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Irony and Mystery: Vitaly Komar's Three-Day Weekend

For thirty years, Vitaly Komar and Alex Melamid, the pioneers of Soviet nonconformist pop/conceptual art, ribbed the art establishment (and just about everyone else) in art projects made with a smile. When, for example, Komar and Melamid began working collaboratively with elephants in 1995 or advocating *The Healing Power of Art* in 1997-99 — Rubens for liver problems, Seurat for pimples — it looked like a joke. But the irony never suggested a cynical rejection of the value of art. For these artists, reared in the Soviet Union on the traditional craft of painting, the inspiring force that they felt in the company of masterworks was real. Through irony, Komar and Melamid acknowledged that some things are so awe inspiring that they confound comprehension.

Since 2003, when Komar chose to work alone, his art has seemed more serious and spiritual. But Komar's strange mandalas — graphic symbols of the universe inspired by Hindu and Buddhist tradition — which, at the same time, unify symbols associated with Islam, Judaism, and Christianity, are in the deepest sense ironic, for the artist makes no claims about their worth. He even pokes fun at his seemingly New Age project by posing visitors to his exhibitions for snapshots behind a painted plywood mandala that mimics classic amusement park kitsch. The mixed-media pieces in the *Three-Day Weekend* cycle invoke religion not as a source of simplistic fundamentalist answers about purported "truths," but instead as a fundamental mystery that Komar, the perennial ironist, neither cares nor dares to resolve.

The *Three-Day Weekend* project began with a personal epiphany. Upon the chance discovery of a long-forgotten family photo, Komar suddenly understood his strange attraction, some twenty years earlier, to the famous photo of Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin at Yalta, a picture he saw for the first time when he immigrated to the U.S. in 1978. The family photo, his favorite when he was a child, shows six-year-old Vitaly posed between parents shortly before his Christian father divorced his Jewish mother because of religious differences and disappeared forever. What connected the family and Yalta photographs in Komar's mind was that

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each comprised a brief triadic unity, with a central figure between what would soon be foes. In this way, Komar believes that he had subconsciously projected himself into Roosevelt's position. This explained why he turned F.D.R. into E.T. in Komar and Melamid's collaborative 1982 tempera and oil painting, *Yalta Conference*; after all, E.T. (whose film debuted in 1982) not only conjured childhood but was an alien in the U.S. like Komar himself. On specially made graph paper, *Fragile Unity with E.T.* essentially charts this phenomenon, showing in a humorous way how public history helped reveal and reconstruct Komar's fragmentary understanding of his private history.

Times were tough for young Vitaly and his single mother, and neither Soviet ideology nor its symbols of community could blunt the pain. In *Between Darkness and Light*, Komar substitutes his missing father with the patriarch he knew, Josef Stalin. A lack of symmetry speaks to a child's world out of balance, where Manichaean forces battle for the boy and his mother, oppressed in a grim Hades. Overhead are the fragments, a circle, a triangle, and a square, that only hint at the spiritual fulfillment embodied in *Four Moons as Part of a Snowflake* with its Islamic-inspired crescent moons, Jewish Stars of David, and Christian crosses. The symbols of the three religions invoke the holy Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays that the artist proposes as a "three-day weekend," a time to pray or, for that matter, to play, so different from the one-day Sunday weekend of Stalinist times that caused enormous hardship for Komar's Jewish grandparents. At a time of arrogance and intolerance expressed through nationalism and religious fundamentalism both in the U.S. and abroad, *Four Moons as Part of a Snowflake* literally provides an artistic blueprint for a better world.

Is Komar serious? I believe that he is — it's a vision inspired by *tikkun olam*, the Judaic hope for "repairing the world." But by characterizing his Utopian world as a snowflake, Komar acknowledges, with an ironic wink, the fragility and impermanence and maybe also the impossibility of his dream,

In just this spirit, Komar invites like-minded people to join his "Three-Day Weekend Society." To judge from *Triple Yin-Yang*, it seems he has already recruited his mother and even Stalin to the cause. Here too, at long last, the artist reveals his grown-up self, the offspring of the worlds of both old photographs, positioned at the bottom of an inverted triangle that diagrams his history like a family tree. Visitors to Komar's exhibitions

can become official members of Komar's society by posing behind the same plywood mandala for a photo I.D. portrait. Yet Komar calls this invitation his most ironic gesture; unlike his works on paper, which attempt to inspire meditation, Komar's interactive photo prop aims to amuse visitors. Ultimately, Komar pokes fun at himself with the mock earnestness of his Three-Day Weekend Society, revealing how he is far from certain about the value of his symbols and mandalas.

The *Three-Day Weekend* cycle destabilizes the meanings of the Yalta and family photographs by placing them in a range of contexts. As their meanings multiply, the irony creeps in: the photos seem to have no fixed identity. This uncertainty removes them from the reality of the everyday world that we tend to assume we understand. With the irony comes a measure of mystery and, in turn, humility and respect. At the same time, through his imaginative recreations, Komar blunts the power that these two old photos hold over him. This helps explain his repetition of them, for even the most disturbing images lose their potency when seen over and over. To master his past, Komar takes a kind of ironic control, affirming the healing power of the artist to salve his own wounds and maybe, just maybe, those of a fractious world.

These remarks are adapted from an essay that appeared in *Vitaly Komar: Three-Day Weekend* on the occasion of the autumn, 2005 exhibition of the same name at the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art, New York.

Reproduced on the following pages are four works from Vitaly Komar's *Three-Day Weekend* series: *Fragile Unity with E.T.*, *Between Darkness and Light*, *Four Moons as Part of a Snowflake*, and *Triple Yin-Yang*. All works are mixed media on paper, 40 x 30 inches, 2004-05. At the artist's request, all photos of the works are details: the specially made, uniform background grid, which the artist considers "something between a mat and a frame, a kind of environment," is cropped to allow for larger reproduction of the images themselves. Photos: Alan Zindman/Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.







