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## Russian artist reads it in the 'papers'

BY TRACI KAMPEL

Artist Alexander Kaletski, a Russian immigrant who fled his homeland in 1975 after gaining notoriety as a theater actor and anti-communist folk singer, has supported himself at various times in his life by hand-painting silk for designers like Mary McFadden, illustrating books and even writing his own novel-- "Metro," about the underground culture of Moscow's Brezhnev days. Now though, he makes a living reading the paper. The wallpaper, that is.

With rough, often vague strokes and a wit that not-so-subtly pokes fun at American pop culture and current affairs, Kaletski paints portraits of characters who appear magically out of elaborate wallpaper patterns. A sampling of his figures -- who range in identity from a fictional young boy with a balloon to a certain former intern wrapped around his waist -- hang at W. Broadway's Dillon Gallery through Oct. 5. Some sport outfits fashioned from a layer of paint applied over the faux velvet, lace and shine of the fabric, while others wear only a border filled in by the garish flowers and designs of the decorative coverings. Some, like the Elvis "Impersonator" entangled in his microphone cord set amid celery green paper with a gold floral print, reveal a humorous side, while others, like the "Black

Widow," a nude reclining in a sea of white skulls, disturb.

Regardless of who pops out of the paper attached to its canvas, each piece is a multi-dimensional creation, with the figures, the fabric and the implications all vying for attention. This artistic activity reflects the inner-workings of Kaletski's psyche -- and his roots. Such ornate wall coverings don't exactly gel with the bleak, downtrodden images most westerners associate with life in the former Soviet Union, but the artist suggests his landsmen-- including his mother-- chose them specifically because they perked up an otherwise dreary existence.

"Conceptually speaking, it's interesting for me to develop something I saw as a child, surrounding me," says Kaletski from his Upper East Side studio. "The upholstery, the walls -- they were like a playground. Always I was imagining people playing inside. I forgot, it was years, then I thought, 'Why not bring them to life again?' As an artist, I was able to do that -- to bring my childhood fantasies to life."

While certainly an outlet for his own memories and impressions, the works do not force Kaletski's creative interpretations on the viewer. He defines his lines enough to introduce his characters, but not so much that he reveals all of their traits and stories. Though even Rasputin appears in his "Russian Mystery," a portrait of the Romanovs lightly painted against a particularly ornate, Byzantine-ish pattern, the Czar's daughter, Anastasia, does not. Could this be a commentary about the



Kaletski's "Sugar Daddy," mixed media on canvas, 60 x 48 ins.

rumors surrounding her secret survival? Or does he leave that visual issue unresolved just for the sake of doing so?

"I didn't want to overcrowd it," he explains simply. "I want to make people see without actually painting it, not to overload the fabric. I just give viewers hints so THEY can imagine."

The paper itself -- Versailles meets Grandma's Florida condo -- generally comes from upholstery stores on the stretch of Broadway between Prince and Canal Sts., and along Orchard St. on the Lower East Side. Kaletski, who buys about three yards of his chosen material at a time, rarely thinks in terms of specifics, preferring to shop until something strikes him as paint-worthy.

"Certain ones just talk to me. Something happens," he says of his browsing style. "I

usually have nothing particular in mind. I buy the fabric and I go with my intuition. For the Czars family, I saw this big, beautiful paper and I knew it would be something royal. I saw epaulets, I moved down and I saw a skull, I painted it as a child's face -- Prince Alexi had hemophilia -- I put

Rasputin in the left corner."

There are, of course, those subjects that call for advance planning.

"I wanted to do Elvis; I wanted to find the tackiest, most disgusting pattern I could. I wanted to make fun of Vegas and that whole thing," Kaletski reports, finally settling for that lovely gold and green design.

Born in Moscow, Kaletski left Russia 22 years ago and landed on American soil with no English skills and no money. He worked for several fashion designers then for himself hand-painting silk while moonlighting as a cardboard collage artist. Struggling for professional attention from the gallery world, Kaletski says he went from place to place in search of a dealer willing to look at his work. At one now-deceased venue, a receptionist agreed to deliver his unsolicited portfolio to the owner; she was fired. Illustrating four books and publishing his own, he accumulated "a chunk of money" and took on the life of full-time artist.

Today, he lives and works out of a studio on the Upper East Side -- its walls remain bare.