

## ART REVIEW

## Nyet to Passé Soviet Realism, Yes to Lenin as Mickey Mouse

By GRACE GLUECK

By now it is a rather familiar exhibition theme, art from the last days and death throes of the Soviet Union. The better-known names of the players today come readily — if not altogether fluently — to the tongue: Ilya Kabakov, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, Grisha Bruskin, Leonid Sokov, Alexander Kosolapov, Eric Bulatov, Rimma and Valery Gerlovins.

So it is no surprise to find them in the latest version of the post-Soviet art show, this time called "Remembrance: Russian Post-Modern Nostalgia" at the Yeshiva University Museum. Covering a wide range of anti-Soviet approaches from the 1960's on, the show includes some of the same works that appeared in "Forbidden Art of Postwar Russia" at the Bruce Museum of Arts and Science in Greenwich, Conn., in 2001.

That show came from the collection of the Russian émigré Yuri Traisman; he also lent heavily to this one, which was mounted by Yeshiva with Alexandre Gertsman, president and founder of the nonprofit International Foundation of Russian and Eastern European Art (Int-Art). The works, by 24 artists who grew up in the Soviet Union but now live mostly elsewhere, have also been borrowed from museums, galleries and other private collectors. Though it claims to be comprehensive, it leaves a lot out.

Mr. Gertsman's use of the word nostalgia in connection with this complex, conceptually based art is that yes, it celebrates the death of the old state-ordered Socialist Realism, but that while deploring or satirizing the past it also looks back with longing to the Russia that was, and to the failed ideals of its Communist revolution. Having broken from the old regime, he argues, the artists still work under the spell of the psychological pressure created by the official Soviet apparatus.

"Deep in their souls, Russian artists love and revere the old culture," he writes in the show's catalog. "While fiercely denying past culture — a denial of the so-called 'democratic' but all-too-suppressive regime — they carry the traditional Russian secret respect for a strong

"Remembrance: Russian Post-Modern Nostalgia" remains at the Yeshiva University Museum, 15 West 16th Street, Manhattan, (212) 294-8330, through Feb. 1.



Leonid Sokov's "Stalin and Marilyn (Two Profiles)," from 1989.

state; a habit of dealing with the absence of the freedom to choose and thus of using allegorical language."

One of the show's most interesting displays is the work of the Gerlovins, a husband and wife noted in Russia for their absurdist performance works as well as for their objects. Here they deal in arcane symbols that evoke myth and religion. In their startling, life-size photograph of Ms. Gerlovina, "Tree of Life" (1989), she appears in goddesslike guise, her body concealed by a long fall of tightly waved hair, her face and chest marked in black with mystical writing. "Eve" (1993-95) presents her with hair and body extended by drawing on the photo, sporting an apple on her head. The work, with its virginal imagery, seems to hark back to the symbolism of Russian icons while sending them up.

Intriguing, too, are the realistic photographs of Vladimir Clavijo-Telepnev, whose four large-scale prints from a series called "Suffering"

(1999-2002) show the faces of two men and two anguished women. The features of the men are horrifically distorted, as if by physical torture; the women seem more affected by mental stress. But the photographs also have an ultratheatricality about them, as if prompted by the Method-acting theories of the early 20th-century Russian actor-director Constantin Stanislavsky.

No post-Soviet show would be complete without the work of Komar and Melamid, among the founders in the 1970's of Sots Art, which alluded to traditional Russian art and parodied Socialist Realism, slyly breaking through the barrier of official censorship. (The word Sots comes from the abbreviation of the Russian word for socialism.) But with "The Toast," from the "Anarchistic Synthesis" series of 1985, part of a triptych in which drinking seems to be the theme, they are hardly represented at their best.

Nor is Mr. Kabakov, another cele-

brated unofficial Soviet artist known for his ironic installations lampooning the indignity of Soviet domestic and other social rituals. But alas, maybe because of space limitations, we are offered here a mere wisp of Mr. Kabakov, including "The Test of Destiny," a small model of what appears to be a placid collective farm-escape with a chubby angel hovering over it and a group of four drawings in which an all-but-empty rectangle is gradually invaded by feathered wings.

Better represented is the work of the enormously clever Mr. Bruskin, whose small-scale sculptures and paintings derive from Jewish and Russian sources, real and folkloric. Inspired by the cabala, a medieval Jewish mystical interpretation of the Scriptures, he has integrated figures of demons, angels, high priests and such with arcane text. Also shown here are some of his well-known porcelain figures representing Soviet citizens in catatonically dutiful poses, like a field marshal holding a missile.

Inevitably, much of the work, while influenced by life in the Soviet Union, has been affected by European, American and Russian art movements. Mr. Bulatov's "Go, Stop, Go" (1973) and his "Perestroika" (1979) derive their spacey, geometric order from Russian Constructivism while appropriating the language of the Soviet poster (itself of Constructivist derivation).

And Natalya Nesterova, in her "Dream on the Shore (Reading Buber)" (1999), depicts two men asleep on a beach, one with a book in his lap, as an airplane (or large dragonfly) hovers over the sea. This painting looks back to Surrealism.

On the other hand, there is a witty observation of just how far official Soviet art opposes European Modernism in the now-familiar "Meeting of Two Sculptures" (1990) by Mr. Sokov, who poses a brooding bronze statuette of Lenin against one of Giacometti's skinny striding figures. America meets Soviet Realism, too, in Mr. Kosolapov's "Mickey-Lenin" (2002), another small bronze statue of Lenin with the head of Mickey Mouse, and in his superimposition of Lenin's head on McDonald's golden arches, with the legend "McLenin's, Next Block."

Yet in its inclusion of those whose work lacks the sharpness and bite of the best post-Soviet artists, the show's impact is weakened. Comprehensive, in this case, comes out diffuse.