The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Risque Exhibit Becomes Insect Battleground

By Simone Peek

April 13, 2013



Artist Ilya Isupov standing alongside one of his ant artworks in which many former residents died scenic deaths. **Vladimir Filonov**

A remarkable exposition opened last week at the Triumph Gallery. Ilya Isupov's collection, "The Anthill," reaped high praise, with live ants starring in the artwork. It was initially an exhilarating sight. Unfortunately, a few days in, the pieces began to look more like grave mounds.

"I think they started eating each other," said an employee at the gallery, who wished to remain anonymous. He peered through the glass, trying to spot a living ant in the piles of carcasses. In the first painting, "The Big Anthill," all ants appeared to have perished.

The watercolor-on-plaster production, "Eyes," proved to be a better home for the creatures. Around a dozen live ants remained in the painting when The Moscow Times reporter visited the gallery.

The piece also gave an insight into the potential root of the problem: smaller and bigger ants seemed to have been put together, and gallery visitors became spectators of a jaw-to-jaw fight among the surviving insects.

“Ants live a long time if you take care of them,” Isupov said, upon hearing the news.

“I assigned it to my daughter after my last exposition, and as I expected of a teenager, she forgot about them. So we had to buy new ants. In any case, it only adds to the drama.”

The ants were specifically imported from Ukraine, where Isupov lives and works.

There are three pieces with real ants in the collection and four more watercolor paintings, in which the anthill image is mimicked.

“On the basis of the series of works with the ants lies an entirely true story,” Isupov said to introduce the exhibition. This story is of the mad Soviet sculptor, Sergei Konyonkov, whose wife committed adultery with Einstein and thus eventually helped the Soviets to obtain the secrets of the atomic bomb.

A portrait of Konyonkov in front of a serene forest workplace is just one of the collection’s many watercolor paintings that makes a reference to Konyonkov’s wife’s espionage.

A recurring theme in Isupov’s paintings tends to be floating eyes.

Isupov uses many different materials, besides the watercolors, including wax and paper to create his compositions, such as the plaster anthill models.

“I do what is interesting and funny. A game of patches of color alone is boring,” the artist said.

The result is a soft-colored art brut collection with surrealist influences — a meadowy alternative world, with elements of ours, but shown through a frame-shaped magnifying glass.

“The Anthill” exhibit is on display at the Triumph Gallery until April 22, along with British artist Graham Dean’s “Thinking Bodies” exhibit. The gallery is located at 3/8 Ulitsa Ilyinka, Bldg. 5. Phone: +7 495-662-0893. www.triumph-gallery.ru*. Entrance is free.*

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