

Jones, Laura K. "Sotheby's Modern and Contemporary Russian Sale, London." *The Saatchi Gallery*, February 13, 2007, http://www.saatchigallery.co.uk/blogon/2007/02/sothebys_modern_and_contempora_1.php

Vitaly Komar, 'Self-Portrait with Three-Day Weekend Mandala', 2005
Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York.

The incredibly Russian Vitaly Komar opened Sotheby's first Modern and Contemporary Russian Art Week on Sunday with a rather amusing talk. His was the first of four public lectures this week that precede a mammoth sale this Thursday. The New Bond Street auction house has 115 lots up for grabs ranging from a Sitnikov still life for £3,000 to a Bulatov oil ('Revolution-Perestroika') that they hope will fetch £120,000. Many of these post-war works have never been offered at auction and all come from private European and American collections. In total Sotheby's are estimating a total of £1.5 million by the end of the week and they expect the Russian sale to become a regular annual fixture.

Even though they lead the Russian art market here in Britain, it's been 19 years since they had a dedicated modern Russian art sale; in 1998 they had one in Moscow and it was a huge success.

You could sense a fair bit of excitement in the air early Sunday morning; some die-hard Komar fans were in the audience. He wears red-rimmed spectacles and has a very engaging Russian burr. "You will have to excuse my post-totalitarian accent", he warned. He is the Komar of Komar and Melamid, the Muscovites who turned Russian art on its head, pretty much, in the 1960s and 70s. After attending the Stroganov School of Art and Design (the oldest art school in Russia), they broke away from the conformist framework of the Soviet Union of Artists to form Sots Art. (They actually got expelled from the Union in 1973 for not doing things by the book.) "I had been brainwashed before I broke away," said Komar. "My false but sweet model of the world had by this point started to dissolve."

In 1974, they got arrested during a performance of *Art Belongs to the People* in a Moscow apartment and later, on 15 September, at the open-air 'Bulldozer' exhibition, their works were destroyed by the Soviet authorities.

Sots Art - a unique version of Soviet Pop and Conceptual Art that married the principles of Dadaism and Socialist Realism - went all out to parody Social Realism and in doing so came to dominate the underground art agenda of the late 60s and 70s. "Whereas Pop Art was talking about the over-production of commodities, Sots Art was talking about the over-production of ideology," said Komar. The pair also pioneered multi-stylistical images in the 1980s. They lived in New York from 1978 and for much of the 80s hung out with the likes of Douglas Davies and Andy Warhol. In 1979 they established Komar & Melamid, Inc. so they could launch 'We Buy and Sell Souls', a project to, um, buy and sell souls. They even managed to sell Warhol's spiritual core in Moscow for 30 rubles. Then they spent lots of money on hiring a big electronic billboard sign in Times Square which read 'Komar and Melamid: We Sell Souls.' "We went out of business pretty quickly though: a lot of people like to sell their souls, but not many want to buy."

They made paintings with a 16-year-old elephant called Renee - Komar on one side of the pachyderm, ("she had long luscious legs"), Alexander Melamid on the other, all three painters working on a big canvas. "The elephant loves to hold a paintbrush in its trunk... there are some very sensitive points on the end of an elephant's trunk you see," Vitaly explained.

The duo then hung out with a chimpanzee called Mikki for a few months too. He learnt how to take pictures with a Polaroid camera. All the photographs were shown at the Russian pavilion of the Venice Biennale in 1999.

Now Komar has struck out on his own and is showing work in the second edition of the Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art which takes place in two weeks' time. Highlights among the special projects of the Biennale include a show of Russian and Chinese Sotsart curated by Andrey Yerofeyev, head of the contemporary art department at the State Tretyakov Gallery.

With the support of their embassies and cultural institutions in their country of residence, Darren Almond, Valie Export, Yoko Ono, Pipilotti Rist, Jeff Wall and Robert Wilson will be exhibiting at the Biennale as "Special Guests". Negotiations are under way to include the work of Andreas Gursky and Pierre Huyghe.

Sotheby's Modern and Contemporary Russian sale takes place at 2.30pm on Thursday 15 February. The 2nd Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art takes place from 22 February to 22 March in Moscow's Lenin Museum, the Schusev State Museum of Architecture and the new TSUM Shopping Centre, and in other venues across the capital.

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