

Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid

The two-man art collective of Vitaly Komar (b. 1943) and Alexander Melamid (b. 1945) worked together for over thirty years, creating some of the most important works of contemporary East-European art. They began collaborating in the mid-1960s while students at the Moscow Art School, continuing together at the prestigious Stroganov Institute of Art and Design. After graduation, they joined the Youth Section of the Moscow Artist's Union—a necessary step if one wanted to work as an artist. But their tenure in the union was short-lived, as they would be expelled in 1973 for creating art that was considered politically subversive. In the Soviet Union, anything created that did not adhere to the official style of Socialist Realism was considered politically hostile. The next year, Komar and Melamid were among the artists that planned and participated in the infamous “Bulldozer Exhibition” on the outskirts of Moscow. Staged without permission, the exhibition was quickly shut down by authorities who destroyed many of the works with bulldozers and fire hoses and arrested many of the artists. An embarrassing scandal erupted when the Western press reported on the exhibition. The controversy eventually compelled the Soviet government to allow some of the artists to emigrate to the West. Komar and Melamid, having already established an audience in the West with their extremely successful shows at Ronal Feldman Gallery, arrived in New York in 1978.

The work on this card, *Portrait of Wives*, was critical to the development of Komar and Melamid's artistic partnership and heavily influenced the direction their art would take. Prior to this work, the two artists had collaborated on projects from time to time, but had mostly worked on their art independently. In the summer of 1972 they worked together at a children's camp near Moscow doing decorative propaganda of Soviet heroes. One day the director of the camp was walking the artists around the grounds when, “suddenly he stopped, stamped his foot, smiled, and said, ‘Here he is!’ Then he told them that they were standing above a big concrete bust of Stalin that had been buried there years before, and that many busts and statues of Stalin too big to destroy were buried all over the country.”¹ The realization that Stalin wasn't gone, but had merely been buried all over the country unearthed in them a flood of impressions from their own childhood, a time period that coincided with Stalin's reign. Both artists decided to explore their youth through their art, rather than leaving it buried inside. The result of this decision was that they both ended up painting portraits of their wives in the style of Stalinist propaganda. Komar depicted his wife holding their son, Peter, up toward the sun. Melamid showed his wife with the trappings of sport, against the background of iconic symbols of Moscow—the Kremlin and the monument to space travel. Comparing their paintings with each other, Komar and Melamid recognized that they both had the same artistic goals and they entered into a fully-collaborative partnership.

Komar and Melamid's *Portrait of Wives* not only marked the beginning of their collaborative career, it also represents the beginning of an entire art movement known as Соц Арт (Соц—pronounced Sots, is short form for Socialist Realism, and Art references Pop Art). As the name suggests, Komar and Melamid's style shares a similar theoretical artistic approach with Andy Warhol's Pop Art. But while the art of Warhol was engaging the overproduction of consumer goods in American society, Komar and Melamid addressed the overproduction of ideology in the Soviet Union. Because Soviet artists were part of a society in which consumer products were scarce, the endless Campbell's Soup cans and Brillo boxes done by Warhol had

little to do with their reality. Therefore the work of Sots artists engaged Soviet propaganda which was every bit as pervasive in Soviet society as was advertising in America.

Unlike earlier forms of unofficial art in the Soviet Union, Sots Art did not openly reject the stylistic requirements of Socialist Realism. The image on this card is a great example of the more nuanced critical position this art took in relation to official mandates. Not only was this work not created in a style contrary to Socialist Realism, it in fact seeks to mimic the official style as close as possible to depict its subject. Many unofficial artists before this worked in taboo styles such as abstraction and symbolism as a statement of their opposition to official styles. Such an approach, however, does not actually confront societal realities, but merely lays out an alternative ideology. Sots Art confronts Socialist Realism on its own terms. As Boris Groys explained, Komar and Melamid were freed from the grip of Stalin by becoming his best students, and launching a project even more grandiose than his.² Like Merlin transforming himself into a virus to defeat Mme. Mimmi in *The Sword in the Stone*, Komar and Melamid work from within the system to turn its own defenses against it.

By claiming the abstract, generalized propaganda style for their own personal use, Komar and Melamid expose its lack of application to reality. Every Soviet citizen would certainly have been very familiar with the image of the mother holding up her child toward the sun—a symbol of the bright future of communism. But this picture becomes surreal when trying to envision that mother as your actual wife and that child as your own son. The disjunction between what you see in your daily life and what that reality looks like when depicted according to the guidelines of Socialist Realism brings into sharp relief the untruth of propaganda. One can imagine a parallel phenomenon if you were to compare what a recent gathering with friends looked like versus the beautiful people and bubbling enthusiasm depicted in a beer commercial. On an abstract, anonymous level this ideal life seems more plausible than when brought down to the level of everyday experience.

For Komar and Melamid, the decision to analyze Stalinist propaganda was not merely a way of scoring political points. As Komar explains, “Through Stalin art we could recreate our childhood.”³ The happiness of Komar and Melamid’s childhoods is tainted by the knowledge that it happened during the Soviet Union’s darkest hour. Therefore the artists were bound to feel conflicted about Stalinist art; historically it references the terror of the purges, but personally, it evokes the happy memories of their youth. By creating celebratory works like *Portrait of Wives*, Komar and Melamid are not simply trying to be mysterious and vague. Rather, the work should be understood as both critical and nostalgic at the same time.

¹ Carter Ratcliff, *Komar and Melamid* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), 17.

² Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, trans Charles Rouble (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 93.

³ Carter Ratcliff, *Komar and Melamid* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1988), 18.