

REVIEWS

brodsky and utkin

Monuments To The Spirit

PORTLAND ART MUSEUM
PORTLAND, DECEMBER

We're incredibly fortunate, we late-20th century earthlings, to have witnessed worldwide political changes of historical magnitude: the end of a dark, decades-long era that was as corrosive to the human spirit as any bloody war; the disintegration of empires and decades-old national alignments, along with—alas—the ferocious rekindling of long-suppressed ethnic hatreds.

As if to symbolize these events—their mystery and all of their marvelous and evil portents—an enormous, bone-grey egg fills the front gallery of the Portland Art Museum, looming like a gargantuan fossil from prehistory. Around it, the walls are lined with exquisitely drafted etchings which are saturated with both a wry, sepia-hued nostalgia and a keenly critical—even gloomy—intelligence. They resemble architectural renderings, 18th-century romantic landscapes, and children's illustrations all at once; works as ambiguous as the events that have surrounded their two young Muscovite authors.

Ilya Utkin and Alexander Brodsky are indeed architects, part of a small circle of leading architectural theoreticians in contemporary Russia, whose work is well-known in the Pacific Northwest owing to the architects' visit to the Goodwill Games in 1990. PAM's Art/On The Edge has brought them to Portland for talks and an exhibition, which includes some of the work shown before.

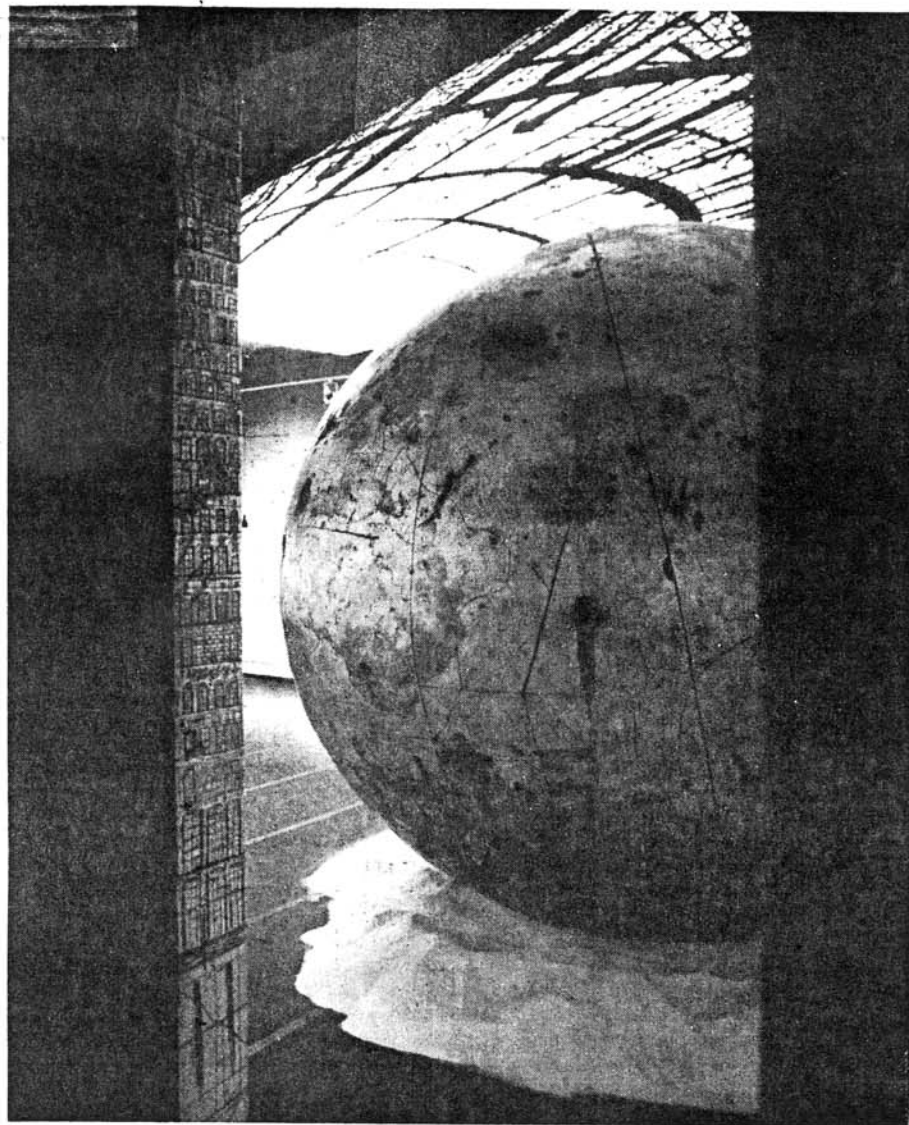
The exhibition also includes detailed plans and a scale model for a pedestrian bridge in Tacoma, a project they conceived of during their earlier visit. (See "Visionary Monuments" by Glenn Weiss, *Reflex*, Sept/Oct '90)

The Russian Constructivists of the 1920s fancied themselves as enthusiastic proletariats, offering art as a tool to help remake society in the heady post-Revolution days: art in the service of mass media posters and books, towers for orators, personal flying machines.

Perhaps because of the implacable steamroller that Soviet society became, the tumultuous, sad fate of the Revolution has made contemporary Russian artists like Brodsky and Utkin more brooding and quixotic. Their works are not marvelous contraptions for the citizen of the future, but whimsical, piercing ruminations on the human condition. Their marvelous etchings and rickety-looking faux artifacts are elegies for individuals in a mass society; odes to people beset by the ugliness of industry, the elements, solitude, loneliness, decay, the end of things.

You could spend a considerable amount of time perusing the etchings. The mark of paper architecture is that theory and plan exist together on one sheet of paper, and the richly narrative pictures are often accompanied by text in an English that is slightly, pleasingly, off.

Surely these are architects' documents. Most are views of a building or monument: an elevation surrounded by plan views,



Alexander Brodsky and Ilya Utkin, *Portrait of an Unknown Person or Peter Carl Fabergé's Nightmare*, painted plaster, 10' x 14', 1990.

section, and perspectives, all in precise relationships and annotated with neat calligraphic flourishes. But what impossible, evocative constructions they are. A deep, narrow trench in a barren plain, filled with a colonnade of 2,001 pillars holding a miles-long sheet of glass. This is the *Nameless River*, a monument to the pairiness of human endeavor: "The stream of Time/ Sweeps off—away—all people's deeds/ And sinks in abyss of forgetting."

A doll's house with the wind and an ocean in the basement on which galleons bob, and a kiwi bird on the roof with her egg on her back (*A Doll's House*).

A bunker embedded in the center lane of a busy freeway, stocked almost entirely with liquor and books (*Villa Nautilus, Bulwark of Resistance*).

Forum de Mille Veritas, a forest-like colonnade on the edge of a beach, where, when the tide is in, gondolas weave in and out, their lonely passengers trying to peruse the messages on every inch of the pillars, all the way to the sky.

The etchings contain scribbled commentary on everything from architecture to the pagan nature of children, and they are loaded with quotations from literature, dedications, and self-marking references.

In a museum room just beyond the shadow of the towering egg, there is evidence that Brodsky and Utkin are not only

poetically inclined theoreticians, but capable builders as well. Here are projects that have actually been built, may be built, or were nearly built. The most exciting element of this part of their show is the model for the Twelfth Street Pedestal Bridge with which Brodsky and Utkin propose to link old downtown Tacoma with the rebuilding of the waterfront. Although business interests in Tacoma have other ideas for the site, it's possible that the bridge could be built because of the enthusiastic support of city cultural affairs manager Michael Sullivan.

Brodsky and Utkin's bridge looks like a falling bulwark from a long-forgotten golden age, as full of rueful nostalgia and humanity as any of the etchings. It is a bridge to memory or imagination, watched at its entrance by two guardian sphinxes, lined pastorally with spruce trees, and ending abruptly in space. Its massively timbered superstructure holds elevators, stairways, and a passageway that will safely carry pedestrians over the freeway and railroad tracks to the waterfront, but it appears to be in ruin, some of its supports dangling or askew.

What a boon it would be to have such a structure in the Pacific Northwest. Moreover, since our buildings are monuments to the human spirit, it would offer us a reflection of our better selves, a testament that we are capable, after all, of irony, passion, and a sense of history.

—Joel Weinstein.