

ART

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 buoyant, playful and sweet. It's also frequently less than compelling. However, it compensates for this with historical, political and cultural content.

In an avant-garde can flourish when there's an official art to react against. In the Soviet Union this condition existed in the extreme. The only art that was recognized was highly realistic and glorified the communist system and its leaders. Anything that departed from this was simply not considered art and was automatically called avant-garde regardless of its formal qualities. A sizable number of Russian artists realized that there was a whole wide world of modern art out there, and they incorporated it into their idioms in a variety of ways.

Those who made work that is called "other" or "alternative" art were not tortured or exiled, nor, as far as a viewer can tell, did the authorities expend that 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 Traisman, a Russian émigré who has spent 30 years gathering unofficial and émigré art. A lot of the work in the show is by artists who left Russia after the fall of communism and is a mostly a continuation — and an expansion — of what they made underground.

While much work shows the influence of major European figures such as Picasso and Matisse who were collected in Russia before the Revolution, it also incorporates traditional Russian art, especially the insistent frontality and religious imagery of icons. Much of it is done in an unpolished or primitive way that alludes to folk art, and these artists might be thought of as counterparts to the outsider artists in this country,



whose work consistently looks simple and unsophisticated. But while outsider artists are regarded as ignorant of the nuances of art making and art history, the Russians had more knowledge than they could contain.

Certainly sophistication marks the contributions of Grisha Bruskin whose work often concerns, as wall 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" shows 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 "Cat with a Bird" by Vladimir Yakovlev. It's hard not to see a political message here.

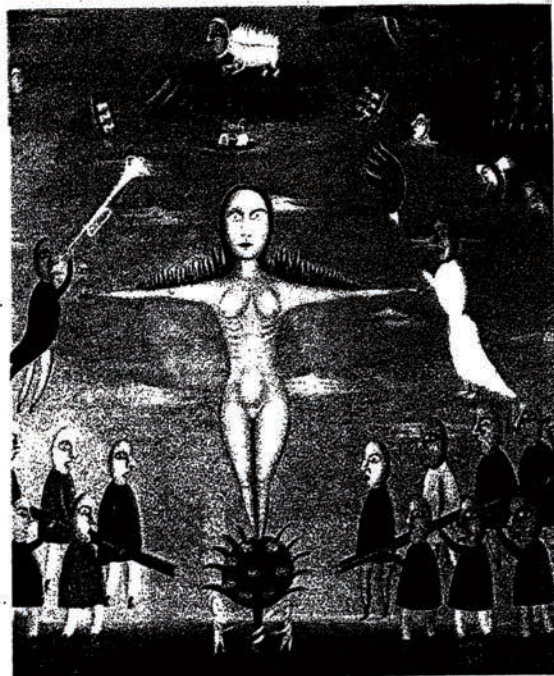
Mr. Bruskin lives in New York now, and other New York-based émigrés have become major players in the New York art world. Vasily Komar and Alexander Melamid are almost household words because of their broad satirical critiques. When they were underground their target was Soviet society, but they find much to lampoon in their adopted American culture. In this show they are represented by an impenetrable diptych painting from the mid-1980's.



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



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," angel 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



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.

The sculpture here is on the small side. The underground artists were anti-monumental in principle, while in practical terms the work had to be easily moveable. "Meeting of the Sculptures" by Leonid Sokov has Lenin looking skeptically at a facsimile of a thin Giacometti man who strides toward him wearing an odd grin. For the Soviet establishment, extra-official art might have just as well come from outer space.

Often the satire in the show is obvious, but it can also be artful. Leonid Lamm ingeniously marries the dollar sign to the hammer and sickle, but Alexandr Kosolopov is thuddingly clichéd in McLenin in which the dictator's head is between two golden arches. An arrow-shaped sign underneath says "next block." In 1991, when the work was made, did the artist see capitalism right around the corner?

"Forbidden Art" is at the Bruce Museum in Greenwich through June 29. Information: (203) 869-0376.

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.