

▼ Art

Cocktails and 500 Cocks

Leonid Sokov's dissident mash-ups **BY R.C. BAKER**

I love him—no, no!” says a laughing Leonid Sokov when I mention Joseph Stalin. We are surrounded by guests hoisting shots of horseradish-infused vodka at a noisy reception for the impish dissident artist, who is explaining that his numerous depictions of the Soviet dictator are less about politics than the collision of cultures.

Talk of how the “Man of Steel” murdered millions through famines and in labor camps, but also led the Soviet Union to victory against the Nazis, moves Sokov to recall childhood memories of people weeping at Stalin's death in 1953: “For Russians, he was God.”

So who better for an artist to marry to this revolutionary god than America's most far-fallen angel?

“Marilyn Monroe may be more mythologic figure for America, and Stalin may be more mythologic figure from Russia,” Sokov explains in his searching English. “Two myths—cocktail!”

The artist offers his own cocktail of exuberant smarts, impudent forms, and coarse humor in his retrospective at Rutgers' Zimmerli Art Museum. In a painting of the dictator and the siren on a gilded ground, Sokov erases the bushy mustache from Stalin's mug, the blank space shimmering in tandem with Marilyn's radiant smile. This mash-up owes a debt to Andy Warhol's gold-leaf deification of Monroe as Catholic icon. The Pope of Pop was an apt influence on the Soviet dissidents who began coalescing as a group in the 1960s, in part because Warhol started as a commercial artist and went on to transmute graphic design into haunting paintings. The Russian artists had day jobs working in mediums leached of artistic daring—children's-book illustration, social-realist tableaux—and created their satirical, rude, nonconformist works on the sly, showing them only to friends and fellow malcontents while avoiding officials who could strip away their livelihoods or imprison them. Sokov had a successful career fashioning animal sculptures, sometimes adjusting his designs to satisfy art committees, compromises similar to Warhol's finalizing layouts with ad agencies. (The skills the dissidents acquired at Soviet art academies—crisp calligraphy, illustrative graphic design, classical painting—can be seen in the works of artists such as Ilya Kabakov, Komar and Melamid, and Oleg Tselkov, all part of the Zimmerli's permanent collection of Soviet nonconformist art. Like Sokov, most of these artists emigrated to the West in the late '70s and '80s.)

Sokov grafted what he learned from Warhol and other Western masters onto Soviet aesthetics to create witty conceptual Frankensteins. If you don't guffaw



Leonid Sokov, *Stalin and Monroe*, 1991, 2008

upon first sight of Sokov's 2006 *Fountain*—which depicts a steady stream of water arcing from a suprematist teapot into a prone urinal—you must have slept through Modern Art 101. Sokov's absurd object plunges us down a greased rabbit

hole of associations, including the flowering of the Soviet avant-garde, soon crushed under the state-enforced pieties of socialist realism, and Duchamp's game-changing 1917 readymade, for which the pioneering conceptual artist described the

Song Dong's Smash

The Chinese artist shatters the everyday

You can't get more quotidian than Song Dong's large photographic self-portraits, *Eating Drinking Shitting Pissing Sleeping* (1999). The listless affect is disturbed, however, by the fish-eye format, which summons a whiff of surveillance so universal as to exhaust both subject and voyeur. Similarly, Song's videos first register as simple street scenes, until his be-

guiling actions rupture the workaday calm. In *Broken Mirror* (1999), passersby disappear behind a skewed rectangle reflecting other pedestrians. Suddenly a hammer enters the frame, as does its mirror image; the steel heads converge, shattering the mirror and reducing the frame to a single promenade littered with shiny shards and startled expressions. *Burning Mirror* (2001) features various urban settings wavering beyond a blurry plastic scrim, which also partially reflects the public spaces behind the camera. Song's face appears in cloudy reflection, and then small flames begin licking the frame's edges. As the fire spreads, the flexi-

actions of his alter-ego, R. Mutt: “He took an ordinary article of life, placed it so that its useful significance disappeared under the new title and point of view [and] created a new thought for that object.”

And what was the Soviet Union if not a home for new thinking? So much so that it soon devolved into Orwell's doublethink: As Sokov and other dissidents grew up, they realized that the Workers' Paradise was a Po-

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temkin village of subpar commodities and banal culture. Some artists used their academic training to paint lush parodies of official portraits, (a prime example, Komar and Melamid's *The Origins of Socialist Realism*, resides in the museum's collection), while Sokov reveled in the shoddiness of Soviet life. In 1974 he played the Russian boor by hacking an ample bosom and a groping hand out of wood, appending the title, *When you grab a breast, you better have something to talk about*. In this startlingly fresh object, Sokov gives us the lout from the Moscow street or the Red Army barracks who is suspicious of intellectuals and rarefied art but also appreciates the need for a theory to justify his actions. Sokov's beautiful installation *Shadows of Twentieth-Century Sculpture* (2001) twists this idea further, reducing scores of works by such modern trailblazers as Giacometti, Calder, and Beuys to souvenir-size tchotchkes placed on rotating platforms. Strong lights cast moving shadows around the room—scurrying ghosts in search of their forgotten originality.

A one-foot-high sculpture from 2002 gives us *The Most Important Word in the Russian Language*, at least by Sokov's lights. *Khuy* means “cock” or “dick,” and sports more than 500 permutations as noun, verb, and adjective, the shining star in Russia's splendid cosmos of obscenities. Sokov fashioned the letters from solid interlocking steel, an X-rated parallel to Robert Indiana's “Love” sculpture. A spry 71, Sokov has already outlasted the Soviet Union itself, and his weighty tribute to Russia's ribald, gregarious, and endlessly imaginative culture will outlive us all.

ble mirror buckles and shivers, oily flairs of color blooming in the creases. Bits of scorched, coagulated plastic drop away to more clearly reveal unwitting protagonists bustling past, with only the occasional pedestrian snagged by the sight of this flaming proscenium. Eventually the prosaic scene is fully exposed, concluding Song's witty optical drama with a few sooty tendrils rather than a closing curtain. **R.C. BAKER**

‘Song Dong Doing Nothing’

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Through February 16