Museum

INSPIRATIONS

Since they first emigrated from the Soviet Union in the 1970s, Komar and Melamid have brought a playfully irreverent approach to artmaking—satirizing Soviet realism, collaborating with artistically inclined elephants, and more. (A show of their recent work is on view at the Yeshiva University Museum through February 2.) We spoke recently with Vitaly Komar about museums, dinosaur bones, and the healing power of art.

MNY: What's your favorite New York City museum? Why?

VK: I love museums that have a sense of aesthetics and a sense of history, like the New York Historical Society or the Yeshiva University Museum. I also like General Grant's Tomb. It reminds me of my childhood and the Lenin Mausoleum in Moscow—a great combination of Russian avant-garde style and Soviet kitsch.

MNY: What was your most stop-in-your-tracks experience in a New York museum?

VK: My first museum opening. Because my perception of the modern art revolution was really shaken at that moment. I came in my red Russian T-shirt—a very beautiful red. And I was told that I was not properly dressed, because it was a black-tie party. Black tie—the traditional bourgeois outfit dating back to the Salon in 19th-century France—was still part of the art world. So I took one of my black shoelaces and wore it around my neck and told everybody I was wearing black tie. But it was a lesson in the relativity of revolution in the art world and in art.

MNY: Is there an object or a collection of objects that's had a strong impact on your work?

VK: The dinosaur skeletons at the American Museum of Natural History. They're so strong, so beautiful. They're objects of meditation—a memento mori. And they're like the skeletons of mythological dragons. They

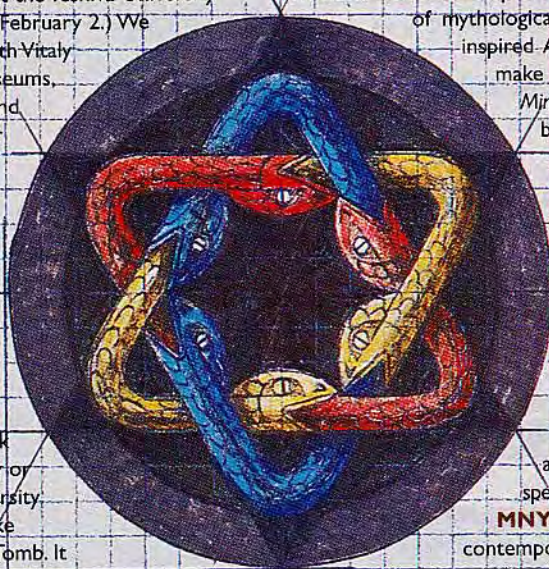
inspired Alex and me to make *Skeleton of the Minotaur* (1978). We bought a human skeleton and a bull's skull and tail, and made a surrealistic image of a minotaur. Then we invented a fantastic story of going to excavations in Crete and making this spectacular discovery.

MNY: Which artist, contemporary or historical, would you choose to do your portrait?

VK: Alex Melamid. And if you asked Alex, he would say me. We've made many double self-portraits together, in different styles—Expressionism, the style of the French Academy, Russian avant-garde, and so on.

MNY: What artist or designers, contemporary or historical, would you like to invite to dinner?

VK: Moses. Because I consider him an artist. He was an iconoclast—he smashed the Golden Calf—but he also created the serpent of brass, a sculpture that had the function to heal people. He understood the healing power of art, which in my eyes makes him the first contemporary artist. To have dinner with Moses, what could be more honorable?



Chan, Vera, H-C. "When Elephants Paint..." www.bayarea.com/mld/bayarea/3020779.htm?template=contentModules/printstory.jsp, April 9, 2002.

When elephants paint ...

Intriguing images inspire debate

By Vera H-C Chan
CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Give enough monkeys a typewriter and they might channel Shakespeare, but infinity is a long time to wait.

To see and own paintings by an elephant, however, will take just a matter of days. On Wednesday, the Berkeley Art Museum hosts "Komar and Melamid's Asian Elephant Art and Conservation Project."

Brush-wielding elephants have been around for at least 20 years. The first known commercially successful artist is Ruby, a Phoenix Zoo inhabitant who is said to have resorted to painting as a way to ward off boredom.

Artistic pursuits for elephants might seem like a circus act, but the purpose is quite serious: The works by Asian elephants are a means of survival.

When Thailand outlawed logging in 1989, it halted a relentless scourge of deforestation. The ban also left scores of endangered Asian elephants and *mahouds* (trainers) without a livelihood.

Their limited alternatives included circuses, tourism and being part of a private collections, until 1998 when Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid opened the first elephant academy of art in Lamphang, Thailand.

The Russian-born artists have built a reputation for challenging the very notions of what makes art. In 1995, they introduced a paintbrush to Renee, an African elephant residing in the Toledo Zoo. Now three academies exist, with the other two in India and Bali, Indonesia.

Elephants "always had such instinctive gestures," says Komar, who with his longtime collaborator have been teaching at UC Berkeley this past semester. "What we just did is give them brush and color."

He cites a historian who almost 2,000 years ago described seeing an elephant making "strange lines" on the ground with a piece of wood or stone. "He said these lines remind him of some kind of message or alphabet."

If one of the tenets of abstract art is unbridled Id, then an animal who takes up a brush has a purity that can never be attained by a human being conscious of aesthetic and commercial expectations, explains Komar.

"Elephant is a big exception from the art market, they're really innocent, they're not corrupted," he

insists. "They really paint because they enjoy it. ... The way they paint the brush strokes, the composition, very fresh, very surprising."

Not that one can force an elephant to paint. And not that all elephants even like to paint. "We never force them to paint because they're very strong," Komar says matter-of-factly.

Elephant artistry provokes reactions ranging from curiosity to amusement to outrage. Yet as the artists point out, inventiveness is not restricted to human beings. "The nature of creation is a much more common thing in the animal kingdom," says Komar, who brings up the example of beaver dams as a "fantastic style of architecture."

The New York-based artists will be featured in a gallery talk at Thursday's opening reception. An auction will also be conducted of all 54 paintings, which successful bidders pick up when the exhibit closes July 14.

In the environment-conscious Bay Area, the issues of deforestation and endangered species will likely be a draw -- if there need to be reasons other than abstract elephantism. The museum's focus, however, is on the conceptual.

"The Berkeley Art Museum has a history of showing challenging, conceptual art," says associate curator Alla Efimova, who adds that the show also "touches on abstract expressionism and we have a lot of abstract expressionism." So while visitors can peruse its permanent collection of works by Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and John Mitchell, upstairs will feature artists such as Juthanam, Lukkang, Ganesh and Bird.

The focus, however, is on Komar, 59, and Melamid, 58. "The artists have been very provocative in all contexts, no matter where they lived and where they worked, and it's meant to do that here," Efimova says. "It's meant to work on a lot of levels and be very ironic. There are no right or wrong responses."

Concept aside, patrons are likely to be as intrigued -- if not more intrigued -- in the process. The artists' talk and screening shows the proboscis technique, and the relationship between the mahouds and their elephants. Unlike the African breed, Komar says, Asian elephants have been domesticated for 300 years, and a language of signals has evolved between the two species.

The process often involves the mahoud bringing the nontoxic and washable paint and changing the papers when the elephantine inspiration process is done. While some scientists have theorized that Asian elephants are colorblind, the artists conducted an experiment in which they painted bananas in red, blue, green and yellow (the yellow was to make sure the olfactory-sensitive creatures didn't go by smell). Inevitably, the greens and yellows were the first to go, and the last were the blues and reds. The artists perceived that as evidence of color perception, and the elephants that chose randomly were judged to be less discerning.

The Russian-born artists have worked with other creatures from the animal kingdom; they taught a monkey from the Moscow circus to take photographs. Other projects they're contemplating include a look

at the towers in which Australian termites live as well as bringing human-cut 2-by-4 boards to beavers to see what the rodents will create.

Likely, though, these critters won't inspire the same spiritual and artistic connection that the elephant has.

"From my point of view," Komar says, "maybe some of the elephants represent an incarnation of the soul of the artist who was not successful in his or her life."

Виталий Комар и Александр Меламид Американские мечты Филадельфия «Арт-Альянс»

Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid American Dreams
Philadelphia Art Alliance

Инициаторы соц-арта Виталий Комар и Александр Меламид уехали из СССР в 1978 году, покинув среду, питавшую их сознание и искусство. В Америке они оказались, как и большинство эмигрантов, в ситуации "in between". Выставка "American Dreams", открывшаяся в одном из старейших выставочных помещений Филадельфии "Art Alliance", как раз и посвящена проблеме сохранения в человеческом сознании стереотипов мышления и феномену замещения одних кумиров другими.

Нынешняя экспозиция – своеобразный отчет самых знаменитых соц-артистов за «пятилетний план» 1994-1999 годов, включавший ряд художественных мероприятий. Среди них – постановка

оперы Naked Revolution композитора Дэвида Солджера, серия коллажей, шелкографии, живописные работы.

Главный герой филадельфийского проекта – таксист-эмигрант, который посещает психотерапевта и во время сеансов рассказывает доктору о своей любви к «вождю». На американской почве последнего заменяет Джордж Вашингтон. Действие происходит в кабинете Фрейда, а в пациенте угадываются черты Виталия Комара. Работы, иллюстрирующие сеанс психоанализа, демонстрируют преемственность революционных лидеров и идеологических кумиров XX века – от Ленина до Марселя Дюшана, – но при безоговорочном триумфе над всеми Джорджа Вашингтона.

В качестве материальных свидетелей любви к «новому вождю» на выставке показана коллекция продуктов массовой культуры: сувениры, открытки и плакаты с изображением американского президента, в сопоставлении с аналогичными продуктами советской пропаганды. Сходство сюжетов, стилистики и символики иногда почти буквально, что должно приводить зрителя к заключению об общности природы любой идеологической агитации. Выставка была приурочена к национальному празднику Presidents' Day, и проект стал, таким образом, подарком американской публике ко дню рождения любимого героя.

Юлия Туловская

The initiators of Sotsart Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid left the USSR in 1978 making a break with the environment which had nurtured their mentality and their art. In America they found themselves, as most other immigrants, in an "in-between" situation. Their exhibition "American Dreams" opened at the Art Alliance, one of Philadelphia's oldest venues, is dedicated to the problem of stereotypes lingering in the human

mind and the phenomenon of old idols being ousted by new ones.

The exhibition accounts for five years (1994-1999) of their activities including the production of the opera Naked Revolution by David Soldier, a series of collages, serigraphs, and paintings.

The principal character of their Philadelphia project is an immigrant cab driver who attends a psychoanalyst's seances during which he talks of his love for "the Leader" impersonated for

him on the American soil in the image of George Washington. The action is set in Freud's reception room, the patient resembles Vitaly Komar. The works illustrating that story demonstrate the succession of ideological idols of the 20th century, from Lenin to Marcel Duchamp, with unquestionable triumph over them all by George Washington.

As material evidence of that "new leader" worship, the exhibition features a collection of mass culture products:

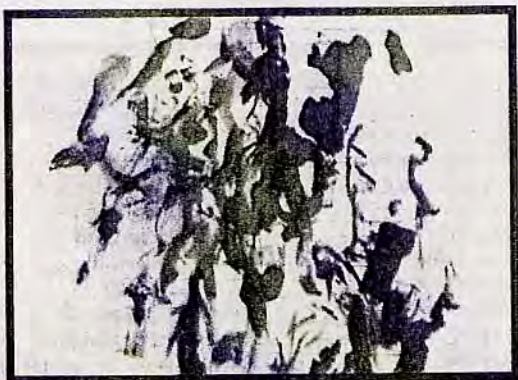


Крылья вырастут. 1999. Шелкография. 73x48
The Wings Will Grow, 1999, screenprint,
73x48 cm

souvenirs, cards, and posters with Washington's pictures, juxtaposed with similar products of Soviet propaganda. The similarity of subjects, stylistics, and symbolism is at times literal, which prompts the viewer the conclusion on the common nature of any ideological propaganda. The exhibition was timed for the national holiday - Presidents' Day, as a gift to the American public for the beloved hero's birthday.

Yulia Tulovskaya

ART FROM THE MASSIVES



A PAINTING BY ARUM

By Fred Kaplan
GLOBE STAFF

NEW YORK – Komar & Melamid, the supreme icons of what might be called the what-meworry school of modern art, were pacing about their TriBeCa studio, preparing for this Tuesday night, when 60 paintings by some of their most remarkable students would go up for bidding at Christie's Auction House.

"Look at this, isn't this stunningly beautiful?" asked Alexander Melamid, the more wiry and voluble of the pair.

He was pointing to a painting by Sao, a young artist from the island of Phuket, Thailand.

Mia Fineman, an art historian at Yale University and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, has likened Sao to Paul Gauguin, noting her "broad, gentle, curvy brush strokes" and "a depth and maturity that, for the moment, remain unrivaled in the elephant art world."

Yes, Sao is an elephant. She used to haul logs for the Thai timber industry. Now she labors with brush and canvas, and her paintings are predicted to fetch

four-figure bids at Christie's.

Ganesh and Ramona are two of Sao's colleagues, Ganesh from India and Ramona from Bali, whose styles might seem more akin to the wispy lyricism of late-career de Kooning.

"To me, it is better than de Kooning," said Vitaly Komar, Melamid's artistic partner. "Because it is more innocent. De Kooning was corrupted by the art market."

As with much of what Komar & Melamid (as they are known) have been up to the past 30 years – first as dissidents in the Soviet Union, now as conceptualists in Manhattan – it is hard to know whether to take this

ELEPHANT, Page A29

Elephant artwork sizing up market

■ ELEPHANT

Continued from Page A1

seriously. Their demeanor suggests the opposite of grim, struggling "artistes." Melamid especially, who looks a bit like Harpo Marx, seems to struggle only when trying to keep a straight face.

Yet their dedication to elephant art, and the glee with which they approach it, appear genuine.

It started five years ago when a friend of Melamid's told him about elephants in American zoos who had been taught how to paint.

"At first I didn't believe it," he said. "I mean, come on, give me a break."

But, after looking into the issue, he saw it was true. In fact, one elephant, Ruby of Phoenix, was bringing her zoo \$100,000 a year from sales of her paintings.

"That's not bad, \$100,000," Melamid said, raising his eyebrows. "I've been in the elephant business for a long time. I know what I'm talking about."

There is a videotape of Komar & Melamid at a zoo in Toledo, Ohio, painting with an elephant named Renee and having a wonderful time at it. Renee holds the brush in her trunk, paints strokes on the canvas in front of her, some wild, some uncannily deliberate. Then she motions toward her trainer for another brush with a different color, and paints some more.

"This was so exciting," Melamid exclaimed. "I was on the left, Vitaly on the right, Renee in the middle – such spontaneity and self-expression!"

"She was a brilliant artist," Komar intoned.

A couple of years later, Melamid read a newspaper article about elephants in Thailand, where the animals had been used by loggers for hundreds of years. Now, for environmental reasons, logging was being banned.

"It clicked right away," Melamid said. "Here were 3,000 elephants, left without a job. If Ruby could sell paintings for \$100,000 — of course, she's a genius, we couldn't guarantee what another elephant might do — but even a good painter, not a great one, could make a lot of money."

Komar, Melamid, and a translator went to Thailand, met the mahouts — the tribal people who live with and train the elephants as a lifelong mission — and offered to help them train their herds as painters.

"The mahouts were not very familiar with American abstract art," Melamid said, "but they said, 'Sure, why not?'"

Eventually, Komar & Melamid set up three elephant art schools in various regions of Thailand. The schools now have a total of 50 elephants in residence.

The proceeds from Tuesday's auction will go to the upkeep of these schools — in effect, the preservation of the elephants. Komar, 56, and Melamid, 54, insist they are making no money off the sales personally.

"Our goal," Melamid said, "is to have thousands of elephants producing hundreds of thousands of paintings. For the first time in history, human art will get some competition. We live in a society, after all, that cherishes competition."

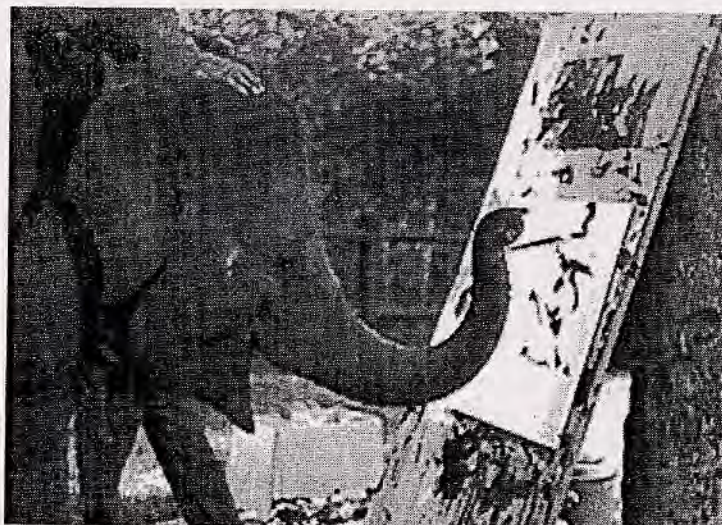
Fineman, the Yale art historian, who is writing a book on elephant art, has identified three distinctive "regional styles" in Komar & Melamid's Thai academies.

"The northern or Lampang school," she writes, "tends to be lyrical and expressive, characterized by broken brushwork, curvilinear forms, and bold, clear, primary colors."

The central school in Ayutthaya goes for "darker, cooler colors" and "broad, vigorous brush strokes that sweep across the canvas from edge to edge."

Elephants from the southern, or Phuket, school "tend toward saturated tertiary colors" mixed on the surface — Sao's Gauguin-like brush strokes.

Every few years, New York stages an exhibition of "Outsider Art," defined as art by the untrained, the rough-hewn. Fineman sees elephant painting as "the ultimate Outsider Art, reinvigorating a moribund art scene and resolving,



ASIAN ELEPHANT ART AND CONSERVATION PROJECT PHOTO

Ramona, in residence at Bali Adventure Tours' Elephant Safari Park in the village of Taro, Bali, Indonesia, spinning her magic on canvas.

the fin-de-siecle 'crisis in painting' with a bold and uninhibited return to gestural abstraction."

All this raises the question posed by the proverbial middle American who looks at an abstract painting and says, "My 5-year-old kid can do that!"

Komar & Melamid have no problem with this sentiment. Instead, they turn the issue on its head — not to accept the common critique of abstract painting, but rather to critique the common dismissal of 5-year-olds.

"Abstract art is the ultimate democracy," Melamid said. "Everyone can do abstract painting. That's what it's all about. It's taking painting from the Academy to the people. Certainly my IQ is higher than an elephant's, but I don't know how much of my IQ I use to paint. So, yes, any 5-year-old can paint a really good abstract painting. Thank God, we've come to a common language."

"The funny thing is," he went on, "after the mahouts learned the craft, their opinion was exactly the same as ours on which paintings were better, which were worse."

But what do we say to the proposition that abstract expressionism is the legitimate province of not merely 5-year-old humans but 10-year-old elephants?

If Ruby of Phoenix can paint like Willem de Kooning, should that somehow alter our understanding — and our value — of modern art? Does it denigrate de Kooning, elevate Ruby, or both, or neither?

Obviously, Melamid admits after some cajoling, this whole business of elephant painting amounts to a statement about modern art and the modern-art marketplace.

Komar & Melamid's art has always been, to some degree, about art. In the 1970s, as leaders of Moscow's underground-art scene, they conceived of "Sots Art," a Soviet version of America's Pop Art. Just

as Andy Warhol satirized the overproduction of consumer goods in the West, they satirized the overproduction of ideological goods in the East.

One of their works from those days, called "Double Self-Portrait," showed their own profiles on a red canvas, looking very much like a well-known 1930s painting of Lenin and Stalin. It was a prominent work in a 1973 Moscow street exhibit that came to be called the Bulldozer Show, because the authorities destroyed everything in it with a bulldozer.

Since coming to New York in 1978, they have satirized America's infatuation with public opinion, commissioning a poll on what Americans want in a painting — what size, what kind of landscape, wildlife, etc. — and producing a reflection of that taste.

Lately, they have fused new age medical fads with Academy notions on "the healing power of art," devising floor plans of the Metropolitan Museum that indicate which artists can best cure what ailments (Rubens for liver disease, Seurat for acne, Monet for hay fever).

Elephant art seems to be the beginning of a new kick. Last year, they had a chimpanzee named Mikki take photographs in Red Square, and displayed the snapshots at an exhibition in Venice.

"Now we are preparing a project to work with beavers," Komar said. "It's an architectural project, to transfer the image of the dam to images of human culture. We will bring the beavers 2 by 4s. That will give them right angles, something they have not worked with before. Let's see what they do with that."



Students and faculty at the Elephant Art Academy, Lampang, Thailand, founded by Komar & Melamid, November 1998. Courtesy AEACP, New York.

You might believe or even boast that, given some paint and a brush, you could dollop and drip with as much finesse as any Abstract Expressionist—but the truth is, you wouldn't have had the idea in the first place. This may have been the existential artistic problem facing a number of now well-known elephants prior to 1995; if so, it was overcome by the Russian artist team **Komar & Melamid**, who in that year developed a method of teaching elephants to paint. The duo gave their wrinkly pupils inspiration and a sense of aesthetic purpose—although, insists Alex Melamid, their first student was also their first teacher: Renée, a lady elephant at the Toledo Zoo in Ohio who, like a number of other African-American elephants, had been painting for years by the time they met her. Their collaboration with Renée proving successful, the artists (the human ones, that is) went on to introduce the concept to Asia, opening the world's first elephant art academy in Lampang, Thailand, in November 1998 and founding the **Asian Elephant Art and Conservation Project (AEACP)** in December of the same year. The elephants mainly work in acrylic paint on locally produced paper: in India they use special thick, shiny sheets and in Thailand a bamboo paper.

On one level, the project is representative of the conceptual artworks for which Komar & Melamid have established a reputation over the years (most notably for *The People's Choice* project that began with a poll of American aesthetic tastes in 1994 and can now be seen on the Web site of the Dia Center for the Arts in New York). But the concept has turned philanthropic, as the sale of the elephants' works on paper supports elephant-related welfare and preservation schemes around the world. Among other ventures, the AEACP donates money to sustain the Elephant Conservation Center in Lampang, Thailand, and is attempting to launch a *mahoutship* (elephant-keeping) school in India to improve standards in the care of domesticated elephants. The organization has also introduced a milk bank for elephant calves and supports the Yayasan "Bina Reksa Gajah" Foundation to benefit domesticated elephants in Sumatra.

The AEACP's first exhibition of elephant art was held in Bangkok in 1998 to coincide with the opening of the Lampang Academy, but it was clear by the **Venice Biennale** in 1999 that the first generation of elephant-artist stars had already begun to emerge, as their official publicity suggests. When Komar & Melamid were asked to represent Russia at the Biennale, they included works by the elephant painters Juthanam, Phitsamai, and Nom Chok, who are consequently facing the demands attendant on artistic fame. Juthanam, a Thai elephant who was adopted by Princess Galiyani, sister of the king of Thailand, has been blessed by both royal patronage and sheer talent and has become a leading light of the Lampang Academy: her work is characterized by thick, meandering brushstrokes, with an organic quality that critics have likened to the interlocking strands of DNA molecules. Another lady elephant from Thailand, Phitsamai is more of a free spirit—unwilling to ally herself with any of the existing academies, she prefers to work on the tropical island of Phuket, creating voluptuous works in the manner of Gauguin, with saturated colors of plum, mustard, and magenta mixed on the surface of the sheet to create broad curving strokes. Nom Chok, who is described as the "enfant terrible" of the elephant art world, began his precocious career at the age of two: having graduated from his juvenile style, which often involved blowing watery paint from his trunk to create Pollock-like drip paintings, he now favors deep murky tones in thick paint with which he flamboyantly and compulsively covers every last bit of the sheet.

It seems that there may be a lot of work to do in the coming months for these talented beasts and their colleagues: a successful March auction at **Christie's** in New York, which raised \$75,000 for the AEACP, will be followed on June 6 by an auction at the Jerusalem Zoo in association with **Sotheby's**. Works by elephant artists can also be seen at **Moore College of Art and Design's** Goldie Paley Gallery in Philadelphia from May 31–August 7 and at the **Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, Australia**, at the end of this year. Be sure to visit <www.elephantart.com>.

"Pachyderm Picassos?"
Art in America 88.5 (May
 2000): 39.

Pachyderm Picassos?

The Moscow-born artist-team Vasily Komar and Alexander Melamid are known for off-beat conceptual works loaded with social comment. A current project is aimed at preserving the Asian elephant, whose numbers in Southeast Asia have dwindled at an alarming rate in recent years, from 11,000 to only around 3,000. In countries such as Thailand and India, deforestation has ruined their natural habitat, and a ban on teak logging has put the elephants and their trainers (*mahouts*) out of work.

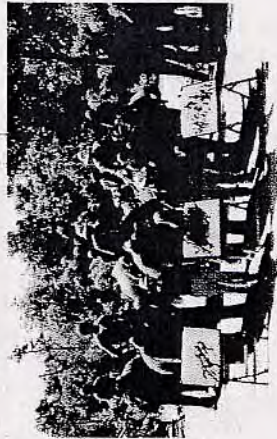
To raise public awareness of the crisis, Komar and Melamid have been teaching elephants how to use their trunks to paint on paper and canvas. In 1997 they established the Asian Elephant Art and Conservation Project (AEACP) to promote and distribute colorful, pachyderm abstractions in order to raise funds for elephant conservation. Proceeds from sales go to organizations set up to protect the animals. The team began working with elephants at the Toledo Zoo in Ohio in 1995, and later trained Ruby, an elephant at the Phoenix Zoo whose works now generate in excess of \$100,000 annually. The first AEACP "art academy" opened in Lampang, Thailand, in fall 1998, and a similar camp has since been established in Bali. Most recently, an AEACP project was initiated in Kerala, India. Komar and Melamid

presented their first lecture on "elephant art" in 1998 at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, and last year featured elephant paintings in their Russian pavilion display at the Venice Biennale.

This spring, the artists launched a series of fund-raising events, beginning at Christie's in New York, where a silent auction of elephant art brought \$75,000 in late March.

An AEACP exhibition appears at the Goldie Paley Gallery, Moore

College of Art and Design in Philadelphia, May 31-Aug. 7 (on view while the Republican National Convention is in town). Another AEACP show and auction will take place in Israel on June 6, at the Jerusalem Zoo. For more information about the project, see the AEACP Web site (www.elephantart.com).



Komar and Melamid with elephant artists in Thailand.



Komar and Melamid,
Founding Father of the Nation, 1997,
tempera and oil on canvas, 72 x 48".

KOMAR AND MELAMID

RONALD FELDMAN
FINE ARTS

Masters of the telling displacement, Komar and Melamid recontextualize Soviet experience in other cultures, particularly in that of their adopted country, the United States. Their works often express the "unthinkable": that despite their differences in economic conditions and their diametrically opposed state ideologies, the Soviet Union and the United States shared far more than they were willing to admit.

In their exhibition "American Dreams," Komar and Melamid examined the cult of personality around George Washington—whom the artists, progeny of Lenin and Stalin, refer to as "Stepfather George." The opening of the show coincided with the last performance at *The Kitchen of Naked Revolution*, a captivating multimedia opera about falling statues by Maita di Niscemi and Dave Soldier, for which Komar and Melamid designed the sets. The themes of *Naked Revolution*, a videotape of which was shown at the gallery, carried over into the exhibition: the dream-life of a Russian taxi driver—something of a comical figure in the émigré community—is haunted by George Washington. The man who could not tell a lie comes to life along with Lenin, Marcel Duchamp, Molly Pitcher, and Isadora Duncan in New York's Washington Square.

Komar and Melamid divided the space into two areas. The first comprised a gallery of portraits in a fictitious office,

with a large desk flanked by two white busts of Washington. Behind the desk hung a majestic portrait of Stepfather George bearing the trappings of the American eagle—a branch of leaves in one hand and a cluster of arrows in the other, a serpentine ribbon above him bearing the ur-text "*E Pluribus Unum*." Elements of the Washington portrait figured in all the paintings in the room, the most striking among them *Founding Father of the Nation* (subsequently retitled *The Wings Will Glow*), 1997. This painting scrambles aspects of Rembrandt's *Ganymede*, 1635, in which Jupiter in the guise of an eagle abducts a beautiful child. Komar and Melamid model the boy's body on Rembrandt's depiction but give him the head of the eagle; Washington, then, takes on the role of Jupiter.

In the second room, Komar and Melamid filled vitrines with "readymade" Washingtonia: engravings, postcards, children's books, ice-cream molds, perfume bottles, and banknotes, the results of years' collecting. Such homey Americana (what speaks more immediately, to an American audience, of innocence, trust in leaders, and faith in politics?) was paired with relics of Lenin and Stalin and artifacts of Soviet Socialist-Realist popular culture (what speaks more blatantly of propaganda and manipulation of the masses?). Above the vitrines were collages that combined Washington-cult images with a photograph of a psychoanalyst's office (complete with an analyst in his leather chair and a patient on the couch), driving home the pair's interest in psychic relations with symbolic fathers.

As committed absurdists, Komar and Melamid revel in unexpected associations. With "American Dreams" they mined a symbolic connection between three revolutions: the Russian, the American, and the cultural revolution of twentieth-century Modernism. They reminded us, for instance, that in the year the Bolsheviks seized power, Duchamp proclaimed the independence of Greenwich Village while standing atop the Washington Square arch. Of course, one needs to be careful in ascribing too broad a significance to the artists' provocative confluences of historical events and figures. Seduced by Komar and Melamid's suggestive interventions and carefully realized presentation, one can analyze too earnestly, forgetting that their art, drawing on both Socialist Realism and Pop, is conceived as much to entertain as to stimulate the intellect.

—Marek Bartelik

Bartelik, Marek." Komar & Melamid." ARTFORUM vol. XXXVI, no. 5 (January 1998): 101-102



Komar & Melamid: *The Wings Will Grow*, 1997, tempera and oil on wood, 72 by 48 inches; at Ronald Feldman.

Komar & Melamid at Ronald Feldman

Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid emigrated in 1977 from the Soviet Union to the U.S., where their work has enjoyed unusual critical acclaim. Their early '80s strategy was to appropriate the painterly idiom of

Socialist Realism and jokingly interrogate the very notions it was designed to propagate. Roughly 15 years later, following often interesting forays in other directions, these artistic chameleons have returned to the Socialist Realist style. Now, however, it is George Washington, one of the key "revolutionary" heroes of the West, who is subjected to the duo's probing. In this exhibition, "American Dreams," the artists compared the images of Washington and Lenin, interpreting the former in Socialist Realist fashion. They conclude that the cults surrounding both leaders are comparable and quite often indistinguishable.

The first gallery contained an installation consisting of two plaster busts of the first president of the U.S. raised above pierlike pedestals and framing a massive wooden desk and chair. This homely furniture stood on a red carpet and in front of a square, half-length oil portrait of Washington wearing a bureaucrat's

blue business suit and tie. He holds an olive branch in his raised right hand and a cluster of arrows in the other, as a scroll proclaiming "E Pluribus Unum" emanates from his lips. This canvas, *George Washington as an Eagle*, is a bland and only mildly amusing image: the hero as Founding Father of the federal government.

The accompanying paintings of Washington, although technically accomplished, suffer from the same lack of subtlety. *The Wings Will Grow* is a case in point. It shows Washington standing left of center in the frame and holding a naked babe against his breast. The child has the head of the American eagle, displayed in heraldic profile, and Washington turns his head in the opposite direction as he glances towards the viewer. His stance is visually buttressed by the column behind him, which is largely hidden by a swath of red drapery swooping rhetorically across the upper part of the picture. The brown suit worn by Washington and the huge globe in the foreground seem allusions to Chaplin's *The Great*

Dictator—an all too formulaic evocation of the threat of American imperialism.

In the rear gallery, display cases protruding from the walls held the artists' rich collection of Washington memorabilia. Above the display cases hung small collages and black-and-white photographs. The photographs show a psychiatrist with his patient, and the collages purport to depict the patient's dream. They show, for example, Duchamp's famous *Cubo-Futurist* nude bearing the features of both Lenin and Washington; Lenin and the "revolutionary" modernist Duchamp standing in front of the Washington Square Arch; and a statue of Lenin saluting the American flag. These works are likewise visually undistinguished. Komar and Melamid are intrigued by the power of images, but they treat these with almost complete esthetic indifference. —Michael Amy

Komar & Melamid

American Dreams
Ronald Feldman Fine Arts
through November 15
BY J. BOWYER BELL

KOMAR & MELAMID produce satire not for the ages but the times, combine the rigid regulations of the socialist art state with the demands of the American market, the interests of many American critics, and the trends of the scene.

And here they come again, almost Super Stars, long past their allotted fifteen minutes, immigrants on the make who have it made. Performers, charlatans and clowns, cunning and constant, with us late and soon. Whatever else they put on a show as well as show paintings. Why ever not?

They construct paintings to be written about, to be texts for the day. Here after twenty years — and where else? — at Ronald Feldman they have found a proper home for a complex assault on George Washington, Father of Our Country, projected as would have been Stalin or Lenin, relics in vitrines, desk in place, realism in all things and the tongue in the cheek.

My tongue was not in my cheek nor was Washington transmuted much worth of a giggle. I was simply not much interested in all the elaborations and asides, the closely reasoned text, the slide presentation by the artists — The Iconography of the George Washington Image or going to their opera *The People's Choice* on what people really want: a work that is supposedly a mixture of *The Beggar's Opera*, *Hellzapoppin* and the film *Reds*, which may be enough of a threat to put off even those with the strongest of constitutions.

Yet, the two always come across like gangbusters — no simple little show of works hung on walls. Not for the

terrific duo who come equipped with all manner of medium, messages and an opera in part funded by *Reader's Digest*. And the powers that be in America worry about Russian free enterprise, Russian ingenuity in an open society! Expose them to Komar and Melamid or Melamid and Komar, art's highwire act, not dancing bears, but nearly everything else.

I don't know what others want, but I am inclined to seek intense visual images. There aren't any currently at Feldman. There is much going on, much that could be subject of discussion for a seminar here or a class there, but not much worthwhile painting. Social realism for the textural critic has thus produced slick, glossy narratives neither Russian nor SoHo, but mostly dull.

Despite much clatter to the contrary, these images are not very well painted, competent, but not compelling. There is no satire of surface, of style, of insight but only of subject. This is what Komar and Melamid do best, make stuff that others can make something of in words, reassure the all but telling the punch line so all will know when to giggle. They have done the paintings based on polls: an idea whose time may have come, but the ensuing paintings lacked the intensity of real realism, contained rather the subjects suggested by the poll. Painting by the numbers by highly competent, but not especially novel, artists. All that they touch turns not to dross but dry and clever, but not really clever enough.

What we have at Feldman is again satire done by the numbers — and partly this is the intent, and partly this is what Komar and Melamid do. They make stuff that allows the critic to perform, the observer to find a path into painting, and the innocent to be amazed at a technique that actually leaves much to be desired. And not

give us social realism crossed with Pop — surely two schools that let out early.

What is especially interesting about this Komar & Melamid exhibition is that the message dispatched is the message received: satire for the slow of wit, paint that does not frighten and easily impresses the innocent. Lots and lots of stuff and used ideas and appropriations. Ah, social realism here adjusted by narration for discussion. They are calibrated to the times, the worst of Russia and America fused into a dual career built upon the common wisdom. They offer ideas about vacuity, generalizations without basis, paintings without zing but easy to mine for concepts.

The concepts, however, require paint — unlike some displays where an oral description is ample, one need not go see the actualization of the idea so patent is the idea, so easy to visualize once described. One has only to look at the Komar & Melamid to be distressed that there is not more to see. And the artists do not want you or me or us to see more because they have no more to show — or not at this time.

only is this enough for many, coupled with a genius at promotion and a sensitivity to the scene, the fearful twosome over and over again have given the scene what the scene can most easily digest — and for the truly slow of wit usually add printed instructions: this is what this is and this is what you can see. What you see if you look, however, are works less than compelling in manner and meaning because this work is driven by narrative, by words, by concepts that need not and here do not go well in paint. They are illustrations shaped as paintings. This is a far, far better exercise that art criticism presented as an aspect of the visual arts, but it also accounts for the lack of visual zing. Some social realism at least impresses with the skill of hand, the precision of work done for hire, the classical unities redone and redone without life and here with less than skillful hands. hey

Komar and Melamid

*Ronald Feldman Fine Arts
31 Mercer Street
SoHo
Through Nov. 15*

In anticipation of the bicentennial of the death of George Washington in 1999, the Conceptualists Komar and Melamid offer a characteristically ingenious, satiric meditation on his image through painting, collage and a collection of kitsch memorabilia.

The paintings simulate the quasi-classical style employed to glorify official culture in the former Soviet Union, where the artists grew up. (They are now United States citizens.). Yet they allegorize the shady side of political imagination, as in "Air Superiority," in which Washington rides a giant flying eagle and wields a personal rocket launcher. The paintings thus represent the Father of Our Country not as the officially sanctioned personification of democratic benevolence but as a demigod — like Lenin, to whom he is equated in several paintings — whose rule over popular imagination is guaranteed by charismatic power.

The irrationality of mass political instinct that this implies is further exemplified in a series of small collages in which American and Soviet political figures and symbols are indiscriminately interchanged without regard for supposed ideological differences. And some 200 found objects devoted to Washington — including coffee cups, bronze plaques, perfume bottles and children's books — suggest a primitive cargo cult of the Great Father. All of this is couched in humorous terms, but it conveys a serious warning: We should beware of our own childlike susceptibility to the allure of powerful leaders.

KEN JOHNSON

Painting by the Polls

What kind of art do Americans really want? The question prompts a bilious sigh. But two Russian émigré conceptual artists, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, have proposed an answer, for painting at least, that unites careful polling, statistical analysis and a scathing sense of humor. In 1993, aided by polling experts, Mr. Komar and Mr. Melamid queried a sampling of Americans about their artistic preferences. Using the results, they created two paintings — "America's Most Wanted" and "America's Most Unwanted," which were shown in 1994 at the Alternative Museum in SoHo. These are participatory works, rather like the 1996 painting the two did with Renee the elephant, who wielded a brush with her trunk, except that in this case the elephant is public opinion.

These two works, and paintings based on recent testing for 10 other countries, have now been published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in a book called "Painting by Numbers: Komar and Melamid's Scientific Guide to Art, edited by JoAnne Wypijewski." Statistically speaking, the painting Americans want is a realistic, "dishwasher-sized" landscape. It contains wild animals and clothed persons relaxing. It is autumnal but also predominantly blue. The painting has some of the eeriness of a diner mural. A great river is visible. Two deer disport themselves

at the water's edge. A steep, wooded hillside cascades down to the shore, where George Washington walks, ignored by a small American family in modern dress. It looks, in fact, like the Heaven of House Republicans, except that there is too much nature.

This painting, and the book that presents it, is a wonderfully tricky work of art. It incorporates nearly all the artistic elements Americans say they prefer, but the result is dreadful, a most-wanted painting, as the critic Arthur Danto points out, that no one could want. To look at this painting is to participate in an instant referendum on the arts, a referendum that illustrates the nature of popular taste without exorcising it.

As Mr. Komar and Mr. Melamid explain, the research for this painting — the poll itself — mimics the polling by which American politics is conducted. "We trust these people to vote for the President," Mr. Melamid says of Americans. "But we never trust them in their tastes, in their esthetic judgment," even though, as the authors found, Americans were quite specific about what they liked.

And what about "America's Most Unwanted"? It is a small, abstract piece, the size of a paperback. It looks like the ragged old linoleum under the kitchen stove, only orange.

JEFFREY HOGREFE

Komar & Melamid's Dreams; Dannheisser's Prima Donnas

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid have been plagued by some pretty bizarre dreams involving George Washington and Vladimir Lenin in a variety of intriguing tableaux. Sometimes Washington and Lenin appear together in the same dream as puppets in a store window, sometimes there's only one. Soon after they realized that they were both having the same dreams, Mr. Komar mentioned the coincidence to his wife, Anna, a psychologist. "She said, 'Don't think you are crazy,'" Mr. Komar recalled, "I have a patient with a similar dream. He is a Russian émigré taxi driver."

Mr. Komar and Mr. Melamid, who are better known as Komar & Melamid, the TriBeCa-based artists who have a keen grasp of the absurd, decided to do something with their dreams. The result is *Naked Revolution*, their first opera. Composed by David Soldier, who also provided the orchestrations for the movies *Basquiat* and *I Shot Andy Warhol*, and written by Maita di Niscemi, who has written the librettos for many Robert Wilson productions, the opera is playing at the Kitchen in West Chelsea through Oct. 18. Komar & Melamid provided the sets, which include monumental gold statues of Washington, Lenin and Czar Alexander III, done in the spirit of Soviet Realism. There are some trained operatic voices in the opera, but the gestalt of the production is what Mr. Komar refers to as "parody of opera."

A little bit of Marx Brothers and a little bit of Fireside Theater, the opera presents the dreams of a Russian émigré taxi driver, played by Tony Boutte, who is troubled by his historical dreams. "Washington, Washington, why Washington? Why should I dream and dream about that old fool?" he asks his doctor. The poor guy has wild dreams that jump back and forth in history, not only about Washington but Lenin, the Czar and even England's King George III. The statues that Komar & Melamid pro-

vided for the production come tumbling down, and new ones appear. "It is really about the destruction of monuments," said Mr. Soldier, the composer. "When I first approached Vitaly and Alex and asked them if they had an idea for an opera, Vitaly wanted to do one about Washington. I suggested that we weave in other historical figures."

Weave them in they did. Molly Pitcher, the Revolutionary War heroine, has a role. Isadora Duncan is seen trying to arrange a meeting with Lenin, a little known histori-

"In our mind, this performance made the connection between three different revolutions," said Mr. Komar, who wears a dark beard, shaggy hair, thick glasses and carries around the satisfied girth of a latter-day Marxist. "The revolution of modern art because it has Marcel Duchamp. The American revolution because it was Washington. And the Russian revolution because of Lenin."

In a quiet moment at the end of the preview performance on Oct. 4, Mr. Komar, who was forced out of the Soviet Union in 1979 with Mr. Melamid, continued to expound on his strange dreams. "My dreams, which began to appear after the fall of the Soviet Union, were maybe prompted by the feeling that we lost something—the loss of the father figure," he said. "Alex and I, we both call George Washington our stepfather. These men are our heroes. We try to create the cult of personality in George Washington in our own style." On Oct. 18, the two get to show

a more two-dimensional view of their hero-inspired art when an exhibit of their Soviet Realism-style paintings of Washington and Lenin goes up at the Ronald Feldman Fine Arts gallery in SoHo.

Mr. Komar also revealed a historical fact that he has mulled over many times. "Both Washington and Lenin were called 'father of the nation' and yet both had no children of their own."



It's the Komar & Melamid show! Artists Vitaly Komar, left, and Alex Melamid turned their dreams of George Washington and Vladimir Lenin into iconographic statues for *The Naked Revolution*, a parodic opera being performed at the Kitchen through Oct. 18.

cal fact: She did try to meet him when she went to the Soviet Union, but he avoided her because he thought she was a dilettante. Even Dadaist Marcel Duchamp makes an appearance, having flexed his revolutionary muscles in 1917 when he climbed to the top of Washington Square Monument with a group of artists and declared the independence of the republic of Greenwich Village.

Volk, Gregory. "Komar and Melamid." *ARTnews* 94, no. 7 (September 1995): 144.

Komar and Melamid

STOREFRONT FOR ART AND ARCHITECTURE

Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid's exhibition involved a series of proposals for a mural to be installed on the outside wall of the United Nations School—an updated version of a similar unrealized proposal from several years ago. Using a famous photograph of Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin taken during the Yalta Conference as their source, the artists' revised renditions (both paintings and mixed-media collages) are hilarious and probing riffs on this symbol of magisterial officialdom. Entering the gallery, one was confronted with Soviet-era red bunting, a large military star on the wall, and a ballot box, allowing viewers to vote for their favorite mural—a neat democratic twist.

In one, a uniformed Stalin sits next to Roosevelt, who has been transformed into the movie character E.T. In another, the three world leaders sit beneath a standing Jesus, whose hands are extended over busts of Washington and Lenin. The images here constitute a reel-

ing tour through artistic epochs, including Socialist Realism, the Renaissance, and Russian icons. Some are highly irreverent (famous leaders seated on toilets or stacked on one another's shoulders like schoolchildren at recess). Others are sharply ironic (the triumvirate seated with black-suited henchmen behind them, while a crowd cheers in the background, as if the Yalta Conference had been a public forum rather than a top-secret meeting).

Komar and Melamid gleefully manipulate an image that is already manipulative: a solemn portrait of sage leaders that conceals the dealmaking, compromises, and behind-the-scenes power politics involved as Europe was divided into post-war spheres of superpower influence and control. Propelling a fixed image through hurtling transformations, the artists invoke—with considerable humor—just how malleable historical interpretations are.

GREGORY VOLK

Komar and Melamid,
Between War & Peace
(version 2), 1994–95,
painted black-and-white
photograph, 48" x 96".
Storefront for Art
and Architecture.



Remnick, David. "What Becomes a Lenin Most?" *The Washington Post*, Sunday, July 25, 1993, pp. G1, G6-G7.

The Washington Post



LEONID KADY (LEFT) BY LARRY LEMER

WHAT BECOMES A LENIN MOST?

In New York & Moscow, Artists Offer Subversive Ideas on What To Do With Those Socialist Statues

By David Remnick
Special to The Washington Post

NEW YORK

Of the countless factors that led to the fall of the Soviet empire, one of the most overlooked was the public's devastating discovery that in Lenin's Tomb, below the pickled corpse, is a high-tech control room, a gymnasium for the guards, a buffet and a toilet. Upon such revelations is history reordered.

Since the collapse of communism two years ago, the Yeltsin government has been faced with the thorny issue of what to do with the remains of Lenin—"kopchushka," the smoked fish, as he is known. Before his death, Lenin had asked to be buried next to his mother in Volkovskoye cemetery in St. Petersburg. But Boris Yeltsin has so far delayed the fulfillment of this simple wish. While trying to carry off an economic and social revolution, he would just as soon not insult older Russians who are already mightily offended by the sudden erasure of all they have ever known and believed in.

But while Lenin still rests like Sleeping Beauty in his glass coffin, the other leviathans of the Bolshevik state have been toppled in every city of the empire, from Minsk to Magadan. These days, you are more likely now to find the bust of a Bolshevik father in a dumpster than on a pedestal in a public park. Politicians, in a frenzy of ecstasy and opportunism, were fast to dismantle the monuments, as if this act alone proved their sudden worthiness and right to power. The green outside Moscow's Tretyakov Gallery is now littered with the fallen greats, their bronze features colored in with the occasional splotch of spray paint. Every city has its iron stumps, pedestals that once supported the weight of glory.

Vitaly Komar and Aleksandr Melamid, two renegade artists who left Moscow for the West in 1977, witnessed the binge of monumental destruction on CNN two years ago from their studio-garret in Manhattan. "We were watching the coup on television, and the destruction of the monuments was amazing," Komar says. "The first thing we saw was the crowds outside the KGB dismantling the statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky [founder of the secret police]. That was all right. We could accept that. It was ecstatic, like the storming of the Bastille, or a natural phenomenon, like an earthquake. But it was the next event that got to us: angry crowds tearing down the main statue of Lenin. This was not a revolution already:

See RUSSIANS, G6, Col. 1



Russian artists Komar, left, and Melamid organized the "Monumental Propaganda" show, currently on view in New York and Moscow.

Renegade Artists With an Eye for the Subversive

RUSSIANS, From G1

This was a very old habit, a conservative tradition, of toppling the old gods, erasing history and remaking it to suit the new regime."

After visiting Moscow one month after the defeat of the 1991 coup, Komar and Melamid, who have been internationally acclaimed for their ironic manipulations of socialist realist art, devised the idea for a competition that would pose the question: How can we preserve the old monuments while giving them a new context that would celebrate the anti-communist revolution, but without erasing history? "Moscow could become a phantasmagoric garden of post-totalitarian art," they wrote in a manifesto. "Why not erect a cage or a great aquarium with fish and octopi swimming around the statue of some great historical figure? Or why not lift a statue by hydraulic cranes, as if to remove it, but instead leave it hanging in the air, ambiguously arresting the moment of dismantlement, extending it into ETERNAL RETRIBUTION?" They issued a call for proposals in the May 1992 issue of *Artforum*; the result is a show called "Monumental Propaganda," which has just opened, simultaneously, at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Moscow and at the Courtyard Gallery of the World Financial Center in Manhattan.

Of the two, Komar was the more active in the project, and he walked me through the New York version of the exhibition a few days before its opening last week. He is a great dumpling of a man, bearded and funny, master of deadpan dada. "The fall of communism was like the fall of

the Roman Empire," Komar says. "In the Renaissance, the old Latin heroes, the mythic giants, were revived, woken up once more and put to new use. Venus and Jupiter returned, but this time no one believed in their power. The fallen idols had new roles in Renaissance art, a new life. This is what we are trying to do in the post-totalitarian, post-socialist realist art: give new life to the old gods." But, he adds, "luckily, these gods are powerless."

More than 100 artists sent their proposals to Komar and Melamid. Many of the sketches and models came from Russians—but mainly

Komar and Melamid have been working together for 30 years, and have become the Astaire and Rogers of conceptual art.

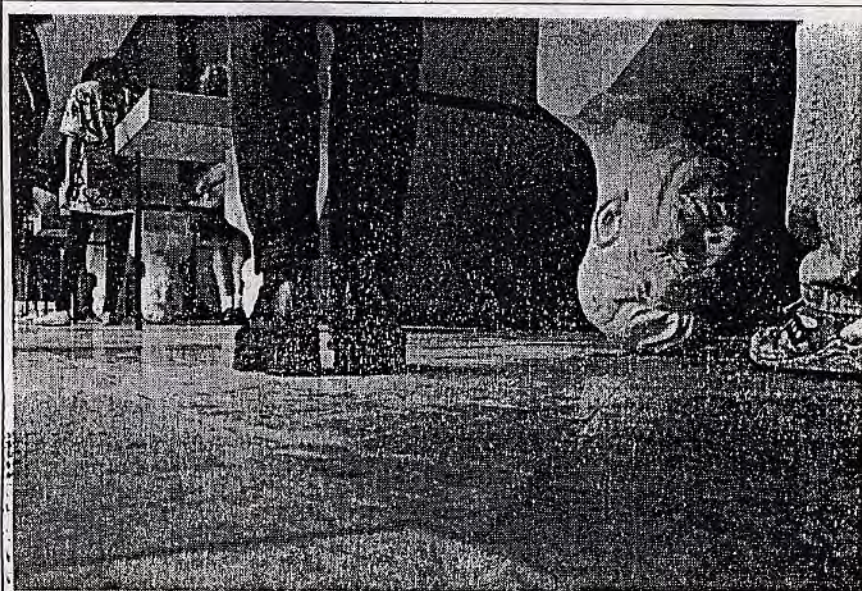
Russians living abroad. "I'm afraid the best Russian artists now live in New York, Paris and Cologne," Komar says. "The younger ones in Moscow missed seeing the world, and they missed the days of confrontation. When one of our outdoor shows was run over by KGB bulldozers in 1974, it was something incredible! Every artist dreams of touching a dictator so profoundly that the dictator tries to destroy you. It meant that we were taken

very seriously. If this has not happened to you, you have missed something very great in your life."

Some of the drawings and models are obvious, playing on the sudden switch from communist kitsch to capitalist flash, but they are irresistible all the same. Konstantin Boyrn, an emigre who teaches at the Parsons School of Design, took the famous seated statue of Lenin on the Kremlin grounds and placed a huge Sony television in front of it. (Lenin contemplating the capitalist future.) Leonid Lamin has merged a golden dollar sign with two hammers and a sickle. Lamin writes in an accompanying blurb that "the new dollar" should become "a new icon," glittering "like the crosses and domes of Russian Orthodox churches."

Robert Beckmann would take the standard Lenin statue (arm outstretched to the "glorious future") and turn him into a slot machine. Others would make of Lenin, variously, a drinking fountain, a weather vane and a seller of discount watches. Art Spiegelman, the American creator of "Maus," takes the classic "Worker and Peasant" statue and merely removes part of the base—which suddenly makes the striving young communists look as though they are about to topple into the abyss. Susan Hoeltzel suggests retaining all standing statues of the great Bolshevik leaders—but replacing their faces with video screens, the better to project on them the visages of the current leadership. In this way, monuments would always be both up-to-date and suitably sycophantic.

Komar passes by each of the exhibition cases with a bemused air. Even now, he regards the old monuments of Moscow as the beloved



Turning Stalin on his head: "We are trying to give new life to the old gods," Vitaly Komar says. "Luckily, these gods are powerless." Above, visitors at the "Monumental Propaganda" show in New York.



Komar & Melamid, *Suite in Chrome Yellow No. 2*, 1993, oil on canvas, 54 x 78".

NEW YORK

KOMAR AND MELAMID

RONALD FELDMAN
FINE ARTS

It's all very Russian. The work for which Komar and Melamid became famous was about the frightening absurdity of the Soviet system, and was directed toward the dismantling of that system. Now that the system has been dismantled, Komar and Melamid are the kings of nostalgia, ardent for the very sorrows that once gave them a claim to tragedy. Like all victims of child abuse, Russians are paralyzed by the loss of the abusive parent—not simply because that abusive parent defined their lives, but also because (nature is perverse) they loved that parent with a depth of emotion obscure to nationals of more genial and less controlling lands. Komar and Melamid's recent work is an attempt to articulate their grief; though it is presented in ironic, humorous, and often cynical language, it is in fact at least as tragic as the ironic, humorous, and often cynical work they made in protest against the ills of the Soviet system.

"Death and Immortality," is one of a series of shows that deals with the disappearance of Soviet architectural monuments. The esthetes among us join with Komar and Melamid in protesting the architectural merits of these works. However, for the artists the salvation of these monuments takes place not in spite of their origins, but in honor of those origins. Russian history has gone in waves of architectural destruction: there was the burning of Moscow before Napoleon; then the destruction of Tsarist and religious buildings by the communists; now

the annihilation of Soviet monuments by the democrats. Stop this madness, cry Komar and Melamid, for when you destroy in the name of some putative new good you do not accomplish good. It's a trope drawn half from Freud and half from Santayana: only when you confront your own past and accept it and make it part of your living present can you escape from its bondage.

"Death and Immortality" is in three parts: a group of paintings (called *Death*, all works 1993) that showed "an anonymous man" (who has the face of Stalin) undertaking a dreary suicide in a dreary American motel room; an installation called *Immortality* that related to the preservation of the Lenin Mausoleum; and a long text that linked "Death and Immortality" to the recent "Monumental Propaganda" show in New York and Moscow, and to a performance done on Lenin's birthday this year at the Mausoleum.

Though the Stalin pictures smack slightly of self-consciousness, the two-room installation as a whole is a profound success. It has a lightness of touch that one has missed in some recent Komar and Melamid works; like all the best Sots art, its concrete meanings are obvious and theatrical, but are given foil by a quiet Cassandra-like awareness of how our society (the artists' adopted one) echoes the failures of the Soviet state.

Komar and Melamid have aged better than many Soviet artists in this post-Soviet period, better than any of the other long-term emigrés. One might have thought that the demise of their enemy would have left them with nothing much to say, and for a moment, with installations like *Searstyle*, 1992, they seemed to be indulging themselves in a humorous but not very meaningful engagement with kitschy America. With

"Death and Immortality" they have manifested the most basic Soviet survival tool: they are altogether adaptable. This work, at once ironic and moving, shows that Komar and Melamid are not—like so many Eastern and Western champions of freedom—artists carried high on the chance winds of political circumstance, but are, rather, among those who, by insistently penetrating personal and political and artistic history, contrive neither to repeat nor to lose it.

—Andrew Solomon

The New York Times

FRIDAY, MARCH 6, 1992

C29

Art in Review

■ Two sides of a team.

Komar and Melamid

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts
31 Mercer Street
SoHo

Through March 28

In this exhibition by the team Komar and Melamid, there seem to be two entirely different shows. The gallery's front room presents the artists' farcical version of a Sears department store, whose wares include canned freedom, wall paneling made of corrugated cardboard and leisure wear riddled with bullet holes. The artists' proposition that there are only three viable styles left for contemporary art, "Modernism, Kitsch or Sears," is argued in dense and amusing visual detail, though many of their broader critical points seem too obviously stated.

The second room features, more successfully, a large horizontal painting done in the artists' familiar and accomplished realist mode. It depicts an imaginary landscape with a radiant celestial monument at its center and Boschian creatures — equal parts insect, animal and human — scattered among the surrounding hills. On the gallery walls, photographed details from the paintings are paired with printed pages from the Book of Psalms.

The hybrid beasts, we learn, depict animals mentioned in the biblical text and also refer to the artists' memory of childhood in Russia. Although some of the figures have the cozy innocence of children's book illustrations, others are creepy enough to hint at a dark, even demonic undercurrent to the words they accompany. The fact that these words include some of the central inspirational texts in Judeo-Christian culture make that subtext a provocative one, and it will be interesting to see where the artists take these ideas from here.

HOLLAND COTTER

KOMAR & MELAMID

RONALD FELDMAN
FINE ARTS

In Komar and Melamid's current show, "Searstyle™ with Psalms," the artists aim their barbs at the latest adventure in utopia: the New World Order, as buttressed by the Bible belt and old-fashioned American consumerism. In *Komar & Melamid's POL-COM*, 1992, a video that drones on continuously like the TVs in Sears' electronics department, the artists have made a "pol-com" (like a sit-com, but political) by adding a jacked-up laugh track to the recent State of the Union address. Mirth erupts not just after the president's pathetic jokes about Barbara and vomiting, but during every pause. Could the message be any clearer? We're not laughing with you, George, we're laughing at you.

Komar and Melamid filled the front gallery to bursting with their rendition of the department store's merchandise. "Searstyle" means "heavy-duty beauty": lots of Formica, faux brick and wood paneling, ceiling tile, carpet, artificial plants, clothes racks, washing machines, Sears logos, and catalogues signed by the artists. The installation is an immense parody of our most sacred cows: life (check out the Die Hard car battery on the cover of the latest issue

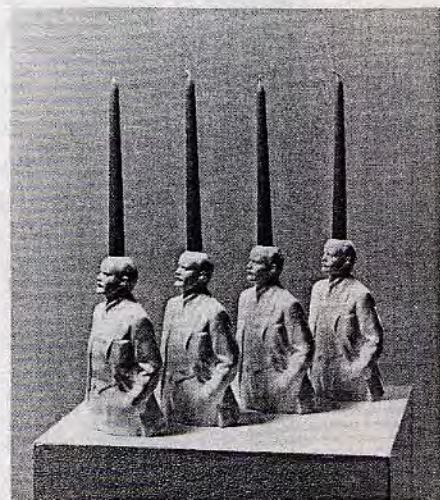
REVIEWS

of the artists' publication, *Death Magazine*); liberty (buy some *Freedom Cans* and *New Freedom Cans*, 1990-92, only 120 calories worth of "FREEDOM, WATER, SALT, AND CALCIUM CHLORIDE. DISODIUM EDTA ADDED AS A PRESERVATIVE"); Modernism (go see *Chocolate and Peanut Butter*, 1990-92, a painting that looks like a collaboration between Mark Rothko and Reese's); and Christianity (bow down before *Supreme Ceiling Tile Cruciform*, 1990-92, a True Cross not made of anything even remotely resembling the true wood). Is nothing sacred?

In the back gallery, the artists presented a large painting entitled *Psalms*, 1991, depicting various creatures mentioned in the Book of Psalms. On the surrounding walls are a number of diptychs (in Searstyle frames) in which photographs of various details of the painting are paired with Xeroxes of corresponding pages of the Psalter. For example, Psalm 63:10 ("They shall fall by the sword: they shall be a portion for foxes") is accompanied by an illustration of a red fox in a green suit eating a figure impaled on a sword. In a typically satirical move, Komar & Melamid illustrate the Psalter as a bestiary. But is this pairing of Psalms and Sears gratuitous? Not at all. On Sundays, Sears doesn't open until just before church lets out. You can go from one to the other without missing a beat.

In a recent interview, Komar and Melamid declared that "there are only three stylistic possibilities for artists of our time—modernism, kitsch, or Sears." In choosing to adopt in the latter, the two artists inevitably face the same sort of criticism that was directed at New York's Museum of Modern Art's "High/Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture" show in 1990. Searstyle is certainly not "true" Sears, which is mass, cheap, and unself-conscious about its *fausseté*. So is it a matter of the high devouring the low again? Are the artists merely exploiting pop culture? Perhaps. It also may be that Searstyle is neither high nor low; that, Janus-faced, it laughs at both people who buy wood paneling for their dens and people who buy wood paneling for their art collections. Searstyle is not only faux Sears, it is searing satire.

—Keith Seward



Komar & Melamid, *Lenin*, 1992,
stoneware ceramic candlesticks, 9 x 6 x 3".

Artforum

*What Is to Be Done with Monumental
Propaganda*

by Komar & Melamid

May 1992

Vol. XXX, No. 9

pgs. 102-103



What Is to Be Done



with Monumental Propaganda?

A Project for Artforum by Komar and Melamid

Today, any effort to save Russia's Socialist Realist monuments from destruction would surely be seen as an attempt to preserve a totalitarian tradition. We propose neither worship nor annihilation of these monuments, but a creative collaboration with them—to leave them at their sites and transform them, through art, into history lessons.

Fate has provided a unique opportunity: we can turn Moscow into a phantasmagoric garden of "posttotalitarian" art. It would be a shame to miss this chance, which is already passing. The statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Soviet secret police, for example, was simply removed from its home in front of the KGB headquarters. But it might have been possible to supplement this monument with bronze figures of the courageous individuals who climbed onto its shoulders and wrapped a noose around its neck on that historic day last August; or to add, say, a huge pigeon to the head of one of the now-dethroned statues of Lenin. And it is still not too late to turn the monument to Marx in front of the Bolshoi theater on its head, in homage to what he himself did to Hegel's dialectic.

Where else in the world could tourists see something like this! Why not erect a cage, or a giant aquarium with fish and octopi, around the statue of some other historical figure. Or else lift a statue by hydraulic cranes, as if to remove it, but then leave it hanging in the air, ambiguously arresting the moment of dismantlement and extending it into eternal retribution. The possibilities for such installations are unprecedented.

For us, the most important monument is Lenin's mausoleum. We propose adding a mere three letters—"ISM"—to the leader's name. So doing, we would save this 20th-century masterpiece and transform it into the symbolic grave of Leninist theory and practice. Perhaps pink flamingos could be allowed to wander about the tribunal from which the leaders once greeted people on state holidays.

We call on our Eastern and Western readers to submit more sketches, maquettes, and written proposals for possible monumental installations of this sort in Russia. The most interesting will be exhibited at the Moscow Institute of Contemporary Art (which opened last December, under the direction of Joseph Bakshtein) for the purposes of general discussion. Our goal is to revolutionize society's view of world history. If even one of these proposals is eventually realized, it would be a magnificent example of fruitful cooperation between Eastern and Western artists and governments.

All proposals for "What Is to Be Done with Monumental Propaganda?" may be sent to Komar and Melamid, c/o Artforum, 65 Bleecker Street, NYC, NY 10012, by 15 September 1992.

Thursday, July 26, 1990
The Seattle Times

Komar, Melamid: mastering the art of the spoof

■ **"In America,"** a retrospective of prints and multiples by **Vitali Komar** and **Alexander Melamid** through Sept. 1 at Fuller Elwood Gallery, 316 Occidental S., 11 to 5 Wednesday through Saturday, 625-0890.

by **Karen Mathieson**
Special to The Times

It sounds like a term project from hell. Two students at the Stroganov Institute of Art and Design in Moscow are assigned to devise a catalog system for thousands of pre-revolutionary military medals currently in unidentified jumbles. The students return with a complex and authoritative system and present their findings (backed up with large charts) to the authorities with great success.

Surprise. The system is entirely random. Vitali Komar and Alexander Melamid have pulled off another deadpan joke at the expense of blind bureaucracy. Komar and Melamid, who met in 1963 while drawing corpses in a morgue as part of another school assignment, excel not just as collaborative but as revolutionary artists. And if you think getting out of the Soviet Union — after a lengthy emigration battle — may have mollified these two, then think again.

"In America," a retrospective of the 13 years since Komar and Melamid reached the United States by way of Israel, shows the artists in full if occasionally laconic spate. Komar and Melamid object to being called Soviet artists. They are naturalized Americans now, and it is Western society that shocks, angers and amuses them.

The high art of the spoof is on display in **"Color is a Mighty Power,"** a collection of small color chips with instructions on how to relieve various ailments from gout to inferiority. Another promotional wonder is a set of photographs called **"A Catalog of Super Objects — Super Comfort for Super People,"** in which Komar and Melamid reveal the esteem-building possible through a tongue ring (every word a pearl), a carry-along pedestal unit and other products.

Two recent etchings called **"Scenes from the Future,"** to be published in limited edition by Sean Elwood Fine Arts this fall, depict the Museum of Modern Art and the Guggenheim Museum in New



Fuller Elwood Gallery

One of the works by Vitali Komar and Alexander Melamid in their retrospective, **"In America."**

York as attractive ruins in the style of 19th-century Romantic art. Sheep graze amid the shattered remnants, shafts of sunlight break the gloom. The whole refers to the transitory nature of artistic dogma, as well as to the perennial attraction of the lost.

Since Melamid and his family established a home base in Bayonne, N.J., some years ago, the team of Komar and Melamid has been investigating life in an industrial center. It's with what might be called the Bayonne Series that one sees the deadly seriousness at the heart of the hilarity. In one four-panel piece, a lithograph of a foundry worker stares grim and straight at the viewer. The shading is intense, as if all the soot of the city had accumulated on this man's spirit.

By comparison, **"Project for the American Flag"** is bright red, white and blue, with the Milky Way in place of the the 50 stars. Komar and Melamid are likely to have strong feelings about their adopted national emblem. This rendition could be taken in various ways — as a dig at self-centered concepts of the United States, for instance, or even as a symbol of the multifarious energies set free in this nation of immigrants.

Komar & Melamid

KUNSTKAMMERPAARE

Vitali Komar (geb. 1943 in Moskau) und Aleksandr Melamid (geb. 1945 in Moskau) provozieren, ärgern und verunsichern seit 1976 den New Yorker Kunstbetrieb mit ihren akademisch, klassisch, realistisch, abstrakt, expressionistisch oder konstruktivistisch gemalten Bildern, die nebeneinander Stalin, Napoleon, vögelnde Konsumenten (Konsomol bedeutet Leninscher Kommunistischer Jugendverband der Sowjetunion), den lesenden Lenin, ein suprematisches Kreuz, Hitler oder expressionistische Kleckerei zeigen. Kurz: Die Malerei von Komar & Melamid, ein Sammelsurium von Stilen, Techniken, Medien und Materialien, ist in ihrem pluralistischen Stil dem Eklektizismus als Methode verpflichtet. Ihre Dissidenten-Seele führt von der Avantgarde bis zum Kusch vollziehen Komar & Melamid ohne Stillstand auf ihrem zweibändigen Piratenschiff, mal in Richtung "Ort", mal in Richtung "Zeit". Mit der Zeit meinen Komar & Melamid: "Die Zeit unseres persönlichen Lebens und die allgemeine Geschichte (beide im Zeitraum zwischen 1945 und 1977, d.h. von unserer Geburt

1943 beziehungsweise 1945 bis zu unserer Emigration aus Russland), dazu der metaphorische Wechsel der Jahreszeiten, von Winter zu Winter." Und wenn sie immer wieder ihre Bilder entzweischneiden, dann geschieht dies nach Donald Kuspit "so, wie auch ihr Leben zwischen Russland und dem Westen geteilt ist - jeder Teil die einzelne, unvereinbare Hälfte einer - theoretisch - einzigen, ganzen Welt". - Komar & Melamid lernten sich während des Studiums am Stroganow-Institut für Kunst und Design in Moskau kennen, wo sie 1965 die erste Gemeinschaftsarbeit realisierten und 1967 ihr Diplom machten. 1972 entstanden Gemeinschaftsarbeiten unter Verwendung des Begriffs "Sots Art", eine russische Version der Pop art. Zwei Jahre später erfolgte der Ausschluss aus der Jugendsektion der Kunstunion. Die Teilnahme an einer Gruppenausstellung der Nonkonformisten auf einem Baugelände unter freiem Himmel in Beljajewo bei Moskau endete damit, dass ihr entstandenes Doppelporäträt als "Lenn und Stalin" von der Miliz zerstört wurde (die Staatsmacht liess Bulldozer anrücken, die die nichtgenehmigte Ausstellung abräumten). Anschliessend wird Komar & Melamid das Atelier entzogen und der Besuch von Ausstellungen untersagt. Mit Hilfe eines Israel-Visums (1977) erfolgt die Emigration nach Israel, kommen die beiden 1976 nach New York, wo sie aus der Sowjetunion geschmuggelte Bilder in der Ronald



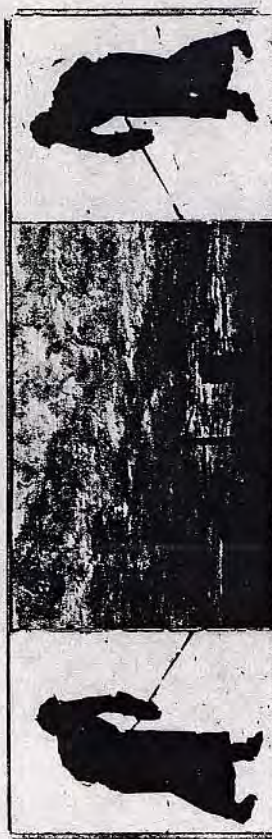
KOMAR & MELAMID. Stalin in Front of a Mirror, 1982-83. Öl auf Leinwand, 102 x 122 cm. Privatsammlung, New York. Foto: D. James Dee. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York



KOMAR & MELAMID. Hitler Cutting His Toenails, 1984-85. Mischtechnik, Triptychon, Total 34 x 103 cm. Privatsammlung, New York. Foto: D. James Dee. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York



KOMAR & MELAMID. Two Workers' Heads, 1988. Mischtechnik, Total 63.5 x 302 cm. Foto: D. James Dee. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York



KOMAR & MELAMID. Evening at Bayonne, 1988. Öl auf Leinwand, Triptychon, Total 63.5 x 188 cm. Foto: D. James Dee. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York



KOMAR & MELAMID. Bronze Leaves, 1988. Mischtechnik, Triptychon, Total 63.5 x 231 cm. Foto: D. James Dee. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

Feldman Gallery ausstellen und einen neuen Staat, "Transtate", mit eigener Verfassung und Unabhängigkeitserklärung gründen sowie - nach ihrer Übersiedlung nach New York im Jahre '78 - eine "Gesellschaft zum Kauf und Verkauf von Seelen". Übrigens: Andy Warhol wird die seinige umsonst anbieten. - In den nachfolgenden Texten, abgefasst im Stil der frühromantischen Fragmente von Friedrich Schlegel, setzen Komar & Melamid ihr eklektisches System im Rahmen von philosophischen Überlegungen unter dem Titel "Gedichte über den Tod. Das Gespenst des Eklektizismus" fort. P.B.

Der Hauptwiderspruch des frühen Modernismus (z.B. des Abstraktionismus) besteht darin, dass ein Hang zur Abkehr vom Einzelnen zum Allgemeinen durch wachsenden Subjektivismus entsteht. (In der Praxis äusserte er sich in der künstlerischen Bewegung, als Kollektiv der Subjekte.) Aber das Einzelne ist immer konkret und das Allgemeine immer abstrakt, und, wie angenommen werden kann, nicht subjektiv. Nur der Eklektiker versteht das Subjektive als das nicht Konkrete und führt somit den Modernismus zur logischen Vollendung, indem er den frühen Widerspruch auflöst.

Was am Ende bleibt, ist "Kitsch" und Parodien auf "Kitsch". Alles, was keine Parodie ist, ist Kitsch.

Der Begriff "Gott" vereint die Materie, das Sein und das Bewusstsein. Ungläubige sehen die Welt aufgeteilt in verständliche und unverständliche Elemente. Aus instinktiver Sehnsucht nach Einheit sind sie gezwungen, zwischen zwei Polen - Lügen und Eklektik - hin und her zu pendeln. Lüge repräsentiert ein Element als ganzes. Eklektik ist der Versuch, die Elemente ohne Gott zu vereinen. In der Kunst kann der konzeptuelle Eklektizismus (anarchistische Synthese) zum Erlangen des Glaubens führen (geistige Synthese). Der Eklektizismus ist kein Resultat, er ist ein Tanz, ein Reigen, nach dem eine glückselige Ruhe vor dem Tod möglich ist.

Als Studenten tranken wir gerne "zu dritt". Gewöhnlich tranken mit uns: Fedja (Fedulov), Tolik Basel'cev, Slon oder Antonov aus der Keramik-Klasse. Als wir uns in der Anatomiestunde kennenlernten, nahmen wir eine Flasche "für zwei" - der Dritte schwamm nebenan schweigend in einer Wanne mit Formaldehyd.

Früher glaubte man, je komplizierter das Kopieren eines Kunstwerkes ist, desto wertvoller sei das Kunstwerk selbst. Geometrische Abstraktionisten widersprechen heute dieser Regel.

Wir sind Kinder des Sozialistischen Realismus und Enkel der Avantgarde.

Die Spezialisierung der Künstler auf Gattungen ist typisch für das vergangene Jahrhundert. An ihre Stelle tritt heute die Spezialisierung auf Stile. Nur der Eklektizismus ist die Befreiung von den sklavischen, monotonen Schöpfungen, ähnlich der Arbeit am Fließband.

Die Seele des Eklektikers ist dem Wetter ähnlich. Stilwechsel ist Launenwechsel, Bewegungsfreiheit der Seele.

Bilder an Museumswänden sind nicht nur Dialoge zwischen Künstler und Künstler. Sie sind noch die Anrede eines Dritten - des Zensors.

Jede Frau hat etwas von einem Kamikaze.

Die Seele ist teilbar. Es gibt ein ICH der Vergangenheit, ein ICH des Übergangsaugenblicks zwischen dem Vergangenen und Zukünftigen und ein ICH der Zukunft. Die Unsterblichkeit der Seele ist der Tod des zweiten ICH.

Unsere Individualität äussert sich in allem, sogar darin, wie wir auf dem Klosettbecken sitzen und ein Buch lesen. Folglich kann ein und dasselbe Individuum sich in verschiedenen Stilen und Gattungen äussern. Alle suchen ihren individuellen Stil und finden immer einen Unterschied zu anderen. Die Talentiertesten kultivieren und entwickeln sehr schnell ihre Besonderheit, aber leider wird auch diese schliesslich und endlich doch ein Teil dieses oder jenes historischen, kollektiven Stils.

Glaube ist nur eine halbe Sache. Die andere Hälfte ist Unglaube.

Wir haben so viele Gedanken im Kopf, dass uns seit zwanzig Jahren schon die Ohren dröhnen. Um diese Gedanken zu dämpfen, trinken wir Wodka, lesen Zeitung und malen Bilder.

Komar & Melamid

Veröffentlichungen im KUNSTFORUM:
Gisind Nabakowski, Prospekt '86, Frankfurter Kunstverein/Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, Bd. 86, S. 266.
Thomas Wulffen, Komar & Melamid, Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, Berlin, Bd. 97, S. 281.

Beyond Manhattan: Bayonne Manifesto

Komar & Melamid

Komar, Vitaly, and Melamid, Alexander. "Beyond Manhattan: Bayonne Manifesto." *Glass Art Society Journal*, 1990, pp. 64-66.



"Absinthial Vodka." Photo, edition of 1,000. Part of "Bergen Point Brass Foundry, Bayonne." Photo by D. James Dee, c. 1989.

Jostling against others at openings, or at receptions in artists' studios—everywhere where the artistic life of New York is heard—one cannot escape the mounting sense of claustrophobia. Ah, it's now become impossible to see the paintings past the sea of backs of an art-crazed public. We dash out to the streets for a breath of fresh air, but no relief: here, too, we are tossed like tiny pebbles on the waves of the bustling crowd. Stifling!

Van Gogh, of course, fled from the "dwarfish infamies of M. Messonier" to Arles; Cezanne packed it in for Aix-en-Provence. Gauguin, finding no peace in Brittany, sailed to

Tahiti. Still earlier, J. F. Millet, hemmed in by the conventional pieties of the salon, took himself 30 miles from Paris to the unspoiled hamlet of Barbizon, and there attracted his artist friends, inviting them to share in living out his artistic credo: "In art it is the human aspect which touches me most deeply."

Gasping a bit for breath in our Canal Street studio, overcrowded with guests, we escape, climbing up to the roof. Twilight. An incredible sunset flaring up to the West. A wildly yellow sky in which an immersed white sun begins to flush; red swelling, then fragmenting, into strips of violet

and green. And there—just beyond Manhattan's teeming streets, the buildings stabbing at the sky, the artists clamoring over one another like bees in a hive, crazed to produce new honey for the philistines—beckoning beneath this glorious sunset: New Jersey. Yes! there we will shed the dishonorable for the honorable, indifference for passion, the mercenary for the selfless, the banal for the original. And we are ready for our incredible journey, though we know it won't be easy.

First one must be willing to suffer the anxiety of departure. One must steel oneself for the trial of the congested Holland Tunnel; one must stick stubbornly to the right in order to pick up the New Jersey Turnpike; one must find the stamina to press on, five, six—a full seven minutes!—before reaching Exit 14A. And one must be willing to pay the toll for all this (25 cents) before one passes over to reach the promised land: Bayonne.

At last, beauty assails our eyes from every vantage. The Bergen Point Brass Foundry, for example. For here, in this glass-enclosed relic of another fin de siècle, at the southernmost tip of noble Bayonne, just by the entrance ramp to the Bayonne Bridge (which would take you to Staten Island, were you even to consider returning to New York), the New Jersey workers vie with the sunset. While the slanting rays of the sun slice randomly through the lamp-like building, the workers, clad in protective helmets, gloves, and aprons reaching down to the floor, move about the foundry fire as if in some ritual dance, pouring out the liquid sun and fashioning it for human needs: drainage faucets, pipes, sewer valves.

Many artists dream of destroying the barrier between them and the viewer. But first they are occupied with creating this barrier, by creating their works.

Poems of Death, 1988

By day, we tread Bayonne's gallery-free streets, reveling in their spare simplicity. No trendy clubs; instead the hearty, unpretentious fare of Hendrickson's Restaurant, offering us "a bit of old Europe." We stroll along, passing the ancient ruins: abandoned factories, junked cars, industrial dumps, the wretched refuse of a dying culture's teeming shores, all as poignant in their decaying beauty as the crumbling Colosseum of Rome.

By night, taking a path behind the Avenue A side of the foundry, we cross the railroad tracks to climb the abandoned viaduct that once led to the Kill van Kull piers. From its peak, pressed into the backdrop of the sky, the factory appears enormous, with the openwork girders of the bridge lacing over it, and to the right, the vertical line of its smokestack joining the jagged Bayonne silhouette of factory chimneys and church spires. We are filled with love and affection for this tiny peninsula as the vesper church bells ring out this city's refrain and leitmotif:

Sunset-Bronze-Gold

Sky-Foundry-Church

Here we must agree with Jean Baudrillard that America is "the only remaining primitive society . . . of the future." Spread out below us: the meadows of vacant lots, from which the elusive fragrance of wormwood rises up to mingle with the bouquet of chemical emissions.

Ah wormwood, eternal grass of industrial dumps! We ourselves loved you in our Moscow childhoods, rubbing your scraggly stalks between our small fingers, inhaling your bittersweet aroma. Now we can carry you back to our studio here in our new Barbizon, spreading you in handfuls across our window sills, or, picking fresh shoots from your humble yellow stalks, immersing you thoroughly in a bottle of vodka to produce, in a few days, our fine liqueur, Komar & Melamid Absinthe. For it is said of you in the Revelation according to John:

The third angel blew his trumpet, and a great star fell from heaven, blazing like a torch, and it fell on a third of



Alexander Melamid. Photo by Mark Sullo.



Vitaly Komar. Photo by Mark Sullo.

During his visit to New York, Andrei Voznesensky said to us: "I consider you to be the best Russian artists here. And perhaps," he said, gesturing backwards, "even there." He does not understand that one cannot be the best here and there.

Poems of Death, 1988

the rivers and on the fountains of water. The name of the star is Wormwood.

And, according to the Bible, the falling wormwood star foretells the end of the world, or at least the end of the Christian world, the world that began with the very same star, the one—remember?—that decorates the Christmas tree:

When wise men had heard the King they went their way; and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was.

Sister and brother artists, you too who once saw the star in the East may now want to travel west to follow it. Perhaps our spiritual odyssey is not over yet. For here is the beginning and the end, where, after wending one's way through the perfectly symmetrical paths of a Bayonne park, one comes to sit on a bench by the edge of Newark Bay. Here, as the sun sinks behind the neoclassical facade that bears just two words—*women* over one door, *men* over the other—everything can be seen darkening and disappearing: airport, turnpike, distant mountains.

Someday you too, kindred spirits, may gradually gather in New Jersey, may even visit our studio on Avenue A, next to the Bergen Point Brass Foundry. Here, at the beginning and end of our journey, we and a handful of our students from the New York Academy of Art have already come to study this city and portray its people.

The Bayonne School is born!

Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid met in 1963 during an anatomy drawing class in the morgue of the Institute for Physical Culture, Moscow. Since that time they have collaborated on artworks influenced by styles ranging from socialist realism to abstraction, expressionism, and graffiti. They emigrated, via Israel, to the United States in 1978 and 10 years later became American citizens. Komar & Melamid often employ irony, humor, and parody in their campaign against the oppression of art and ordinary life by totalitarian dogma. Their work is included in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Australian National Gallery, and the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

Sunday, October 29, 1989

The San Diego Union

The Arts

Komar and Melamid: 'The art of TransState'

In order to form a more perfect social structure, to insure the independence and autonomy of the personality against encroachments by the Powers of Darkness, to implant

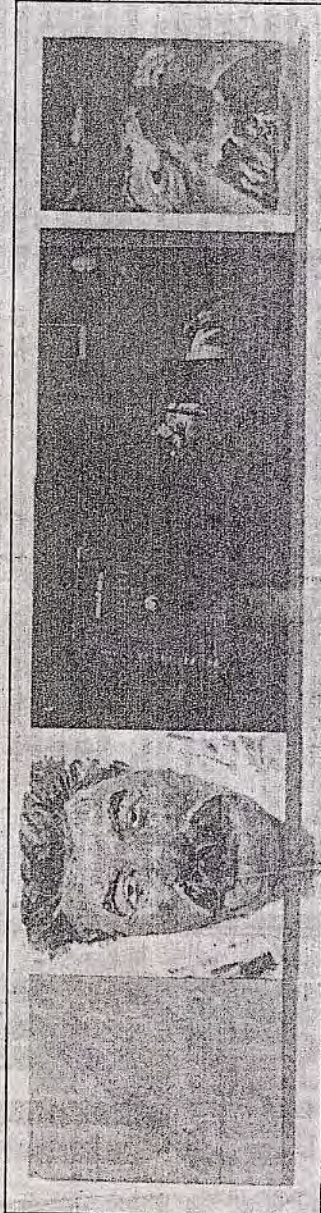
Art review

social stability, order and freedom, we — Vitalii Anatolevitch Komar and Aleksandr Danilovich Melamid — found a new state — TransState — and adopt for it this Constitution.

The preamble to a constitution by the above named artists, May 14, 1977.

By Robert L. Pincus
 Art Critic

Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid have made a virtue of being marginal. Born and raised in the Soviet Union, American residents



Josef Stalin is the butt of their lampoon in the five-panel piece 'Vespers,' by Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid.

since 1978 (citizens since 1989), they have enough detachment from their former land and their current one to satirize both.

Yet they seem to possess genuine affection for both cultures. Their art

is, at times, a remembrance of a Soviet past and a love-hate affair with the United States. An "I Love New York" bag looks just as much at home in their work as the face of Stalin.

Although there is a strong thematic link between all of their work, don't look for stylistic consistency. Komar and Melamid were schooled in the Stalinist realism we often associate with Soviet art and they

parody that style in many of their paintings of the early '80s.

But as the decade has unfolded, the only consistent aspect of their work has been its inconsistency.

"Our eclecticism represents a very

clear idea, to put everything in the picture, the whole world," explains Melamid in a marvelously entertaining interview with critic Carter Ratcliff in his 1988 book on the artists.

Komar and Melamid have long exhibited in New York and with some frequency in San Francisco. Indeed, their first solo show in Manhattan, in 1978, consisted of work sent from the Soviet Union by methods they still won't disclose. But their current exhibition at UCSD's Mandeville Gallery is their Southern California debut and gallery director Gerry McAllister deserves credit for assembling it.

It is not part of the "Treasures of the Soviet Union" arts festival. Shockingly, only one exhibition of work by contemporary artists is: ex-

See Review on Page E-4

Review

Continued from E-1

amplifies the art of Alexander Brodsky and Ilya Utkin at the San Diego State University Art Gallery, complemented by a few of their etchings at the La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art. There are two, if you count the show of contemporary posters at the La Jolla Museum. But that is cheating; design is one thing and art is another.

A show by Soviet emigres wouldn't have qualified for inclusion, anyway. But this exhibition without a doubt is a primary side benefit of the festival.

Komar and Melamid met as students at Moscow's Stroganov Institute of Art and Design in 1963. Shortly after graduation, in 1967, they began collaborating. By 1973, they had teamed up in a substantial way and their individual careers became history.

They, along with several other artists, made headlines in 1974 when their exhibition of unofficial art outside Moscow was bulldozed. By 1977, they had gained exit visas and emigrated to Israel. Within a year, however, they had relocated to New York.

Sots Art, the term applied to their early work, was derived from the first syllable of the Russian word for Socialism. Like Erik Bulatov, a Soviet artist also receiving much attention in the West, Komar and Melamid parodied everything from busts of Lenin and Stalin to sloganizing posters about the state.

Melvyn Nathanson, an American mathematician who befriended them during a teaching stint in Moscow, recalls the artists' explanation of Sots art from the mid-'70s. "In the West, they would say repeatedly, there is an overproduction of things, of consumer goods. Pop Art makes fun of this. But in the Soviet Union, there are shortages of everything: of meat, clothes, cars, apartments. There is overproduction only of ideology. . . . Komar/Melamid would satirize this."

These artists have remained satir-

ists, as the work in this show indicates. Yet theirs is very complex satire.

Scrutinize the compact five-panel piece "Vespers" (1985-87). It is funny, in a brittle sort of way, and the most tyrannical of Soviet leaders, Josef Stalin, is the butt of their lampoon. Looking from left to right, he makes an appearance in the second panel, as a wood face in relief that resembles a mask. He then reappears, in the fourth, standing before the bed of a seemingly terrified woman, mimicking the pose he adopts in a portrait on her wall. His final appearance, in the final panel, is as a blowup of the face in wood, with a green dot painted on his nose.

The piece is like a puzzle. How does its title relate to this mixed-media work? In a couple of ways, at least, one as good as the next. The most common meaning of vespers is evening and the sculptural face of Stalin is both grotesquely funny and nightmarish. The scene of Stalin and the woman in bed is clearly a night scene too; it seems like a scene from a dream, a surreal apparition.

As Ratcliff explains in an illuminating essay, Stalin is as much a personal symbol for these artists as a political one. In image and sculpture, he was everywhere during their childhood. When he fell into disfavor, those pictures and objects disappeared, as if by magic. Now, he is legally relegated to unofficial history

gle candle on a nearby table. Above her is a row of six blue squares, resembling immense windows looking out onto a night sky. The woman's arms are raised to her head and she seems to be leering at us.

This mixed-media work has its own metaphorical logic, however. It speaks of two realities, one of the state, with its imperious authority, and that of the individual, placed in a world that seems inexplicable, that offers little light.

Similarly, another two-part picture, "The Bright and Lofly Goal" (1985-86), expresses their skepticism of the idea that there are bright and lofty goals, in politics, life and art. The red shadow of a figure in the right canvas of this diptych is rendered in an expressionist style. He is reaching upward and a white hand, reaching downward, is superimposed upon his. In the panel on the left, we

are looking at a ceiling, with a three-bulb fixture; only one light is on. The skepticism of Komar and Melamid extends to the art world of which they are a part. Finding New York claustrophobic, they have taken a second studio in industrial Bayonne, N.J., and have done drawings and paintings of workers at a brass foundry.

"There — just beyond Manhattan's teeming streets," the artists wrote in the April issue of *Artforum* magazine, "the artists clambering over one another like bees in a hive, crazed to produce new honey for the philistines — beckoning beneath this glorious (New York) sunset New Jersey."

It would be hard to miss the ironic tone of this prose. And surely there is irony to be found in the idea of two

Soviet emigre artists, skilled in Stalinist realism, finding American industrial workers to be inspirational subject matter.

Yet nothing is simple and straightforward in Komar and Melamid's art. Their poetic rhapsody about New Jersey is funny stuff, but the artists' drawings and paintings of workers are frequently quite beautiful. In the United States, where the factory laborer is devalued and not celebrated, they find him an intriguing subject for art.

Could Bayonne be a leading contender to become the capital of TransState?

"Komar and Melamid: Recent Works" is on view at UCSD's Mandeville Gallery through Dec. 10.

Review/Art

2 Soviet Emigrés Celebrate Their New Home, Bayonne

By ROBERTA SMITH

The art of Komar and Melamid, the well-known Soviet émigré team, has been experiencing difficulties for a few years. Their current exhibition at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts indicates that their troubles continue, despite the best of intentions.

The artists' intentions seem considerably elevated. Their new work communicates a genuine good-heartedness and sincerity that have not previously been prominent in their emotional repertory — at least not since their paintings were first seen in New York City in 1976, a year before they left the Soviet Union. Gone are their sly early 80's sendups of Soviet Social Realism. The surface ironies of those paintings yielded deeper meanings about memory, the trustfulness of children and the large and small lies of history. Blending aspects of official art with French Neo-Classicism, the paintings also revealed Komar and Melamid to be Conceptual artists able to wield academic painting styles like sharp-edged tools.

Absent, too, are the less effective ironies of the artists' eclectic, multi-panel extravaganzas, like the two seen in 1987 at "Documenta 8" in Kassel, West Germany. Those works recalled the Soviet team's early 70's pre-emigration efforts, while taking aim at the stylistic scavengings of Neo-Expressionism.

Now Komar and Melamid have forsaken the New York style wars, turning more sympathetic eyes on their new hometown, Bayonne, N.J., and the Bergen Point Brass Foundry there. Their current exhibition is a multi-media homage to the foundry and its workers that is by turn confused, tame and irritatingly condescending. It is also a sad show, reflecting the efforts of two significant artists trying to find a new subject in their adopted country.

The exhibition covers too much ground too quickly, turning style into a blunt instrument. The first gallery

at Feldman is dominated by a mural-size painting, an image of workers around a glowing forge loosely executed on a brass leaf surface. On either side, an abundance of smaller four-panel works juxtapose more forge scenes, images of the foundry at sunset and drawings of individual workers, gloves and shoes.

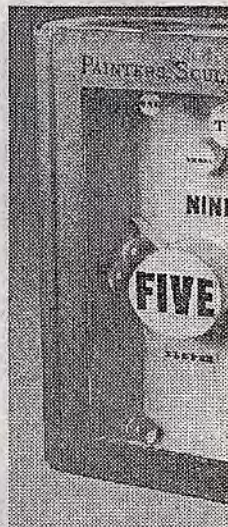
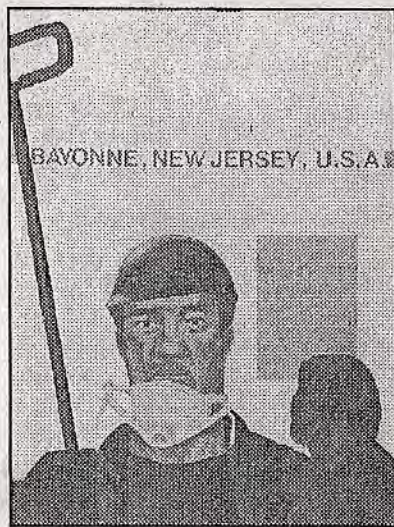
As before, social and esthetic commentary seem to be the goal. The workers' silhouettes are sometimes contrasted with monochromatic panels of gold paint — intended, one supposes, to symbolize money, abstraction, greed, the art market and so forth.

In the second gallery, one is confronted with 14 "Bayonne Rock Garden" sculptures: terra-cotta planters, plants and all, landscaped with rusty bits of metal. Large color photographs of similar metal scraps strewn about abandoned dumping sites indicate the source of the decorations.

Everything in sight communicates an unusual indifference to material and technique. The multi-panel works, sometimes so slapped-together they look seriously unfinished, gloss over the power of both art and honest labor. In them, the workers remain heroic anonymous silhouettes, little more than badly used artists' models, the reality of their lives lost in a haze of sloppy pictorial effects. And since close attention to the work goes unrewarded, the viewer can also end up feeling exploited.

Two details say a lot about what's missing from this show. One is the small finely wrought lithograph by a New Jersey artist named John A. Noble that Komar and Melamid incorporated into a larger work dedicated to him. An image of ironworkers around an anvil made in the 1960's, it harks back to the American Social Realism of the 30's and it honors manual labor with an equal amount of the artistic kind.

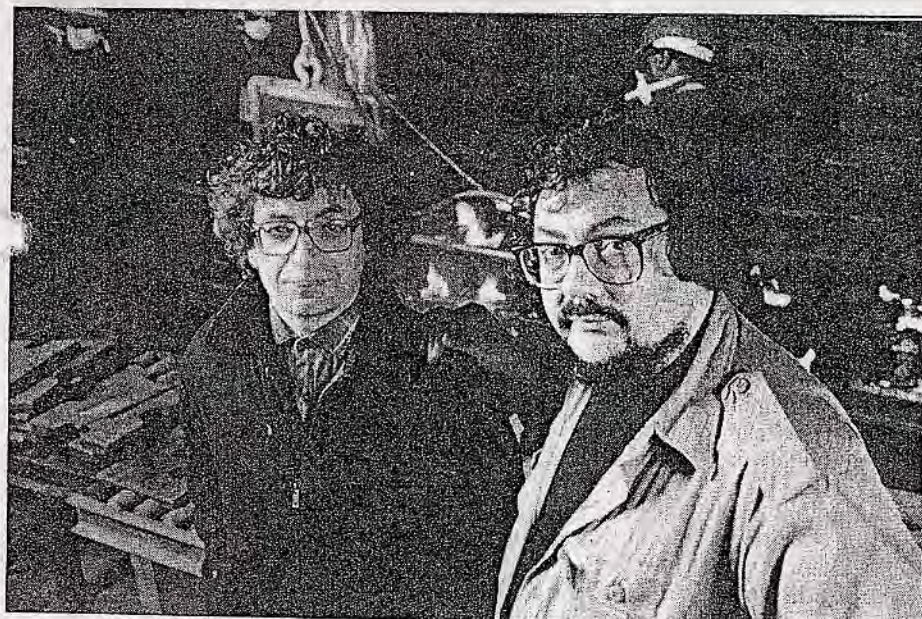
The other detail, found in a vitrine at the show's center, is a cluster of bottles of homemade absinthal vodka. Their labels say the vodka is



Detail (left) of "Golden Hands," 1988, mixed media by Komar and Melamid, at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, and an untitled work by John A. Noble at Fiction/Nonfiction Gallery.

flavored with "Genuine Bayonne Wormwood" and call the 60-proof alcohol "The True Spirit of New Jersey." The bottles and their contents represent a multiple made in an edition of 1,000 by the artists themselves. A minor work to say the least, this multiple nonetheless conveys more about Komar and Melamid's situation and sensibility — their memories of Russia, their ambivalence toward their adopted homeland, their characteristically skillful, skeptical high-spiritedness — than anything else on view.

"Komar and Melamid: Bergen Point Brass Foundry, Bayonne" will remain at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, 31 Mercer Street, through April 29.



JACQUES CHENET—NEWSWEEK

Absinthial New Jersey vodka, industrial garbage, mixed media works: Melamid (left), Komar

ART

The Muscovites of Bayonne

Two Soviet artists find inspiration in a foundry

Inside the Bergen Point Brass Foundry, a turn-of-the-century structure all covered with soot, a handful of workers ply a 19th-century trade, casting plumbing and monumental fixtures out of aluminum and brass. Green and orange gases rise from two stone "kettles" of molten metal, causing Russian-born conceptual artist Alexander Melamid to remark, "This place is like a temple." Pointing to the kettles, he adds, "Here is the altar."

Discovering altars in a foundry and art in its debris has been the stock in trade of Melamid and Vitaly Komar, his partner in pranks for two decades. Komar and Melamid, who are best known for their nostalgic sendups of Soviet socialist realism, have found inspiration this time in the "typical" American city of Bayonne, New Jersey. Their latest show, "Bergen Point Brass Foundry, Bayonne," presents paintings, drawings, photos and sculptures celebrating the foundry workers and the city's "19th-century society." It will travel to Paris and Cologne in the fall.

Moscow morgue: The wiry Melamid, 43, and the bearlike Komar, 45, say they met in an anatomy class at the Moscow morgue in 1963. At the time they were students at the Stroganov ("as in beef") Institute of Art and Design. By 1972 they were working together exclusively. They came to the attention of the West when they participated in the illegal "Bulldozer Exhibition" of 1974, which was bulldozed to the ground by Moscow police. Though they never work together on any piece at the same time, they first discuss their approach and make

sketches. "It is not about losing ego," says Melamid. "It's more like making love," says Komar.

Inspired by American pop art of the '60s, Komar and Melamid were among a group of Moscow artists in the early '70s who painted a homegrown version of pop they called Sots art. Sots art targeted a society whose most available commodity is ideology. After they did an irreverent representation of Laika, the sputnik dog that died in space, they were expelled from the Moscow



'Capitalist realism': American rendering

Union of Artists for "distortion of Soviet reality." They soon began to smuggle works out of Russia. One was "Color Writing," an abstract of color-coded squares spelling out the free-speech article of the Soviet Constitution. A friend convinced officials it was a tablecloth.

Next came works painted in a sentimental academic style, which spoofed socialist realism. Stalin is probably their most frequent subject; one treatment shows him gazing coyly into a mirror, another has a nude nymph stroking his chin. They have portrayed Ronald Reagan as a centaur and have painted a scene at Yalta featuring Hitler, Stalin and the movie character E.T.

The "American" works in the Bayonne show represent a turning point for Komar and Melamid, who, after a decade in the United States, recently became U.S. citizens. Large canvases of men at the forge are painted in a heroic "capitalist realism" style, with loose expressionistic strokes. Industrial garbage scavenged from Bayonne dumps—paint cans, hard hats, rusted metal ribbons and chains, bits of plant matter and wood—form sculptural arrangements in terra-cotta pots. In a vitrine filled with objects and photos are bottles of amber-colored liquid: part of an edition of 1,000 bottles of Komar and Melamid Absinthial vodka, flavored with "genuine wormwood of New Jersey, U.S.A."

Fences and pipes: Bayonne is a city of aluminum-sided homes, oil and chemical tanks and a fair share of garbage dumps. "These are no less beautiful, no less historic than Roman ruins," says Melamid, sweeping his hand across the landscape. Komar points to a cluster of fences, tanks and pipes. "This," he declares, "is the same as the Beaubourg."

Not everyone in Bayonne is pleased with the artists' irony. The local newspaper, the Bayonne Community News, reports that Mayor Dennis Collins is uneasy about the tongue-in-cheek sniping. Nonetheless, he acknowledges that the artists have recognized that tradition means much to the people of Bayonne. "It's a town where church is the most important social obligation," says Collins. "It is a great compliment that they recognized that no matter how it was meant."

Actually, Komar and Melamid put together their show with great affection. To them, Bayonne is far from the "art-crazed New York hordes," the self-proclaimed arbiters of taste who enforce an American-style "official art" of the curator and the marketplace. In a "manifesto" published in Artforum magazine, Komar and Melamid urged all "kindred spirits" to follow their example, foresake Manhattan and join them in the wormwood-filled meadows of Bayonne. It is a new age, they say. "The Bayonne school is being born."

JOAN WESTREICH in Bayonne

KOMAR AND MELAMID

Ronald Feldman

Because of the preponderance of political icons in their work—everything from Stalin, Lenin, and Hitler to Ronald Reagan, the American eagle, and the American flag—Komar and Melamid tend to be classed as political artists. Never mind that the exact nature of their politics remains obscure, nor that a sneaking affection for both their skillfully appropriated Socialist Realist style and the ideological certainty of the world described by that style blunts the critique of authority that American observers are so anxious to discover in their work.

This exhibition again demonstrated the elusiveness of the duo's politics. The gallery was given over to a glorification of Bayonne, New Jersey, where the artists now maintain their studio, and more particularly, of the workers employed by Bayonne's Bergen Point Brass Foundry. Multi-panel paintings juxtapose images of workers toiling in the foundry, the brilliant, pollution-induced sunsets of Bayonne; worker portraits; academic renderings of machine parts; and relevant classical subjects (Hephaestus is a favorite). In the center of the first gallery stood a vitrine containing artifacts relating to factory life and bottles of absinthe made from New Jersey wormwood. The centerpiece of the back gallery was a rock garden consisting of potted plants entwined around bits of rusty industrial detritus.

The word on this exhibition was that it satirized the pretensions of the New York art world by tossing it together with the gritty reality of the Bayonne factory worker. To further this confrontation between art and life, factory employees were invited to the opening and art-world cognoscenti were shipped out weekly for a Saturday bus tour of Bayonne.

One feels curmudgeonly questioning the authenticity of Komar and Melamid's embrace of the "real

America." Nevertheless, it must be noted that these (mostly rather poorly executed) paintings and objects contain no real examination of the economic realities of the workers' lives or their status as relics in rapidly deindustrializing America. Instead, Komar and Melamid seem content to serve up their adopted city as yet another reinforcement of the mythology of America's Golden Age. There is something disturbingly patronizing about this celebration of old-fashioned labor by the urban sophisticates of the New York art world. In the end, the show's "politics" began to resemble nothing so much as simple nostalgia.

— Eleanor Heartney

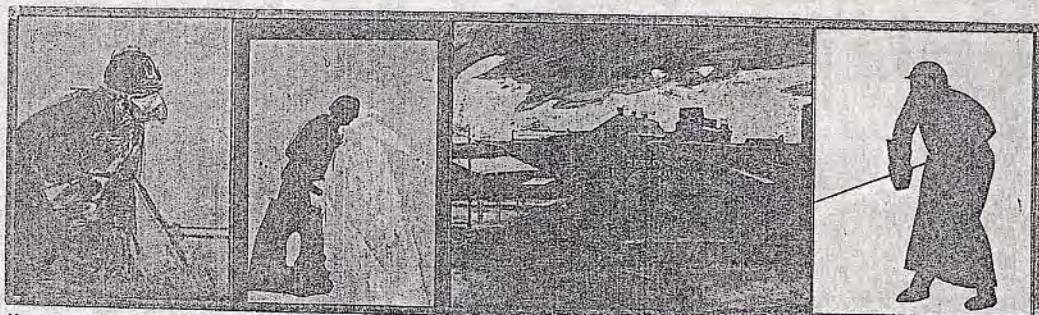
ERIK LEVINE

Diane Brown

Erik Levine's cool approach to sculpture is a welcome antidote to the emotionalism of many postmodernists who have forsaken skillful execution and cohesive imagery in favor of bombast and rhetoric. Levine shuns these tendencies in his large-scale, mathematically conceived works, which exist as paradigms of formalism. Streamlined, subtle, and stable, Levine's structures are rooted in the art of the '60s. But what relieves his work of Minimalist sterility is its sensuality, which is derived from the curving, rounded forms juxtaposed against rectilinear elements. Levine's use of marred, milk-toned, unadorned, furniture-grade plywood imparts



Komar and Melamid, *Bayonne Rock Garden*, 1988, mixed media, 10 inches in diameter. Ronald Feldman.



Komar & Melamid: *Winter at Bayonne*, 1988, mixed mediums, 25 by 86 1/4 inches; at Ronald Feldman. (Review on p. 206.)

Garet's new paintings replace his adolescent classicism with the romance of heroic, monolithic abstraction. While the new work is undeniably more difficult and enigmatic, it's also tougher and gutsier.

—John Zinsser

Komar & Melamid at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

Komar & Melamid's new installation, based on a six-month stint in Bayonne, N.J., is strange and moving, though perhaps not in the way they intend. In drawings and paintings, the duo glorify Bayonne's anachronistic Bergen Point Brass Foundry—its spirit of comradely hard work, its brawny, technologically primitive, fiery and sweaty atmosphere. In typically dense profusion, they present images of fists and masked faces, of infernal forges and cloaked men tending them, of low, dark buildings silhouetted against glowing sunset skies.

This homage to the proletariat, so deliberately close in spirit to American social realism of the '30s, is of course just as close to Russian Social Realism of the same era, from which our version drew its moral and stylistic inspiration. That's the strange part, for the results fly in the face of the

ironic pastiches of state-sponsored Soviet art K&M have heretofore offered. What's moving is their seriousness about their radically revisionist enterprise; or perhaps they are simply homesick. Insisting that Bayonne represents the truth about American life at the end of the 20th century (and, implicitly, that New York is just some irresponsible distortion of it), they replace the pieties of official Soviet art with an American myth of their own invention.

Along the way, K&M offer some vivid and effective sketches. The smoldering skies and smoky interiors create a nice hot atmosphere, and all the capable, anonymous men comport themselves with noble gravity (though surely one of the most fetching images is that of a man with his pants crumpled around his ankles, his breath coming out as pale gray vapor and his pee as polished gold). And as usual in K&M's work, there is a brave, risky eclecticism in the choice of mediums and styles, with drawings, collages and paintings ganged in diptychs and triptychs that vaguely suggest rebuslike narrative relationships. Finicky realism, Ashcan-style bravura and Michelangesque renderings of rippling muscles join homages to a competent local artist, John

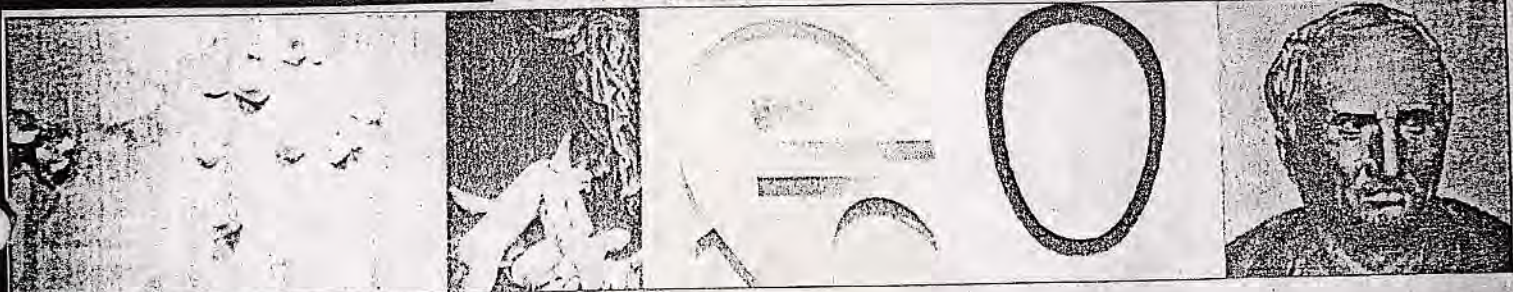
Noble, and on the opposite wall, to hidebound academicism in the form of a solemn portrait of Karl Marx.

But there is more: a display table filled with Bayonne memorabilia and sample bottles of absinthe that K&M brewed from indigenous wormwood; large color photographs of local dumpsites; potted "rock gardens" filled with rusting industrial parts and local flora. The wide-ranging inclusiveness begins to seem not, as in the past, a simple democratic gesture broadened by a widely shared aversion to signature styles, but a kind of grateful abdication. The unwillingness to discriminate (and some of this stuff, the rock gardens particularly, is very dull indeed) is now fueled, apparently, by adamant humility. Before the grandeur of Bayonne, Komar & Melamid stand mute.

Lest their point be misunderstood, K&M conducted tours of the foundry during the exhibition and even, Beuys-like, advertised the opening of a school: "The Goal of the Bayonne School: to find beauty in everyday life, to realize the connection of our individual past and future with the past and future of all humanity...." It seems cruel—to the artists, and to the community

they took to heart—to be cynical, but it's really no kinder to get misty-eyed. The fact is that the working class in this country is in dire straits, and no amount of romanticizing painterly attention will make that less true.

—Nancy Princenthal



Komar & Melamid: Eggs, Coitus, and Cicero



Dinner at the Cottage

ART

Fatal Vision

By Gary Indiana

KOMAR & MELAMID, Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, 31 Mercer Street, through March 23.

Komar and Melamid's mixed-media "New Paintings" exploit and desecrate the latest constructs of "the new" with the enthralling sarcasm and painterly imperiousness that's invariably ascribed to their work. However, as usual, a lot more than sarcasm and imperiousness is going on. In a contrary spirit not unlike that of consumer advocates, Komar and Melamid have made an exhaustive inventory of successful recent painting styles, shrunk the samples down to digestible dimensions (typically 13½ inches by 11 inches), put them to work on politically and sexually frontal material, and arranged them in deadpan formalist sequences. The studio-apartment scale of the work, the elastic range of its specific historical references, and the mediation of individual ego inherent in Komar and Melamid's collaboration deflate a mythology of art-making that has wobbled into deep senility: the artist as a volcano that erupts once or twice a year, its lava cooling into fantastic new forms for an awed and grateful public to decipher.

The most aggressive aesthetic implication of the 45 works on view is that the exact wording of postmodernism's bankruptcy statement can be as classical as yesterday, as arbitrary as today. The more subtle message emitting here is that it is always possible, even in extremity, to say a little more. The issue of context that has occasionally been wheeled out to

differentiate what these émigré artists do from what "American" art is up to simply can't be applied here in good faith. Komar and Melamid's fused view of art and politics sees the U.S. and the USSR with equal clarity, whether or not our national vanity acknowledges it. Their work has been bulldozed in Russia and slashed in America; little wonder, then, that their new paintings tend to merge the two places into the same mental territory.

Since the author of these lines is featured in one of the works, I might as well begin there. In *Gary and Blok* (seven panels, mixed media), the American writer and the Russian one are separated by a swastika of plastic rats, a Balthusian study of numerous dildos, and a swastika-shaped game board on which numbered career moves are indicated for various professions (artists and intellectuals, etc.); Blok is flanked by a swastika floral arrangement.

But what does it mean, I heard myself asking one of the artists, stupidly. Surely you don't mean that.

However, K & M's new paintings mean what they look like they mean, constructing their meaning by turning the present moment's aesthetic and political tropes into earnestly secular motifs. A Constructivist version of the cross, featuring a Brisk 'n Bouncy Lowfat Milk container, serves as the root form linking Jackson Pollock being raised on Iwo Jima, the Soviet flag with gold dollar sign replacing the hammer and sickle, a photograph of

Jasper Johns with gold nails driven through the eyes, and a Yalta-inspired variant on Johns's *Three Flags*.

The Yalta Conference is one of several iconographic anchors in the show, a symbol of East-West misalliance, of the seductions and betrayals composing modern life's song of expedience. The cackling wickedness of rulers and the infantilized credulity of the ruled are symbiotic themes that extend from politics to the culture industry, often embodied in *faux-naïf* methods of representation or objects redolent of childhood. In *Allies*, over the texts of two solicitous letters between FDR and Stalin, we find a Venetian carnival mask; in *The Minotaur as a Participant in the Yalta Conference*, amid Jungensstil variants on the latest species of East Village bull, we find Lenin attempting to scare a little girl with a bovine headdress.

Appearance is the quintessence of deception throughout this elaborately varied production. In *Sounds*, a Soviet teen-party interior has an impeccably Conceptual-looking border of glass slides that deconstructs the image in a surprisingly rigorous way, since the slides are enlargements of herpes viruses. If you look carefully into the background of *Autumn in the Village*, which features the ultra-postmodernist insertion of a paint-smeared plastic bull, you will notice a male figure being lynched from an equally up-to-date, motorized crane.

Images of castration, fucking, and execution, not to mention rape and torture, weave through this exhibition as subjects of formal study, as if assigned in some post-holocaust academy where the debris of art history provided an array of equally worthy techniques for rendering our century's favorite activities. While Komar and Melamid may appear to have flattened both subject matter and style into value-exempt monads, the moralism of this show is devastatingly thorough and unsparring.

The installation is a tour de force of arrangement, the pieces running evenly along the horizontal midsection of the gallery, with intermittent vertical branchings. The component panels, numbering in the hundreds, were produced separately in the studio before their eventual configurations had been decided. The number of panels in each work varies from one to 11, the largest being *When I Was a Child Matzoh Reminded Me of a Braille Book and The Minotaur as a Participant in the Yalta Conference*. Except for three single-panel pieces, each work is a montage sequence, optimally juxtaposing painting, photography, and sculpture; most of them read more coherently from left to right, or from the bottom up, than otherwise. Before being spliced together in the gallery, the panels resembled bits of an immense rebus, satirically scaled for the new median-income art collector.

"New Paintings" echoes *Biography*, a 1973 work consisting of 197 square wooden miniatures (smuggled out of the Soviet Union while K & M still lived there, exhibited in New York in 1976). Like *Biography*, the new work is a polyglot inventory of the artists' lives, expanded to apply Soviet-bred skepticism about everything to the material of American culture. The show also casts a Proustian backward glance over Mother Russia; aside from the much-noted sarcasm, K & M's paintings quite often convey a genuine ache of nostalgic longing.

They are also mercilessly, enduringly funny. It is a great pity that many seasoned gallery-goers, who after all are obliged to look at laughable things all the time, feel inhibited around deliberately humorous paintings. One is strangely moved by the sight of prestigious-looking individuals gazing with total sobriety at a picture of Franklin Roosevelt with a pickle on his head, Hitler clipping his toenails, or a condom dredged from a canal in Leningrad.



KOMAR & MELAMID

—Ronald Feldman Fine Arts

FOR THE past few years, Komar & Melamid's collaborative work has described the depersonalization of Soviet-sponsored formulaic painting. In ominously heroic portraits of Hitler, Stalin and Lenin and in equally rigid landscapes and genre scenes, they have commented with brutal sarcasm on totalitarianism and its art. In their new paintings that control has been abandoned with a vengeance. What was once an indivisible collaborative identity has splintered into half a dozen wildly opposed sensibilities. These paintings are not ponderous single images but sequences of small panels of prodigious stylistic and conceptual diversity. And it is now revealed with a great deal of gusto that their work's ostensibly pure political content—which was

always suspiciously susceptible to Freudian interpretation as "sublimated" or "repressed"—did indeed harbor great reserves of eroticism. These new images are richly, sometimes startlingly, perverse. There are castrations, rapes, child abuse, necrophilia, tasteless jokes and crude draftsmanship in abundance.

Once again, Komar & Melamid created an exhibition that disturbs seldom exercised presumptions. This maniacally varied work takes American as much as Russian culture for the subject of its humor. The tyranny of excess, which reigns as ruthlessly here (especially, at the moment, in the realm of painting) as scarcity does in Russia, is eyed

to withering effect. Nor are the avant-garde art community's own sacred cows safe from attack. In these series of images, strung together like coded phrases and sentences, art is presented as if it were a formative stage of text. The material chosen, moreover, suggests a pastiche of currently popular critical terms. With the recurrent clocks, real and painted; the lone miniature TV set and the frequent use of commercial imagery; the condensed, self-referential format (the miniaturized paintings recap a 1973 piece called *Biography*), the artists seem to be lampooning postmodernism's unending "discourse." The all too familiar rhetoric adapted from semiotics concerning the death of the author, the unyielding authority of popular culture—in short, the inexorable advance of endlessly reappropriated imagery—evidently entertains Komar & Melamid no less than runaway expressionism.

As always, the outstanding political ignorance of the American public, in and out of the cultural vanguard, is ruthlessly exposed. Do we like seeing Roosevelt sent up with Stalin? What, more basically, have we done with the memory of their alliance? There is something improperly appealing about work that turns the attention from domestic to foreign transgressions. To be made aware of our self-righteous responses can be discomfiting. But Komar & Melamid also have a more subtle, difficult point in mind. In juxtaposing scruffy, badly made images with images in a flawlessly finished Socialist Realist style, the artists mean to suggest the sexiness of authority, technical as well as political. We are forced to recognize that unremittingly disciplined academicism is far more seductive than stylistic and narrative lenience or, especially, than evident emotional vulnerability. They prove that wielding power, in any language—verbal or visual—is always the dirtiest game in town.

—N.P.



Komar & Melamid, *Hitler Cutting His Toenails*, 1984-85, mixed media, 13½ by 40 by 1½ inches. Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.

Art

Through the Ironic Curtain

In SoHo, two Soviet dissidents jape the awfulness of court artists

Joseph Vissarionovich Dzhughashvili (1879-1953) lives again! Pink, incorruptible and smelling only a little of mold, the Maximum Leader and Supreme Baby Kisser of the Soviet Peoples has come back to greet us. Who would ever have supposed that the most immediately memorable show in New York City's SoHo, at the start of the 1982 art season, would be a gallery full of mock Stalinist socialist realism, done in the correct borsch-and-gravy colors of official Soviet art 30 years ago? But there is nothing that pluralism will not give us; and so it is with the exhibition by Vitaly Komar (a name that, in Russian, means "mosquito") and Alexander Melamid, which grandly fills the Ronald Feldman Gallery all this month.

Komar, 39, and Melamid, 37, henceforth denoted as K & M, are both "dissident" Russian artists, who started exhibiting their peculiar team form of Pop conceptual art in the U.S.S.R. in 1972; in the fall of 1974, they took part in the still notorious "unofficial" art show on a vacant lot in Belijaev, a suburb of Moscow, which was flattened by police bulldozers. Soon after that, they were able to arrange their departure for the U.S.A., where all art is *ipso facto* harmless. Do you long for the days when the old left was new? Then head for K & M, who will fix you up. This is the most paralyzingly funny exhibition to be seen in New York in quite a while, which unfortunately is not saying much, given the low quotient of wit in the American art world.

In essence, K & M's work is of the same kidney as Alexander Zinoviev's *The Yawning Heights*: a prolonged satire that is bureaucratically realistic; a machine that recycles its own absurdity; above all, a meditation on the entropy of rhetoric, the way clichés wear down and finally deflate one another. K & M's work is obliged to resemble what they poke fun at: anyone can caricature an official Russian political picture, but only Russians can do it effectively. This involves a steady sequence of double takes: Just how serious are these guys, anyway? One can imagine some good apparatchik responding without irony to K & M's appalling *View of the Kremlin in a Romantic Landscape*, its gold onion domes and

pink ramparts and red star floating on a sea like the isle of Cythera itself, framed by a "classical" Poussinesque clutter of arching trees, fallen columns and pediments and other bric-a-brac. It has the deeply sincere vulgarity of a holy card: an alliance between Alexander Gerasimov, Stalin's favorite artist, and Walt Disney.

Perhaps other Russian painters, unknown to the West, are busy boring and

clicking like so many deathwatch beetles within the facade of idealist kitsch known as Soviet socialist realism. But it is hard to see how they could ruin it more thoroughly. K & M's paintings are not merely banal, but excruciatingly so, oily and inert, varnished so heavily that three-quarters of the surface is glare; the eye gropes for the clichés that lie embedded in them. The accretion becomes a kind of conceptual art, holding everything in quotation marks.

Sometimes a weird sort of yearning intrudes. As a child, Melamid lived on the Moscow street that Stalin's staff car reputedly took on its way from the Kremlin to his country dacha: If you look carefully, his elders told him, you might see him in the back of the car. Melamid never did, but a yearning for the ogre is commemorated in *I Saw Stalin Once When I Was a Child*: the red curtain in the rear window slides back, revealing the fleshy nose, the twinkling eye of the Dreadful Father. "To us," Melamid points out, "Stalin is a mythical figure. We are not trying to do a political show. This is nostalgia."

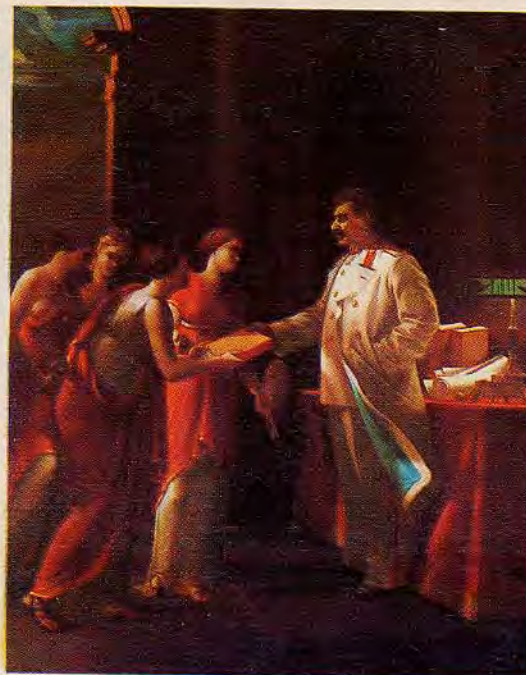
Well, up to a point. To suppose the work is only a satire on an obsolete propagandist style is to miss its deadlier thrust. What K & M are getting at is not just totalitarian art, but official art as such. *Stalin and the Muses*—showing Clio, muse of history, presenting a volume for revision to the mustachioed god in his transcendent white military greatcoat—is "objectively" a hilarious spoof, done in clumsily tight parody of the 17th century grand manner. But then, if these sleek pictorial tropes are so absurd when lavished on Stalin, why should they be any less so when used on Louis XIV, Peter the Great or any other enlightened despot?

Seldom has a tyrant been so absolute or cruel that he could not find some major artist, a Rubens or a Titian, a Velásquez or a Bernini, to fawn on him for a suitable fee. It is the nature of carnivores to get power, at which point, having disposed of their enemies, they deploy the emollient powers of Great Art to make them look like herbivores. Stalinist socialist realism was merely the end of this process, carried out by hacks. After it, the more intelligent of the Beloved Leaders would want radio and TV, not painting, to be their cosmeticians. We must thank Melamid and Komar for reminding us what towering heights of awfulness the great lost tradition could reach in pre-electronic days.

—By Robert Hughes



Komar and Melamid's *View of the Kremlin in a Romantic Landscape*



Stalin and the Muses: deeply sincere vulgarity
Clicking within the kitsch like deathwatch beetles.

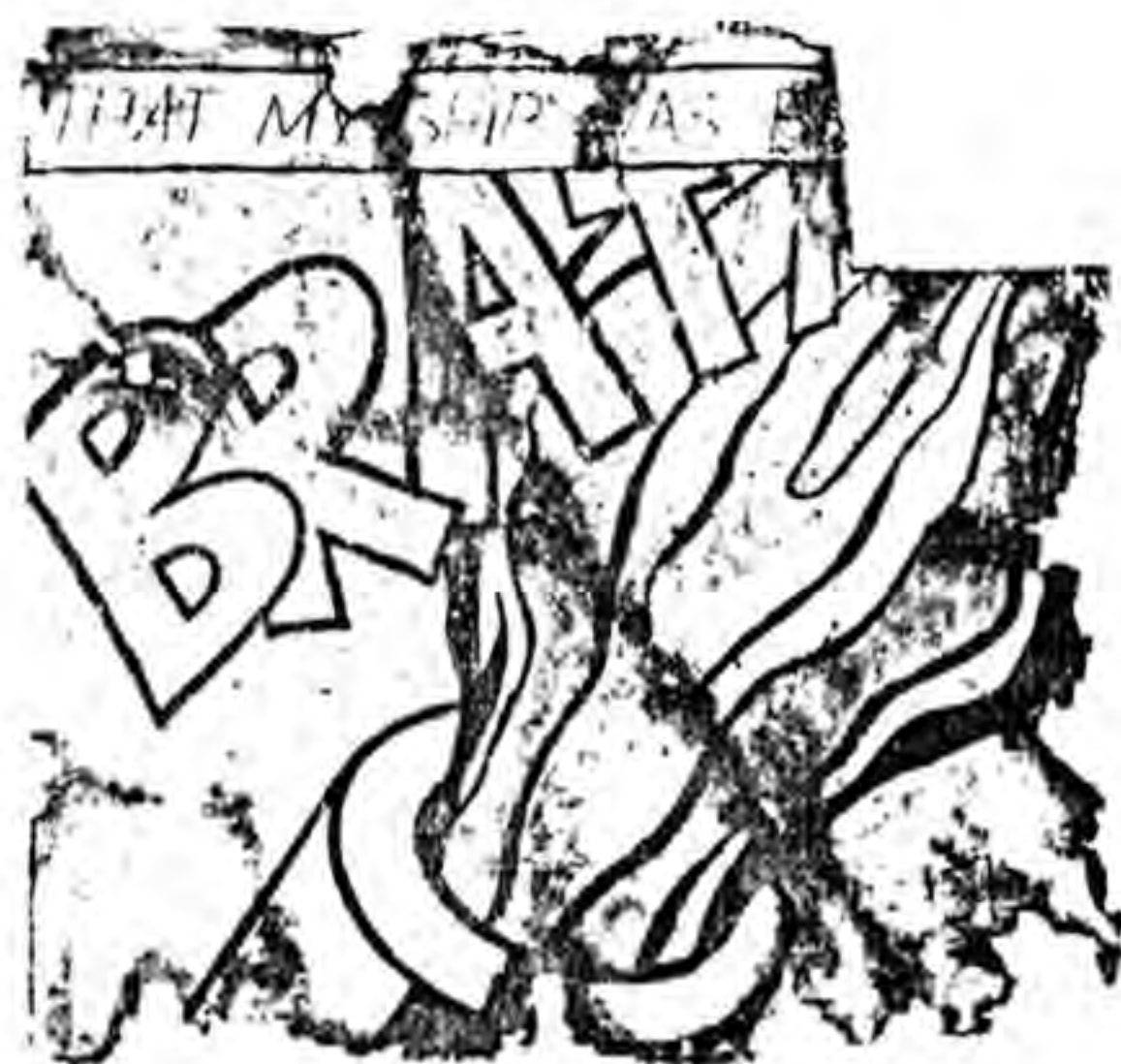
VITALY KOMAR/ ALEXANDER MELAMID

The joint works of the Russian artists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid are not part of official Soviet art; in fact, the works were smuggled into this country so that they could be placed on exhibition here. Although they live and work in Moscow, Komar and Melamid have been expelled from the official artists' union because they have supposedly distorted Soviet reality. Yet what is on view displays the artists' humor and concepts with such freshness that surely the American art public must respond positively to these works.

The artists have taken American Pop art, Warhol's soup cans, Lichtenstein's comic strips, Indiana's stenciled words, and made copies of these paintings. Then they have taken a blowtorch to the copies and pasted the charred fragments on canvas, all with the idea that these Pop paintings need only some aging process to provide them with a proper historical place among the classics of art. They have also tried to add this historical sense to such American structures as the Guggenheim Museum and the Saarinen TWA building at Kennedy Airport by painting these buildings as if they were already Roman ruins. Moreover, they have invented a realist artist, N. Buchumov, who they imagined had lost his eye in combat with a Constructivist, and they have produced a number of works by him. They have painted a whole series of

landscapes by Buchumov, one for each season over a span of sixteen years, in which Buchumov's nose appears at the left of each canvas. They posited that if a realist painter with one eye executed a landscape, his remaining eye would trap the tip of his nose in his field of vision. The sixteen years covered by these landscapes include the years in Russian history which correspond to civil war, collectivism, and the purges, yet Buchumov goes on painting the same landscape with only minor changes.

Other paintings such as *Don't Babble* and the humorous double self-portraits painted in mosaic-style and in a medallion format like a commemorative medal satirize Soviet posters and official art. A white wood circle, square, and triangle are offered for sale because the artists feel that every home and every family should own these eternal ideas. In *Color is a Mighty Power*, painted squares which promise to cure such ailments as laziness and impotence are also offered; one need only stare at a particular plaque for a certain length of time to achieve the cure. And there is a *Biography* dealing with the life of a young Russian and 197 miniature paintings on wood that include take-offs on art history and art styles. We look forward to succeeding exhibitions by Komar and Melamid. (Ronald Feldman, February 7-March 20)



Komar and Melamid, Post Art no. 2
(Lichtenstein), 1973. Oil on canvas, 42 x 42".
Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts.