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## Bittersweet modern Russian art

By Jackie Wullschlager

"Beauty, though, will save the world," wrote Dostoyevsky in *The Idiot*. Generations of artists and writers played out that uniquely Russian glittering idealism: first building revolutionary utopias – Malevich's and Kandinsky's abstraction, supposed to herald a new spiritual reality – then turning to "underground" art as an inner emigration, a morally authentic opposition to communist oppression. Seventeen years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, is anything left of that ecstatic seriousness in Russian art today?

In the untitled video premiering at her first London show, *Acquaintances* at White Space Gallery, Olga Chernysheva answers that question with a spare, poignant vignette. A woman stands by a metro station compulsively drawing and erasing the same pattern of circle, triangle, square on a cheap plastic sketchpad toy that she is trying to sell to passers-by, before fading into the soft white mist of a Moscow morning. This offer of magical geometry to indifferent city savages is a scene of simple quotidian economic reality, yet it is shot through with art history – the repeated abstract forms of Malevich's suprematism, a dream of utopia endlessly evoked then denied.

In "XXX MALEVICH" and "SEXLISSITSKY", Alexei Buldakov takes fragments of the same darting suprematist shapes, lines, wedges, and makes of them vivid cartoon images that mutate into limbs and body parts to perform in a primal cartoon to the soundtrack of grunting, panting lovers: a parody of the high-minded radicalism of Malevich and El Lissitzky, as well as of today's pornography and art-market pieties. This is on show in *Russian Dreams*, an exhibition of post-perestroika artists opened this week at the Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach. "Dreaming has been a fundamental and traditional feature of the Russian character," says curator Olga Sviblova, director of Moscow's Multimedia Art Museum. Both shows concentrate on photography, film and installation, and argue persuasively for a continuing distinctive sensibility in Russian art, as the grand themes of 19th- and 20th-century painting and literature are reprised in contemporary media.

The poster image for *Russian Dreams* is a slice of a phosphorescent green moon pulled down to perch on a roof terrace giving on to a vast twinkling city. It comes from Leonid Tishkov's ravishing photographic series "Private Moon", shown in Paris earlier this year – a work of formal beauty choreographed with photographer Boris Bendikov to cast Tishkov as lost hero of a modern fairy tale, journeying through different worlds and into dreams to protect his imagination. The big fake fluorescent moon set variously within a diamond blue stage set, zooming in at an open window, hanging low over a shadowy figure in a water garden, bringing flickering romance to a giant Moscow apartment block, reminded me all at once of the moonlit views of the Dnieper by 19th-century landscapist Arkhip Kuindzhi (the revelation at the National Gallery's 2004 *Russian Landscape in the Age of Tolstoy* show), Gogol's urban fairy tales such as the proto-surreal "The Overcoat", and the revolutionary opera *Victory over the Sun*, designed by Malevich, where the sun is captured and brought down to earth, plunging the world into darkness to prepare for a new cosmic order.

Tishkov similarly pulls the moon out of the sky to recast everyday life, but with the 21st-century ambivalence towards lost utopias, melancholy and sense of disconnection that characterise all the works in Miami. Installed in a darkened room, Alexei Kostroma's "Feathered Aggression", a five-metre cannon layered with white feathers and fitted with an interactive mechanism causing a section of the gun barrel to drop suddenly then rise, is a nostalgic/mocking allusion to Russia's imperial past. Andrei Molodkin's "Democracy", a liquid sculpture of transparent bubble letter vessels filled with crude oil, explores the intersection between art and money in Gazprom-powered Russia. The collective AES+F's "Defile", a collage of video and digital photography, blends images of death and high fashion as unclaimed corpses from a morgue are cloaked in haute couture dresses and float over an invisible catwalk. AES+F's film "Last Riot", a dance of death where androgynous gilded youths in designer clothes ritually caress/kill each other with Playstation weapons, was one of the most discussed exhibits at last year's Venice Biennale; this piece confirms the collective as masterly narrators of 21st-century dystopian visions.

National identity has obsessed Russian artists since the 18th century, when a European-style culture began with the founding of St Petersburg as a tsar's fantasy, a city literally built on a shifting Baltic swamp. The overarching theme at Miami, of Russian contemporary art caught between dreams and inventive nostalgia, is embodied in the thoughtful photographs and films of Olga Chernysheva, on show both at the Bass Museum – the Moscow sequence "Dream Street" – and more fully in *Acquaintances*, where three 2008 series documenting and deconstructing the Russian capital are on display for the first time.

Chernysheva trained as a cartoonist but, she says, "my inner profession is animator". Her monochrome "Moscow Area" prints have classical gravity, often using the framing and setting of architectural details, and a gentle graphic tone, emphasising unexpected textures or forms. But what brings these night cityscapes alive is the dazzle of light and shadow. The spotlight on an old lady entering a church, just defined by an ancient door with an orthodox cross in the corner of the picture, has a Caravaggio-like glint. An empty park is lit by a circular ring of street lights swaying uncertainly. Young girls skate against a backcloth of multi-domed St Basil's Cathedral illuminated only by a banner of fairground lamps strung across a huge grey sky.

Highlighting the marginal, lonely, eerie, Chernysheva makes 1960s Moscow cityscapes look like antiquity. Installed on a wall of light boxes, the metre-long Duraclear prints comprising "From the Deputy" trickle down like gnarled, half-stuck banners, showcasing election graffiti on housing blocks. "Alley of Cosmonauts" follows the dereliction of a dismantled space centre, now a muddy building site. Geometry is deformed by biology as asphalt road surfaces are torn up by tree roots and lined with the paths of ants; everywhere is the flotsam and jetsam of social change. Yet the light in these bittersweet images of contemporary Russia express stoicism and hope. When Chernysheva's work was shown at St Petersburg's Russian Museum, she called the show *The Happiness Zone*; symbolically, it happened to coincide with a retrospective of the great Tolstoyan chronicler of tsarist Russia, Ilya Repin. Like 19th-century Russian narratives, Chernysheva's star-spangled grisaille panoramas, with their fragments of unlikely beauty, are at once political art and fables for a country still in search of itself.

*'Acquaintances'*, White Space Gallery, London, to January 17. [www.whitespacegallery.co.uk](http://www.whitespacegallery.co.uk)

*'Russian Dreams'*, Bass Museum of Art, Miami Beach, to February 8. [www.bassmuseum.org](http://www.bassmuseum.org)