Back to the Classics

"Perestroika: Liberalization and Experimentation - The mid/late 1980s-2010s"
Through April 28, Spring Street Studios, 1824 Spring St. and at Winter Street Studios, 2101 Winter St, 713-223-5522.

BY KELLY KLAASMEYER

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

When I spoke with her in 1996, Tobreluts worked out a deal where she rented a studio there. She used to rent it for like $500 a month. That's because you have the night, 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 - 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. That same video is currently on view at Spring Street Studios in "Perestroika: Liberalization and Experimentation - The mid/late 1980s-2010s." The Russian artists of "Perestroika" turn the past into something new.

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The mid/late 1980s-2010s, the FotoFest exhibition which covers work from the beginnings of Gorbachev's reforms, through the fall of the Soviet Union to today.

In the Greek myth, Hercules (Herkules) 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 jerkly 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 some cultural, political and historical climate.

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 komzala, 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 a Russian bodybuilder plays Hercules in a video by Olga Tobreluts.