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'Consciousness Without Borders': New Russian Art

Yulia Virko and Anthony Gelfand in St. Petersburg

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"20.255" by Yulia Virko, 2020 **Courtesy of artist**

The St. Petersburg exhibition “Consciousness Doesn't Have Borders” showcases the work of two young contemporary artists, Yulia Virko and Anthony Gelfand. This show is an expanded version of a previous joint show held at Center for Contemporary Art Winzavod in Moscow earlier this autumn.

Both Virko and Gelfand create their own realities based on what they once experienced, felt, saw or dreamed. Yet the two artists approach their subjects from opposite directions. While Gelfand gets his inspiration from family archives, stories in social media and personal memorabilia, including, for example, children’s toys, Virko explores the imagery of her dreams in massive paintings.

“My paintings tell you about that precious and particular moment in time when you are waking up without realizing it yet, the moment when the borders between dream and reality are still blurred,” Virko told The Moscow Times.

Some of Virko’s imagery is surreal, if somewhat disturbing: trains bursting into flames and careening off the rails, a lion sailing in an orange rescue boat, a huge iceberg floating in raspberry water and a flock of flamingos facing up a police patrol. Gelfand, by contrast, creates his installations to share some very personal moments with viewers. His art revolves around particular events, people and memories.

While Gelfand is as specific as possible about references and titles, Virko only numbers her paintings and never gives them names. “When there are no hints, the experience turns into an engaging and captivating quest; the numbers set the audiences free from any preconceptions. Instead, they ignite imagination and inspire fantasy, and this is what I like,” she said.

Yulia Virko and Anthony Gelfand have a lot in common: Russian origins, art education in the U.S., a keen interest in exploring the borders between reality and human consciousness.Both of them also use layering, collage and mixed media in their works.

Yulia Virko studied illustration at the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), graduating in 2017, and then went on to earn a master’s degree from the Savannah College of Art and Design. The artist now lives in Moscow.

Born to a family of immigrants of Russian descent, Anthony Gelfand holds a B.A. in art and painting from Savannah College of Art and Design. He is currently based in New York.

Before moving to the US, Virko studied with Yekaterina and Valery Leventhal, who recommended that the young artist to take a course at RISD and helped her prepare for the exams. Yulia Virko is grateful for the experience. “In Russia, they emphasize the importance of learning the technique first, while in the U.S. they put experimentation first. When you focus too much on perfecting your technique, it can hamper your creativity and make you lose your courage. But if you have no courage, how can you ever create something of your own?”

The exhibition is organized by a “transformative labyrinth” designed by architect Ksenia Lukyanova in a way that the viewers can enter or exit it from any direction and explore the exhibition in any order. “The idea was to mix Yulia’s and Anton’s art and for the audiences to immerse themselves into one reality and then another and alternate their experience as they explore the exhibition,” said exhibition’s curator Kristina Romanova. “In these halls Yulia’s imagination meets Anton’s memories, and these two realities interact. The metal labyrinth that our designers created inside Kabelny Tseh in Sevkabel is like the circle of human consciousness.”

Yulia Virko sees this exhibition design as essential to the works. “There should not be a specific order to it, because we never end up at the beginning of the story that is taking place in our dreams,” she said. “Art in general is always a recycled idea. So, the only way to make it your own is by combining the elements differently, in our own personal way. And in that sense, everyone who comes to the exhibition will create and solve their own puzzles.”

The show will run through Nov. 15 at Kabelny Tseh of Sevkabel Port *in St. Petersburg.*

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