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Belarus - Paradise Lost?

By Irina BIGDAI

Sometimes the world of art is cruel: artists become popular and audiences acknowledge them either after they join the majority or when they live in a foreign land. We can admit that Alexander Kaletski is rather lucky, since he has become famous worldwide in the prime of his life and at the peak of his powers, though abroad.

Minsk audiences are also lucky in this respect. From July 7 to 21, the Minsk Museum of Contemporary Art hosted the exhibition of Kaletski's works from New York.

Born in Tula in Russia and a graduate from Shchukin's art college, Kaletski moved to the USA in 1975 for political reasons. At that time his works were not put under Khrushchev's bulldozer at Krymskaya Quay, and as well as his songs were in harmony to the young Moscow avant-garde of the stagnation period. While still in the USSR, young Kaletski wrote an autobiographic novel "Metro," which was published in New York in 1985 and in Minsk in 1996.

"I arrived in the States and there I saw real democracy. One can draw what he likes - no one is interested in it and won't look at it," said Kaletski at the opening ceremony of his exhibition on June 6 in Minsk. In spite of unquestionable professional theater player's skills, few doubted the bitterness of these words was sincere. "As many Soviet emigrants, Kaletski, obviously, did not suit to the American dream right away," wrote Leonid Leontiev in the November 6, 1996, issue of the magazine "Novoe Russkoe Slovo". This atmosphere predetermined the unusual choice for the wild West art materials: cardboard from the streets, toothpaste, ketchup, mustard.

Time passed, but the wonderful country remained strange. Suddenly a piece of luck knocked at his door. In 1994 the New York Dillon Gallery heeded to Kaletski's works and his

hands of the management of the gallery. This is not a "lucky chance," it is rather a result of years of persistent work, the faith in his art, an admiration of creativity combined with the desire

Soviet artists entered this promising tomorrow only abroad.

Kaletski's exhibition in Minsk is not completely incidental. Alexander often comes to Minsk to visit his mother and sister Natasha. Last year Natasha introduced her brother to the director of the museum, Vasily Sharangovich, who immediately put Kaletski's exhibition on the museum's schedule. Among other guests at the opening ceremony was the wife and muse of the artist - a charming Afro-American model from Jamaica, and Deputy Minister of Culture Valery Gedroits.

Ten cardboard paintings were on display in Minsk. Kaletski's mixed technique stemmed from the Soviet era. He portrays only people and all his heroes have something affecting and pathetic. Maybe this very amicability, the absence of aggression, their humanity attract people and make them invest into Kaletski's creativity and pay big money for his paintings. Perhaps dadaist art is in vogue again, as was in 1916 when European and American artists placed all the trash on the walls of art galleries. Leonid Leontiev suggests a plausible explanation of consumer behavior: Kaletski's art will be in concordance with the interior of rich houses, and will cool off their business atmosphere. Americans are rather solvent and they want to escape from the incredible rhythm of life. The demand for "the mystery of Russian soul" hiked once again.

"My dream came true in 24 years," said the deeply moved artist. "I show what I like, and no one can prevent me from doing this." However, his last words puzzled everybody: "I will ask for political asylum in Belarus." This statement can be considered only as a joke - Belarus can hardly be compared with Paradise Lost.



Alexander Kaletski's collage "And the winner is..."

success became obvious. Numerous exhibitions, colorful catalogues, sales, fame, money: his talent fell into the professional

to survive and achieve his goal. Soviet citizens used to believe in the prosperous future. Life made its own corrections and many