



Academician Natalya Nesterova, Honorary Artist of Russia, and Alexandre Gertsman

Alexandre Gertsman Contemporary Art: *International Understanding from Moscow to Manhattan*

By SAMUEL GRIGSBY

The term “Russian art” for many Americans still evokes images of stoic Soviet monuments and the stillness found in paintings characteristic of socialist realism. These same Americans, however, would see their conceptions of Russian art cast to the wayside upon viewing the diversity, splendor and talent of the works showcased in the Alexandre Gertsman Contemporary Art gallery in NoHo. Closed to the public, the gallery operates as a sanctuary for the works of the stars and the up-and-comers of the Russian art world alike. It is a space where pieces of all media gather to alter the art world and prove that Russian art is more than outdated posters and lifeless statues of leaders of days gone by.

As the gallery’s name evidences, Alexandre Gertsman is the prime mover behind the New York exhibition space and the recent resurgence of interest in Russian art in the United States. Born in Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine, Gertsman began his career in architecture, graduating with honors from the Architectural Academy in the same city and winning a Silver Medal for his diploma project in the All-Soviet Union

Competition. He pursued post-graduate work at the Moscow Central Research Institute of History and Theory of Architecture. By the time Gertsman moved to the United States in 1992, he already had years of experience as a freelance art critic and art lecturer, making for an almost effortless transition to a life dedicated to fine art and its curatorship.

Gertsman, founder of the International Foundation of Russian and Eastern European Art (INTART), has built his career on connecting an international community of artists and art enthusiasts. Well before opening the doors of his personal gallery in 2009 he had already curated over forty traveling exhibitions of Russian art in some of the most prominent museums of Moscow, St. Petersburg, New York, Washington, Aachen, Venice and Vienna, among many others. Gertsman’s shows have generated outstanding reviews from the *New York Times*, *New York* magazine, *The Associated Press*, *The Washington Post*, *Artforum*, *New York Social Diary*, *Moscow Times*, and *TASS*, and have also made the *New Yorker’s* and the *New York Times’* Critics Lists of New York’s most highly recommended exhibits.

One of Gertsman’s most prominent connective projects is the American Friends of The Tretyakov Gallery Foundation, an organization that he founded to promote the appreciation and exchange of Russian



Boris Orlov, *THE MOST IMPORTANT*, 1989, mixed media, 60" x 60"

culture and art between American art fanatics and The Tretyakov Gallery: the national museum of fine art in Moscow. The foundation's 2002 Inaugural Ball attracted a number of the world's most iconic and well-known patrons of the arts, including Donald Kendall, Founder and former CEO of PepsiCo and pioneer of American-Soviet trade, and Dr. James Billington, The Librarian of Congress and a scholar of Russian culture, who chaired Mr. Gertsman's First Tretyakov Ball. NBC News anchor Linda Baquero, supermodel Natalia Vodianova, and Olympic champion Oksana Baiul were hostesses in different years, Hollywood superstar Elijah Wood guest-starred, world-renowned virtuoso pianist Vladimir Feltsman recited, principal performers of the Metropolitan Opera and American Ballet Theatre sang and danced, and Valery Ponomarev's Big Jazz Band entertained. Fashion designer Donatella Versace, Tony Award-winning Broadway producer Barry Weissler, and award-winning recording artists George Michael and Patti LaBelle have all supported the organization and its events.

The rapport Gertsman developed with some of the biggest names of the contemporary Russian art world along with the influx of Russian art and art fanatics to the United States aided him in expediently and effectively opening his successful NoHo gallery.

There is little fanfare for the façade of the Alexandre Gertsman Contemporary Art Gallery. The building's front is much like many others along Broadway except for the small name placard next to the call button. Upon entering, however, guests may feel as though they have stepped in through the hidden entrance of an exclusive, members-only venue,



Academician Tatyana Nazarenko, National Artist of Russia, and Alexandre Gertsman

for that is precisely what the Alexandre Gertsman gallery is: exclusive. Keeping the space closed to the public retains the premier status of the art inside and remains consistent with the clientele: seasoned art collectors and critics as well as a new wave of Slavic-American elite with renewed passion for the arts, as the *New York Times* explores in the 2005 article "New Slavs of New York: All Bling and No Borscht," which features Mr.

Gertsman as a primary representative of the new Russian community in New York City.

Gertsman does not allow his gallery to rigidly serve as just another New York exhibition room, but instead devotes it to a multitude of purposes. Visitors to the gallery may casually consider a new direction of art collecting one day, then find themselves seated at a lavish candlelit dinner in the same gallery the next evening. This is not due to lack of options, for Gertsman certainly has many as the owner of one of the most prominent galleries of Russian art in the United States. Rather, it goes back to the concept

of exclusivity, but this time for Alexandre Gertsman himself. Nobody does what he does; he is the only gallery owner to display the art he shows with such an intimate connection to the artists themselves. Even as luxurious fundraisers carry on and the famous faces come and go, it is all about the art for Gertsman.



2005 Tretyakov Ball at the Metropolitan Club. Valentin Rodionov, Director of The Tretyakov Gallery; Thomas Krens, Director of The Guggenheim Museum; and Alexandre Gertsman, President The American Friends of The Tretyakov Gallery Foundation



Alexandre Getsman and sculptor Edwina Sandys at the gallery



Alexandre Gertsman, Christine Ebersole, Tony Award Winner, and Bill Moloney, artist

The gallery has welcomed the names of some of the most prolific Russian artists of the era. Gertsman's gallery features the works of a number of artists with pieces in the permanent collections of world-renowned museums like the Metropolitan Museum of Art, MoMA, The Guggenheim New York, the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, the Tate Gallery in London, and, of course, Moscow's own Tretyakov Gallery. Gertsman does not shy away from any particular style of art for his exhibitions. Sculptures in bronze and plaster stand next to paintings in a variety of styles hanging on the walls. His exhibitions and shows have touted everyone from conceptualists like Ivan Chuikov, Komar & Melamid, Alexandr Kosolapov, Boris Orlov, and Leonid Sokov to sociopolitical artistic voices such as Rimma & Valeriy Gerlovin, Ilya & Emilia Kabakov, and Mikhail Roginsky. On multiple occasions,



Mikhail Roginsky, COMPOSITION, 1990, oil on canvas, 80" x 60"

the gallery has featured individual artists for their own personal exhibits. Celebrated Russian artist Academician Natalya Nesterova is a frequent contributor to Gertsman's gallery shows, securing her own solo exhibition in 2010. Another name familiar to connoisseurs of Russian art is Tatyana Nazarenko, National Artist of the Russian Federation, who has submitted a number of her works to a variety of Gertsman's showcases on top of her 2011 solo exhibition. Both Nesterova and Nazarenko are winners of the National Award of Russia and The Triumph Award.

Alongside the works of renowned artists in the gallery lie pieces by the up-and-comers of the Russian art world. Artists like Kandinsky Prize-winner Kirill Chelushkin, Vladimir Clavijo-Telepnev, Alla Esipovich and Olga Tobreluts bring their work to Gertsman as one of the first points of contact in their rise to glittering reputation. With the juxtaposition of paint and sculpture, large and small, modernism and conceptualism, Gertsman's gallery may sound like a hodgepodge of drastic differences. On the contrary, every piece is carefully selected and meticulously placed to fit in



Jim Dale, Tony and Obbie Awards Winner, Oscar Nominee; Frank Blocker, Drama Desk Award Nominee; and Alexandre Gertsman



Rimma Gerlovian and Valeriy Gerlovina, TREE OF LIFE, diptych, photograph, 80" x 40"



Ivan Chuikov, WINDOW LXVI, 2005, oil on board, 60" x 40"

the theme of the show and the gallery itself. The Alexandre Gertsman Contemporary Art Gallery exudes harmony in all of its functions, and guests need only gaze upon the visage of the unique works on display as they are reflected in the gloss of the hardwood floors to receive the message of cooperation and understanding that the gallery promotes.

The pieces and artists featured in the gallery demonstrate a key theme of international understanding: that of change. Looking through the catalog of pieces in Gertsman's gallery allows viewers to see a memoir of Russia's changes over the past decades. The works simultaneously speak of tumult and triumph, and guests who fully comprehend these past and present changes will clearly see both the tribulations of Russia's as well as the glamour and luxury of today's top Russian models and forerunning businessmen. However, the understanding in Gertsman's gallery goes deeper than visualizing a social transition and promoting a new class of art, for the gallery owner also dedicates himself to the betterment of the arts and humanity alike.

He hosted at his gallery a number of non-profit fundraisers and humanitarian events, as well as performances: he has held soirees for Congresswoman Carolyn Maloney and Congressman Joseph Crowley, Crown Princess Katherine and Prince Alexander of Serbia's Foundation, and a retrospective by Sir Winston Churchill's grand-daughter, sculptor Edwina Sandys. Christine Ebersole, Tony Award winner, and Jim Dale, Tony and Grammy Awards winner, have partaken in the events, and

Daytime Emmy winner Kim Oler along with Drama Desk nominee Frank Blocker have performed at the occasions. Alexandre Gertsman has used the gallery to host book-signing parties for his friends Pulitzer Prize nominee David Margolick, prominent British journalist and writer and Founding Editor of The Times Nicholas Wapshott, and leading Russian art historian and former Head of Russian Sotheby's Dr. Alla Rosenfeld.

Whether open for a fundraiser or an exhibition, the Alexandre Gertsman Contemporary Art Gallery certainly holds an important place in the Russian art world and the New York art scene alike, and has been aptly characterized as "the center of Russian culture in the city" by the Russian-American Press. By keeping his art space exclusive and closed to the public, Alexandre Gertsman himself reassures the importance of the art and artists he displays as something more than just depictions of beauty; they are marks on the history of the art world as well as the contemporary sociopolitical sphere. Connecting Russian artists to American patrons has certainly developed a new direction of art collection, but has also fostered an environment of communication and cooperation between two regions that have historically had more than their fair share of differences. Because of the exchange of ideas and visions that Gertsman has initiated through his gallery, when the doors close and the exhibitions change, it is about more than just art; it is understanding.