

N E W Y O R K R E V I E W S



Alexander Brodsky & Ilya Utkin, detail of *Portrait of an Unknown Person, or Peter Carl Fabergé's Nightmare*, 1990.



Alexander Brodsky & Ilya Utkin, detail of *Forum de Mille Veritatis*, 1990, (Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York).

### ALEXANDER BRODSKY AND ILYA UTKIN

Architecture in the Soviet Union has always been a tool of propaganda. Constructivism, overscaled neoclassicism, and functionalist modernism have in turn served ideological ends in a shift of styles that has corrupted and devalued the significance of all built form. Moreover, paralyzing bureaucracy and an equally debilitating economic situation have meant that, even under glasnost, almost nothing besides low-cost housing blocks were built. Skilled labor is nonexistent, and materials are in short supply (domestic manufacture is so limited that designers have, for instance, a choice of only three kinds of windows).

Like Western architects during economic recessions, the more creative Soviet architects have turned their backs on this dismal professional scene and concentrated on theoretical projects, executed on evenings and weekends and originally shown only to friends. During the 1970s a loosely organized group of designers called the Paper Architects began entering their schemes in foreign, particularly Japanese, competitions—and winning. The relatively small cash prizes provided the architects with just enough resources to keep drawing. Meanwhile their far-fetched schemes grew increasingly visionary and even absurdist.

Two of the Paper Architects, Alexander Brodsky and Ilya Utkin, recently staged an ambitious installation at New York's Ronald Feldman Gallery. The styles employed by Brodsky and Utkin range from Egyptian to neoclassical to modernist, while their monumental geometric forms recall those of the French visionaries Ledoux and Boullée as well as the Russian constructivists. Captions and texts accompanying or inserted into the images transform architecture into a vehicle of satire, allegory or fairytale-like narratives.

The first, dimly lit space was occupied by an enormous egg being pushed by a life-size human figure built of crisscrossing wood slats. The piece, entitled *Portrait of an Unknown Person or Peter Carl Fabergé's Nightmare*, refers both to Russian history and to the myth of Sisyphus; a related etching speaks of the nostalgia for permanent, immobile forms and durable materials in a world of throwaways and teardowns. In the second room was a grid of 16 fat, closely spaced columns plastered with tiny drawings and near-illegible texts. A Charon figure in a gondola navigated throughout this *Forum de Mille Veritatis*, apparently leading hapless mortals to a place where they would no longer search for earthly truths.

Around the walls of both rooms were the etchings that form the core of Brodsky and Utkin's work. Executed in a Beaux-Arts composite format, the etchings depict fantastic structures generated from an ironic nostalgic attempt to retrieve meaningful and inspiring architecture in the face of an increasingly dehumanizing urban environment. The *Columbarium Habitabile* is an enormous honeycomb in which individual houses slated to be torn down can be stored; the *Dwelling House of Winnie the Pooh* proposes a tiny, movable domestic cylinder as an alternative to massive, anonymous apartment buildings. Other drawings refer to the psychological toll on people forced to live in hostile environments: a preposterous glass tower pays ironic homage to the "Little Man;" *Villa Claustrophobia*, an inverted mirrored cone set within a brick cylinder, is a metaphor for the alienated mind turned in on itself.

Brodsky and Utkin's three-dimensional objects are made of plaster inscribed with finely drawn hieroglyphs, their surfaces resembling ivory scrimshaw or pottery shards found in archaeological ruins; their etchings are similarly "aged," sepia-toned and covered with ornate, old-fashioned script. But this allegiance to the past is belied by the way the pair manipulates and subverts historically loaded forms: columns and domes are hollowed out or supported only by rickety wooden scaffoldings; building styles and types from all periods are juxtaposed with statuary and other vaguely anthropomorphic shapes in crazy, congested cityscapes. Out of these humorous, learned scrambles comes the Paper Architects unmistakable message: The alienating and dehumanizing forces of relentlessly standardized contemporary architecture and urban planning must be abandoned and the search renewed for architecture imbued with hope and humanity.