

ANNA ZORINA GALLERY

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ALEXANDER KALETSKI

Box-Cutter

On view: February 16 – March 25, 2023

Opening with the Artist: Saturday, February 18th, 5-8 PM

Anna Zorina Gallery is pleased to present *Box-Cutter*, Alexander Kaletski's solo exhibition and debut presentation at the gallery's Los Angeles location.

Box-Cutter brings together a decade of Kaletski's most notable series of works, *Cardboard People*, with historical pieces from as early as 2011 in dialogue with most recent ones. This exhibition provides an expansive overview of his never-ending quest for discoveries and enduring fascination with cardboard collage.

Throughout Kaletski's over 40-year career, he has stayed true to the medium of cardboard boxes, or more specifically, to used, broken down, waiting-to-be-recycled, discarded paper containers. Rather than seeing them as commonplace objects to be overlooked, he explores their potentiality, elevating them as a hallmark material within his oeuvre. In creating this unique visual language, Kaletski builds upon several seminal art historical legacies such as Pop, Neo-Dada, and Minimalism with his use of commercial items, mixed media, found objects, and simplistic geometric forms.

This preoccupation with cardboard began in 1975 when Kaletski first immigrated to the United States from Russia. Arriving in New York City, alone and penniless, he foraged for art materials to create, as he felt free to fully express himself as an artist, and the streets of the city provided him with a wealth of new possibilities. "I've never seen so much cardboard boxes just laying out in the streets like this – abandoned and thrown away. It was like a treasure trove to my immigrant eyes," Kaletski recalls. In addition to the ubiquity of his new canvases, their quality, which was far superior to drawing paper from his home country, was an inspiration to him, and he has been experimenting with their textures and layers ever since. Each piece begins with a walk on the streets in different neighborhoods all throughout the city. Like an explorer on an expedition, Kaletski searches in littered corners and alleyways for blocks on end for cardboard boxes that speak to him. Aside from seeking materials to paint on, there's also a performative aspect to his hunt – the passing of time, movement in space, and the act of revelation all become part of the finished paintings.

With each mixed media portrait, Kaletski is world-making, creating characters he conjures up and gleans from his own experiences. In both cases, he seeks inspiration directly from the cardboard boxes in their original, abandoned forms. Akin to Michelangelo, who famously said that every block of marble had a statue inside of it waiting to be set free, Kaletski seeks to do the same with his paintings by allowing images to emerge from within their dormant layers. Taking cues from their inherent qualities, such as logos, stamps, labels, or colors, the artist incorporates found elements of the source material to build the DNA of his *Cardboard People*. He then engages with wordplay sparked by a particular company brand printed on the cardboard or a shipping label that catches his eye. One example is the earliest painting in the show, *LaCoste* from 2011, which depicts a young, blond athlete wearing tennis whites bearing the iconic alligator logo throughout the composition. By salvaging found *Lacoste* tennis shoe boxes and appropriating the brand image, Kaletski creates a new formal structure and composes a compelling visual conversation between this discarded remnant and his lively characters. An additional layer of meaning emerges when considering how a capitalist society

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that warrants major sports endorsement deals for maximum profits further requires athletes to become walking billboards, as poignantly illustrated in this work.

Another example is one of his most recent paintings, *Princess Bride*, from 2022. Utilizing the entire surface areas of the boxes as his canvas, Kaletski plays with cutouts and collages in his unearthing of a woman from Pahlmeyer Wine packaging. He treats the cardboard as fabric and designs a revealing wedding dress with a daring opening over her torso for this rather angelic-looking bride. The two-dimensionality of her pose and demeanor further call to mind early Renaissance iconography of the Madonna or the saints. This tension between the pure and the naughty is in constant play and offers endless modes of interpretation under Kaletski's deft hand and whimsical style.

Reaching for the Stars is the only work on display that is not a singular portrait. Instead, it's a celebration of a diverse gathering of people holding up glasses of champagne, dancing, and playing music against a backdrop of the bright signature colors of the Veuve Clicquot Champagne House. With the sparest of assured lines, Kaletski captures the complete essence of his *Cardboard People*, freeing their *joie de vivre* spirits from within their material confines. This is an excellent example of how he masterly portrays the world around him, his fellow neighbors who traveled from afar and landed on this soil for a better life and their share of the American dream.

Since the artist continues to live and work in the same East Side neighborhood where he first arrived 47 years ago, these pieces are as much about the specificity of place as they are about the material and painted portraits. As a result of his continual engagement with cardboard boxes, they still hold decades of history of New York City in their worn surfaces and aging labels, the most significant being those from the late '70s when Kaletski first arrived and the city was at its grittiest. While a bleak decade for most residents, it was arguably one of the most creative and vibrant for artists like him, who drew inspiration from the city's trash-strewn streets. His paintings are like time capsules of a particular place, at a particular moment in time; relics of an ever-changing urban sprawl.

Kaletski's works open new ways of seeing and understanding our shifting world. By revisiting this quotidian material throughout his practice, he continues to push the boundaries of materiality and representation, yet stays true to his wonderment and joy of discovery. With each found cardboard box, he renders them anew and excavates life out of them by imbuing them with wit and humor, always finding the beauty in the detritus of life.

ALEXANDER KALETSKI (b. 1946, Russia), immigrated to the United States in 1975 and currently lives and works in New York City. He has exhibited widely in shows internationally, including those in Mexico City, Tokyo, Shanghai, Vienna, Minsk, and New York City. His works are held in the permanent collections of the Voorlinden Museum in the Netherlands, the Claryville Art Center in New York, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Belarus. Prominent private holdings include the Meeschaert Collection in France, the Lynda and Stewart Resnick Collection in California, and numerous collections in Switzerland.

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