



## No Absolutes

### New exhibit explores cultural identity and perspective in contemporary Russian and American art

by Dave Rootes | October 18, 2001

When *The View from Here* opened at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow ten months ago, it marked the first time a collaborative exhibition of American and Russian contemporary artists' work had been held at a major Russian museum in almost a decade. Now, after a couple of other stops in the United States, the show will spend the next two months at the Gallery of Contemporary Art at UCCS.

That's fortunate because much of the art in this show is difficult to assimilate on the first viewing. Sure, there's plenty to enjoy without giving the artwork too much thought, but many of the pieces have a depth that deserves additional exploration. "A lot can be read into most of this," said gallery director Gerry Riggs. "There is a lot on the surface, but when you find out about the artists, you get even more." Learning about the artists is made easier by a 112-page exhibition catalogue as well as biographical information that's posted next to the work.

The principal link between the artists in the exhibition is that all are concerned with social commentary through personal narrative. The Russians often take advantage of their opportunity to address topics that were taboo in the years prior to Perestroika, while breaking away from the regimen of social realism. The Americans, meanwhile, comment on the ongoing problems of our stratified capitalist society largely through the debunking of stereotypes. The majority of U.S. contributors are minority artists, although, according to Riggs, "even the Anglo artists in this group embrace distinctly multicultural viewpoints."

A subsidiary link between the work in the show lies in the fact that 85 percent of the works are presented through the screen printing medium and all of the artists are associated through the studios of the Hand Print Workshop International based in Alexandria, Virginia and Moscow, Russia.

Among the Americans, photographers William Christenberry and Robert Heinecken are perhaps the best known. Christenberry, born in Tuscaloosa, Ala., returns each year to document the decay and evolution of Southern society. His photograph, titled "New Grave, Havana, Alabama," provides a psychologically charged narrative about Southern culture. Additional print work, including "Dream Building," provides an equally compelling tableau, grouping examples of religious and commercial signs into a telling statement about provincial Southern thought.

Heinecken, on the other hand, uses the juxtaposition of images to expose the ways in which the persuasive power of the photography molds our national self-image. His piece "Life in Time of War 1" portrays a fashion model in a camouflage swimsuit contrasted with an exhausted marine in the Gulf War conflict. The diametric opposition of their situations in contrast to the similarities in their apparel helps describe the ambivalent roles violence and commercialization play in today's society.

African American artist Renee Stout uses techniques similar to Christenberry to comment on the intersection of materialism and spirituality in contemporary life. In her screen print "Burn for Love," the artist combines occult and commercial symbolism into a shrine-like reliquary of social criticism.

Chinese American Hung Liu contributes a dramatic color spitbite, aquatint and etching titled "Mu Nu, Yellow River" that exemplifies several of her recurrent themes. Struggling with the ambiguities of her Asian immigrant personal history, Liu alters the ideas behind Chinese government photographs and postcards, humanizing anonymous subjects into a statement about the incongruities between romantic Western perceptions and the austere realities of Chinese life.

Few of the names of Russian artists will ring a bell with local viewers for obvious reasons. Nonetheless, a number of those represented are among the best from the former Soviet Union.

Ukrainian artist Pavel Makov is represented by five expressive works ranging from a joint book project with American poet Beth Joselow to screen prints incorporating contrast and symbolism into rich lyrical abstractions. Both "Nightingale" and "Small Target II" combine stencil-like elements with more precise imagery to forge a dimensional and layered commentary on the concept of place and its relationship to our chaotic world.

Leonid Tishkov is a multifaceted artist and poet whose medical background has heavily influenced his work. His cartoon-like "dabloid" figures, part stomach and part foot, inhabit several of his artist books including one on display here. Another of Tishkov's books, "The Crystal Stomach of the Angel," gives a disturbing visual component to his own poetry. It is clear that, for Tishkov, the stomach is symbolic of man's biological self as well as a medium for addressing his own psychological makeup.

While each of the artists in the show deserves commentary, it's probably best to let the viewer formulate his or her own interpretations, allowing interplay between the artist's ideas and the viewer's own emotional inventory. Plan to make an extended visit -- or multiple visits -- to absorb the depth of the work in this show.

### **capsule**

*The View from Here: Issues of Cultural Identity and Perspective in Contemporary Russian and American Art*

Gallery of Contemporary Art at UCCS, 1420 Austin Bluffs Parkway, 262-3567

On exhibit through Dec. 14.