

## ArtScene

# Forbidden art out for all to see



Georgette Gouveia

Some day when we look back on the collapse of communism in the old Soviet Union — and as far as I'm concerned, there's really no rush to do so — we will be forced to conclude that communism collapsed not so much through the efforts of President Ronald Reagan and Pope John Paul II or the visionary leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev but because it was ugly and boring.

Surely, you need look no further for proof of this than Soviet culture, which was hilariously spoofed in an American TV commercial, in which a lumpy Soviet fashion model trots down a runway again and again in the same frumpy housecoat and babushka as the fashion-show hostess intones "swimwear," "day wear," "evening wear." (Actually, the "evening wear" was accessorized with a flashlight.)

You might be reminded of that commercial as you tour "Forbidden Art of Postwar Russia," at the Bruce Museum of Arts and Science in Greenwich through July 29. The exhibit features more than 70 paintings, drawings, sculptures, photographs and multimedia works by Soviet underground artists, who challenged the official (that is, only) aesthetic philosophy of their nation in the period from 1953 through 1988.

These works are sometimes engaging and thought-provoking. But you may conclude by journey's end that the protest art is no more exciting than the art it was protesting against.

Once again, the Bruce does a lucid job of charting the historical trajectory of a culture. We learn about Social Realism, the official style of Soviet art set forth in the 1930s to sing the praises of the communist way of life. No minor chords needed apply.

Needless to say, the restrictions of Social Realism led to a variety of protest movements, including the Reform School of the 1960s, which was loyal to Social Realism but wanted a more honest expression of it; the simultaneous Radical School, which rejected Social Realism in favor of bold color and abstraction; and sots-art (an abbreviation for "socialist") in the 1970s and '80s, which



Aleksandr Kosolapov's "McLenin" is included in the Bruce Museum's exhibit "Forbidden Art of Postwar Russia."

used American Pop Art even as it satirized it.

The clear-cut history lesson aside, the exhibit contains many works that are garish, heavy-handed, mechanistic — in short, unattractive and, worse still, tedious. Granted, the artists who made them did so under the most difficult of circumstances. But the sad irony is that having come of age under an oppressive regime, these artists seemed to have internalized repression. They didn't need a dictator. They limited themselves.

There are, of course, exceptions. Vagrich Bakhchanyan's "La Gioconda" (1982) — a mixed-media work that reinterprets Leonardo da Vinci's iconic "Mona Lisa" as a puzzle, with the artist's name on each of the pieces — raises provocative questions about gender identity and the appropriation of one artist's work by another, a hot trend in contemporary art.

Aleksandr Kosolapov's "McLenin" (1991) is a fun Pop Art oil painting that blurs the lines between capitalism (McDonald's golden arches) and communism (a profile image of Vladimir Lenin, father of the Russian Revolution).

At the end of the exhibit you'll find Timur Novikov's "Empress" (1995), a homage to the Empress Alexandra, who was assassinated along with her husband, Czar Nicholas II, and their five children in 1918 after the Russian Revolution. Here a photo of the empress is lovingly encased in a beaded frame set on a blue velvet cloth.

Surely, neither this artist nor anyone else is advocating a return to czarist autocracy. But you can't help

looking at this photo of the stunning Alexandra and thinking that it provides some of the very little beauty in this show.

Unfortunately, for these artists and for viewers of this exhibit, you really can't go home again.

While you're at the Bruce Museum, check out "Golden Dragon, Flaming Pearl: Symbolism in Chinese Robes of the Qing Dynasty" (through July 8), featuring Chinese robes from the 18th and 19th centuries. Even more striking are the fantastic dragon accessories and the horrifyingly tiny (no more than a few inches long) shoes worn by women with bound feet.

From Saturday through Aug. 19, the Bruce will be offering "Seasons of Life: American Impressionism and Frank Vincent DuMond," with figure drawings and charming landscapes by the painter (1865-1951).

Hours are 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays and 1-5 p.m. Sundays. Admission is \$4; \$3 for senior citizens and students. Admission is free for children age 5 and under at all times and for all on Tuesdays. The Museum is at 1 Museum Drive (off Steamboat Road). 203-869-0376 or [www.brucemuseum.org](http://www.brucemuseum.org).

**Another opening:** More than 20 artists will exhibit their work from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday in the New Rochelle BID's annual spring art show, which takes place on the city's new library green. 914-576-5332.

The Germaine Keller Gallery's maiden show is a group one that features handmade jewelry (Saturday through July 1, in Garrison). 845-424-3575.

Through June 24, the Chappaqua Library is presenting a group show called "Expressive Portraits." 914-743-1292.

New paintings by Rob de Oude are at the Landmark at Eastview in Tarrytown through June 27. 203-637-5562.

Ceramic vessels by Harriet Ross are at the Flat Iron Gallery in Peekskill through June 29. 914-734-1894.

New paintings by Julie Gross, Heather Hobler-Keene and Madeline Silber are at Kenise Barnes Fine Art in Larchmont through June 30. 914-834-8077.

**Kudos:** To Chicago painter Frank Trankina, winner of the first Alexander Rutsch award, which was named for the late painter and Pelham Arts Center supporter. The award carries a \$5,000 prize. You can see Trankina's work at the center through June 23. 914-738-2525.

**City lights:** The 23rd annual Museum Mile Festival, celebrating nine Manhattan cultural institutions from 82nd Street to 104th Street, will be held from 6 to 9 p.m. Tuesday. Think of it as a giant cultural block party. 212-606-2296.

Georgette Gouveia covers the arts for The Journal News.