

Oleg Vassiliev¹

I know, I know...; this isn't one of those cheerful cards of perky, prancing reindeer you usually receive over the holidays. However, those of you who have been on our mailing list for years know that our holiday cards always feature good art—real art. And as the old saying goes, good art doesn't necessarily match the sofa.

Once you get past wondering why we would have such a gloomy-looking image on our holiday card, you probably can start looking at the piece itself. At first glance, you might think that it is a photograph, but then you realize that it isn't—it is a painting (oil on canvas). Then you might wonder who the person shown in the painting is, why is he shown in this almost completely deserted place, why is there a statue, why does the painting include the apparently time-elapsing nature of the background (showing streaking car lights), etc.

As you read the title of the painting—*Portrait of Erik Bulatov in Mayakovsky Square*—you are perhaps even more puzzled. Who is Erik Bulatov, what is Mayakovsky Square, and why do those two have any connection to the artist? A little background might help.

The artist, Oleg Vassiliev, was born in Moscow in 1931 and first met Erik Bulatov when they were both boys. They met through their mutual boyhood friend, fellow artist Ilya Kabakov. Although Vassiliev now lives and works in New York, for 33 years he and Bulatov worked in Moscow illustrating children's books as a team. In their spare time, they did creative artwork for themselves. Their studios were side-by-side, with such openness and freedom between them that they operated, effectively, as if they were one studio.

Vassiliev's work has always dealt to some extent with memory—with how memories are constructed and with how they can be depicted on canvas. However, this aspect of his work became more pronounced when he moved to New York in 1990, leaving his friends and the close-knit art world he knew behind. In Moscow, Vassiliev and Bulatov saw each other almost every day for the better part of 50 years. But after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Bulatov moved to Paris while Vassiliev moved to New York. That separation—although personally painful—gave Vassiliev perspective, and it affected the way he saw and remembered his friends and past life.

So why paint Bulatov's portrait in this direct, frontal way, and why place his portrait over a painting of Mayakovsky Square (a public square in Moscow)? And why do it in a way that so directly links Bulatov with Mayakovsky? It is almost as if the faceless, back-lit statue has descended from the pedestal to confront the viewer of the painting. Why would Vassiliev do this?

It all starts to make sense once you know a little bit more about Mayakovsky and about the role that Mayakovsky Square played in the life of Vassiliev, Bulatov, and their artist colleagues.

Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930) was the leading poet of early 20th Century Russia and one of Vassiliev's and Bulatov's favorite poets. Although many of Mayakovsky's poems were lyrically beautiful, in others he sought to “de-poetize” poetry and adopted the crude language of the “man in the street.” Those poems were direct and confrontative, written for mass audiences. Like many of the leading artists and literary figures in early 20th Century Russia, Mayakovsky

initially was a strong supporter of the Russian Revolution and the Communist takeover. However, over time, he became disenchanted with communist life and fought with Soviet authorities. He committed suicide in 1930.

During the late 1950s and 1960s—formative years for Vassiliev and his friends—Mayakovsky Square became one of the few public places in Moscow where people dared to speak at least somewhat freely. Consistent with the plain, outspoken style of Mayakovsky himself, young artists, writers, philosophers and others would come to the Square to meet each other and to share ideas.

Like Mayakovsky's poetry, Bulatov's artwork combines lyric beauty and confrontation. One of Bulatov's best known works is a large painting from 1971 titled *Red Horizon*. It superimposes the brightly colored red and yellow striped "Order of Lenin" over a beautiful beach scene, thereby depicting the psychological truth that Soviet power and control overshadowed every aspect of life at the time. (The time-elapsed car lights in Vassiliev's painting, resulting in a red and yellow striped horizontal band, allude to this early painting by Bulatov).

Further, Bulatov lived near Mayakovsky Square, and Vassiliev would pass by the Square and see the statue of Mayakovsky every time he visited Bulatov's house.

For all of these reasons, and perhaps others, the painting links Vladimir Mayakovsky and Erik Bulatov. Bulatov's way of painting is equated with Mayakovsky's complex mix of lyric and confrontational poetry. By linking Bulatov and Mayakovsky, Vassiliev's painting also links the leading artists and literary figures of early 20th Century Russia with Bulatov, Vassiliev and their friends. The painting also recollects the freedom of speech symbolized by Mayakovsky Square and Vassiliev's memories of innumerable visits to Bulatov's home. Yet the Square is shown at night, in a dark mist, and we remember that, after an initial period of support for the revolution, Mayakovsky despaired and committed suicide.

The painting is a complex combination of hope and despair, tribute and critique, warm memories about friendship in Moscow and cold-eyed assessment of that friendship's place in history. It is simultaneously beautiful and chilling.

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, including the United States, Italy, France, Norway, Canada, Spain, Chile, Japan, and Germany. His work is included in numerous public and private collections. A major retrospective of his work was exhibited this fall at the world's leading museum of Russian Art, the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. The exhibition will travel to the State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia in early 2005. The exhibition is accompanied by a 180-page full color book containing texts by various persons, including Erik Bulatov.

¹ © 2004 Contemporary Collections, Ltd.