

CURATOR'S INTRODUCTION

« PERCEPTION AND REALITY »

/ BORIS MANNER /

For over two decades Olga and Oleg Tatarintsev have explored the language of forms in their work by using an astonishing variety of expressive techniques. Their alliance took shape in the late 1980s when they were still studying at the Lviv National Academy of Arts. Ceramics has from their earliest works occupied a special place for these artists.

Although ceramics may be one of the most ancient artistic materials – one need only recall the amphorae covered with paintings that have come down to us from antiquity – in the 1980s its use was relegated to “marginal” practitioners. By the 1990s the University of Applied Arts in Vienna called an end to its rich tradition of instruction in ceramics. Ceramics was relegated for the most part to handicrafts and to artisans rather than artists. Its distinctive aesthetic was no longer suited to the times; the era’s new paradigm was mass production of art. The meticulous process of preparing ceramics was utterly out of step with the quickened pace for creating artworks and with other trends that arose in the digital age.

Olga and Oleg Tatarintsev developed their immediately recognizable language of ceramic forms in direct opposition to that trend, and it is a language that came from a profound understanding of the potential in the material being shaped. Severely cubic forms appeared with surfaces painted in a carefully selected spectrum of colours. Individual pieces began to merge into sculptural landscapes in which viewers could be immersed as they wandered through a new topography. Later works found room for new materials such as metals. Darker themes began to crop up among the elements of the first spatial compositions that featured immense balls or cubes reminiscent of board games.

Black and white tones on the ceramic surfaces became a prominent means of expression. They offered a bleak and menacing contrast to the cheerful, shining surfaces. In the later works this contrast took extremely diverse forms – sometimes the silhouette of an attack aircraft on the wall and sometimes a blotted out police interrogation transcript.

Separate words and short texts began to appear, conjuring up meanings from outside the artistic composition itself, and the artists more clearly displayed their own attitude toward the issues that mattered to them. The critics noticed the appearance of political themes. In pieces like “The Nature of Silence” (2017) we see how language was distorted and altered as it came under pressure from the machinery of state violence. Raw power dominated the world of art, not shrinking even from the destruction of its individual practitioners, sending such poets as Osip Mandelstam to perish in the anonymity of the GULAG.

The dread induced in the viewer by the themes of death and suppression is in sharp contrast with the pleasure derived from gazing upon gleaming coloured objects. It would be tempting to write off this dialectic of forms as due to differences in the artistic styles of their creators. Olga Tatarintseva asserts an independent artistic identity in the work of the two artists. It can be characterized as a “formal” position that unfolds in the context of the history of forms of concrete art. While the style, jointly developed by the two artists, has integrated elements of conceptual art after 1945. However, a little analysis immediately reveals that the work of these artists exists in an endless multiplicity of contexts. A knowledgeable observer will easily find a wealth of allusions in these pieces. The imagery and objects forcefully remind one of Saul Levitt, Max Bill and Richard Lohse. The textual and conceptual elements hark back to the period of Stalinist terror and can be interpreted as a reference to Joseph Kosuth. Both artists are making these allusions quite deliberately in order to express their attitude toward particular phenomena of art and living in society.

Non-representational art and its repertoire of forms arose at the beginning of the XX century. Nevertheless, the generation of Kazimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian was dealing with problems that were of a completely different kind from the ones that engaged the generation of Sonia Delaunay and Max Bill. Conscious references to that tradition can be made out in Olga and Oleg

Tatarintsev's works. However, their oeuvre should not be regarded as an appropriation, merely copying and blending forms and traditions. It is instead a constructive process, which maintains an awareness of cultural interaction and places itself in that context. This "constructivism" in forms and spaces has from the very beginning been one of the prevailing tendencies of non-representational art, and its genesis has always been tied to the way forms occupy space. The architects of Malevich and reliefs of Jean Gorin will serve as examples.

Olga and Oleg Tartarintsev have gone a step farther by allowing the viewers to become integrated into spatial motion. As they become part of a sculptural landscape, they encounter a panorama of symbols and enter a new paradigm of perception. These objects and symbols inspire contradictory feelings in us – desire and revulsion, enjoyment and dread – through their smooth monochromatic sheen and their monumentality and invocation of the horror of violence and death.

This is exactly how Edmund Burke understood beauty and sublimity in his essay *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Viewers perceive beauty in the smoothness of the objects, in their multidirectionality and in the variations of their glaze, but they also experience the awe of the sublime because of their monumentality and mysteriousness. These works executed in such a variety of styles balance each other and provide a sense of equilibrium.

Karl Gerstner in his *Cold Art* of 1957 describes the concrete non-representational art of that time. In particular, he quotes Theo van Doesburg on major figures in the De Stijl movement: "A bottle is for drinking from, and a painting is for looking at. Just like any other object, an individual work of art has no functional load – that comes about only when interacting with the observer." This idea could be applied to one of the central aspects in the Tatarintsevs' output. Both artists operate within the context of their art, its history and the political realities among which they have grown up and now live.

They transform their perception of reality into a plasticity, which brings about a mental interaction with viewers through their perception of the beautiful and the sublime. Nevertheless, the enjoyment that observers derive from the beauty of these objects is completely at odds with their overwhelming monumentality and frightening content. Form and content are endlessly seeking equilibrium. The deliberate contradiction heightened by the faultless virtuosity of artistic execution is in a balanced state, which leads viewers to a fresh perspective on the objects and on how to understand objective reality. They are being offered a way to reconsider and define their relation to the world. However, the artists leave the right to draw any conclusions solely to the viewers.

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