

ANNA ZORINA GALLERY

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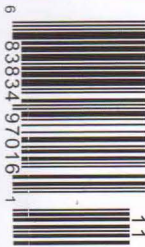
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Russian-born, American artist Alexander Kaletski found paradise in the United States in more ways than one.

FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE

WRITTEN BY MELISSA KAREN SANCES



Alexander Kaletski is known for using cardboard as canvas, sometimes taking taglines on a box like the one shown here and incorporating them into his paintings. This cardboard piece is entitled "Bon Voyage."

Vero Beach has been likened to paradise before, but not like this. On Saturday, November 22 local photographer Hilary Bonbright Mullarkey will open her studio with "Cardboard Paradise," an exhibit by Russian-born, American artist Alexander

Kaletski, best known for using cardboard as canvas, celebrating the human condition on labeled and unlabeled boxes in a style sometimes reminiscent of Picasso.

"His paintings have so much personality – I just fell in love with them the first time I saw them," says Hilary,

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CHRISTIANA RIFAAT

In 1975 Kaletski arrived in the United States with 30 of his drawings, no funds, and minimal English. Today he calls America home and is internationally renowned for his singular style.

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who has two cardboard “Kaletskis” hanging in her home and one canvas at her studio.

While Hilary was already familiar with Kaletski’s work, the two didn’t meet until her sister had a chance encounter with him at a frame store in Manhattan. Her sister told Kaletski that Hilary was a photographer; and when Hilary contacted him, she asked if she could photograph him at his studio. Soon after, Hilary commissioned him to create a cardboard painting of her stepdaughter, Coco Vandeweghe, a world-class tennis player. To capture the athlete’s essence, Kaletski painted her playing tennis on an oversized Coco Chanel box, incorporating her famous name into her portrait.

In many cases, what winds up on the box is a tongue-in-cheek matter of chance. “I actually start painting at the moment I’m painting, and it’s like a mutual inspiration between the box and me,” explains Kaletski. “Then I begin to read what’s on the box, and make a connection to one of the lines, sometimes to funny ones like ‘Handle with care’ or ‘This side up.’”

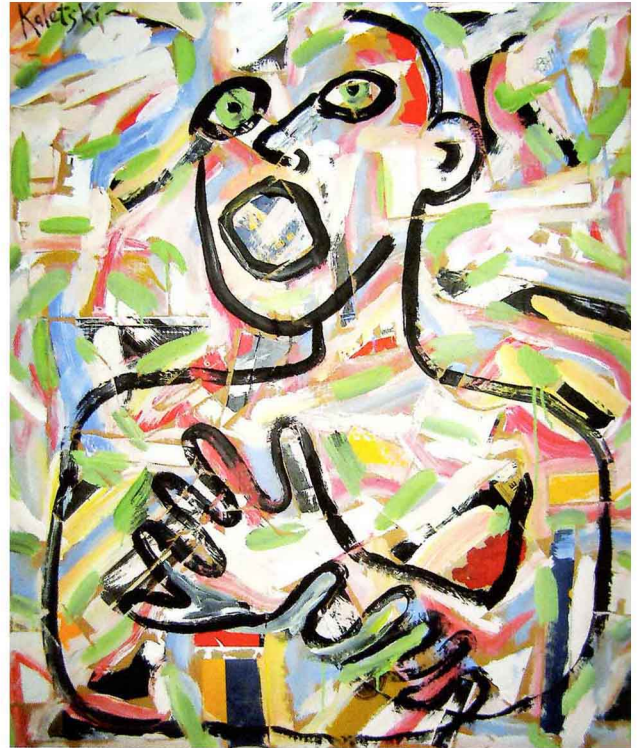
But when there are special requests like in Coco’s case, Kaletski gets serious. Coco’s father was so moved by the gift of her portrait that he cried. “It was one of the most complex cardboard paintings I ever did,” Kaletski says; and he and Hilary agree that it was not only a work of art, but the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

The “Cardboard Paradise” exhibit celebrates what’s special about Vero Beach in Kaletski’s singular fashion. With a focus on food, wine and design – some of his bestsellers incorporate Tiffany and Hermes boxes – the exhibit will remain on display into the new year. It will be the first of many at Hilary’s new studio space.

If you ask Kaletski, he was in paradise from the moment he arrived in New York in 1975. Penniless, but with 30 of his drawings in tow, he felt liberated. Some of his work was smuggled into the United States, but most he had to purchase from the Russian government. At the height of Communism, art wasn’t the property of the artist – it belonged to the state.

“I had to go to the Ministry of Culture in Moscow, and they evaluated how much each painting cost and I paid them,” Kaletski explains. “Then they put a stamp on the back of it permitting me to take it out.”

With freedom came an introduction to another American institution: capitalism. In a Socialist country, Kaletski hadn’t had to worry about money, but now it was a necessity. The artist moved into a welfare hotel and started singing underground songs that he had performed



Kaletski's style is sometimes reminiscent of Picasso, as in "Thirst."

at home, touring the States giving concerts for the Russian community and visiting universities where students were interested in Russian history or music. Some of his paintings traveled with him, but many didn’t return as he slowly began to find a market for his work.

In his first year in New York, Kaletski barely made ends meet and certainly couldn’t afford fancy art supplies. Walking the city streets, he couldn’t help but notice the cardboard boxes that most would call refuse. “It was so beautiful to my Russian eyes!” he says. “In Russia we didn’t have any cardboard. You would go to the store, and you’d have to bring your own paper to wrap what you bought, usually using newspaper.”

Kaletski immediately started painting on these boxes once destined for landfills; but what he laughingly calls his “Cardboard Period” – alluding to Picasso’s “Blue Period” – wouldn’t begin for another 20 years.

In the meantime, the artist continued to share his

“High-end” cardboard, like Burberry, Tiffany and Hermes, is hard for Kaletski to keep in stock. “Ms. Burberry” is an example of a piece painted on one of those “rare” mediums.

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underground world across America. After he was on tour for two years, he was in Los Angeles when he met Merv Griffin, host of "The Merv Griffin Show." Fascinated by Kaletski, Griffin invited him on the show and hired a writer to pen his story. But while the artist envisioned a Dostoevsky-like novel, the writer had other ideas, so Kaletski decided to write the book himself.

For the next seven years, he wrote an autobiographical novel entitled *Metro*, translated it to English and published it in 1985 to critical acclaim in the United States. Returning to "The Merv Griffin Show" to promote his book, the artist suddenly had enough money to stay put in New York and paint full time.

In 1996 the Dillon Gallery in Manhattan agreed to show 30 of Kaletski's "Cardboard People," and his show was sold out on the third day. He brought 30 more to the gallery, and those were purchased, too. "Nobody had ever heard about a double sold-out show," he says. Several years later, the same gallery featured one of his most famous exhibits, "Cardboard Castle," and for the past 20 years, his exclusive boxes have had a worldwide following. "Now everyone wants one!" he says with a laugh.

Today Kaletski can purchase top-of-the-line art supplies, but he still finds himself scouting for his favorite canvas. "When I find a good cardboard box, I carry it no matter where I have to go," he says. "I know if I don't pick it up, I will regret it for 10 years. If I'm going to the movies, I will place it outside the movie theatre until the show is done. In my mind it becomes like art already, and to leave it would be like missing a painting."

The artist still lives in the same studio apartment he moved into when he left the welfare hotel in 1975. In Russia, he says, money was considered evil, and in America it was considered good. For him it falls somewhere in the middle. "I never chased money," he explains. "If artists think about how much they will make, I think they should be in the stock market. I only do what I feel."

Being true to his feelings was always important. While Kaletski was winning national art competitions at the age of six, he knew that if he wanted to study art as an adult, he would have to paint in the style of socialist realism, which celebrated the Communist regime. So as an adolescent, he took his art underground.

By that time, Kaletski was already singing secretly at underground concerts. At the age of 15 he realized that the government could control the radio, "but they couldn't control the guy with the guitar." Gathering like-minded friends, Kaletski had an immediate audience, and something that felt like freedom from government control.

While he went to university for theatre, sacrificing his creative spirit to submit to the whims of his directors, Kaletski quietly rebelled against the Communist state. Exhibiting art and singing in the underground community, Kaletski was risking incarceration or psychiatric hospitalization. "If you didn't accept Soviet reality," he explains, "and you painted something that wasn't Soviet, that meant you were crazy." Nonetheless, such risks were worth his own spiritual liberation.

His work in an acting troupe brought him to America for the first time, a place he had never seen but always identified with. Whenever he had to perform for class, he would choose a part from an American play, like "The Glass Menagerie." "Sasha was my nickname," he says, "and as a joke everyone called me 'Sasha America.'"

The acting troupe needed a young prince for a Pushkin fairytale, so after government interrogation Kaletski was allowed to make the trip to New York. He loved everything American: the people, the buildings, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, "Jesus Christ Superstar."

When he returned to Russia, he knew it was time to make a move. Kaletski's father passed away when he was 13. He says that had his father been alive, events would have unfolded differently since his leaving the country would have jeopardized his father's career. His mother, however, was a free spirit. Even though she came from a highly placed Communist family, over a lifetime she realized that she didn't believe in socialism, selling her china and books to help her son first pay for his art and then fund the trip to America.

In 1997 Kaletski's *Metro* was released in Russia to great success, and the artist soon returned as a hero. His family had moved to Belarus, south of Russia, and one of his most meaningful shows was at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Belarus, organized by his sister and attended by his mother. That's when he knew he had won a life-long battle against communism.

This year the Kaletski Museum opened in Claryville, N.Y., and the artist continues to focus primarily on oil paintings and cardboard work. This month his oils will be on display at two New York galleries – the Anna Zorina Gallery and the Mary Boone Gallery – and his latest cardboard exhibit will open on November 22 at 7 p.m. at Hilary Bonbright Mullarkey's studio at 1150 19th St. in downtown Vero Beach.

If you ask Kaletski, he was in paradise from the moment he arrived in New York in 1975 – and paradise just keeps getting better. ❁