

Imprints of freedom

Russian and American artists meld social and political issues in exhibit at MAG

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A nation's history leaves an indelible print on its artists — as a new exhibit at the Memorial Art Gallery eloquently attests.

"The View From Here" showcases 70 screenprints by 22 contemporary Russian and American artists. It's a streamlined version of a much-publicized show that debuted five years ago in Moscow. Many of these pioneering prints were just acquired by the Library of Congress.

Predictably, much of this post-Cold War work explores newfound artistic and political freedom. Some artists use that freedom to search their nations' tortured past. Others take a fresh look at their own lives, which often seem suspended between old and new social values.

These artists also share an unexpected feature.

"None of them were known for being print-makers," says Marlene Hamann-Whitmore, curator of education. "They came from other mediums — architecture, sculpture, conceptual art."

What lured them to screenprints? This is a flexible medium that embraces a heady variety of styles. (It's basically a stencil technique in which ink is pushed through a screen to create an image.)

The prints offer intricate textures, comic book action, traditional portraiture and political satire. Because multiple copies are made, they can transmit an artist's ideas to many viewers at relatively low cost.

Both in Russia and America, these messages can be stark and uncompromising. Russian artist Igor Makarevich creates a set of mock tarot cards showing the secret pre-1941 pact between Hitler and Stalin. Makarevich wasn't particularly fond of either leader, so his cards bear images of dismemberment, hanging and spooky fornication.

Jaune Quick-To-See Smith, a Native American, denounces the uprooting of her people with a sardonic design. A huge train bears down on a group of braves on horseback. Nearby is a punning slogan: "Get your reservations now."



The title of Russian artist Alexander Dijkstra's *Soldiers Are Always Blending In With Nature* packs a similar nasty punch. Three camouflaged soldiers seem to be leaning into a field of flowers. On second glance, we realize that one rifleman is dying and "blending" into the earth.

More optimistic imagery is found in Hung Liu's *Martyr*. Liu is a Chinese-born American who was forced to undergo four years of hard labor and "re-education" during China's Cultural Revolution. His lithograph portrays a deeply weathered face flanked by perky dragons and butterflies, traditional symbols of Chinese culture.

If you're looking for sheer panache, head for Pavel Makov's *Small Target II*, a virtuoso study in textures. The ruins of a city are surrounded by giant flowers and realistic patches of peeling paint.

"It's like layers of memory you can erase," says Hamann-Whitmore.

With its emphasis on social issues, "The View From Here" is well suited to a university town such as Rochester. But the museum's longtime



Chinese-born Hung Liu's *Martyr*, far left, and Russian artist Alexander Dijkstra's *Soldiers Are Always Blending In With Nature* are two of the prints in the exhibit, which runs until June 26.

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visitors might ask whether recent exhibits are becoming too narrow in their appeal. "The Paper Sculpture Show," "The View From Here" and an upcoming show of art made with unorthodox materials are all resolutely off the beaten track.

Curator of exhibitions Marie Via says that the gallery's priorities haven't changed. It tries to offer a lively balance of exhibits, importing a blockbuster such as the Parrish or Degas shows every three years (previously every two years). A major exhibit for 2006 will be announced this fall.

"We can't continue to show the same 20 artists again and again," says Via. "We want to cover some new ground."

WTRF.com and Chronicle.com

If you go

What: "The View From Here," an exhibit of 70 Russian and American screenprints. The 22 artists are affiliated with the nonprofit Hand Print Workshop International.

Where: Memorial Art Gallery, 500 University Ave.

When: Through June 26.

Admission: \$7 (\$5 for students and seniors, \$2 children ages 6-18).

Special events: Russian-born artist Viktor Komar will speak about his work at 7 p.m. May 19. Entry costs \$5, including gallery admission.

Call: (585) 413-7720.