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## **Moving symbols of fragile unity**

### **Vitaly Komar's exhibit at Gershman Y links personal, global healing.**

By Victoria Donohoe

For The Inquirer

Much about Vitaly Komar's exhibit, "Three-Day Weekend," at Gershman Y has the force of a public statement. And the ability to move us is truly present.

It's not hard to see the urgency behind the message conveyed in this cycle of imaginative re-creations by Komar, an internationally known Russian artist living in New York since 1978.

What will undoubtedly astonish you, as it did me, is the very direct and achingly real way that Komar links painful experiences of family separation during his early childhood with a compelling need for healing on a global scale in our own day.

Komar picked his utopian "Three-Day Weekend" title as a symbol of peaceful coexistence among different peoples and different ideas of faith and spirituality. He was thinking of Friday for Muslims, Saturday for Jews, and Sunday for Christians - with persons of all other faiths joining in, along with atheists.

Rather than have such people stand idly by, he thought like-minded members of his Three-Day Weekend Society could dedicate themselves to love, to family, or to creativity, or might even start up small family-type businesses - no threat certainly to big corporations.

Essential to Komar in getting Three-Day Weekend moving is his attempt here to create very easily understood symbols. They've evolved for him out of mandala drawings and paintings he has made that are graphic symbols of the universe. These symbols take the shape of universal mandalas by joining ancient symbols of spirituality with historical and personal images.

Three-person images have special poignancy for Komar. Not until the 1980s in New York did Komar first see the photo of the three Allied leaders at Yalta - Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin - an image banned in the Soviet Union.

That picture haunted him. And gradually he began to see it interchangeably with his own favorite family photo, showing him at age 6 with his father and mother.

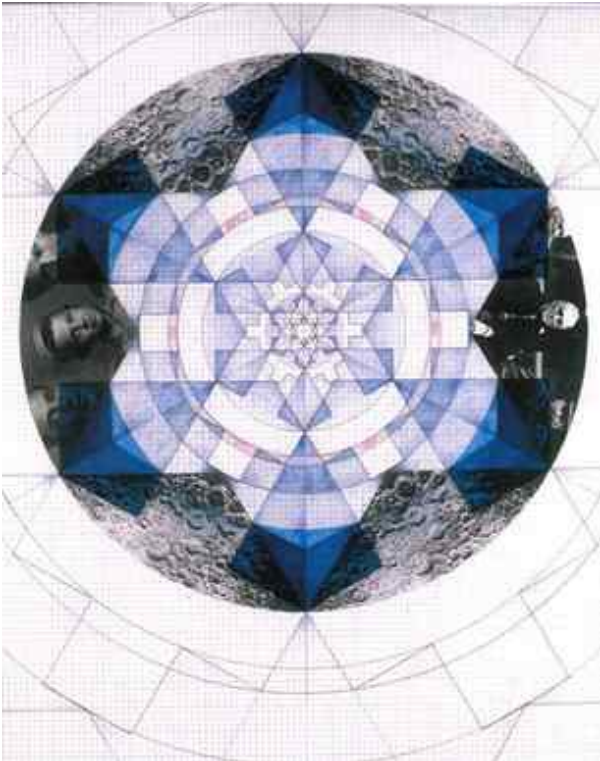
That picture had been taken shortly after World War II, and just before his Christian father, a Moscow military man, divorced Komar's Jewish mother. The child never saw his father again.

The main reason for the divorce was that his parents' separate religious traditions could not coexist peacefully.

So, for Komar, the two photos - Yalta and his old family picture - became a symbol of a fragile unity. The Yalta image stood for the Allies' unity just before the Cold War. The family photo captured a cherished moment not long before the breakup of Komar's family.

These two pictures put him back in touch with his old dream of a happy family and with his longing for peaceful coexistence among peoples, ethnic groups, and religions.

The work featured here is some of what Komar calls "art for the soul." This fascinating and profoundly inspiring show isn't lacking in creative contradictions and imaginative oppositions, and it has a real audience outside the "art world" itself.



Vitaly Komar, "Fragile Unity," mixed media on paper

Also at Gershman Y, Chrystie Sherman is a photographer with broad social concern who has located and photographed people in five ancient Jewish communities scattered in India.

Her exhibit is called "Lost Futures: Journeys Into the Jewish Diaspora - Photos of Jews of India."

Persons she photographs singly and in small groups seem to perch with confidence and wonder on the edge of the known, the almost known, and the not yet known. Sherman's attitude toward these subjects is a key element, her handling intimate, personal and fresh, and she evokes rather than analyzes.

Her accent on the typical is the mark of a documentary approach, and yet several photos have the casual atmosphere of an oversize sketch.