From Russia, With Paint and Politics

By WILLIAM ZIMMER

Forbidden Art: The "Postwar Russian Avant-Garde" at the Bruce Museum may have a lurid title, but the art itself is frequently boisterous, playful and sweet. It is also frequently less than compelling.

However, it compensates for with historical, political and cultural context.

In avant-garde, the art can flourish when it's an official art to react against. In the Soviet Union, this was often interpreted as apocalyptic art and automatically called avant-garde regardless of its formal qualities. The artists realized that there was a whole world of modern art out there, and they incorporated it into their idioms in a variety of ways.

Those who made work that was called "other" or "alternative" art were not tortured or expelled, nor, as far as a viewer can tell, did the authorities expend much effort in denouncing them. In fact, some artists had day jobs as illustrators in the official style. But even in open societies, it is difficult for artists to make art only for themselves or for a circle of kindred spirits. If your art has no possibility of earning you any money — and you have that universal itch that artists have to make art — there's nothing to do but to have as good a time as possible.

The 70 pieces in this show are all from a private collection assembled by Yuri Treisman, a Russian émigré who had spent 50 years gathering art, which is the number of Russian artists who had more knowledge than they could contain.

Certain sophistication marks the contributions of Grisha Bruskin, whose work often concerns, as well information says, the incompatibility of the various elements of Russian life. His "Birth of the Hero," from 1987, is displayed at the entrance to the exhibition. The piece is 15 bronze figures, painted white so they look like plastic, certainly an incongruity. Mr. Bruskin's steel cutout "Jacob and an Angel" moves the characters in a kind of tango. This piece seems out of the folk art tradition but it is modern in its laconicism. This is true as far back as 1970, the early days in terms of the show, in the seemingly naive but terse lines "Cat with a Bird" by Vladimir Yakovlev. It's hard not to see a political message here.

Mr. Bruskin lives in New York now, and other New York-based émigrés have become major players in the New York art world. Vasily Koman and Alexander Melamed are almost household words because of their broad satirical critiques. When they were underground their target was Soviet society, but they find much to lampoon in their adopted American culture. In this show they are represented by an imperceptible diptych painting from the mid-1960s.

Installation art is perhaps the hottest genre right now and one of its most respected practitioners is Ilya Kabakov. Here his contribution is modest line drawings, in a set of four drawings called "Window," angelic wings appear tentatively in the first panel, and by the fourth they practically crowd the center. It is significant that Mr. Kabakov is dealing with angels, which are plentiful in the show. The urge to summon them up might have been a need to bypass the Soviet era and to go back to a more spiritually inspired Russia.

The religiosity in the show isn't solemn. Exemplary is Leonid Purygin's cartoonish icon with the weighty title "Lion's Self-Immolation With Love for a Girl He Never Knew and Waited For." If the work visually looks like illustrations for the Book of Revelation, it's a good bet the allegory is a personal one.

"Forbidden Art" is at the Bruce Museum in Greenwich through June 29. Information: (203) 869-0777.

"Jacob and an Angel," left, a work in steel by Grisha Bruskin, and above, "Dollar" by Leonid Lamn.

Above, "Lion's Self-Immolation With Love for a Girl He Never Knew and Waited For" by Leonid Purygin and "Cat With a Bird" by Vladimir Yakovlev.