

# City Paper

VOL. 18, NO. 42 OCTOBER 23-29, 1998

## Prints of Russia



ART

Screenprinter Yuri Avvakumov, not 24 hours off the plane from Moscow, smooths his fine silver hair into a ponytail as he studies the black-and-white test print unfurled before him at Alexandria's Hand Print Workshop. Like

a photographer in the darkroom, he aims for the right ultraviolet exposure for the screen's photo-emulsion. At the print's densest end, the text from the cover of *Pravda*—dated Aug. 19, 1991—melts into illegible chunks of ink. As the tone lightens incrementally, the headline resolves to read, in Cyrillic: "Coup D'Etat."

Avvakumov's wife, Alyona Kirtsova, emerges from an adjacent room grasping loose keys in one hand, paper and pencil in the other. Her red hair springs wildly from her scalp and her broad face is flushed as an apple, but her pace is measured and assured. Like her husband, she's beginning work on her three-week screen-printing project at Hand Print.

Today, the 44-year-old Kirtsova will rub graphite tracings of her collection of old keys, using a technique called frottage. The artist says she's compelled to transpose her host of memories—including those of old apartments whose doors these keys once opened—onto her prints. New recollections, she explains, constantly crowd her mind: "I suffer from memory."

Her husband's work is more cerebral. Trained as an architect, 41-year-old Avvakumov loves fantastical, unbuilt schemes. He's created a series of computer-generated images of unrealized Russian utopian architecture from the '20s and '30s, which he'll superimpose onto his *Pravda* images. The schemes, many reduced to skeletons, explore Avvakumov's notions of truth in construction.

The couple met Dennis O'Neil, their host and the founder of Hand Print Workshop, at the experimental Moscow Studio project O'Neil started with Russian printmaker Boris Belsky in 1991. The Studio taught American screen-printing techniques to artists from former Soviet republics and Europe, using nontoxic materials previously unavailable in Russia. Last year, O'Neil, tired of dividing his time between Moscow and his teaching position at the Corcoran School of Art, handed the Moscow Studio over to its Russian head. He then opened his own studio (next to his two-story clapboard home) to collaborative American and Russian printmaking ventures—he's hosted seven artists so far—to re-create the cooperative flavor of the Moscow Studio.

Before his guest artists leave, O'Neil asks that they sign an unusual guest book in the bathroom adjacent to the studio: He invites them to grace the lavatory wall with a signature print. Igor Makarevich added a Pinocchio-like figure crouching over the faucet; Y. David Chung outlined a flying man rising into the distance beyond the mirror. At the rate at which high-caliber artists come and go, O'Neil will soon be charging admission for his commode.

—Jessica Dawson