

## Oleg Vassiliev

Memory is a fickle thing. Why do we remember some things and forget others? What is it that brings certain memories to our attention at a particular time? Artist Oleg Vassiliev has grappled with questions such as these for more than 60 years. “Memory is capricious in its choice of subjects,” he explains. “Often one recalls something quite unimportant; at first glance, it seems incomprehensible why memory retains some things and lets others go.”

While it is quite common to struggle to remember certain details from our past, it is equally common for an incidental smell, sound, or object to cause some long-forgotten and seemingly insignificant memory to come flooding back with tremendous impact. At other times, memories will suddenly be re-played in our heads for no apparent reason. Oftentimes, these flashes of memory are bittersweet, for while they may take us back to a happy time in our lives, they also serve as stark reminders that the moment has passed and cannot by any amount of will be returned to us.

Throughout his artistic life, Vassiliev’s central theme has been memory—how it works and how it is constructed. Vassiliev made the painting depicted on this card, *Memory of Kira* (2011), approximately a year after the death of his wife. Although Kira had served as the subject of a number of Vassiliev’s paintings, this one has a unique poignancy. As is often the case when we lose someone close to us, the physical absence heightens the vividness of our memories of the person lost. Important for Vassiliev is the fact that the painting is not a generalized portrait. Instead, it is based on a specific memory. He highlights this fact by documenting the source of the memory on the back of the canvas: “On the 5<sup>th</sup> of September, 1989, we were together with Leonid Sokov, Natasha and Erik [Bulatov] by the ocean—New Jersey, Sandy Hook.”

Walter Benjamin has stated, “History breaks down into images, not into stories.” Such an understanding of memory is in line with Vassiliev’s artistic method. He starts by capturing images that strike him as particularly significant at the time the events are occurring. As Vassiliev describes it, as he goes through life, occasionally he will encounter something that strikes him as important—he terms it a “spark.” Recognizing its importance, but unsure how, or if, he will use it in an artwork, he creates a drawing, sketch or photo. He explains, “Those moments are stored for future reference and put aside in my memory. After a period of time, something new comes up and that other material would surface and that particular memory would be stirred. Earlier memories from Russia may come into contact with new impressions received in America. This meeting of the two is very interesting to me.”

On a beach in 1989, Vassiliev recognized just such a moment, and he created a sketch of his wife playing in the surf. He explains, “The event happens so suddenly and so quickly that often one may not even notice one’s heart throb and one’s soul stand still. And yet, in the meantime, the moment has been marked and memory will return to it many a time.” But it was not for more than twenty years that this “spark” encountered a catalyst in Kira’s passing that resulted in its incorporation into one of his canvases.

Vassiliev recognizes that memories are not fixed, but are fluid creations whose nature is constantly in flux: “Memory is not just an imprint,” he explains, “it’s a construction.” That is to say, a memory is *remembered*: each time it is recalled, it is created all over again. Indeed, memory has every bit as much to do with the present as it does with the past. Not only do present circumstances call up a memory to our conscious attention, they actually change the memory itself. As McGill University neuroscientist Karim Nader explains, “Every time you remember something, you’re changing the memory a little bit. We’re always changing the memory slightly.” While some may lament the impurity of memories that results from the present’s corrupting influence, Vassiliev does not seem to be troubled by this. In fact, he argues

that the interaction of past and present is the very essence of existence: “The present is saturated with the past as a live sponge is saturated with water. Not the past which has passed, but that which is constantly alive... To me, the visible and tangible world is more a thing of remembrance than of perception of reality.”

In *Memory of Kira*, Vassiliev’s use of light effects suggests to the viewer that what they are looking at is far more than just documentation of a past event. Beyond mere illumination, light in Vassiliev’s works has a material, transcendent quality. The intensity of the light washes out the center of the painting, leaving only peripheral descriptions of the sea and sky. In the center, the figure of Kira is enveloped and suspended in a halo of pure light. This light creates an ambiguity in the structure of the space in the painting, simultaneously lifting Kira off the surface into the space of the viewer while also blocking her movement away from us. As a result, she is lifted out of the physical landscape, and her presence is no longer constrained by the particularity of the past event. In essence, this memory of Kira has become timeless as her body begins to dematerialize and fuse with the light. Vassiliev explains, “Kira is walking through the space that does not let her enter; she is walking away from us, captured in the spatial structure of the white color that would not normally be used to render depth as it has no perspective. But she is still walking away...”

Through his use of light, Vassiliev captures the experience of losing a loved one. We can never get that person back. At the same time, he or she lives in our memory. Kira has become part of the endless stream of memories that constitutes Vassiliev’s life. As Vassiliev says, “That light is the very essence of remembrance. The deeper one delves into the past, the more powerful the stream of light. And somewhere over there, beyond the boundaries of the discernible, it turns into a river of golden light. In that river my life drowns, and everything that was before lives.”

- Clinton Buhler

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Oleg Vassiliev was born in Moscow in 1931. As an art student in the Soviet Union, he became disillusioned by the official requirements of producing sanctioned state art and, together with his good friends Erik Bulatov and Ilya Kabakov, joined a vibrant community of nonconformist artists. He emigrated to New York in 1990. Since 2006, he has lived near his son in Minnesota.

Although Vassiliev’s work was first shown in the West in 1977, it did not receive much attention outside the Eastern Bloc countries until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since then, Vassiliev has been recognized as one of Russia’s leading painters. His work has been shown throughout the world and is included in many major private and public collections, including the State Hermitage and Russian Museums (Saint Petersburg), the Pushkin Museum and State Tretyakov Gallery (Moscow), the Kunstmuseum Bern (Switzerland), the Zimmerli Art Museum (United States) and various other museums in the United States and Europe. In 2004, the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow hosted a major retrospective of Vassiliev’s work, fulfilling a childhood dream to see his artwork displayed on its walls. Earlier this year, the Museum of Russian Art in Minneapolis hosted a major exhibition of Vassiliev’s paintings and drawings, following up on previous exhibitions of Vassiliev’s paintings at Faggionato Gallery (London) and of his drawings at Forum Gallery (New York). His work is currently featured in the exhibition “Breaking the Ice: Moscow Art, 1960s-80s,” at the Saatchi Gallery in London until February 24, 2013. More information about Vassiliev and his work can be found at [www.olegvassiliev.com](http://www.olegvassiliev.com).