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Diplomat Turns Flat Into Belarussian Art Exhibit

By Alex Labrom

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The exhibit features a mix of conceptual art, photography and multimedia.

Behind the door of apartment number 33 in the House on the Embankment, you can catch a glimpse of contemporary Belarussian art in an exhibit of often challenging, provocative, dark and light works that are housed for the rest of the week in the home of an Austrian diplomat.

The exhibit "The Belarus – Young Contemporary Art" has temporarily taken over the apartment of Simon Mraz, the cultural attaché of the Austrian Embassy in Moscow and director of the Austrian Cultural Forum.

As part of his job, Mraz is responsible for both Russia and Belarus, and after a number of trips to the latter he became intrigued by the "highly dynamic and diverse art scene" that had evolved despite being "mostly shut off from the international art world."

This exhibition is part of the VI Festival of Contemporary Art Collections being organized by the National Center for Contemporary Art, which is celebrating its 20th anniversary. When approached, Mraz suggested bringing works from Belarus, much of which comes from a Minsk partner, Y-Galery.

The exhibit packs in a mix of conceptual art, photography, multimedia and paintings, giving a taste of what Mraz says is a "young, independent, nonconformist generation of artists."

Sergei Shabohin's installation is part of his project called "Terror Ready-Made Collection," which looks at the aesthetics of dictatorship and features images from the recent controversial trial of the men accused of bombing the Minsk metro, pictures taken by Belarussian secret services and a patriotic body-building contest. A fragment of another installation recreates a 1970s Soviet resort.

One of the most striking and disturbing artists on show is A.R.Ch, the acronym that comes from the initials of Andrei Chikatilo, the infamous Soviet serial killer. His paintings are dark and light at the same time: a man punches a woman in the face, an old man hangs from a noose.

"It is stunning what this artist is doing living quite isolated in a little village in the countryside," said Mraz. "He shows us a nightmare ... the opposite of the officially approved happy, nice, classic family. It is about violence, lack of perspective, darkness — all that in the light color of the greatest Belarussian artist, Marc Chagall."

Many of the artists reflect the political situation in Belarus, where President Alexander Lukashenko has remained firmly in charge for nigh on twenty years, but Mraz says he looks at the art first.

"I do not ask about political views, I must believe in an artist and I do so when he gives us a strong artistic impression," Mraz wrote in an e-mail interview. "Artists show us in their artistic language how they see the reality around ... [They] make us see their fantasies, their fears. ... This can be politically hot, but the action of the artist is an artistic reaction."

Some parts of the flat are just that though, part of his flat. Mraz says he found people looking for artwork in the toilet. Onlookers also once took him making lunch as a piece of art.

"The Belarus – Young Contemporary Art" runs till Aug. 19. 2 Serafimovicha Ulitsa, entrance 2, apt. 33, 6th floor. www.ncca.ru

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