

Armenian Art Abroad: The Emigré Experience

By Chris Klein

THE MOSCOW TIMES

Last November, Nina Getashvili spent two weeks in England as the curator of an exhibit of art by contemporary Moscow artists. When she returned to Russia, she had the sense that everything had changed, that she had become an immigrant in her own country. Even for Getashvili, an art scholar and collector who is never short of words, this sensation was hard to describe.

"Things change so quickly these days," she says. "I got off the plane and felt that I was gone with the wind. I felt like an immigrant, but now there is a new shade of meaning to the word."

That new shade of meaning is something Getashvili is trying to figure out with the help of her artist friends from the Caucasus. As the first of a series of exhibits called "Gone With the Wind," the collector has organized a display of prominent Armenian artists who now live in Moscow and abroad. It is a small show, but the abstract oils and graphics are good, and the luxurious Armenian Embassy serves as a perfect gallery.

Getashvili, who is Georgian, worked for 20 years at the Center of Research for Inter-Ethnic Relations, where she investigated the causes and effects of ethnic tension. She ultimately became disillusioned, she says, because her interest in promoting cultural ties was ignored by her colleagues, who focused more on politics and economics. So she quit, and for the past two years, Getashvili has immersed herself in collecting and exhibiting paintings from the Caucasus and beyond.

Each of the artists featured in the exhibit has pulled up stakes at some time in their lives. Some of them have had great success. Others, like abstract painter Genrikh Elibekyan, who arrived in

Moscow three weeks ago with only two suitcases and a portfolio of paintings, have lost nearly everything. Elibekyan fled Armenia, where war has made working and living an impossibility.

"He used to sell his paintings all the time, here and abroad, to museums and galleries," Getashvili says. "Now he has to show his work here, for free. He is a refugee."

Rudolf Khachatryan, on the other hand, has lived for the past three years in London, where his irreverent black-and-white graphics are selling well. Even at this show in Moscow, one of his pictures sold for several thousand dollars. For him, this exhibit is noteworthy because it is the first time his work has been displayed alongside paintings by his son and daughter.

"This is not too significant for me, because I have *four* kids, all of them artists, and my wife is an artist too," Khachatryan says, laughing. "It would be *really* great to have a true family exhibit."

Moving to England gave Khachatryan the chance to exhibit and sell his work more freely and easily, but Getashvili is not convinced that emigration is a good thing.

"Even if you move to Paris and have a good gallery that sells your works and you become rich," she says, "you still leave something behind, you feel a sense of loss."

Khachatryan takes a slightly different view. "Creative people should travel a lot and should live in many places," he says. "I have lived in London for three years and I've never felt like an immigrant there." He pauses. "But I think it is true that my heart belongs to Yerevan."

"Gone With the Wind" can be seen only by appointment. Tel. 249-5122.



"Period of Manifestation of an Image," by Rudolf Khachatryan, an Armenian artist now living in London.

Rudolf Khachatryan (1937–2007)

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