

The Wonderful and Wacky World of Noi Volkov

That Noi Volkov's recent work vibrates with bold colors, sweeping movement, a great sense of humor, warmth, kitsch, and a relaxed simplicity is no surprise to his friends, his collectors, and to those who have been lucky enough to know him. The idea behind this exhibition, however, is anything but effortless. The artist's dedication to the craft of making his ceramics, be they sculptures or teapots, is evident in both his creative process and the end result. Volkov's portrayal of artists and their most famous masterpieces pays homage to his early and longtime influences; however, he pushes that envelope further so as not to interpret them for us but rather to discover and reimagine what art history looks like in the mind of a contemporary artist. Never derivative, Volkov's work is wholly recognizable, above all, and rooted in a deep understanding of and respect for art and in his own personal émigré experience.

Born in 1947, Volkov began painting as a child and swiftly emerged in secondary school as a standout student. Upon graduation, he was accepted to the prestigious Vera Mukhina Higher School of Art and Design in Leningrad, where he spent ample time visiting the Hermitage Museum, studying the classics. Working as an independent artist in the Soviet Union, however, was a minefield full of risks and creative censorship. By the late sixties, two approaches to navigating away from suppressive controls were prevalent. One was to work within the confines and aesthetic rules of the "official" Union of Soviet Artists, for which an artist was given a means to make a living and a studio. The alternative was to be an outsider, a nonconformist, "unofficial," an outcast, with the understanding that one's work would never be exhibited and that self-expression was a farce. In his lifetime, Volkov would know both.

"Through my paintings and ceramic sculpture I try to convey the humor and beauty that inspires my daily expression. To me life is a divine comedy and its truth flows through me and into my work through my ceaseless experimentation."

– Noi Volkov

Artists were seen as servants of the state, and while he developed his craft in the monumental section of the Union of Soviet Artists by way of decorative ceramic murals and government-authorized commissions for public works, paintings done for himself—after hours and underground—were considered contraband. And thus, a duality emerged: Volkov, along with his contemporaries, would live out two creative lives—one for Them (the regime) and one for themselves (for art's sake). The two rarely crossed paths. One time they did, however, was when Volkov refused an "official" request to render a portrait of Lenin, which was considered a prestigious assignment. Eyebrows were raised.

It was in Odessa, after compulsory military service, during which he painted signs and slogans, that he found his niche. By the mid-1970s, established artists there began showcasing each other's work in so-called "apartment" exhibitions. These exhibitions were part of a wider nonconformist movement throughout the Soviet Union, especially in Moscow and Leningrad, in which artists bucked the system and became their own critics, admirers, collectors, competitors, and, above all, *community*, in the wake of authoritarian rules against them. There was no art market. There were no galleries. Soviet artists weren't even allowed access to international magazines and journals that featured images of work that was being done in the West. Yet, it was in these apartments where an art world of its own was created and work could be shown in secret.

Within this polarized climate, Volkov continued to make paintings as he saw fit, some of which were increasingly political in nature. He worked out of a cellar studio (literally underground) and like most artists felt pressured by the risk of being caught. Any wider dissemination of artworks proved too difficult to sustain. For example, on September 15, 1974, a group of artists in Moscow participated in a now-historic outdoor exhibition where they organized a showcase of their works, which was forcibly ended by Soviet authorities, who used bulldozers. Artworks were seized. Some were destroyed. Artists were arrested. For some, including those in Odessa, emigration was the only outlet to creative freedom.

While other Jewish artists and friends had already resettled in Israel, Europe, and the United States, Volkov began the harsh bureaucratic petition to leave in late 1977. For whatever reason, repeated requests for an exit visa from the government were routinely denied. It was during this 14-month process that the KGB focused their attention on his painting. A knock at the door in early 1979 proved fateful and unfortunate—two paintings were seized, *Christ Appears to Brezhnev* and *The Cranes Are Flying*. The former was deemed illegal for its use of religious imagery and satire of the Soviet leader; the latter for its depiction of peasants heeding nature's call against the backdrop of Soviet banners after a festive all-nighter. In short order, Volkov was arrested and jailed for two months, subjected to interrogations, and threatened with time in psychiatric hospitals. Upon his release, his kiln was confiscated and, in effect, so was his livelihood, career, and source of income. Paintings produced in this dark period proved intensely personal and offered deep social insights into anti-Semitism, the facade of Communism, and the skepticism of Perestroika. Finally in 1990, he got out with his wife and child.

"One of the most remarkable, as well as admirable, characteristics of Noi Volkov," wrote the esteemed collector, the late Norton Dodge, "has been his ability to avoid being overcome by the adversities he suffered as an artist under the repressive Soviet regime. He has been able to shake off his successive difficulties and to enjoy life and its rewards, both large and small. His capacity to triumph is characteristic of other courageous nonconformist artists from the former Soviet Union whose resistance to authority helped to undermine the monolithic Soviet system and lead to its final disintegration."¹

Settling in Baltimore, Volkov was almost immediately recognized for his unique imagination and technical mastery. In 1990, a series of ceramic samovars he made led to the exploration of creating teapots. A year later, he was given his first solo exhibition at Baltimore Clayworks as part of a broader welcoming of local artisans and craftsmen. The art he had kept inside for nearly 20 years came pouring out. And like the works featured in this exhibition, they celebrate his visionary spirit and represent a new stage in his artistic life.

While creative freedom in America gave way to exploration, Volkov's strong sense of Russian identity is key to understanding his appreciation for the ironic and the absurd. Like the writer Mikhail Bulgakov before him, Volkov relishes in depicting images of the fantastic and the supernatural. His has become a world of Pop, transitioning itself with an easygoing human appeal, a sharp perception, and a wit about where he's been and where he's going. At the same time, his arrival to the United States coincided with the media and Internet revolution (made possible by the personal computer), which allowed for hyper exposure to and immersion in popular and often unknown images of classical art history, pop culture, and international contemporary art. In his own words, "they invaded my mind like a flood."

1. Noi Volkov, *American Pie*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1997.

A new way of looking at the past emerged as a theme if not a dominant ideology behind a developing body of work about contrasts, intersections, and a dialogue with objects in a different, absurd context. When one combines the styles and techniques of the old masters with those of contemporary artists, something original and eclectic is born. Add to that the juxtaposition of historical art characters and modern art scenes—Salvador Dali as Don Quixote as painted by Pablo Picasso, sculpted by Volkov as *Two Knights*—and one gets the idea. Leonardo da Vinci, Marc Chagall, Kazimir Malevich, Andy Warhol, and Piero della Francesca, among others, all get this type of treatment, and it makes for interesting and unexpected situations. The twist is that he reimagines their art into these three-dimensional ceramic and sculptural works and then turns them on their heads.

If mixing opposites is a basis for his work both in content and form (some textures are smooth and slick, some are jagged and rusty), then so is the move toward blending a creative approach to his own style, be it conceptual, crafty, folk art, or even outsider. The “kitsch” factor here is palpable, but that doesn’t digress from his point—to enlighten, entertain, and rethink. Instead, that label is welcomed as a complement to a larger overall philosophy being employed here. In his own words, “one cannot understand art without entering a different world. When I paint, I enter a different world. My work isn’t like the work of any one artist, but it has qualities and features of several. When I discovered these masters, it changed my mentality and my own work became more complicated.”

Volkov has also said, “By integrating three-dimensional form and painting I explore the ways in which color helps to enhance the play of light on sculpture. I treat my forms like canvases of my own invention, shaped methodically to receive the vision I paint upon them with my brush. I consider my work finished when the painting on the form has brought out the ‘soul’ hidden within my sculpture. . . . My eyes delight in being exposed to such an excess of character, color, and design. These images come alive in my mind and live out their reality in conjunction with my own individual creativity. My vision decorates what I see and animates it into a conversation between the influences of the images with my own imagination.”

As a result, *Ed Hopper #4*, an homage to Edward Hopper’s classic image of urban Americana, is remade as a ceramic teapot, utilizing his famous late-night diner scene, but also incorporating an industrial faucet design for a spigot and a fellow night dweller figure for a handle. The effect is as ironic as it is tongue-in-cheek. Consider Lucien Clergue’s iconic photograph of a contemplative Picasso rendered by Volkov as *Chagall Picasso*. It has an early Chagall background and seems to suggest Pablo’s inner thoughts as he takes the images in. Lastly, *Malevich, edition #1/50*, a teapot rooted in Suprematist forms and theoretical influence, draws an important connection between Russia and Volkov and speaks to the dichotomy that informs his life’s work.

Within the scope of the 20th century, and certainly within Russian art history, few artists can be deemed “game changers.” Kazimir Malevich fits the bill, and his innovations in art have spawned entire generations whose creativity has benefited from his teachings, if not his revolution. His *Black Square* of 1915 was essentially the first work of abstract art ever made, and his practice of Suprematism is arguably Russia’s most important export to the art world. By subtracting any means of a horizon line, Malevich contributed to the end of figurative art, called for the end of what he coined “the old art,” and duplicated this feat by producing *Red Square*, followed by *White on White*, an absolutely white canvas. To Volkov and like-minded art students able to see it in books (the Soviet regime, of course, suppressed it), this approach spelled out infinite possibilities.

However, back when he was at art school in Leningrad, Volkov was a constant Hermitage dweller, and a melancholy and nostalgia for his beloved old masters kicked in and in high gear. During a recent talk, he revealed, “How could I say goodbye to the Tintoretts or Caravaggios or Rembrandts or Veermers? I understood the need to move in a new direction, and agreed with it, but decided to *merge* Malevich’s ideas with that of the classics. In hopes of creating something new, I blended the characters of one painting onto another so art could interact on a stage within my mind.”

Only later did he realize the political implications of his painterly “collages” and the risk of working freely in a totalitarian environment. Before his arrest, he was an accidental nonconformist, and out of that oppression came invention, and then innovation. Volkov is a survivor, a surrealist in his own right, and after more than 20 years here in America, he’s the embodiment of a true, free spirit, and of worthy of a following—the creator of a wonderful and wacky world we get to share. After a career of referencing, refiguring, and now reforming the masters, he now takes his place as one of their own.