

Art in America
June 1985

Komar & Melamid Confidential

With icons of power and other assorted imagery, this team of Russian émigrés makes paintings and performances about the confusions of history. Their recent work, the author argues, suggests a new possibility; that of refashioning and so escaping the labyrinth of the 20th century.

BY GARY INDIANA

Komar and Melamid's complete works comprise a theater of bizarre forms, a conceptual vaudeville in which the acrobats, the sword swallows, and the ladies-who-get-sawed-in-half all betray the sameness of difference, with sly intimations of some entropic horror hidden beneath the clogged proscenium. History and memory mud wrestle, like two psychotic borscht belt comedians intent on killing each other. The acts finish, the audience and performers bleat out the national anthem with the orchestra, people finally herd off to the exits. But the doors are bolted shut and nobody can leave the theater. And then, of course, it's discovered that the building is on fire.

The 1984-85 paintings shown in February and March at the Ronald Felman Gallery are assemblage works, variedly scaled combines of mostly 13.5-inch-square wood panels. Physically and pictorially, the contents of an individual panel may reflect one or another narrative or formal investigation; the method governing the work -in-progress as a whole was aleatory, digressive and whimsical. Only when the exhibition became imminent were the individual panels decisively arranged into discrete multipanel works. These were installed in the gallery along a horizontal line, like sentences. (Certain works extend up or down, or both, like sentence diagrams.) Though they weren't organized in any narrative or chronological order, the works could be read as episodes in an extensive, joint autobiography, in which personal imagery is framed within acerbic models of the sociopolitical mise-en-scene. In the movie of the artist's lives, the background scenery has shifted often: the Soviet Union, Israel, New York. They splice together the cultural decors they've inhabited to emphasize the spiritual vacancy connecting all parts of the known world. (Happiness stops at Vienna, as E.M. Cioran once said. But only a fool would be happy with what any modern culture recommends as happiness. The dictatorship of the proletariat, state capitalism, consumer product paradise: it's all junk, hologram-scenery passing before the eyes of the engineered soul.)

In variously subtle and brash ways, K&M's undistracted gaze at the costume parade of modern political power reflects a collaborative inability to be taken in, a refusal to see things 'innocently'. The artists had the fortune to grow up in a country where the secret truth, shared among most people, is that everything is a lie. to be thus equipped, willingly or not, is to look through the modern "new to the real "new", which is hardly ever visual in form, but mental. Namely, deformations in consciousness wrought by an ensemble of cultural elements that serve needs of power. As K&M's work shows us, the academic styles of the 19th century, as Expressionism, as anything "rediscovered" or as new and pluralistic as you please.

The world view described by K&M's work is broader than what most current art deals with, and the specificity of their subject matter is startling. There is nothing vague about Komar and Melamid are addressing, through they do address many things at once. Among them, personal history, homosexuality, political mythology, the history of iconography, castration anxiety, death. The anthropological equations they make between various cultural icons aren't easily read read by viewers with a single-culture frame of reference, however.

As work is a synthesis of the artists' experiences in the Soviet Union and the United States, a central motif

is the Yalta Conference, the symbol of two countries' wartime alliance and the birthplace of the modern geopolitical world. The Yalta Conference photographs are mysteriously charged images for thousands, perhaps millions of Americans and Russians who have no idea of what actually occurred at Yalta. Since Yalta, history has sufficiently accelerated for near events to seem ancient, and "postliterate" visual culture has proliferated so virulently that a fairly recent photograph can become a mystically obscure artifact. The world of Yalta is so lacking in immediacy for the postmodern American mind that its icons are simultaneously assimilable to the hazy realm of ancient myth, and accessible to be content-free recyclings of visual fashion. Komar and Melamid can insert Zeus and the Minotaur into 1945, or Stalin into a painting with George Washington, without violating the sensibilities of most people under 25. And Stalin and Hitler can re-emerge as neutralized cultural images, the repressed returning like ba pennies, perhaps to close unlucky eyes.

The iconography ranges back to real ancient history as well: Nero, Cicero, the world of imperial Rome. Once more we are in a time of myths and strange auguries, portents, blood rituals, the blind leading the blind. Each item of the mind's symbolic furniture becomes laden with triple, quadruple meanings. Surely the *Canal in Leningrad* is really a canal in Venice. Obviously that is Lenin behind the Minotaur mask in *The Minotaur as Participant in the Yalta Conference*. Appropriate to an imperial age, the phallus is ubiquitous: dreamily erect in *Dinner at the Cottage*, noble as repose in *Green Spot*, transubstantiated into a functioning cucumber in *Five Cucumbers*, and lopped off (in the guise of a severed finger) in *Adam and Eve*. Corresponding mythological phobias are evoked: women are again likened to "boards that have never been screwed" (*A Break in Conference*), good for sex "if you put a bag over their heads" (*Schoolgirls*), armed with vagina dentata (*Hitler Cutting His Toenails*).

History with distance, becomes myth. Folding *our* history into the mythic mold (as in a painting like *Ronald Reagan as Centaur*, 1980-81) while bringing the figures of myth into the settings of our reality folds in time into a single overcrowded moment. Pictures of gathered time, fanned out all at once, K&M's composite work forms an immense endlessly reconfigurable rebus, the labyrinth in of the Minotaur. In *Allies* appearances in the world of power are reveal din masks, arbitrary and interchangeable. In *Gary and Blok* a floral mandala is also a swastika.

Employing a broad heterogeneity of painting styles within works, komar and Melamid extend the theme of history-as-masquerade-party to art, presenting the "diversity" of contemporary painting as an entropic industrial production of marginal difference. Moreover, juxtapositions of various modernist styles with examples of classical realism establish a zero value for painting. A double deconstruction occurs: of art and history and the artist in history, or the historical relation of the artists to power.

In the Feldman show, a sequential viewing led the spectator from works redolent of childhood (*Escape form the Shadow*, *Family Treasures*, *Little Boat and Little Locomotive*) across a two-room visual maze to an "ending" a work called *The Death of the Artist*, and a one-panel epilogue (which was stolen from the gallery during the show's first week), *Stalin's Bed*. The visual pairing of these last two works, and many other effects in the show, forcefully conflated the artist and the tyrant as figures imbued with power, whose value can not only be lucidly assessed after death, by history. Komar and Melamid are particularly fascinated by legendary tyrants like Hitler and Stalin, who harnessed whole cultures to their schemes of mastery. In a parallel manner, their new works also reveals a fascination with artists whose legends have at times dominated cultural production: in *It's Time for Us*, soldiers raise a Jackson Pollack on Iwo Jima, and Jasper John's *Three Flags* is reinvented as the "three flags" of the Yalta Conference. (As seen in this show, the Yalta Conference comes across as one of the most ambitious conceptual art works ever executed.)

Komar and Melamid's collaboration represents the "death" of the artist as an individual, aggrandized ego. Numerous panels in their new work mock "Neo-Expressionist" efforts to recover art's long-ago-volcanic power as primal-scream therapy; as conceptual markers, they speculate on the death of art in its present mannerist sub-life. The greeting-card ensemble of politicized fairies in *Fairy Tale*, the 3-D aging bull affixed

to the middle panel of *Autumn in the Village*, the primal-scene stick figures in *Adam and Eve*, all derive from already derivative “styles” that have come online in the art-marketing treadmill. repetition, death: in art as in life. But more importantly, the voice of Komar and Melamid’s works is a posthumous one, the ruminative chatter of consciousness viewing the world from a place of uninhibited resignation. The work’s irresistible humor is, usually, the melancholy, deep cutting humor of displaced persons, wit sharpened by catastrophe.

“I have been dead for many years”: there is scarcely a voice worth listening to in modern times that can’t be imagined repeating Garbo’s aphorism, from Walter Benjamin to Samuel Beckett. Playing dead is one of the best methods of staying alive artistically. It enables one to consider the world as if it’d already ended, to sift the debris, to find pleasure in the ruins. Komar and Melamid’s work is about ruins, and about condition of being ruined. The “Post Art” paintings they made in the early ‘70s while living in Moscow replicated Pop Art paintings they had seen in reproduction, but with the added dimension of decay, simulated by blowtorch; their Warhols and Lichtensteins look like crumbling frescoes. “scenes from the Future,” an ongoing series, shows “postmodern” landscapes of decaying museums and gutted airports, the feral optimism of modern architecture denuded by its future dysfunction. Besides literal ruins, K&M are preoccupied with the suffocation of ordinary life by ideological debris and the material garbage that history accumulates around us.

K&M’s work has this to say about historical thinking, too; the more of it you do, the more you experience you lack of freedom and the impossibility of doing anything “new”. Everything “new” becomes superannuated and forgotten; every bright earthly possibility (like the Yalta Conference, or the hopeful dinosaurs of the “Ancestral Portraits” series) eventually bites the dust.

Several recent K&M paintings combined the garish classical conceit they’d used earlier (in *Marx and Engels with Still Life*, 1981-82, etc.) with equally garish, high-colored Abstract-Expressionist splashes: *Discobolus*, *Alexander the Great* and *The Venus of Milo* (all 1983) were widely mistaken as some sort of homage to “triumphant” American painting, just as the earlier “straight” classical works, which borrowed lightning effects and composition devices from European masters (Tiepolo, David, Caravaggio) were taken as ironic contextual displacements of paintings in the Socialist Realist style. (There is actually, no such thing as the Socialist Realist *style*.) The effect of *Discobolus* and the other works just as mentioned is that of a tightly condensed exhaustion, collapsing centuries of art production into symbols of “dynamic” political and esthetic orthodoxy.

The panel paintings compress these ideas differently. They afford historical exhaustion the chance to reel itself out at stupendous length, but in graceful miniature. (*Biography*, a 1973 work with similarly encyclopedic breadth, consists of 197 much tinier wood squares that follow a fictional chronology; authentic miniatures coming from the land of Faberge.) Personal history is particularized with deliberately absurd, self-exposing explicitness. Scenes of cruelly impersonal social facts permeate contiguous images of family gatherings and sexual encounters with the pathos of loss, like snapshots taken moments before the fatal car crash or the arrival of the secret police (*Double Self-Portrait in interior*, *Family Treasures*). The image of Stalin works as a multi-contextualizing element in the new work. Stalin is not a straightforward historical anchor but signifies the presence of power mechanisms in all social configurations. In K&M’s earlier “history paintings” (*Stalin and the Muses*, 1981-82, *The Origin of Socialist Realism*, 1983), Stalin is mythologized, with ludicrous earnestness, as the progenitor of all things good; that is, as he portrayed himself through the Soviet culture industry; in *Thirty Years Ago* and *Blindman’s Buff* (both 1983), Stalin’s framed portrait in the background establishes the vintage of the scenes depicted, and heightens their somber mood. In the new works, Stalin (or some who looks like him) pops up like a subtext flushed from concealment; shaking hands with George Washington, raping a peasant woman at a conference, hoisting a Churchill-headed lion over his shoulders.

For K&M, Stalin may embody repressive power (as do Lenin, Roosevelt, Cicero, Hitler et al.), but he signifies other things, too. When Komar and Melamid were schoolchildren, their environment was heavy with Stalin’s presence: in pictures, public statues, busts and history books, on the radio. Then, with

dizzying speed, the public memory of Stalin was abruptly erased, following Khrushchev's Secret Speech in 1965. Stalin's picture was airbrushed out of official photographs, his figure removed from historical paintings; books were withdrawn, edited, reissued minus Stan. In K&M's work, Stalin represents a recovery of lost time, and also the breaking of a strong visual taboo. Stalin is a recurring, potent image in an ever-revised, imaginative reconstruction of a dimly recalled past. This past is hypothetical, contingent, possibly fictitious. A culture that edits its own memories produces collective aphasia.

Komar and Melamid's nostalgia for an equivocal, mythologized past is presented with a self-doubting skepticism, Proust's tea laced with vinegar. The "post everything" position of their work is an impossible attempt to freeze time, to arrest the present's ceaseless molestation of the past, to close of continuum. The location of "self" (in this case, "double self") within a fixed glut of things; cultural paraphernalia, the various opiates of the various masses is a strategy to maintain, from each shifting minute to the next, an identity outside things.

This position is menaced by passing time and regularly knocked off balanced= by modern culture's perverse will to leach meaning out of experience. An exasperated discovery of absurdity and vileness in the seemingly decent and seductive is a favorite K&M them. Cynical viewers accuse their work of cynicism; it is, simply, skeptical. Cynicism and skepticism are radically different. Skepticism addresses the world of forms in hopes of distinguishing appearance from being, illusion from reality. It becomes humorous when it deflates pretense and exposes foolishness. Komar and Melamid's work compels viewers to laugh at many things, including the inanities of contemporary art, which have become remystified after a brief deconstructive spell of post-Minimalism in the 70's.

A tonic contempt for formalism, inherent in the methodological flexibility K&M have flaunted all along, is a blatant running gag in their new work. Panels that are "signs" of formalism; exclamation points, diagrammatic abstractions of adjacent figurative panels, etc., appear as punctuation or breathing space within specific works. Formalism becomes a subject rather than a method; the green dot that appears (somewhere or other) in many panels is formalist high camp. K&M "enjoy" formalism, in the same sense that they enjoy Communist propaganda and American art products; as interesting visual debris. On the one hand, the ubiquitous and ridiculous reference to formalist thinking exposes its arbitrariness. On the other, its use as linkage between scenarios of hanging, decapitation, rape and pornographic memoir also exposes the arbitrariness of "content".

Ruins are the second, metaphoric life of objects and ideas. Inhabitants of societies today have, for the most part, been acculturated to anticipate; either as a certainty or as strong possibility, the spectacle of their own annihilation and the larger destruction of civilization itself, in a blitz of atomic flashes. Komar and Melamid's new work suggests the limitless potential contained in the ruins we already have, the liberating energies inherent in all our historical debris: the possibility, in other words, of refashioning the labyrinth so we can find our way out of it.

Art Used in this Article:

-Cover: Komar and Melamid's "Post-Art No. 2[Lichenstein]" 1973

-*Scenes from the Future* 1983-84

-*Discobolus*, 1983, oil on canvas, 72 by 48 inches

-*The Minotaur as Participant in the Yalta Conference, 1984*

- *Allies*, 1984-85

-*Air, Fire and Water*, 1984-85

-*Blindmans Buff*, 1982-83

-*Ancestral Portraits: Allosaurus*, 1980