

VITALY KOMAR, formerly of the Soviet Union and now of New York, is a foremost contemporary artist and one of the winners of the 2004 Ben Uri International Jewish Artist of the Year Awards. He explains the origins of his latest work, to be seen in London this summer.

THREE-DAY WEEKEND

The Three-Day Weekend, for me, is a symbol of the peaceful coexistence of different peoples and different concepts of faith and spirituality: Friday for Muslims, Saturday for Jews, and Sunday for Christians. The idea to create ecumenical symbols in the form of Universal Mandalas originated in childhood dreams. It continues the search of the nonconformist art of my youth. In these mandalas, I unite ancient symbols of spirituality with historical and personal images.

My imagination unites images and concepts that are distant and seemingly opposite. I first saw a picture of the Yalta Conference, an image that was banned in the Soviet Union, in the 1980s in New York. Afterwards, for many years I could not understand why I was so haunted by it. Back then, I made several paintings on this theme. In the first, I transformed Roosevelt's face into the face of ET – a child and alien in America who is from another planet and possibly a different political system.

Two years ago, while looking through old family photographs, I rediscovered a portrait of me with my mother and father that was my favorite in childhood but which I have long since forgotten. My father is dressed in his military uniform. It was taken shortly after the end of the Second World War, and it was the last time that the three of us were together. I was six, my parents would soon be divorced, and my father would shortly leave Moscow. I never saw him again.

When I saw this portrait, I suddenly thought about the image of Stalin, Roosevelt and Churchill. Placing these two photographs side by side, I realized that the picture of Yalta had haunted me because unconsciously I saw in it a forgotten picture of my family. In the depths of my memory, these two trinities had become superimposed. I understood also that the image of ET in my old painting was a self-portrait; it was me – a Russian Jew, an alien from a different world.

The main reason for my parents' divorce was that the Jewish traditions of my mother's family could not coexist peacefully with my father's Christian ones. For me, these two photographs became a symbol of a fragile unity – the unity of the Allies just before the Cold War, and of my family not long before my parents' divorce. An old, naïve dream of a happy family, of peaceful coexistence between peoples, ethnic groups and religions, came back to me through these pictures.

During my Soviet childhood, a weekend lasted only one day – Sunday. This caused a great deal of hardship for my

symbols that united heraldry and mandalas, irony and spirituality, symbols that would genuinely represent the peaceful coexistence of peoples and religions, something that the state emblems—the hammer and sickle, the various state eagles—did not actually accomplish. Unfortunately, *Paradise*, which was housed in my father-in-law's apartment, was dismantled on the orders of state authorities.

We were constantly surrounded by Soviet pop culture – state-sponsored official art and visual propaganda. Publications, exhibitions, and sales of art

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Jewish grandparents, who had difficulty obtaining permission to move their free day from Sunday to Saturday. After Stalin's death, the government instituted a two-day weekend. I was a teenager then, but even now, the two-day weekend – Saturday and Sunday – seems to me a symbol of the peaceful coexistence of Judaism and Christianity. Wouldn't it be great, I thought, to add one more flower to this bouquet – Friday – to include Abdul, my Tartar classmate, whose Muslim family lived in our building?

These visions and dreams were typical of our small circle of non-conformist artists, the friends of my youth. We would drink, recite poetry, and talk about Sots Art (Soviet pop/conceptual art) and *dukhovka* (spiritual questions) until sunrise. Sots Art was a kind of ironical iconoclasm, whereas *dukhovka*, a slang expression of Moscow's bohemia, expressed a dream of an ecumenical mysticism. I've always loved Gogol's cocktail of irony and mysticism.

At the beginning of the 1970s, in a multi-stylistic installation called *Paradise*, Alex Melamid and I tried to combine Sots Art and *dukhovka* in one, synthetic work. I dreamed of making

were controlled by the Soviet government. Under these circumstances, pursuing money and fame meant selling your soul to the devil. Out of principle, many of us chose to make our living as something other than artists. We made art 'for the soul', during free time at the weekends. The two days seemed so short that I dreamed of having at least one more 'creative day'.

My utopia of the three-day weekend was dangerous. This idea could have united people more effectively than Marxism. The idea of the peaceful coexistence of different ideologies was viewed by the government as anti-Soviet propaganda. The common enemy of totalitarian atheistic fundamentalism united us with various dissident groups. I think that Hitler, the common enemy, united the superstars of the Yalta conference in a similar way. In the future, friends, not enemies, must bring us together.

The search for spirituality in art, begun by Kandinsky during the flowering of the Russian avant-garde, was interrupted first by Stalin, and later, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, by the advent of the capitalist free market. I never imagined that my artist friends and I would

be transformed from the so-called avant-garde of spiritual and intellectual life to the avant-garde of real estate. At the beginning of the 21st century, both in Russia and in the West, we have gained much, but have forgotten much too, just as I had forgotten my childhood photograph.

Nostalgia for the nonconformist art of my youth made me return to its unfulfilled dreams and experiments. The painting of ET was part of the Nostalgic Socialist Realism series, made with my old friend Alex. But when I began uniting symbols of spirituality with childhood photographs of me and my parents, I embarked on a deeply personal work. Today, I understand the concept of artistic collaboration very broadly. I continue to collaborate with art history, with the nonconformist art of my youth.

At some point during work on these photographs, a face – mine or one of the others – appeared in the centre of some of the mandalas. These accidents gave me the idea of making painted and stained glass panels with a hole or a mirror in the centre of the mandala. Visitors who'd like to participate in this project can place their faces in the opening of certain mandalas, or see their reflection in the mirror in the others. In this way, spectators can establish a personal connection with eternal symbols of spirituality and the concept of the Three-Day Weekend.

The exhibition already held at Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in New York and this coming one at the Ben Uri are the initial steps in the creation and promotion of a not-for-profit Three-Day Weekend Society.

Vitaly Komar's *Three-Day Weekend* will be shown at the Ben Uri Gallery, The London Jewish Museum of Art, from 7 August - 4 September as part of the 2004 Ben Uri International Jewish Artist of the Year Winners Exhibition. The other artists whose work will be shown are: Yaki Assayag, Dalya Moss, Suzy Hug Levy and Noam Edry

See WHAT'S HAPPENING page 23 for details.

Below left: *Blue Tunnel*, detail, 40 x 30 inches overall
 Below: *Fragile Unity #1*, detail, 40 x 30 inches overall
 Bottom: *Symmetrical Landscape* 30 x 40 inches overall
 All mixed media on paper from *Three-Day Weekend*, 2004-5
 Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York

