



ДИАСПОРА ФИГУРАТИВНОГО ИСКУССТВА

具象散居

FIGURATIVE DIASPORA

JANUARY 16 — MARCH 4, 2018

CURATED BY PETER DRAKE & MARK TANSEY

NEW YORK ACADEMY OF ART
111 FRANKLIN STREET

ERIK BULATOV
ALEXANDER KOSOLAPOV
KOMAR AND MELAMID
IRINA NAKHOVA
OLEG VASSILIEV

XIE DONGMING
YU HONG
NI JUN
LU LIANG
LIU XIAODONG

Press Coverage

ArtNews

Artnet News

Gagosian Quarterly

Hyperallergic

The Tribeca Trib



9 Art Events to Attend in New York City This Week

By The Editors of *ARTnews* 01/15/18

Opening: “Figurative Diaspora” at New York Academy of Art

For the New York Academy of Art’s annual show of figurative work, the artist Mark Tansey and Academy dean Peter Drake have put together an exhibition of art that wasn’t state-sanctioned in China and the Soviet Union. Work by five Soviet artists will be shown alongside more recent art from the People’s Republic of China. The show focuses on a continuum of artists who used their academic training to subversive ends, in the process enlisting stylistic touches borrowed from social realism as a language to express dissent. Pieces by Alexander Kosolapov, You Hong, Erik Bulatov, and others will feature.

New York Academy of Art, 111 Franklin Street, 6-8 p.m.



Editors' Picks: 11 Things to See in New York This Week

Sarah Cascone, January 15, 2018

“Figurative Diaspora” at the New York Academy of Art

For this year’s winter show of figurative painting, artist Mark Tansey and NYAA dean Peter Drake have brought together a selection of works of unofficial, non-sanctioned state art from artists working under the Soviet and Chinese regimes. Beginning in the 1950s, young Chinese artists were sent to the USSR to learn oil painting, not a traditional Chinese art form. The academy claims this is the first exhibition to explore this connection, pointing out that there were artists from both countries who subverted their academic training to create politically dangerous work.

Location: New York Academy of Art, Wilkinson Gallery, 11 Franklin Street

Price: Free

Time: Opening reception, 6 p.m.–8 p.m.; daily 2 p.m.–8 p.m.



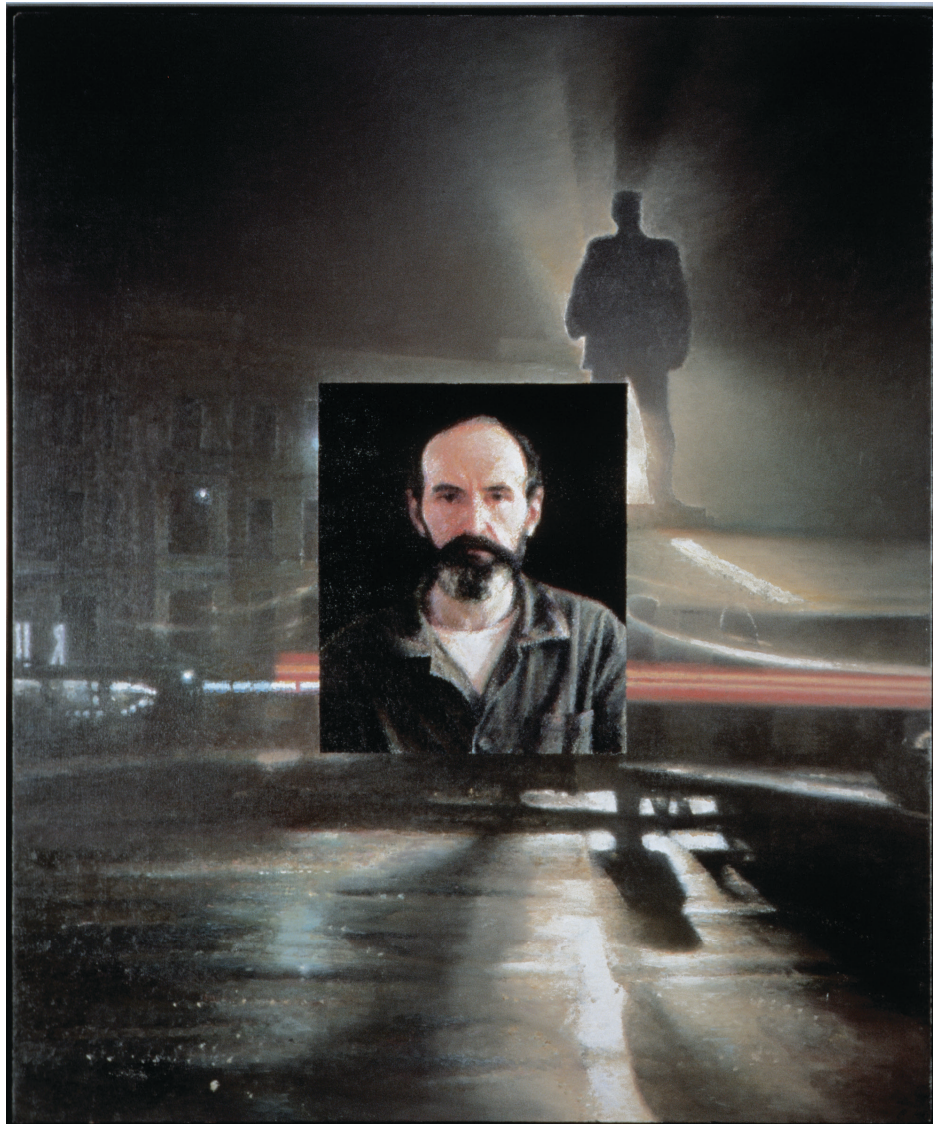
‘Figurative Diaspora’: Progressive Works Rooted in Social Realism

By April Koral Jan. 31, 2018

“Figurative Diaspora,” now on display through March 4 at the New York Academy of Art in Tribeca, is a provocative sampling of paintings that turns social realism on its head. Curated by the school’s dean, Peter Drake, and artist Mark Tansey, the 18 works are stylistically rooted in those heroic portrayals of the worker, and utopian images of the Soviet and Chinese Communist state. Deemed “subversive” by the curators, these paintings by Chinese and Russian artists—some of whom have immigrated to the U.S.—take a jaundiced view of those systems. It is an unusual yet fitting show for the academy, one of the foremost institutions of figurative art.

Surprisingly, the curators note, China had no tradition of oil painting until the 1950s, when Soviet artists trained their young Chinese counterparts, spawning propagandistic realism under Mao and a new tradition of technically impeccable figurative art. Generations later, as we see in “Figurative Diaspora,” those stylistic influences—if hardly its ideological ones—remain. What these works share, Tansey says, “is the similarity of gestures, the figural dynamics and the Social Realist voice.”

Peter Drake took us on a tour of the show. Below are his edited comments on five of the pieces.



Oleg Vassiliev, *Myakovsky's Square*, 1995

The painting shows a portrait of artist Eric Bulatov superimposed on the famous square in Moscow, a former gathering place for poetry readings and other expressions of dissent that often resulted in arrests and beatings by the authority.

“Throughout their lives, these artists experienced ideals presented to them as utopian possibilities and then saw them collapse. A lot of what this work does is to set up illusions and then break them down.”

“The band of red running through the painting shows that no matter how liberal that area of Moscow was, it was limited. Anything they did creatively had very sharp parameters that were defined by the state.”



Komar and Melamid, *AntiChrist (Glory to God)*, 1990-91

Several of the works in the show contain religious references. “Spirituality comes up over and over again. When the Soviet empire collapsed, a vacuum was created and there was a rush to religious culture that was just as dubious and destructive. Having been raised inside the Soviet culture, they’re deeply suspicious of anything that is authoritarian whether it’s religious or political.”

“Glory to God,” a title inscribed on this painting by Komar and Melamid, has come to be a meaningless phrase, said Drake, similar to “God bless you,” and the painting slyly makes that point. “By placing the Christ-like figure inside Lenin in a pose that you might see over and over in social realism, Komar and Melamid are being critical of both these extremes. The utopian possibilities have collapsed on them and once again their belief systems get disrupted and then discarded.”



Lu Liang, *Huatugo-1*, 2017

“One sees these cities all over the place in central China, unoccupied in bleak and empty landscapes, ghost cities that are being made in advance of civilization in the hope that industry will follow, that agrarian culture will move into an urban environment. But it just hasn’t happened. It’s all about loss and progress at the same time.”



Ni Jun, *Portrait of Ma Kelu*, 2015

“This is very typical of the work that Non Jun’s being doing for the past 30 years,” Drake said, noting that such paintings that appear conservative to Western eyes can be seen as progressive in China, where Non Jun, one of the country’s most influential painters, is based. “To paint something that was realistic, that showed people as they are, and the city as it is, is doing art for art’s sake—the exact opposite as doing art for political purposes.”



Yu Hong, *Resolution*, 2015

“A man stole a manhole cover and sold it for scrap metal because he was so poor. A woman who was walking down the street reading on her cell phone fell into the hole and was found days later. One form of misery leading to another form of misery. The people in the painting are the observers of the new China. This the metaphor for the new China’s two extremes: the huge disparities of wealth where some people can afford a Maserati and other people can barely feed their family. It’s a really strange and sad painting.”

FIGURATIVE DIASPORA

February 26, 2018

In 1990, Vitaly Komar, a key figure of the Sots Art movement, introduced Mark Tansey to a community of Chinese painters who had recently arrived in New York from Beijing. In return, Tansey organized an informal exhibition of their paintings in his New York studio, entitled Transformations (1994).

Twenty-three years later, Figurative Diaspora, co-curated by Tansey and Peter Drake, Dean of the New York Academy of Art, presents paintings by five Chinese artists, three of whom participated in Tansey's Transformations exhibition, alongside works from five Russian artists who had been creating "unofficial," subversive, non-state sanctioned art decades earlier. In serendipitous coincidence, a scholarly publication Thank You for



Your Love 1994, edited by Xin Wang, curator and art historian based in New York, with contributions from Cindy Xingyi Qi, MA student at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, will be available in the summer of 2018 to closely examine the multifaceted implications of the Transformations gathering not only for the participating artists, but also for the art historical discourses in 1990s New York and that of contemporary Chinese Art.

In addition to Drake, Komar, Tansey, and Wang, speakers also include Jane DeBevoise, Chair of the Board of Directors of Asia Art Archive in Hong Kong and New York, and Heidi Elbers, an artist and Director of Exhibitions and Alumni Affairs at the New York Academy of Art. This is a preview of the full conversation that will appear in the Summer 2018 Gagosian Quarterly, on newsstands May 1, 2018.

Peter Drake Figurative Diaspora at the New York Academy of Art in some ways was motivated by the Transformations exhibition that was put together by Mark Tansey back in 1994. It was hosted in his apartment and consisted of four Chinese socialist realist artists including Liu Xiaodong, Chen Danqing, Yu Hong, and Ni Jun. In Figurative Diaspora is this notion that a visual language was migrating across cultures in the East while it was marginalized in America and Western Europe. It was still being preserved and to a degree, re-enlivened as propaganda. This language was kept alive.

Vitaly, you introduced these artists to Mark so maybe you can explain how you first encountered their work.

Vitaly Komar At that time, Alexander Melamid and I published a call to artists in Artforum magazine. We asked for proposals of what to do with Soviet communist-era monuments or Socialist monuments to Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin, because Russia started to destroy these monuments in the early 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Artists from countries including Germany, China, and Russia responded to this. Our studio became a kind of meeting place.

PD When you saw the Chinese artists, did you immediately recognize traces of the education that you received in Russia?

VK Yes. Moscow represented a traditional Western academy for China in the same way that Rome did for Russian artists in the nineteenth century. Russian artists were moving to Rome to study the Renaissance and Baroque periods.

PD Vitaly, were you and Mark friends at that point?

Mark Tansey Yes, we had met. I very much admired Komar and Melamid's work and how they had internalized critical content in the socialist realist form.

PD Were you ever in a studio of theirs at the time?

MT The first time I visited their studio was the evening-meeting Vitaly mentioned earlier. That's where I first saw slides of Chen Danqing's pictures and was introduced to him.

PD In your essay for the Transformations booklet, you said, "Chen's work served as an introduction to me to the works of Liu Xiaodong, Yu Hong, and Ni Jun. And this transformational edge in his work led me to appreciate the importance of understanding their work in terms of extending temporal transformations of their culture rather than the narrow temporal postures of mine." You were seeing it through a very particular point of view and it took you awhile to adjust.

MT It was common at that time to view contemporary art as existing in a singular, formal present. But apprehending the art of Chen Danqing or Komar and Melamid involved multiple times, multiple styles, and multiple relations between form and content.

Heidi Elbers Peter and Mark, you have been working towards the Figurative Diaspora exhibition for quite a while. Can you talk about your thought process?

PD It first started with that old school idea of focusing on technical sophistication. But over the past ten or fifteen years, it's changed dramatically and now the proposition is something more like traditional skills and contemporary discourse. It always felt like the artists that were in Transformations and Figurative Diaspora had made an enormous effort to acquire an incredibly difficult set of skills and they're trying to do something that's progressive with it that hasn't been seen before. Part of what makes it so interesting is that the language has morphed as it's moved along. The grammar has changed. Some of the tropes from Soviet socialist realism still show up. You'll see figures portrayed from below or lit with artificial lights and things like that, but being used in such different ways now, and it feels like there's a real connection between all three cultures.

Vitaly, when you were a young man did you ever make official art?

VK Yes, I did it when I was very young. People compete for these commissions because the government pays very well. In Soviet Russia there were not many private collectors. You needed to make your living. Everything belonged to the government. In Soviet Russia, the government was your landlord, they owned land, supermarkets, and police.



PD There was only one client.

MT Vitaly, the meetings you hosted back in the '80s and '90s were really inspiring. In spite of the language barriers, different histories, and authority systems it was as if the pictorial language we had in common had taken on a life of its own.

VK And I look at all these relationships that we formed. It was a time of hope because everybody believed that something new was happening.

HE Vitaly, could you talk a bit more about the history of Sots Art? You are one of the founders of the movement [Soviet Pop Art].

VK Sots Art is akin to Pop Art in the Soviet Union. I can see similarities between totalitarian mass propaganda in Soviet Russia and the culture of advertising in the US. All forms of visual propaganda try to push people towards doing something. In the case

of commercials, it's igniting a desire to buy or consume. In the case of visual propaganda, they portray a positive image of the future or glorify the government. It's a concept that attempts to manipulate consumers. Western commercials are the propaganda of consumerism. And Soviet visual propaganda are the commercials of socialism, ideology, or communist ideas. They have clear parallels, and that's why Sots Art seems similar to Pop Art.

XIN WANG Mark and Vitaly, I see irony as a prominent element in some of your works. Symbolism and irony are present in the work of some contemporary Chinese artists, particularly in those who practice the highly satirical Political Pop style, but what is striking about the four artists in Transformations is an earnest attitude, almost with no hint of irony.



VK For me, Sots Art was a type of self-purification because I felt brainwashed in school. It was through self-irony and introspection that I felt purified. Self-irony is quite a strong weapon. I'm not sure how the Chinese understood this, but I see a lot of Sots Art in China now.

Jane DeBevoise Yes, it's interesting that Sots Art predates Political Pop in China. Political Pop really started toward the end of the eighties and continued into the mid-nineties. But what you're describing is more about how Chinese artists were recognizing similarities between consumer advertising and propaganda and relating it to the Chinese government propaganda they had been exposed to growing up. Chinese Political Pop emerged at the moment China was beginning to embrace Western capitalism and reject communist ideology or the most strident application of Chinese ideology. Artists were very sensitive to that and saw the trap that they were about to fall back into.

MT It reminds me a little bit of a dilemma that art graduate students faced in the late '70s in New York. The prevalent, "end-game art" practices were found to be at odds with the critique of the art commodity. For some, critical practice replaced art practice. There were those of us who found ways to internalize critique in the art and learned to live with the paradox.

JDB That's a great description. For me, there seem to be many parallels between Russia and China. I have always wanted this conversation to happen. When I see young Russian scholars coming out of universities, I try to push them towards Chinese studies. I think they'd bring such an interesting perspective that we as Westerners would not necessarily bring. For example, with Political Pop, there was always a question in my mind as to whether the Chinese had seen Sots Art before they did Political Pop or were they just identifying the same post-socialist condition that intrigued the Russian artists.

VK Once, I saw a copy of Carter Ratcliff's book about Sots Art and my work in Beijing. It was a Chinese translation of his book. So I asked if he knew it was translated and available in China? He said, "No, they never asked permission." [laughter]

PD We discussed some of the similarities between the two cultures, in relation to Sots Art and Political Pop, but what are some of the differences? There's some palette differences obviously.

JDB One thing Vitaly said that I think is interesting is that he saw Sots Art as a critique.

VK Self-critique. For me it was self-criticism.

JDB In China it seems that there's still a reverence for Mao. That is one thing that's different. Even at the height of Political Pop there was still a strong reverence for him as a founding father, as someone who sent the Westerners packing, who defeated the Japanese along with some help from other countries including the United States. He is somehow seen as bringing dignity back to China, despite all the terrible things that happened in the Cultural Revolution, the people who died, and the thirty million people who starved. Somehow that has been reconciled and the positive aspects of Mao

continue in the imagination of the Chinese, even today. In Russia today, it seems the cratering of the socialist experiment or the utopian project continues to resonate and that decline is attached to political figures.

VK But I still believe that the Russian experience of utopia is a very important tragic lesson for humanity. I don't know if we really have the ability to learn from history, but it was a very important lesson in how the best intentions went awry. As the saying goes, "the road to hell is paved with good intentions."

JDB Yes, I think that's a difference.

XW And I think Political Pop in general has less figuration and realism.

JDB It's more poster art. It's not really socialist realism. It's flat, more like graphic design. They're picking up on the posters that they painted during their childhood and the prevalence of those flat colors. The whole idea of irony is an interesting question. Where is the irony?

VK It's related to the idea of self-reflection. Self-irony is only when the idea looks at yourself from another side, from another point of view.

HE Mark, I want to ask about the artist as curator experience. You curated this show in the past, Transformations, and now you're co-curating this show with Peter. Does the experience of curating make you see things differently in the studio? Have you thought about that?

MT Curator is probably the wrong word. What was your term back in the '90s, Vitaly? Instigator? [laughter] I'm one who instigates, I want to see what's going to happen. The pictures came to my attention and I was fascinated to see how the questions, the ideas continue.

PD The only other time I remember you curating was at the MFA in Boston where you put together a show from their collection and that was fascinating. I love that tradition where an artist is having a solo show and is given free rein and then everything becomes a kind of marker for who you are. You're mixing and matching from decorative arts, painting, sculpture.

MT You're having relationships. It's a lovely experience.

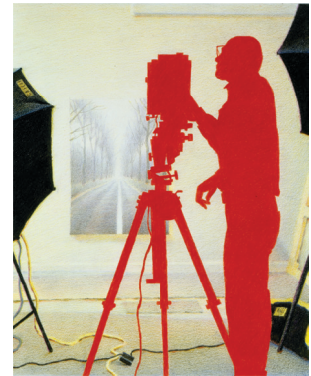
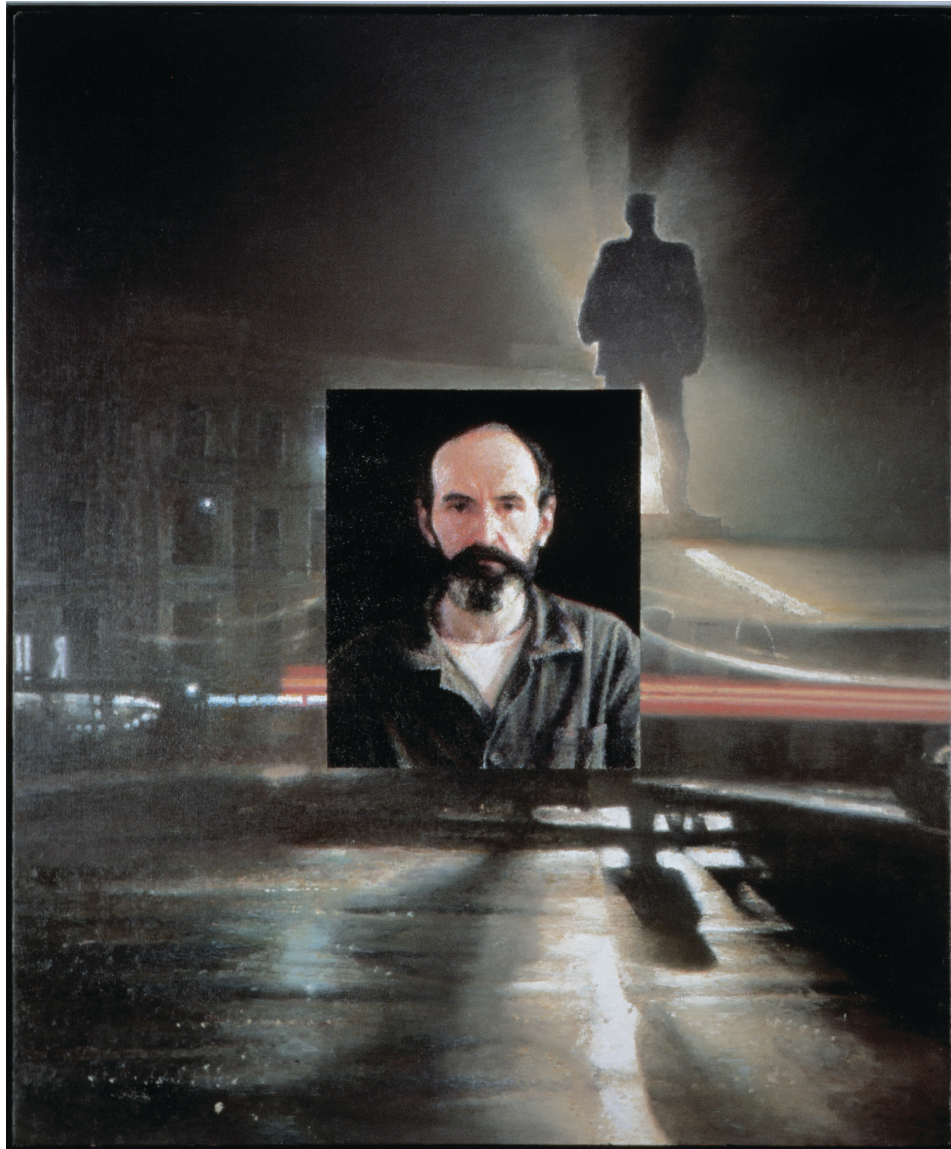


JDB So in Transformations, did the artists propose the selections of their own work? Did you talk about an idea that you wanted to develop or was it really just about them sharing the most interesting work they had been doing at that time?

MT They chose their own work. In the previous three years since the Komar and Melamid meeting, I made numerous visits to Chen Danqing's studio on 42nd Street. It was like walking into a space between worlds. It was beyond the dictates of any singular authority or ideology. The paintings displayed freedom and vitality in the crossing of different times, styles, and cultures. I saw this work acutely as self-authoring, as embodying "self-representation."

I found in later meeting Liu Xiaodong, Yu Hong, and Ni Jun that where spoken language presented obstacles that the pictorial language we had in common was wonderful conversation and provided a sense of kindred spirits.

The Transformations show itself was in a "space between worlds"—that is neither a gallery nor an academic institution. It was an appointment exhibition in the spirit of Komar and Melamid's studio meetings. And it was an extension from the pictorial conversations in Chen Danqing's studio that were so vividly self-representing.



Your Concise New York Art Guide for Spring 2018

Your list of 45 must-see, fun, insightful, and very New York art events this season.

February 28, 2018

Figurative Diaspora

When: January 16–March 4

Where: New York Academy of Art (111 Franklin Street, Tribeca, Manhattan)

Following a tradition of presenting figurative artists, the New York Academy of Art is mounting an exhibition of “unofficial” art — that is, art produced by official training but without state sanction. The show, which features five Soviet artists and five contemporary Chinese artists, reveals the influence of Soviet Social Realism, which was used by post-1950s Chinese artists to make daring, subversive, and mocking work.



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