

Komar & Melamid

Would you believe it if I told you that America's favorite painting is a dishwasher-sized, blue landscape that includes George Washington, people in late 20th Century clothes, deer and a bellowing hippopotamus?¹ Would you believe that people the world over prefer similar blue landscapes? What if I told you that America's least favorite painting is paperback book-sized and consists of geometric patterns in gold, orange, peach and teal? How, you might ask, can an artist find out what "the people" want in their paintings? And is it a violation of artistic integrity to even ask?

For most of the history of Western art, artists have essentially performed work on order for various patrons. Whether we think of ancient Greek statues, Michelangelo's ceiling of the Sistine Chapel or Rembrandt's portraits, most of the great, historical works of art were done at the direction or request of the Court, the Church or a wealthy private person. It is a relatively recent romantic notion that the artist is a solitary genius who should paint what his or her own vision dictates and that it is the public's job to understand the artist. In the past it was the responsibility of the artist to understand what the patron wanted and to produce something that satisfied the patron's wishes.

Giving artists this freedom to explore their internal, personal visions has led to an explosion in artistic expression in the 19th and 20th Centuries. This, of course, has been good in many ways. But one negative consequence is that, over time, art has evolved into something far removed from what the general public likes and understands. Given the gap that exists between contemporary art and the general public, should an artist working today follow his or her own inner vision, wherever it may lead, or should the artist try to do something more responsive to the tastes of the lay audience?

Working together as the team Komar & Melamid since the early 1970s, first in Moscow and then in New York, Vitaly Komar (b. 1943) and Alexander Melamid (b. 1945) have grappled with the questions of "what should an artist paint" and "what is art" from the beginning of their careers. In one of their most recent projects, "The People's Choice," Komar & Melamid decided to find out what the public likes and dislikes about art and, based on their findings, to paint what the public would most and least like to see. Komar & Melamid were struck by how polls pervade American society, governing things ranging from where the President vacations to what color packaging is used to market a new brand of toothpaste. In America, it seems, taking a poll is the accepted way to find out what the public wants. So Komar & Melamid engaged a market research firm to survey a statistically valid sample of ordinary Americans about art. The survey contained 102 questions to determine preferences in painting size, color, subject matter and artistic technique.

Based on the survey results, Komar & Melamid painted what—statistically—should be the "most wanted" and "least wanted" paintings in America. "America's Most Wanted" is dishwasher size (preferred by 67% of those surveyed); is a realistic looking (60%), outdoor (88%), autumn (33%) scene; is predominately blue (44%); contains

¹ The study shown on this card contains everything the final painting does except the hippo.

evidence of the artists' brushstrokes (53%); and includes wild animals (51%) and fully clothed people (68%). Because Americans were evenly split over whether they preferred ordinary or famous people in their paintings, the painting includes both George Washington and a group of ordinary people at leisure.

Komar & Melamid then surveyed the people of other countries and found surprisingly similar results. As diverse as Russians, Kenyans and Chinese might seem, they all preferred realistic, blue paintings of mountain and water scenes over abstract, geometric paintings. Only the Dutch preferred abstract paintings, but even then they liked paintings that are blue and organic in appearance rather than pastel and geometric. (The survey results and paintings for all of the countries are on the Internet at www.diacenter.org/km/).

What are we to make of this project? Are Komar & Melamid making fun of the public's taste in art, the art world's elitist stance, both, neither? Komar & Melamid say that they are genuinely trying to make art that has relevance in ordinary people's lives. The people who were surveyed enjoyed talking about art, and they said that they liked the resulting "most wanted" paintings. However, the art-world establishment saw things quite differently. The consensus seemed to be that popular taste was irrelevant to art:

"I think that talking about what *the people* want is absurd," proclaimed the art historian Dore Ashton. Someone else darkly raised the specter of the Nazis and "degenerate art," as if the lay public were equivalent to a jackbooted mob. ... Meanwhile, on the Web, the artists were attacked for "buying into" market supremacy.²

Whether seen from the perspective of the lay public or the art-world establishment, it is clear that "Komar and Melamid's project is conceptualism at its most elegant and effective, a little bomb thrown into the works. It puts into question not only the relation between art and ordinary people, and the meaning of 'the market,' but also the ambiguity of opinion polls and, by extension, the discordance between the individual and the mass."³

Because of their willingness to tackle fundamental questions facing contemporary society, Komar & Melamid are among the most widely respected and exhibited artists working today. Their work is included in numerous public and private collections.⁴

² From Luc Sante's review of Painting by Numbers: Komar & Melamid's Scientific Guide to Art, a book about "The People's Choice" project. The review appeared in "The New York Times Book Review," January 4, 1998.

³ Id.

⁴ © 1998 Contemporary Collections

The questions, survey results and paintings for all of the countries are also on the Internet at [[address]].

(Interestingly, this imposition of what constitutes acceptable taste from the top down mimicks the top down imposition of the artist as genius that the public must follow.

Interesting, also, to think of them as Soviet artists where the Soviet government, in the name of “the People,” dictated the Socialist Realist style. In what ways this “top/down” imposition of taste different than Dore Asheton’s comment and the general view of the artist as isolated genius??

have grappled with the question of “what should an artist paint” since the beginning of their careers. In their very first installation after they began working together as a team, “Nicholai Buchumov,” dealt specifically with this question. According to legend, in the early 1970s Komar & Melamid discovered in a trash can in Moscow a traditional painting of a mermaid sitting on rocks by the sea. The painting (according to the story) was signed “N. Buchumov,” but no one had ever heard of an artist by that name. So Komar & Melamid “invented” him, creating his autobiography and a number of paintings supposedly done by him.

According to the story Komar & Melamid created, Buchumov lived and worked in Moscow at the beginning of the 20th Century. He hated the artistic style of the time, which consisted of theoretical abstract geometric paintings known as “Suprematist” art. Instead, he loved nature and believed in painting exactly what he saw. According to the story, Buchumov got into a fistfight with a leading Suprematist artist that cost him his left eye. After the fight, Buchumov left Moscow and moved to the small town of his birth. There he painted the exact same landscape scene four times per year—spring, summer, winter and fall—for 15 years. (Komar & Melamid gave these “Buchumov” landscape paintings have an absurdist touch: since Buchumov was a literalist, he painted exactly what he saw, including the profile of his nose on the left edge of each painting).

This first Komar & Melamid installation—which consists of the painting supposedly found in the trash can, the 59 landscape paintings (one was “lost”), and various objects (Buchumov’s photograph, autobiography, notebooks, pallet, brushes, coathanger, eyepatch, etc.)—dealt directly with the question “what should an artist paint.” The years that Buchumov supposedly painted these landscape scenes were years

of tremendous upheaval in Russia, starting with the beginning of the Bolschevic (sp?) Revolution in 1917 and ending with Stalin's consolidation of power in 1932. Yet Buchumov's paintings have no hint of any of the war or famine that engulfed the country.

America's Most Wanted: Dishwasher-size (67%), "realistic looking" (60%), outdoor scenes (88%), blue (44%), visible brush strokes (53%), fall scene (33%), ordinary people or famous—makes no difference (50%), persons in group (48%), fully clothed (68%) and at leisure (43%).

Least Wanted: Paperback book size (4%), thick, textured surfaces (40%), geometric patterns (30%), sharp angles (22%) and bold, stark designs (39%), colors kept separate (18%), gold, orange, peach, teal (1%).

When Komar & Melamid lived in Russia, the Soviet government—in the name of "the people"—required that art conform to a particular style known as "Socialist Realism." Is the government's articulation of taste, whether from Moscow or Washington, an accurate reflection of what the public wants? Is it possible to go to the public and ask them directly?