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Soviet Art Comes West.

Soviet Art Surfaces at Red Wave Gallery



Photo for the Reader by Deon Dickson

Joanna Stingray at the Red Wave

□ By Dave McCombs

When Joanna Stingray first showed her collection of contemporary Soviet art nearly a year ago, the exhibition bore the stigma of contraband. The twenty-eight-year-old singer-songwriter tells of slipping the works past Soviet customs agents, who didn't recognize the avant-garde pieces as art. Then came *glasnost*. Now, many of these former underground pieces and their creators travel the London, Paris, and New York gallery circuit. Under relaxed state regulations, nonunion artists may sell and exhibit their work at home and abroad.

Stingray's latest show, "New Art From Leningrad," opened March 19 in West Los Angeles. The month-long exhibit includes more than one hundred works from thirteen Soviet artists and gives visitors a glimpse of this counterculture now thriving in urban areas of Mikhail Gorbachev's restructuring nation.

The Red Wave gallery, located at 1653 Sawtelle Boulevard, was opened just for this exhibit. Works done of pieces of plastic shower curtain, burlap, wood, plates, clothing, and other media, crowd the five-hundred-square-foot space. The images, from haunting and painful to kitschy and kinetic, stretch from floor to ceiling throughout the gallery.

Much of the art was given to Stingray by Soviet artist-musicians she befriended while on her more than thirty visits to the U.S.S.R. since 1984. At the time, the artists created the works with no intention of selling or formally exhibiting them, says Stingray. Now the paintings sell anywhere from \$400 to \$20,000. Millionaire art collector Frederick R. Weisman of Los Angeles has added several of the pieces to his vast contemporary art collection, although this show is the first time the works have been offered for sale to the general public.

Afrika Bugaev, one of the show's artists, says *glasnost* has boosted the Moscow-Leningrad avant-garde community.

"Now I can do what I want. I don't have to have a job," says Bugaev, who has used earnings from his works to begin a collection of American contemporary art, including pieces from Niki de St.

Phalle and Andy Warhol. "I am very interested to bring these back to Russia," says Bugaev.

Stingray, who immersed herself in the thriving Leningrad counterculture years before Soviet chic became popular, compares the ambience there to America in the sixties. "The basic atmosphere [in the U.S.S.R.] is similar to what it was here twenty years ago. The people create whatever makes them happy. Since they aren't in it for the money, there are no rules, no boundaries," she says.

These free-wheeling attitudes are evident in the exhibit and reflect the broad interpretation of art embraced by its formerly underground contributors. Bugaev, one of the founding members, was instrumental in putting the group together. "He's been described as the everpresent Afrika," says Stingray. The Soviet artist has spent the past month in Los Angeles, helping Stingray open the exhibit.

Bugaev is now in New York, designing costumes for a performance art piece by Popular Mechanics, a Soviet artists group that stages productions bringing forty different types of artists together. Poets, painters, dancers, and musicians all do their thing simultaneously in Popular Mechanics' performances. Bugaev's role includes eating flowers, beating drums, and dancing with animals.

Stingray also has several other projects in the works. Along with art collector Weisman, she is working with Mayor Tom Bradley's office to name Leningrad a sister city with Los Angeles and is trying to expand an ongoing art exchange program with the Soviet Union. In conjunction with Komsomol, the Soviet youth organization, she has negotiated a contract to open a sixteen-track recording studio in Moscow. In August, Stingray will perform along with Soviet musicians in an eight-city tour of the U.S.S.R. The concert series will promote Stingray's four-song record, to be released by Melodia, the state-owned recording label.

"New Art From Leningrad" runs through April 16 and is open Saturday through Thursday, between 1 p.m. and 7 p.m. For info call 473-1645. □