

CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR

AN INTERNATIONAL DAILY NEWSPAPER WEDNESDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 1988

Soviet pop culture makes waves in Los Angeles show

Paintings and rock music by 'unofficial' Leningrad artists are nonpolitical, full of surprises

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Los Angeles

Americans got a peek under the rug of *glasnost* here this week in the form of an exhibition of contemporary art by young Soviet fringe artists not recognized by the Soviet hierarchy and, therefore, free of the straitjacketing optimism prescribed by doctrinaire Socialist Realism.

The exhibition — destined for New York and London — was brought out, piece by piece, over four years by an American, Joanna Stingray, who wanted to show her countrymen that the Soviets "aren't culturally behind us and outdated," but are rather "just as innovative and exciting as artists here [in the United States]."

The vibrant and energetic experimental works seen here on such media as shower curtains, butcher paper, T-shirts, computer printouts, and plastic plates, were painted by Leningrad artists known as the "New Painters."

The exhibition, "Red Wave — Unofficial Contemporary Art and Music From the USSR," which opened last Thursday at a local gallery, continues through tomorrow before going on to New York in the spring and London in the fall.

Essentially primitive in style, distinctive in their humor, and childlike in whimsy, the works use bright colors to depict mythical beasts, dancing figures, real animals, and caricatured human beings.

Local critics and curators at the opening called the works essentially rebellious but nonpolitical — "renegade," "unconstrained," "graffiti-like."

Richard Koshalek, director of the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, said, "This collection of work is proof that innovation and experimentation in art is not something that is restricted to the Western industrialized nations. The young Russian artists have shown us that creativity has flourished there, despite government restrictions. It's surprising how similar some of these works are to what's going on in Europe and the United States."

None of the artists, said Miss Stingray, want to defect from the Soviet Union. Mostly in their early 20s, they are classified by the government as "unofficial" and so are not allowed to earn money from their art and are permitted only about four exhibitions a year.

All are fully committed to their art, however, taking part-time jobs such as cooks, mechanics, or maintenance personnel to allow time for that commitment, while still paying the bills.

"But they are very happy, and what they have said is that they are an integral part of the Russian culture," says Stingray, comparing the spirit in Leningrad now to that of New York's SoHo district in the late '60s.

A \$150-a-plate reception to benefit Greenpeace, the international environmental organization, opened the exhibition, amid bomb threats at the Try Solomon Gallery, where about 80 works are

being shown. Since all of the artists are musicians as well, tapes of their work were played. None of the artists was permitted to leave the USSR to attend. Many works of the New Painters, however, have been exhibited in an old Leningrad building that has been converted by artist Timur Novikov into an underground contemporary museum.

Stingray has been singing, writing, and playing on the Los Angeles music club circuit since the early '80s. When she visited the USSR in 1984, she saw a number of unofficial rock bands whose music can't be sold in stores there, but whose talent "rated with the [David] Bowies and [Mick] Jagers of the world," she says. When she saw that the groups were such a far cry from the Soviet groups that are well known in the West — groups like AvtoGRAF, which made an appearance via satellite in the 1985 Live Aid concert — she wanted to convince Westerners that not all Russian rockers "were like a lounge act from Cleveland."

Every three months since 1984 she has transported tapes of under-



Organizer Joanna Stingray with paintings by Leningrad's 'New Painters'

ground Soviet bands to the US, and in 1986 they resulted in a representative album titled "Red Wave."

She has also brought back the artworks given to her by the artists, and has not encountered problems at customs. "Either our suitcases weren't checked, or the customs agents would look at a piece and laugh and say, 'Take it!' They didn't consider these works to be art," she says.

Frederick Weisman, an influential local collector, says, "When you

go to the Pushkin Museum or the Hermitage, you don't see this kind of art. I'm very pleased with [this exhibition], because it has a sense of humor that I didn't think existed in Russia in the few times I have been there. It's kind of an uplift to me."

Although the artists did not make it to the show, there were videotapes, with their comments in English subtitles. Said Mr. Novikov, "We are continuing the work of our ancestors. As to the development of art, the obstacles seem to grow fewer. We look ahead with joy in our eyes."

Overall, the exhibition was seen here as a welcome and valuable cross-cultural sharing of ideas and attitudes, and as primary evidence of the kinds of visual themes that will emerge from younger-generation Soviets as *glasnost* continues to relax traditional restraints. "It's a way of starting an East-West dialogue that is very important," said Mr. Weisman.