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## Back to the Classics

The Russian artists of "Perestroika" turn the past into something new.

By **Kelly Klaasmeyer** Wednesday, Apr 18 2012

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I first met Olga Tobreluts in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1996 when I interviewed her for the *St. Petersburg Times*. Sixteen years later, I ran into her in Houston. Tobreluts is one of 142 artists who hail from Russia, Belarus and Ukraine included in the epic, ambitious, Russian-themed exhibitions of the "FotoFest 2012 Biennial." Three exhibitions at four venues feature Russian photography from the late 1940s until the present day — from the USSR and Stalin to Russia and Putin. The exhibitions were curated by Evgeny Berezner, head of the "In Support of Photography in Russia" Project of The Iris Foundation, Moscow; Natalia Tarasova, a writer and cultural affairs consultant for the same project; and Irina Chmyreva, Senior Researcher at the Russian Academy of Fine Arts.

FotoFest has always taken a wonderfully global approach to the world of photography, bringing a geographically diverse range of work to Houston viewers as well as to FotoFest's international attendees. Houston doesn't have a huge Russian community. Most of us will probably need some cultural orientation and catch-up to view this work in its larger cultural context, and that's tough when you talk about a country as historically, politically and socially complex as Russia.

Sixteen years ago, I visited Tobreluts in her sprawling prerevolutionary apartment, an amazing 1910 Egyptian revival (!?) structure with 15-foot-high sculptures of pharaohs flanking its door. Like a lot of elegant old Russian apartments that had previously housed the bourgeoisie, under the Soviet Union it was turned into a *kommunalka*, an apartment housing multiple families, one in each room, its glory decidedly faded. In the chaos after the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union, spaces like this came available and were colonized by artists working with an openness not previously available.

Tobreluts was a member of Neo-Academism, a St. Petersburg movement born in 1991 with the fall of communism and led by the artist Timur Novikov. Neo-Academism looked to classical sources for artistic inspiration, and St. Petersburg, a city of museums and neoclassical architecture, provided plenty. It wasn't about postmodern irony, although irony — and humor — are very much present; instead, it was a way to reach back and reinvigorate history in a time of dramatic cultural change — change taking place against the crumbling grandeur of the city of St. Petersburg.

If you look at early 20th-century photos of the artists of the Russian avant-garde, you might see them dressed in constructivist costumes or showing off designs for the uniforms of the modern factory worker. They were looking to the future and breaking from the old, decadent and corrupt Czarist excess. (Stalin, however, saw to it that their idealism was short-lived.) Meanwhile, when you look at photos of the artists of Neo-Academism, you see them goofing around and dressed up like 19th-century dandies or clad in flowing Greek robes. Embracing history and beauty seems a fitting rejection of the brutal functionality of the Soviet state.

When I spoke with her in 1996, Tobreluts was showing a digital video in which Hercules stands next to a tree of golden apples. The exhibition was at Pushkinskaya 10, an abandoned building in the center of St. Petersburg, just off famed Nevsky Prospect. It had been turned into an artist's squat around 1990 and was headquarters for Neo-Academism and the school they created, The New Academy of Fine Arts. That same video is currently on view at Spring Street Studios in "Perestroika: Liberalization and Experimentation — The mid/late 1980s-2010s," the FotoFest exhibition which covers work from the beginnings of Gorbachav's reforms, through the fall of the Soviet Union to today.

In the Greek myth, Hercules (Herakles) had to steal the golden apples of Hesperides for his 11th labor. For her campy-looking video, Tobreluts digitally collaged an image and ever so slightly animated it. She got Russian bodybuilder Alexander Vishnevski to play the mythological hero and strongman and pasted his image against a landscape pulled from a *Star Wars* storyboard. He stands on digitally drawn grass next to the tree of golden apples, and nothing really happens; the leaves jerkily blow in the "wind" as Hercules just stands there. Then suddenly an apple drops, and the virtually immobile Hercules briefly flexes his pecs. It's wittily anticlimactic; there is no display of strength, no dramatic action. Then and now, it carries with it political commentary — just because you have the might, you don't necessarily have to use it.

Tobreluts studied architecture and then took a computer graphics course in Berlin in 1989. Creating digital video in 1995, when the work was made, was an involved undertaking that required a lot of expensive hardware and software no matter where you were. In St. Petersburg, a city of 4 million people, circa 1995, there was one publicly available computer that could do the job, a massive Silicon Graphics machine, optimized for 3-D rendering. Tobreluts worked out a deal where she rented it at night, which also benefited the owners, as it protected the computer from theft and from technical issues. According to Tobreluts, if you turned it off, it might not come back on.

Just as technology is very different today than in 1995, so is Russia. Tobreluts no longer lives in that 4,300-square-foot apartment. (I think she used to rent it for like \$500 a month. That kind of thing isn't remotely possible anymore; real estate is astronomical in St. Petersburg, and last year CNN ranked Moscow as the fourth most expensive city in the world, while New York came in a paltry 32nd.) Tobreluts is still creating digital images, and changing Russia and evolving technology have made that much more possible. Today Tobreluts shows her work internationally. (She is also at Deborah Colton Gallery showing more of her art-historical and cultural keptomania, including a pair of digital photographs incorporating Greek statuary and casting Elvis and Madonna as Adam and Eve.)

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Tobreluts's witty video *Academism Manifesto* is also on view at Spring Street. In it, you see the members of the movement in 19th-century costume, with Novikov dressed as Pushkin. The live action is cut with computer-generated scenes comically showing a figure in a boat painted with the word "Neo-Academism" moving through scenes created by digitally collaging historic paintings. Silent film-style text panels appear offering up statements about beauty and the dawn of Neo-Academism.

Fellow Neo-Academist Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe offers up more video, a satirical remake of the classic Stalin-era film *Volga-Volga*. The 1938 musical comedy was made during Stalin's Great Purge, when he was executing around 1,000 people a day. It tells the tale of a plucky provincial postwoman traveling the *Volga River* to an amateur musical competition. It was Stalin's favorite movie, and he screened it over and over, watching it during his bouts of insomnia. The dictator was an ardent admirer of the film's star, Lyubov Orlova.

Mamyshev-Monroe is known for his portraits of himself in costume, often cross-dressed. His lush color photos from his 1996 series *Lives of the Remarkable Monroes* are on view, featuring the artist as Marilyn Monroe, Dracula and Peter the Great. For *Volga-Volga*, Mamyshev-Monroe made himself up to look like the film's heroine and digitally inserted his face over Orlova's, singing along with the hokey soundtrack. It's great even without the back story, but knowing that this "musical comedy" extravaganza was filmed during the horror of the purges makes Mamyshev-Monroe's alteration darkly absurd. The fact that a guy in drag has replaced Stalin's favorite actress adds yet another layer — Stalin recriminalized homosexuality in the Soviet Union after the Revolution had decriminalized it. (There is a whole other show to be curated around art and sexual identity in Russia — and given St. Petersburg's now-infamous new ban on "gay propaganda," it would be timely.)

Novikov has work on view as well: tapestry-like wall hangings from plush fabrics ornamented with gold cord, with vintage photographs placed in their centers. An untitled work from the *Lost Ideals from the Happy Childhood* series (2000) frames a black-and-white photo that looks about five-by-seven inches, in the middle of a deep, rich, reddish-purple velvet panel. The photo is of a white marble statue of a young boy playing a drum; it's the white of Greek statuary, but it looks to be Stalin-era. The boy is wearing the shorts and kerchief of the Young Pioneers, the Communist version of the *Boy Scouts*, who, in Stalin's day, would be asked, "Are you ready to fight for the cause of Lenin and Stalin?" and would reply "Always ready!" With very simple elements, Novikov has potently evoked a blend of disillusionment, loss and nostalgia. The works on view were created after Novikov lost his sight in 1997 from an unknown/unrevealed illness. The artist had amassed a huge collection of fabrics and photographs that he used by memory, instructing his family on their combinations and feeling out their placement.

Novikov died in 2002 at age 43, from the ongoing illness that had taken his sight. He was the founder of the *New Academy of Fine Arts* and Neo-Academism and is often compared to André Breton or Warhol. Pre- and post-Soviet era, he is considered one of nonconformist art's most influential figures. His loss was a great blow to his friends and fellow artists. I interviewed Novikov in 1996 around the same time I interviewed Tobreluts, and I wish to hell I could find the tape. Novikov had an incredible presence — he was sharply intelligent and media-savvy, which was still relatively rare in the mid-'90s. (Artists had been working underground for so long that the kind of promotion and press information that was the norm in most of the art world was slow to take hold — just finding a show could become an epic quest.)

In our short conversation, Novikov wasn't some messianic character advocating a retrograde agenda. He had developed Pirate Television in 1989 with Mamyshev-Monroe, Russia's "first independent television channel." He had been the artist for the rock group Kino. Warhol had come to meet him in 1992. Novikov was a creative, boundary-pushing figure, and Neo-Academism blended theory, aesthetics, humor and satire in a way that I couldn't and still can't pin down. It wasn't a rigid agenda, it wasn't satire and it wasn't the postmodernism of my grad school. It was intellectual and playful, sincere and insincere, something shaped by a unique cultural, political and historical climate.

Next week I'll cover more of the "Perestroika" show, as well as the other FotoFest exhibitions, "After Stalin, 'The Thaw,' The Re-emergence of the Personal Voice" and "The Young Generation."

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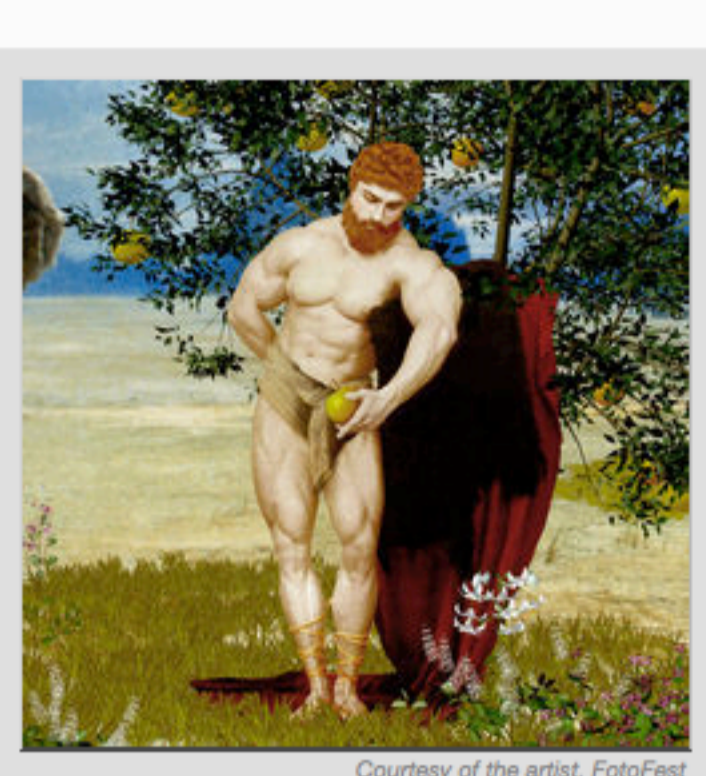
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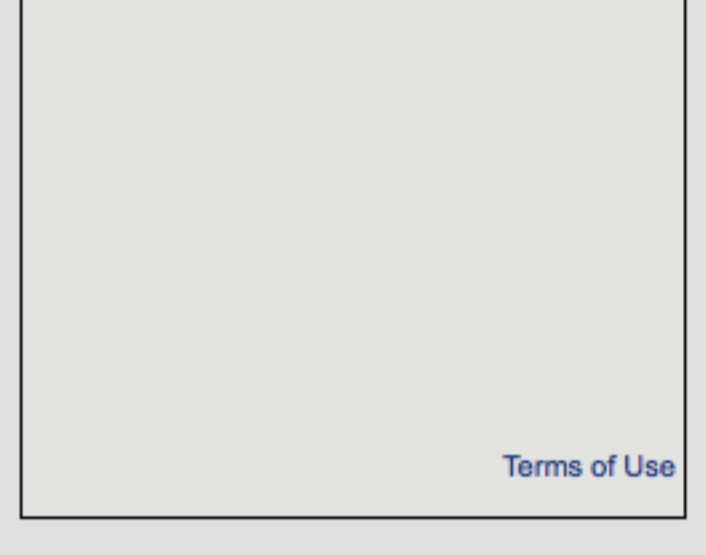
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