



Russian artist Alexander Kaletski stands in front of one of his works at the Dillon Gallery in New York. Kaletski's

show "Cardboard People" opens Sept. 26. The paintings are from, and inspired by, his earliest days in America.

AP PHOTO

Artist turns trash into profit

BY LAURA BARGE
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Twenty-one years ago, Alexander Kaletski left a successful career as an actor and checked into a welfare hotel.

The worlds he traded were more than mere miles apart. Not only did he abandon the stage, but he also left behind his mother, his sister and his country — Russia. And he came to New York with only his clothes, watercolors, a guitar, a candelabra and the most precious possession of all — freedom.

He took nothing for granted in those days, not even a cardboard box. Good thinking, as it turned out, because the boxes were a crucial stepping stone to his career as an artist.

His show, "Cardboard People," opens Sept. 26 at the Dillon Gallery in Manhattan's SoHo. "Cardboard People" are paintings from, and

"I would just start painting, without thinking, and things would just appear out of the cardboard. Suddenly there was form, the painting and the box melded somehow."

Alexander Kaletski
on his "Cardboard People" paintings

Suddenly there was form, the painting and the box melded somehow. ... To me these boxes were beautiful, to you they are maybe just garbage, but to me they were really beautiful."

Corrugation lends a special dimension to the pieces. The texture comes through the nearly opaque paint in neat, evenly spaced lines. They lend tidiness or regime, depending on the subject but are used effectively and do not distract.

Theatrical Institute and worked professionally in films and television in Russia. One of his last roles before leaving the Soviet Union was in a movie about gymnast Olga Korbut's life.

He decided to go into acting, he said, "to express himself without subjecting his art to government standardization." At the time, only officially designated artists were allowed to legally sell their work, which was forbidden to be abstract,

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inspired by, Kaletski's earliest days in the United States.

He was broke and spoke little English, so he began painting who and what he saw in his new country. The cardboard canvases were readily available in streets and alleys. They were free, and the quality, Kaletski says, was better than Russian drawing paper.

"Cardboard People" are a set of collages, less actual people than composites, they represent all walks of life — the disenfranchised and the rich. His subjects include a drag queen, school children, a biker, homeless men, a soldier and a gallery guide.

The cardboard drawings fetch anywhere from \$3,500 to \$6,000, well below the price of Kaletski's oils, which sell for as much as \$32,000.

While his oils display an exquisite and profound understanding of human emotions and nature's abstract beauty, the "Cardboard People" are primitive renderings, not childlike, but simply illustrated, sometimes crooked or out of proportion. Their expressions are masterfully executed and certainly clear. Though often comical, they are not ridiculous.

Kaletski uses scraps of fabric and other found objects to dress his subjects. Bright yellow juice boxes become a risqué dress in "Golden Delicious." The "Gucci Woman," is elegantly dressed in a shopping bag from the famous store, the bag's handle serves as dress straps. A tuxedoed gentleman poses elegantly against the backdrop of a champagne box.

The boxes often had text. Even if he didn't always understand the logos and words, he incorporated them into his collages, sometimes with poignant results. The Kleenex logo appears in a painting titled Civil War. Shipping labels become shirt pockets. The Dell computer company's logo is transformed into a jacket. A society lady in a fur coat is framed by four white rabbits and "Bunny Lettuce" in large, red letters.

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Similarly, the artist's hands move nonstop in graceful arcs to emphasize his words — a perfect match for his lively blue eyes and hearty laugh. A naturalized citizen of the United States, he speaks fluent English with a moderate Russian accent.

Kaletski has come a long way since the "Cardboard People." He now paints on canvas and linen, but his art is still about the human condition. His style is more sophisticated, and one is likely to hear the words Picasso and Klee when eavesdropping in the gallery.

"Dead Ancestors," Kaletski's 1995 show, dealt with heroes, social class and memory. They are posed and costumed like museum portraits but are not the photo realist masterpieces of art textbooks. They are colorful, exaggerated and wry.

His recent Chicago show, "Split Personality," illustrates the duality of human nature. These paintings show the emergence of his current style, modern and minimal. They have two faces, mirror images, facing in opposite directions. A body that can't agree on a point of view.

Kaletski calls his current phase, "line drawings." His figures, now expressed in sparse lines and curves, are active and social. In "Black or White," chalk lines drink and dance on a chaotic patchwork of gray, white and black. "Women in Love," is the outline of a kneeling woman imposed on a canvas of blue oils so rich, one can easily imagine swimming in it.

Gallery owner Valerie Dillon has watched his progression with a keen eye.

"He was one of the first artists that I invited to join the Dillon Gallery," she says. "The originality of his images and the concepts behind his work, place him on a level of his own."

She has presented two other solo shows of his work and believes the best work of his career is still ahead of him.

Kaletski's background in theater clearly comes through as he talks about his life.

He never formally studied art but attended the prestigious Schukin

surreal or critical of Soviet life.

Kaletski painted anyway and went "underground," where he found a thriving culture that provided him with an audience for his art, songs and eventually, material for a novel.

He was born in 1946 in the northern Soviet town of Monchegorsk. It was so far north, that half the year is day and half is night. He was born in April, at sunrise. At age 6, he won first prize in a national competition for his illustrations of Pushkin's fairy tales, but his life took many detours before returning to painting.

His father, an orphan raised by the state, became a deputy in the Soviet congress and president of a construction firm. He died when Kaletski was 13. Kaletski's maternal grandfather was a commissar in the Soviet army following the revolution and was the first communist ambassador to Germany. His mother taught German at various high schools and universities. He has one sister, now an engineer. Growing up they had nice apartments, cars and a summer house.

It was a lush life by Russian standards, and in some ways preferable to what lay ahead. But Kaletski, who once had been arrested for singing a song about a poet and who had begun to feel strangled by all the restrictions in the Soviet Union, decided to leave his country and seek artistic freedom in America.

He left the Soviet Union with the wave of Jewish emigration in 1975 by convincing authorities that his father had been Jewish.

He went first to Vienna for a week, then to Rome for a month, and finally New York where he initially lived in a welfare hotel, then a room in Queens and finally an East Side studio he still uses today.

Since Glasnost, he has been allowed to visit Russia several times, most recently for a personal victory. His novel, "Metro: A Novel of the Moscow Underground," was published by Viking in 1985. This year it will be published in Russia for the first time. Response has been enthusiastic, and Kaletski is thrilled his story, written in Russian, will finally reach his former countrymen.