

How Anti-Kremlin Artists Are Diagnosing a Sick Regime

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Artists Against the Kremlin

[Читайте русскую версию здесь.](#)

Artists Against the Kremlin is an exhibition of Russian-speaking artists organized by All Rights Reversed gallery with the support of The Moscow Times at De Balie arts center in Amsterdam.

The more than 100 paintings, installations, photographs and sculptures — most of them new — on display were created by artists who, for the most part, have long declared their opposition to the Russian regime. Two and a half years after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, this art is seen less as a protest than as a testimony. Or, rather, as a diagnosis — and in some cases, a confident prognosis.

During the feast of the Babylonian king Belshazzar, “**XXXXXXXX XXXXXX XXXXXX**”

doomed and dying,” said [Linor Goralik](#), one of the many participants in the exhibition. Goralik’s horror “icons” flank the video for “Putin’s Ashes” by Pussy Riot founder [Nadya Tolokonnikova](#). While the viewers caress Nadya’s delicate knees in net stockings, her hand deftly fills pharmacy vials with the product of the combustion. All by herself.

Among the artists on display, in addition to the authors mentioned above, are Andrei Bilzho (everyone pictures his own heroes in his head when looking at his drawing “Kiss of the Devil”), Victor Melamed, Mikhail Ray, Danila Tkachenko, Slava Ptrk, Artem Loskutov, Vladlena Sandu, Alexey Kovalchuk...

And many artists are exhibiting under pseudonyms that say little about them: olo.olooloolo, Kungfuct, Pomidor, Party of the Dead, Igor Ost, artisterror, BFMTH, K.Hell, Kuril What, AXXYX...

Among them is the curator, who acted as an exhibitor at the same time. His unmistakable “A Little Country” is about one fearsome republic living inside Russia according to its own laws. A mosque in the style of the Hagia Sofia (a mosque just like it was [built](#) not so long ago in the capital of this republic) on a bright green square cloth brings to mind the unapologetically politically correct Brodsky — “Green only on the banner of the Prophet” from “Journey to Istanbul.” And of course, one cannot forget about the woven “paintings” of Soviet nonconformist artist Timur Novikov.

The exhibition as a whole confirms the truth: old ideas live and triumph, at least by virtue of their validity and eternal, alas, relevance.

I do not know who exactly hides behind the pseudonym Kastuś Kalinoŭski (the name of the hero of the January Uprising of 1863–1864 in the lands of the former Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth against the Russian Empire), but his porcelain invalids (“Soldiers,” from the “Sad Toys” series) refer, of course, to the sculptures of Ukrainian–Soviet avant-garde sculptor Vadim Sidur, whose centenary we have just celebrated.

And the porcelain meat grinder with babies in diapers (Tasya Asya, “Original Debt to the Russian Federation”) refers to “The Wall,” Alan Parker’s film set to the music of Pink Floyd. That film once shocked the world. But more than 40 years have passed, and society has gotten used to it.

The drawings of Sasha Skochilenko, who, on the eve of the exhibition’s opening, was fortunately among the political prisoners [exchanged](#) by Putin for murderers and terrorists, also inadvertently refer to a sad page from Russian art history (and the country’s history).

Sentenced to seven years in a penal colony for spreading “fakes” about the military — by swapping supermarket price tags with anti-war leaflets — Skochilenko is to some extent an artist by chance. She studied directing at the Russian State Institute of Performing Arts and, before this whole story, was professionally involved in music and wrote poetry.

She didn’t start to draw in earnest until she was imprisoned. Sasha’s mother says they even gave her daughter colored pencils, but not right away, and only six colors. And so everything was put to use, including diluted paste from gel pens.

Obviously, despite all the abuses prisoners face today, the conditions in which Sasha found herself can hardly be compared to those in which Soviet nonconformist painters Boris Sveshnikov and Ülo Sooster, who were even younger at the time of their imprisonment than Sasha, created their graphic evidence of total gulag humiliation in the 1940s and 1950s.

It was forbidden to draw in those camps. When a guard snatched a pack of Sooster's drawings and threw them into the fire and Sooster pulled them out, he got his front teeth knocked out.

Sooster's 100th birthday, by the way, is in October. I'm not comparing those horrors to these — but I can't help but notice a self-evident trend.

Artists Against the Kremlin is on display at De Balie until Sept. 3. Admission is free. More information [here](#).

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