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15 CHARACTERS OF UKRAINIAN INDEPENDENCE ERA ART SCENE

The purpose of this text is to familiarise the Polish viewers of the Contemporary Ukrainian Art-scene exhibition with a certain number of iconic figures. This selection, fixed in quantity, is the inside view of the process, which, of course, is open to change in both directions: both increase and decrease. With the inevitable subjectivity, this view for a good reason claims to be the “representative section” of Ukrainian art scene since it has gained the current status, that is, from the beginning of the 90's, when Ukraine appeared on the map as an independent country. Separate essays are devoted precisely to those characters of the art scene that defined Ukrainian artistic process all this time: in the late 80's, which served as a springboard for the development of new quality, in the 90's, in the zeros, as well as currently. All the changes related to imagery, theme, genre, media preferences, and other kinds of artistic trends, notable for a given period, are reflected in this concise outline on an individual basis. But anyway all this is a reflection of general dynamics – both in terms of evolution and transformations caused by the change of generations.

Transmedia layers

Arsen Savadov has been an active missionary of pictorial transavantgarde, creating its special neo-baroque version and making it the main focus of Ukrainian art in the late 80s. He started his career with Georgiy Senchenko. It was as a duo in 1987 that they created *Cleopatra's Sadness*, a painting that became a milestone for the development of Ukrainian “new wave” (also dubbed as the “Southern wave”), which chose the “hot line” of transavantgarde. Their vital, large-scale, quotational canvases of the late 80s were memorable for a very distinctive style: dematerialized background brightness, planar “comic shading”, curly “engraving” font, inclusion of the red outline bringing a sense unreality into the picture. These paintings were also distinguished by the simulative quality of figurative meanings. Form in its own way preserved the quality of the academic artefact and appeal to high art, though instantly compromising it. In the early 90's artworks were already being perceived not as self-sufficient objects, but rather as a part of some specific installation system. Its intrigue was based on the paradoxical dialogue of deliberate contradictions, playing with the complementarity of seemingly irreconcilable approaches: earlier uncharacteristic visual austerity, minimizing the signs, on the one hand, and the spectacular “pompous and triumphal” intonations of monumental grotesque, on the other.

Having created a few more installations and synthesized projects involving the elements of painting, photography, sculpture, performance, video, and text (*Baizhang and the Fox*, *Voices of Love*, *Crime and Punishment*), in the second half of the 90s the tandem ceased to exist, but many of the discovered principles have been developed in projects by Savadov himself. From that time until the mid-00s the artist was mainly working on photo projects, the “pictorial” staging of which tended nevertheless to the form of big paintings. For the artist, the important components of these photographic images were social content and shock, which is most evident in the *Book of the Dead* project. The outrage of this series owes mainly to transgression factors – going beyond human, to the area which is usually defined as posthuman. Another fundamental project by Savadov, *The Collective Red*, includes a lot of pictures set in bloody slaughterhouse shops, alluding both to the myth of the Minotaur, and the thick-crimson communists’ demonstration. *Deepinsider* (1998) occupies a special position within Savadov’s photo projects. It is a dynamic cinematically constructed megaproject, which consists of different subsections (*Donbass*, *Fashion in the Cemetery*, *Greenhouse*, *On the Roof*).

In *Donbass-chocolate* he creates a provocative situation at one of Ukrainian coal mines. The artist was exploring the identity of two marginalized groups: one the most radical groups in the Ukrainian society – contemporary artists, and the group most typical in the sense of social depression – miners.

Artists, photographers and several male models dressed in ballet tutus, infiltrate the everyday “underground” life of real miners. The author managed to bring together the mythological and the real. The mine is a peculiar version of the “catacomb culture”, and at the same time a special “club”, a closed male community requiring the intense use of body, a masculine place – “men only”. Similar places had always been a typical conventional site for documentary photography and were usually considered inaccessible, but the artists managed to break in. These places enhance the sense of courage or manipulative ability of a photographer who entered the limited or insecure situation. Savadov’s strategy reminds of the artists who, in the opinion of the American artist Martha Rosler, “like the astronauts entertained us by showing us the places we never hope to go. War photography, slum photography, “subculture” or cult photography, photography of the foreign poor, photography of “deviance”. It is an artistic journey, the passage of extreme, a mystical path, which carries a revolution in the perception of reality. Artist wraps staged scenes with miners into documentary, because for him it is the evidence of the real existential experience.

In the early 2000s Savadov returns to painting, which also assimilated the transmedia properties. In his spectacular, longwinded canvases (*Fio Land, Flight into Egypt, Eastern Lighthouse*), simulating the neo-academism of media era, his own photo shoots are echoing through the basis of painting... All this is mixed in certain hallucinosis, often with a touch of Dada and mysticism. The large-scale painting *Toward the Heart* is typical for these new searches of the artist. In esoteric traditions, to which he constantly appeals, the heart is the center of life and the seat of the pure, transcendent mind. The compositional pattern resembles the scheme of the Epiphany, and its center here is “Heart of Jesus”, only this time with the iconography changed – instead of sharp light and flames, it is entwined with striped ties. Near the foot of the stairs, amidst the theatric junk, and random groups of the love cult adherents, there are “the debris of former greatness” of sacred images and senses. The air is filled with vinyl records, in some places turning into halos... A bright picturesque image has obtained dual nature, merging into the temptation of semblances.

The Magic of Illusion

Alexander Gnilitsky is one of the most brilliant exponents of the “Southern wave”. As early as the transavantgarde days, his painting style had undergone several changes. Starting with flowery “curly style” (*Discussion on the mystery, The Call of Laodicea, Ausonia - the abode of Paradise*), in a number of subsequent works the artist unexpectedly announced almost complete pictorial austerity (*Lisa is crying, Chu, Better beneath and inside than on top and outside*). Black and white grisaille of aesthetically annihilated painting, white ground of the canvas as a trap for the viewer, allusions towards art history were the distinguishing characteristics of these paintings. The irony of deliberately understated, infantile author's position, and the compressed fragmentation of spatial view in *Watteau. Children's Dance*, both take the scene depicted by Watteau away from its initial coordinates, and drive it into a completely different conceptual aura. The deconstruction method of interpreting art quotes, typical of the era, lies at the heart of paintings created by Gnilitsky at the turn of the 80's and 90's, such as *Little Zephyr* that uses Monet's landscape, and *Infanta* inspired by the works of Dali. Artistic simulation of academic school in the paintings *David / Marat* and *The official portrait of genius* revealed a paradoxical interest of the “neobaroque” painter to postmodernist neoclassicism. The cycle of green monochromes, varying motifs of waves and water explosions (*A wave and a boy*) belongs to this period as well. The external calmness of scenes in *Feed the kitty* and *Bad flora* is but a trick, a veil that cannot hide the mood of “quiet horror”.

Gnilitsky was among the first Ukrainian artists who turned to video. In the early 90s, he filmed his own poem-action *The Sleeping Beauty in a Glass Coffin*, in which Morpheus, Eros and Thanatos fused in a decadent Sacrament. In *False Mirrors*, filmed together with Natalia Filonenko and Maxim Mamsikov, directors also function as actors. In the film, there are no rigid ideas and goals. The spectator sees a feed of video-improvising, sexual delirium of surrealistic nature, caused and coordinated by given modules of deformation, certain optical filters, which here are presented by misshaped mirrors from the “laughter room”.

The principles of natural optical (not electronic) projection are later used by the artist in *Sun City*. Resurrecting the visionary tradition in the spirit of London “Eidophusikon” of the 18th century or pre-cinematic era, Gnilitsky visualizes and legitimates the idea of archaic media, in particular, camera obscura, “Magic Lantern” etc. becoming “new media”. The media vector was being actively developed in a duo with Lesya Zayats, representing “The Institution of Unstable Thoughts”.

In their programme projects, including *Visual Vinyl, Room, Mediacomfort*, the duo finds the original technology of balancing between real and synthetic worlds. The artists would mostly call their actions

“cinematic meditation”, which resulted in the most ordinary reality suddenly turn to its psychedelic side. *Visual Vinyl* is a multimedia performance with the use of analogue animation, the exclusive version of the connection of dance music, video, kinetic sculpture, and conversion of a DJ-set into a specific art show. This is a simple but effective optical trick, when the real things come to life in front of the viewer, while the artists completely ignore digital media.

One of the areas of Gnilitzky's work is a variety of “dummy” sculptures, creating of kinetic neodada opuses, such as *The mechanical skeleton blowing bubbles*, *Tomb of Tamagotchi*, *Old Beggar Lady*, and *Miner on strike*. The sculptural mechanics of *Show Yours* installation reveal the idea of infantile wishes as yet unformed sensation, and the conflict between the “dead” technology and “animated” flesh.

During the “zeroes” the artist, in addition to working with media, on the one hand, prefers pseudo-narrative painting recoding myths and semantics of cult cartoon characters, television series, tales and legends (Cheburashka and Crocodile Gena, Stirlitz and Muller, Fantomas, Dracula, The Mermaid ...), and on the other hand, iconizes small household items, cups, bowls, bottle openers, tennis balls, plates, increasing them to absurd, non-functional dimensions and transforming magical illusionism of as-if-realist painting into strange, mysterious and incomprehensible “things-in-itself”. Canvases painted during the last period of life, when the artist struggled with terminal illness (*Bedside chest*, *Ladder*, *M. M. Ge*, *Zinc*) are filled with hidden drama and depth of experience.

New documentalism

Ever since the 90s the main issues presented in the works of Vasiliy Tsagolov, be it painting, photography, installation, video or performance, has been violence, criminality, and social pathology. They dominated in the content of the projects that have become a part of his general “Hard TV” concept, which was based on the assumption of world being non-material and presenting it as solid biological fiction, the global TV-object. The artist interprets the world of violence as a clean visual effect. In an interview, he expressed an assumption quite “seditious” at first glance, but in fact not unreasonable: “Maybe someday we will come to understand the consequences of humanism, when we will be able to accept violence, not necessarily on a physical level, but at least visually and philosophically. Aestheticisation of violence may be the ground for creating a new ontological project”. He is convinced that aestheticization of violence is a sign of the present times, stimulated by the fatalism of erased borders within the moral imperative of “positive / negative”. He does not criticize society, and tries to highlight an iconic villain with certain “choreography” of criminal activity or entertainment, as seen in the *Milk Sausages* film, *The Fountain* sculptural group, *Soft Horror* photography series works from *Macho* and *Wandering bullet* series... A mythical persona of an intruder disturbs society foundations, law-abiding citizens need an anti-hero – bold and brutal, and it should not disappoint them. Or, as in the *Ukrainian X-files* series, the artist tries to translate the mystical obsession with extremely popular ideas of the existence of extra-terrestrial civilizations into a special pictorial language, in which the academic manner, as if inherited from socialist realism, turns into some “paranormal realism”.

In recent years Tsagolov has been consistently developing his own theory of “new documentalism”. For him, the documentary does not have any relation to the passive capturing of crude reality – only that document provides a fact, which has itself been staged. Terrorism today can be viewed in the same vein as the artist uses in his *Swan Lake* installation (2007), in which sculptures of dancers in tutus and shaheed belts as if froze in a step of *Dance of the Little Swans* against video decorations. Tsagolov repeatedly turned to installation, an important element of which is specially created sculpture (as a rule, painted plaster casts of human figures). In this context, we should also mention *Bandit hassle* (it was shown in 2000, in one of the squares of Bratislava during the festival of social sculpture), *Hostages*, *A Playwright's Dream*. Naturalistic and dummy-like, the sculptural part of all these spatial compositions would not so long ago could cause a lot more talk about a certain intermediate stage (the stage of so-called “shaping”) of sculptural process in association with anatomical theatre rather than with sculpture in its true and traditional sense.

But in the ensuing zeros, the canonical boundaries of the concept of sculpture itself became so blurred and smeared, that one would rather consider the “expanded field” of sculpture. Naturalism, dummy features, reinforced by new materials being included (silicon, for example, or plastic, as in the final version of *Swan Lake*) or by a simple “impression” method, as in this case, as opposed to inherent plasticity, in many ways became the identification signs of contemporary sculptural objects. The direct use of live models as sculptural casts in Tsagolov's installations creates a sense of ephemerality, special lifelikeness and reliability, at the same time increasing the much wanted effect of Hippocrat's face – the face of death. For the artist, the terrorist attack is a spectacular performance on the “ontological scene of today” (Boris Groys). The artist gives a clear element of the grotesque act of terrorism and cynicism making drama become farce – dummy-dancers look

like severely manipulated zombies. The contrast of soft-sounding music of Tchaikovsky, subjected to computer processing, peaceful video landscapes, and the feeling that something terrible is about to happen (akin to suspense films), as timers on shaheeds' belts ominously blink, brings even more anxiety and fills the image with tragedy.

Neo-baroque and the beauty of the national stereotype

Oleg Tistol, starting with the second half of the 80s, turned to the problems of national identity, using post-avantgarde methods. He was the founder and leader of the Volitional Edge of National Post-eclecticism group, developing mythological and historical models in search of new "beauty of stereotype" using the language of contemporary painting. Referring to Ukrainian Baroque, colours of *parsuna*, stories and heroes of national or ancient history, and Soviet signs and symbols, the artist modifies their original meanings and leads a confusing, at times ironic, postmodernist game in paintings like *Reunion*, *Exercise with clubs*, and *Bohdan Khmelnytsky*.

Throughout the 90s Tistol (now in a duo with Nikolai Matsenko) continued to develop mainly within two closely related projects: *The Museum of Ukraine. Fragment* and *Ukrainian Money*. However, even in these works, comparing to the early Ukrainian neo-baroque, one may feel the shift of emphasis, different teleology prevailing.

In one of the manifestos, the artists justify their "historic choice" in a following way: "Ukrainian mentality assumes the way to achieve success different from Suvorov's postulates (...). We, who were born and developed as a nation with the active help of Genghis Khan and raised between Sobieski and Ottomans, Pilsudski and Atatürk, were able to comprehend the great "science of losing". In the same text, they settle yet another fundamental thesis – "the struggle for beauty of stereotypes". Having become skilled, ever since Volitional Edge of National Post-eclecticism group, in connecting and ironic interweaving of various myths and cultural stereotypes, the artists still do not give up the desire to create a new Ukrainian stereotype, or, even more, – a new meta-myth.

In neo-baroque of the end of the XX century (in complete analogy with its historical prototype) external vitality conjugates with gloomy experiencing the impermanence of existence, fragility of cultural archive. *Museums* of Tistol and Matsenko have been as if programmed for such a final. The disembodiment processes get ever more visible in them, as well as turning of a formerly "pure" painting into a heterogeneous object. Though it is mounted by docking of multiple paper-glass modules into a "painting" unit, but indeed it already is not one: joints, fractures, intervals, and shining glass which blurs and hides a picture become no less important. The technology itself gets profaned, as if getting cheaper, it goes against the "eternal" materials, painting becomes more dematerialized, while capturing larger and larger exhibition area, becoming more virtuous, but at the same time even more elusive. In essence, we face the transient "imaginary museum", unsteady models of hoax.

One of the *Fragments of Ukrainian money* created by them appeared at the Kyiv Art Meeting (1995) as a "high relief" installation, now close in style not to Baroque, but to some national empire. It fit into the interior of the Ukrainian House (former Lenin Museum) so naturally that almost completely dissolved in it, in its peculiar architectural and historical aura.

Tistol's *National Geographic* painting project was dedicated to ethnography, the search for a national identity, but this time "alien" one, on the material of Sikhs, Bushmen, etc. – the author, who had never been to these regions, immersed in their lives, as any profound National Geographic reader or viewer of Discovery Channel. Stylized stencil-plane approach with elements of realistic images to create effects recycled television images. Stylized stencil planar approach with elements of realistic images created an effect of recycled television images.

In Tistol's painting series of the recent years one may clearly see the interest, on the one hand, towards "telerealism", and on the other – towards the traditions and methods of pop-art, like the "outlandish" iconized character of a palm tree in *Yu.Be.Ka.* project (Crimean South Bank). The ground for creating a series of trees' "portraits" was author's stay in Gurzuf in 2006. Palm-tree is both an attractive decorative object and a significance symbol. Operating with a timeless symbol like this, already overloaded with countless associations, the artist manages to create his own image, as if "Ukrainising" a palm-tree. Tistol does not conceal that today he is actively using TV screen or a small camera for making his images ("telerealism"). But the artist is not just obtaining television and photo-images – he also carries out a whole chain of media manipulations and transformations to make a viewer feel a fundamentally new semantic and spatial quality behind transparent, light, artistic and deliberately simple painting.

Biblical myth and non-stop painting

Alexander Roytburd is a very prolific painter. Creating art for him is a cyclical process.

This is similar to non-stop painting. He has come a long way – different times, different principles of picture construction. Along with that he is always recognizable: a metaphysical constant is always present in his work. He has a completely individual language, and his own world, shaped differently from anyone else's.

Some of his works of the second half of the 80s, which used timeless mythologies, nevertheless included acute social notes passed in the allusive, but concise and expressive "Aesopian language". His paintings are often based on fables, with their semantic concision, nominal scenery and mild ironic moralizing. Filled with internal conflicts, his biblical paintings have also been one of the favourite genres of the artist.

The pictorial system of works from this busy period (the late 80s and 90s, most fully represented at the 1-st and 2-nd "After Postmodernism" exhibitions in Odessa) was characterized by excessive generosity and baroque. But, as Sergei Kuskov accurately observed in his writing about these exhibitions, here it is "in the abundance and fullness of manifested forms... the very climax of condensation and compression, sealing of image textures,... the language of painting, swelling and curving, gradually reveals its groundless (transcendental) origin ..."

The Lady in White project of 1993 inspired by Titian is also not lacking in a phantasmagoric grandeur of heaps of plastic forms. But the surreal dominant emerging within it successfully kept them within an organic part of a holistic, but branched clone...

The paintings collected in his new pictorial *Pinakothek*, sometimes make it seem that he moves away from his former keenness on complicated mythologies, abundance of quotes and metaphorical discourse in the direction of greater immediacy and vitality (but not giving up the museum allusions too). And here to author's help suddenly comes the "purity of genre", be it someone else's flattening self-portrait (Rembrandt's) subjected to ironic deformation, or almost Chardin-like constructed still life with a title borrowed from Mikhail Nesterov's religious painting *Vision to Youth Bartholomew*. And sometimes, on the contrary, he is again under the power of wordy symbolic structures and quotes that shift senses. Roytburd's works presented in his *Pinakothek* send viewers to different signs and codes from art history. A distinctive feature of the artist's new works is that he resorts to "labelling" while absolutely not getting attached to the content of quoted works. In this mode, *Downed Ace* or *Mother of a Partisan* paintings were created.

Similar methodology reveals not only archaic postmodern clichés, but also involuntary consonance with "alter-modern" (the term of Nicolas Bourriaud) – a new kind of universalism, born out of an endless string of translation, subtitling, and dubbing. In some of Roytburd's paintings exposed in the *Pinakothek*, conventionality is adjacent to the distinctive absurdist humour, recreating the atmosphere and "choreography" of endless madness.

Kharkiv social photography

New Ukrainian photography is mainly rooted in the 60's and 70's, the era of Time group when, Kharkiv photographic school was actually born. And although the school has always been characterised by social sharpness, it has always been difficult to draw the line between documentary and staged photography. Kharkov artists often are so expressive even in sequential shooting, that it creates the effect of spontaneous staging, and it's getting harder to distinguish document from fiction. The blurry borderline has always been the trump card of Kharkov school. This is the school's feature that was so evident in one of the most significant exhibitions – a major retrospective of Boris Mikhailov in Kyiv Soros CCA in 1996. In the project Mikhailov's works from different years lined up in a single large installation. *The Earth* and *Twilight* series, along with *Luriki* – a series of aniline painted photographs, presented a critical reflection on Soviet life, capturing the post-Soviet collapse and all other features of the artist's work.

In the early 90s Mikhailov created the Emergency Response Group in Kharkiv, which also included Sergei Bratkov and Sergei Solonsky. For their Sevastopol project "Alchemical surrender" (completed on a warship), the group shot *The Sacrifice for the God of War* video, showing the artists themselves collecting along the railroad discarded hygiene products with menstrual blood, which referred both to the ancient ritual practices and the traditional taboo for women to be on the ship. Their second work demonstrated on the ship, was a literal and therefore suggestive, "Pandora's Box" – *Three letters* installation, which is a box containing only three letters – the ones that distinguish Ukrainian alphabet from Russian (the show was taking place at the peak of crisis in Black Sea Fleet separation between Ukraine and Russia).

Another resonant project by the Emergency Response Group during the mid-90s was *If I were a German* series. This project is a simulation, verified and played out by the artists, of controversially congested ethnological mythologies and systems, along with self-identity issues. Polemical sharpening (sometimes to the point of feigned cynicism) of these ideas and sadomasochistic relations such as occupational eroticism,

repressed desires, framed by the iconographical quote from a certain, as if already illustrated by someone, set of cultural history, along with frequent bucolic spirit – all of this filled the project ironic grotesque content and understated psychoanalysis.

Alike Mikhailov, Bratkov quite impressively documented the dismantling of the Soviet myth. He critically approached the revaluation of values caused by this collapse, relationships with the recent past and the difficult “transitional” present.

The heroes of his individual photo series – sailors, secretaries, former paratroopers, kids, boxers, policemen, street hooligans, are all very realistic, natural, but at the same time the tone of staged and “overexposed” colours provide images with certain excessiveness. “Craziness” of his characters is offset by systematic artist’s approach. He almost always keeps a restrained tone of irony and play, and its characters retain external calmness as they stay within their familiar everyday space, posing against its background, as if not noticing how reality gets transformed into a sign of itself. The balance of brutality and tenderness, comedy and tragedy is a characteristic feature by which one may immediately recognize the principles of Kharkiv social photography in Bratkov’s pictures.

Horror stories (1998) are one of his most prominent series. Essentially giving up computer manipulation in favour of filming on location – in a tram depot station, or basement dormitory, or colourful incomparable surroundings of communal apartments, he applies ironic cynicism to stage his photographs, in which collective actions and entertainments of “Soviet pioneers and pupils” or, translating into a universal scale, mere inhabitants of “City of Lost children” turn into similarly comical, though bloody rituals. Bratkov treats his characters, his “babies” as zero degree beings, free of morality – the original children’s self-interest does not distinguish between good and evil (although, at the same time he is shooting hard documentary series about orphanages, full of compassion and anguish). Having chosen the genre of photographic illustration, in which the original element is a specific literary form, dark pioneer folklore, Bratkov is trying to avoid the danger of falling into pure illustration. He tries to reconcile the eternal conflict of words and the visual imagery, which must be exceeded and saved at the same time. “Sots-Art”, popular in the late Soviet context as we know it, is actively resorted to comic visual signification, attribution of commonplace verbal idioms as ideological opposition. The artist also seems to keep a lot of those attributes, but by mixing red ties, the bust of Stalin, Coca-Cola, swastika and the like, he uses them more as emblematic opportunities of “scenic” decor, free from any kind of ideology and transforming the image into a shock in itself.

In a picture, which the artist took in the beginning of the zeros in Petropavlovsk fortress, he uses advertising principles of deliberate non-compliance in order to create the image of people in bathing suits, leaning on the massive building to sunbathe ... in the snow. *Procession*, of the larger *Ukraine* series, was seen and captured in Ukrainian countryside in the deserted, “minimalist” landscape. Panoramic elongation of composition, distance to the horizon line, in which he runs the processes generate reflections on the state of motion and metaphysics frozen space. As the artist himself philosophically stated, “people go from one place and arrive at the same place – going from these people to those people”.

Gene Mutation

Ilya Chichkan’s painting – subject- and stylistically-wise – in the early 90s was inspired by cinema (*Faith. Hope. Love, Jaws*, pictures shown at the Gene Mutation exhibition), which did not argue the methodology of postmodern appropriations then typical for Ukrainian artists. Photography was his other passion of those years. Turning to the technical methods of the late 19th century “pictorialists”, the artist strived to make his photos look like paintings. In his “graveyard” series one may feel the collision between immobility and mobility of the image, between reality and illusion.

Among the most impressive Chichkan’s projects of the 90s we should highlight the ones associated with the post-explosion mythology (Chernobyl). Focusing on physical mutation, the artist takes its environmental aspect to aesthetic dimension. He started with a readymade in the group exhibition “Alchemical surrender” (1994), which was held at the operating warship in the Crimea, simply placing the mutant embryos in embrasures on the deck. Presenting this way a kind of bodily sculpture, the artist tries to break the taboo of generally accepted ethical norms on the demonstration (or hiding?) something terrible, ugly, and shocking. A little later, in the photo installation *Sleeping Princes of Ukraine*, he provides the idea of mutation in these objects with new semantic codes. Decorating the main characters – here, stillborn flesh – in cheap jewelry, he sees them as princes, with rare equanimity comparing and mystifying the concept of noble Scythian burial rites and the burial of Chernobyl nuclear-sarcophagus. “Monstrous beauty” of these images fits into the mainstream of post-catastrophic sensibility, which his *Atomic Love* video (2002) is also equipped with.

Chichkan's *Abstract Realism* project completed in the late 90s includes a series of large-format portraits of Kyiv mental hospital residents. The author is concerned with the problem of conformity of normal and abnormal at the level of society and that of art form.

Anthropomorphic animalism defines the imagery of many photos, videos, and paintings the artist has been making for a decade now. He comes up with all sorts of "human" stories for rabbits, fish, ducks, monkeys, sometimes filling the plot with psychedelic sense, or pseudo-scientific theories, such as "psychodarwinism" (which is also the title of one of his projects, which crossed the postulates of Darwin and Freud's statements: monkey turned human not because of work, but because of emotions, sex, and war), clothing them in the form of plausible reality. Apelike creatures fill the painting installation of *Totalitarian Darwinism*, with a rigid sense of irony de-ideologosing canonical monuments of the Soviet era.

The aesthetic identity of the artist in recent years has been largely determined by the position of "idiot", clearly emerging, in particular, in his video-miniature *Basketball*. It has a similarity to the Russian Blue Noses group, whose work is also seen as absurd, funny or brutal provocation, shocking the audience. It is no accident that it is with this group that Chichkan in 2007 created a joint *Mind Games* project, using interactive games and art forms. The installation consists of portraits of famous thinkers and scientists (Einstein, Freud, Pavlov, Baudrillard etc.). Basketball hoops are nailed to the forehead of some portraits, which the audience can throw balls at, and other pictures are attached vertically to the half of a ping-pong table. There are theories that only in games, especially in sports, life come at ease, aimless and free. It is due to this kind of interaction that the artists manage to carry out their hilarious scenario implying "devaluation" of certain eternal values of history and art itself.

The extract of reality

As an artist, Maxim Mamsikov is interested in everyday life most of all. However, his interpretation of the genre does not mean a simple life-likeness. His paintings are rather fit into the latest trend of certain "post-media realism" based on the mechanism of paradoxical psychological compensation – the further away from reality you go, the more insistently you cling to its semblances.

His images often resemble a collection of random images with "blurred" focus, as if with the effect of shaking camera, similar to what is usually used by the directors Scandinavian "Dogma". Sometimes scenes are reminiscent of the panoramic "shot" from a bird's eye view or sometimes out of the window of a fast-racing car...

Plots of small or even miniature works by Mamsikov (one of his series was called namely *Pocket Art*) are unelaborated, fragmentary, and lacking of didactics: players in the pitch, lovers on the lawn, a waterer, a pack of Belomor cigarettes, Gorbachev's "Foros" bald head, a tank in snow, a plate of borsch, a plane taking off, a skier, Gagarin, birches. The language of these works is an intriguing game on the verge of reality and light unobtrusive dreams. In the *Road* and *Billboards* series the artist managed to combine minimalism and many nuances of "full-scale" painting style with advertising and pop-art elements.

The new series – *Heaven* and *Curtains* – showcase the enlargement art form and enforcement of metaphysical status, while the "tachiste" *Colour Proof* project, containing almost equal amounts of the abstract and the hyperrealistic, gains vectors in the direction of experiments with the pure essence of painting.

Maxim Mamsikov offers the viewer a certain extract of reality, transferring his immediate impressions into laconic stories. This is the basis of "light" realism in his work. Showing only fragments he is as if pulling them out of their time. In *Aeroflora* series he, like Gnilytsky, is interested not in people but in objects. It's a colourful, infantile world: huge inflatable toys floating in the blue sky. The intensity of the bright, pure colours and almost a designer construction of the canvas give birth to poetics close to psychedelics of pop culture, spectacular effect of pop art, which, incidentally, can be seen in works of several other Ukrainian artists. Mamsikov is trying to show and hide at the same time, filling the image with mysterious senses and emotional vibrations. Placed in celestial void, particular familiar things gain some new, otherworldly meanings.

Fiction as reality

Lviv artist Andriy Sagaydakovsky, the author of quite radical installations that literally wrap, but also cleave closed spaces, replace the usual perception of things with the completely different, unexpected angle, loose objects of their perpetual force of attraction, not just turning them physically and functionally (e.g., a table nailed to the wall), but, above all, in the associative, figurative manner. "Andriy Sagaydovsky shows us all the material quality of the 'low-fi', with huge pressure creating in his installations a fictitious model, which turns out to be more real than reality" (Jerzy Onuch).

Sagaydovsky's painting, exaggerating ordinariness, grotesque in its imagery, painting style and the materials used, also reverses the common perception of reality, forcing the viewer to question the unambiguity of

everyday existence. The matrices of the simulated reality are the artist's numerous imagery series, ghosts filling daily life with murderous platitudes: "this is a table", "right-left", "Thursday is not Tuesday", "rain". With all its apparent diversity, Sagaydavsky's painting of the recent few years definitely consists of several thematically and stylistically connected cycles. First of all these are works, united under the mark of *Anatomical Studies* – expressionist by manner, low-key though risky colour-wise, as it seems that the complicated, subtle monochrome palette might nearly "get muddy". *Studies*, with dynamic ridiculous and at times frankly affective postures and facial expressions of depicted figures and faces; barely readable, deliberately blurred "indicative" texts, playing a rather graphic, visual, vacillating role than just informative and explanatory – here, these are one of the most important elements bringing the image to absurd.

Chanson art

Stanislav Volyazlovsky, the artist from Kherson, came up with the name of "chanson-art" for his numerous series. They use the style of folk prints, prison tattoos, children's doodles, echoes of dark humour, "dissociation" of the image, akin to schizophrenic, radicalism of high insanity... The heroes of his works – from the famous, charismatic and odious politicians (here you can see Tymoshenko, Putin, Yushchenko, and Berlusconi) to the sacrificial king of Russian chanson, Mikhail Krug, and just some legless girls, or nurses evoking images of the *Parallel cinema* film about werewolf paramedics.

Thus, the image of Yulia Tymoshenko, with a bandage over her left eye is a hybrid of a pirate, a mermaid, and the Statue of Liberty. Vladimir Putin is presented in the form of Saint George, tattooed with gas formulas and killing the snake with a trident. Viktor Yushchenko is Cossack Mamai, with unchangeable attributes of the canonical image (horse, sword, spear ...), but instead of a goblet of wine, there comes yet another ironic stereotype, adapted, so to speak, to the factual biography – that is, a barrel of honey. The significant cause of the effectiveness of the artist's imagery is its technological uniqueness, when the seemingly mundane and understated becomes refined and exclusive.

"Idiotically" meticulous ballpoint pen drawing is applied to a sheet of paper or old second-hand sheets, pillow cases, tinted with tea stains. As acknowledged by the artist himself, "chanson art" is a kind of reflection about the world in which I exist, with its interests, concerns, fears, religion, new cultural challenges, its TV and programmes filled with moronic ads, dismemberment, crime, pornography, shows, politics, with its yellow press and pulp literature the style of Marinina, with its internet – endless source of information for everyone". An important feature of Volyazlovsky's works – in addition to visual opulence, is that they carry a large share of accompanying text, being somewhat like a message to the audience, sometimes in the guise of the paranoid, but literally perfect and unexpected.

"Orange" generation

In 2004, about twenty young artists took active part in the Orange Revolution. The premises of Contemporary Art Centre in Kyiv served them as a basic lab. The result of such spontaneous collective action was the R.E.P. exhibition, in Ukrainian standing for "Revolutionary Experimental Space", and an almost immediately formed art group of the same name that positioned itself as the new generation of Ukrainian art. The main means of the Group were simulated «bad painting» of neoexpressionist manner, installation in the urban environment, and social performance. Artists were aware of insufficiency and bureaucracy of the institutional model of art process and chose public vector under the cover of the parasitic institution image. R.E.P. seeks to create its own niche in the social life of the country, which is still going through a period of wild democracy, with permanent presidential race and political scandals. Using the style, tactics, techniques and attributes of marketplace policies (street protests with megaphones and banners, "agitation tents", flags, leaflets), artists desperately invade everyday life and cultivate their extreme metaphors within it.

R.E.P. (Nikita Kadan, Ksenia Gnilitska, Lada Nakonechna, Zhanna Kadyrova, Volodymyr Kuznetsov, Lesya Khomenko) for a long time have been developing the *Patriotism* project, which includes a set of graphical symbols that correspond to different words and concepts, and allows the use of these symbols to create visual stories, mainly in the form of murals. *Patriotism* makes local issues become a theme of universal communication. This project, "Esperanto" in spirit, seeking to address the difficulties of translation, is in a utopian way oriented towards the conversation about differences in common language, and is also closely associated with the social nature.

Group leader Nikita Kadan remains faithful to the critical vector in his personal works, be it monumental murals with the use of Suprematist style and Google Earth software with coded protest against the illegal construction in a particular area of Kyiv, or small light-boxes with graphic images on the same topic. Gift plates with drawings in the spirit of Stalinist era aesthetic medical guidelines are visual basis of Kadan's *Procedure Room* project. It is dedicated to the typical in today's Ukraine recurring practice of police violence

and various aspects of its public perception. “Souvenir” plates contain printed images of police torture methods, the indifferent lines of which seem to deprive the images themselves of pain. As in the illustrations of “Popular Medical Encyclopedia”, Kadan’s “patients” usually bear a kind and tranquil facial expression. Surrender to violence-based instruction (though supposedly done “for the good”) is akin to obedience of a delinquent child, “who, – as we read in the artist’s text accompanying the drawings, – understands the inevitability of avenging hand rising”. A sort of “post-Soviet” sadomasochism perceived with a smile, because irony is perhaps the best medicine for phantom pains of the past. The plates are a part of a large urban project, which, in addition to the themes of violence, refers to common issues of physicality and dialogue with the body. The body is considered here in several meanings: as something personal and inalienable, as private (thus it can be an object of exchange); as civilian (the work with which is committed by professionals in blue police uniform). It’s not just about the body, but also about brainwashing through torture as “invisible regulation” of mass consciousness.

Creating her sculptures, Zhanna Kadyrova shows interest in mundane household material – coloured ceramic tiles. Images of daily life increased to abnormal size, such as: a crushed pack of cigarettes, a road sign, a school globe, plastic stirring sticks or “diamonds” made of tiles, gain a rustic, even brutal, but at the same time glamorous beauty. Along with that, exploiting a once discovered artistic technique – that is, making sculptures from banal construction material, she succeeds in avoiding repetition, discovering new aspects each time. The *Fillings* project also continues the artist’s major line. But now she, like other artists of the R.E.P. group, goes beyond filling up the space of room out to the street, trying to harmonize its voids, cracks, and fractures.

Her *Monuments* project is a sort of monument to anyone, pure historical potentiality that we have to be: any object might be guessed under the folds of the sheets. One of her latest projects, *Implicit Forms*, is designed for both external and internal spaces. In it, she is working with a new construction material, changing its usual context and purpose. The artist has set an unusual task for a sculptor, fixing the unseen in sight – that is, seeing the world on the “non-material” level. Thus “cement” rays of light and “concrete” video projections appeared. She fills the exhibition space with objects, “revealed” by the light and “underlined” with shadow. In this case, fullness is equivalent to emptiness – the objects themselves are the starting point of emptiness. In false interior alien inclusions of “ready-mades” are almost indistinguishable from real items.

The research of context of relation between local and global, which occurs in different social environments (politics, Goths and Emos, villagers ...), is the centre of attention for SOSka group from Kharkov (Mykola Ridnyi, Serhiy Popov, Anna Kriventsova). The practice of their reactional diagnosis is similar to the methods developed by Situationists – “method of construction of situations introducing additional elements to a reality they can turn (the *détournement* principle) and thus reveal new meanings, hidden until then”. Alike R.E.P. members, the Kharkiv group also works in active social direction. Even the scandalously closed international exhibition of contemporary art at Kharkiv Art Museum, curated by SOSka, was transformed by the young artists into a performance, having created against this background a virtual exhibition, open and actively articulated in art sphere.

Be Happy video, shown at PinchukArtCentre in 2007, was made by Ridnyi in collaboration with Bella Logacheva. In the spirit of Mikhailov, with his famous *Case History* project about the life of Kharkiv’s homeless people, the artists filmed the life of a homeless woman, so to speak, of the “new generation”. But if Mikhailov shows the life of the homeless as “disease history”, heavy, dark, and pathological, the young artists, however, tried to create the image of a “positive” vagabond – show a tragedy through naive optimism and homeless “dolce vita”. But the sad report by Logacheva and Ridnyi is yet about transience and relativity of such “happiness”. Another bold action by Ridnyi himself was the *Passport* project. In protest against the humiliating procedure of issuing the EU visas to Ukrainians, the artist lay on a sidewalk near the German Embassy and documented how guards were making him get out of there. In the wake of endless Ukrainian elections SOSka created an ironic “topical” project titled *They are in the Streets* – street scenes parodying political “soap opera”, the heroes of which had pin-ups of infamous Ukrainian political leaders upon their faces.

The *Wake* video installation, which involved professional mourners, is the ritualistic, emotionally hysterical metaphor for mourning over iconic artworks of the twentieth century, starting from the avantgarde, symbolized by Duchamp’s *Fountain*, and ending with glamour and art market, the essence of which is represented with *Diamond Skull* by Hirst.

Translated by Lesia Prokopenko