

London 2008: Arguments in the Galleries

Comment: Published in *Border Crossings* magazine, Dec 2009

[London July 1922] First I dropped my linen at a laundry – by now I had a valise full of laundry. Then, at a bookstore, I bought a guidebook with a map for tourists and, with it, like the old woman with her mortar¹, I set out to see the city.

Peter Svarich, **Memoirs**

Like my great-uncle Peter Svarich, I too set out to see the city. For the better part of a decade, on various literary projects, I had been completely engrossed by the history and culture of the Balkans, Byzantium and the Eastern Orthodox Church, in which I am deeply rooted through Ukrainian ancestry. But here in London I hoped for an encounter with my other self, the one born and raised English-speaking in a former possession of the Hudson's Bay Company (Alberta), and so, like Great-Uncle Peter, I set out for Western Civ.

In my case, I decided on the galleries, large and small, as my point of reference. Perhaps I chose unwisely, for the gallery exhibits I visited stood up and bit me.

On a February morning under a dull sky that would not lift for a month, I emerged from the Pimlico underground station and made smartly for the Tate Britain and the Turners. Because of on-going maintenance in the Clare Gallery housing them, they were not on view. I wandered into the main event, an extensive survey of the paintings of Peter Doig, an artist “whose work has been more talked about than viewed,” according to a critic for *The New York Review of Books*.²

This was certainly true for me, and I turned in.

The show was the talk of the town. According to the pamphlet accompanying the show, Doig is considered a British artist (“one of the most internationally admired artists to have emerged in Britain since the early 90s”) even though he now lives in Trinidad and grew up largely in Canada. At any rate I thought of him as Canadian - he wears a plaid snap-button shirt in one photo - as I made a bee-line to the canvases, large and radiant, that shouted “homeland” at me. I stood revelling in them, up on a wall labour-intensive *paintings* (no smart-alecky gizmos making a digital racket), metres of horizontal lines of the land in watery colours and disciplined brushwork: the long, sleek shaft of a canoe miles adrift off an Ontario shore; the Milky Way braiding a cobalt sky; the outline of a figure lost in the leafless woods and standing at the edge of a sheet of ice, boots casting a black shadow. It took awhile to see how really very strange they were.

Doig has said he paints “quite modest subjects”; if so, he nevertheless transforms them into the imaginary, “a place that is somehow a wilderness.” *Somehow*. In “Echo Lake” an

¹ Baba Yaga, in [Slavic folklore](#), is a witch-like character who flies around on a giant [mortar](#), kidnaps (and presumably eats) small children, and lives in a house on chicken feet.

² Sanford Schwartz, “Enchanted and Ominous,” *NYRB*, July 17 1008, 6.

OPP officer (that's his black and white car in the bush) shouts out across the water, holding his featureless face between his hands.

But there is a persistent figure, from one painting to another. In "Milky Way," a phantasmagoria of stars and of green trees, some of them lighted up as though on celestial fire, is reflected in a lake in perfect symmetry. Then the eye eventually takes in the rest of this enchantment: a small canoe, a figure slumped forward between the gunnels, and the arm dangling in the water. I shivered with the anticipation of incipient awareness.

That same figure adrift in the canoe shows up large and white in "Swamped," along with menacing broken stumps poking surreally out of black holes in the swampwater. In "Canoe Lake," the very large surface gives us a monumental green canoe – large enough for an entire crew of *coureurs de bois* – in a yellow-green stream. The (ungendered) figure is turned towards us with a head bent under long yellow tresses, its arm nonchalantly hanging over the side, its hand fingering a puddle of concentric watery rings. This is a canoe going nowhere. It's marking a point, the still point of Tom Thomson's grave. Tom Thomson drowned in Canoe Lake on July 8, 1917, age 40, under mysterious circumstances. But this is not the London view of things. According to the panel text, "the figure in the canoe [was] originally prompted by a scene from a horror film, *Friday the 13th*." This is harped on, here and in the papers, and for all I know it's what Doig himself has said, but I'm too old to have shivered to *Friday the 13th*. I'm haunted still by the NFB production – the images jumping out of the film projector in the school gym – in which we look at the oil paint on canvas and imagine the body in a dead man's float under water, twisted in weeds, invisible but *there*.

"Going back to Canada when I was a little bit older," Doig told Doug Saunders in the *Globe & Mail*, "I realized how much I had absorbed there. It now felt important."³ It took some while for the Brits to see it. I read in a panel text "The winter sports and frozen ponds, though painted from the artist's London studio, are everyday Canadian scenes. The very choice of snow subjects, and the saccharine colour palette, disconcerted many observers in the London art world at the time."

Saccharine? As though Londoners live in a palette of screaming neon chartreuse! I see exactly the colours - a diffusion of whites and blues - that light makes when reflecting off snow and ice. I see how falling snow clots up the atmosphere and seems to blot up deep colour, leaving us in a pastel world. We are in the realm of winter. *Mon pays ce n'est pas un pays, c'est l'hiver*. Doig has also found the visual equivalent of the hushed soundscape of snow, the utter stillness of nature in hibernation; the wonder of melting pond ice even as a figure walks across it, as though on water; and the welcome, pungent scent of the brown muck at the bottom of the melting stream. This painting is called "Reflection: What Does Your Soul Look Like?" Pretty Canadian, I thought, pitying the urban sparrows that are Londoners.

What does your soul look like? But also Byzantine, it turned out.

³ Doug Saunders, "Part Winslow Homer, part Canadian stoner," *Globe & Mail* March 22, 2008, 9.

I had never been to the Courtauld Institute Gallery, that collection housed in the imposing neo-classical Somerset House which faces onto the Thames from the Strand. A series of gifts and bequests by 19th and 20th-century collectors have made of the Courtauld a centre for art history education as well as of objects of public.

This was not a collection I expected or even wanted to evoke the achievements of Byzantium – I can't imagine anything further from the minds of the gentlemen-industrialists whose second-generation fortunes afforded them discriminating purchase of Cezannes, Manets and Renoirs. But on a basement wall nearby the gallery's loo hung a small exhibit of black and white photographs by Robert Byron, the great traveller and travel writer, "wit, dandy, homosexual, controversialist and general ornament of English upper society."⁴ For ten months in 1933-34 he had travelled around [Persia](#) and [Afghanistan](#) and his classic *The Road to Oxiana* was the result, along with these photographs.

But he had already visited the monasteries of Mount Athos and he had published the combative *The Byzantine Achievement*, debunking classical Hellenic culture, in which he made the case for the universal treasury that is Byzantine art, architecture and theology. So, with teacups and trays clattering in the caf behind me, I stood just outside the loo, and had a good look at Byron's Iran of 1932-34: at the King's Mosque (Masjid-I-Shah) in Isfahan (1611-1628), a view, from above and from an adjoining domed roof, of its "bulk and huge acreage," its brick- and tile-work clearly delineated. Of the Mosque of Sheikh Lotfollah (1602-1619) – also in Isfahan – he wrote: "I have never encountered splendour of this kind before." But he had, in Byzantium. For the monumental feature of the Islamic mosque, the dome, was learned from the Byzantines, especially the church of Hagia Sophia built by Justinian (532-37) and then recovered in the west a millennium later, in Brunelleschi's Florence Cathedral (1420-34).

It now became impossible to see the Courtauld collections except through a Byzantine lens in one eye, as though I were squinting, first one eyeball and then the other, to see the overlay of influences. "The Coronation of the Virgin" by Guido de Siena (active around 1260-1300), for instance, a subject claimed here to have been restricted to Northern Italy, was also an iconographic subject in the *fifth*-century mosaics in the dome of the apse of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, likewise for Rome's S Maria di Trastevere. Although an angel is shown in three-quarter profile (classical Byzantine iconography countenanced no profiles except for evil or wicked characters, who avoid eye contact with the pious, who for spiritual communication with the saint or holy person, require two eyes visible), all else here is Byzantine to me: the full-frontal positioning of the bodies, the Virgin's hands in hieratic pose, palms bent out toward us, Christ with an open Gospel on his knee.

⁴ D J Taylor, "Robert Byron By James Knox," the *Independent* 12 October 2003

In Giovanni Baronzio's fourteenth-century "The Nativity and the Adoration of the Magi," Mary is still a semi-Byzantine figure, recumbent alongside the Divine Child swaddled in the manger, and sharing the iconographic zone with angels, magi, ox and calf, shepherds, and St Joseph at the baby's bath. The narrative elements are presented in their own zone but as simultaneous events, so reminiscent of Byzantine icons. It is not until the [High Middle Ages](#) (1000-1200) when, with the recovery of the western Empire, the artists of the Latin church finally were able to compete with the uninterrupted achievement of the iconographers in the East.

So it is poignant to realize that at a date (late fourteenth century) when Barnaba du Modena's "The Virgin and Child," still includes such tricks of Byzantine style as the heavy shading of the Virgin's face and the gold striations on her mantle, Byzantium herself had only another century to live, after a thousand years of painting.

Byzantium had been Christianity's cultural and spiritual conduit into the Slavic lands, a revolutionary achievement not to be equalled until the political and ideological triumph of Bolshevism some 900 years later. The Hayward Gallery on the South Bank was hosting *Alexander Rodchenko: Revolution in Photography 1891-1956* organized by the Moscow House of Photography Museum and made possible with the support of Roman Abramovich – the billionaire oligarch and owner of the Chelsea soccer club. One must be grateful for this post-Soviet generosity enabling one of the most comprehensive retrospectives of Rodchenko's work ever assembled, and assume that such exhibits are no longer entangled with creepy Soviet-era sensibilities. So I thought, as I walked into an overwhelming visual environment of revolutionary graphics (posters, magazine covers and book lay-outs), photographs and photomontage produced in a feverish few years, 1915-1934, particularly after the 1920s when Rodchenko discovered the Leica camera.

Along with other avant-garde artists, Alexander Rodchenko supported the Bolsheviks when they came to power in 1917 in Russia and enthusiastically participated in many of the new-fangled artistic co-operatives which promised a parallel revolution in aesthetics: the Visual Arts Department of the People's Commissariat for Enlightenment, the Association of Radical Innovators, the Institute of Artistic Culture, with poet (and eventual suicide) Vladimir Mayakovsky⁵ in the First Working Group of Constructivists, and with painter (and eventual émigré) Vasily Kandinsky, in a national network of art museums. In late 1920, he was appointed to an important post at the new Higher State Art-Technical Studios. He was convinced that he and his fellow-travellers were launched in "a Communist direction for all forms of art;" yet by 1930 – when those same Studios were closed under political pressure – they were about to crash-land.

⁵ For all his loyalty to the cause, Mayakovsky was viewed by Lenin "with suspicion and even irritation," according to Maxim Gorky. "I am incapable of considering the works of Expressionism, Futurism, Cubism and other 'isms' the highest manifestation of artistic genius. I do not understand them." In Solomon Volkov, *The Magical Chorus: A History of Russian Culture from Tolstoy to Solzhenitsyn* trans. Antonina W Bouis (Knopf 2008), 66, 73.

As I visited the many rooms of the exhibit, it dawned on me that what I had thought of as an *international* vocabulary of modernism – the tilted camera positions, the close-ups on marginal details, the top-down and bottom-up perspectives, the double-exposures—and of modernism’s formalist fetishes – the geometry of industrial plants, the abstracted patterns of domestic interiors, the flattened planes of the human face or figure – was in fact the production in this one artist of a Bolshevik faith in the importance of a “revolution in perception” as well as of the revolution on the factory floor and in the Politburo. The camera was to Rodchenko’s eye what the hammer and sickle were in the hands of the workers: a tool in service of a society reinventing itself. Nothing could be further from “artistic inspiration” born in the soul of the alienated “genius.”⁶ Rodchenko’s Productionist Manifesto, co-written with his wife Varvara Stepanova, proclaimed: “Down with art, long live technical science” and “Destroy the last remaining attachment of human thought to art.”⁷

We look up under the balconies of a new apartment block or up the steps of a fire escape – Rodchenko loves the repetition of pattern – or down onto the street from the balcony onto crowds of commuters or close-up on the fenders and camshafts of cars in a factory or alongside an assembly line of light bulbs – Rodchenko loves the utilitarian object in mass production. He shoots in railway stations, at tramway stops, at his own breakfast table, his wife drinking tea while reading *Komsomol’skaya Pravda*. Bands march, women push baby carriages, workers lay asphalt. In 1928 he declares: “It seems only the camera is capable of reflecting contemporary life.”⁸ And then I start to notice other themes. In 1932 he shoots a Moscow-at-night series featuring an illuminated Lenin and First of May signage. In 1935 he and Stepanova create a photomontage of a rank of mounted soldiers and warplanes racing across the sky. A banner stretched across the soldiers’ lances bears the message from General Voroshilov: “May the glorious traditions of the First Cavalry serve as an exemplary example for our young soldiers and commanders.”

In 1938 they superimpose a grinning Red Army soldier in steel helmet onto the hammer-and-sickle: he holds a large rifle on his shoulder. “Prepare ourselves for the defense of the socialist homeland!” Another photomontage lays Voroshilov inside a giant Red Star, flanked by rank upon rank of Soviet soldiery in helmets. I am getting uneasy: we have seen these armoured titans before. And the sports parades of gymnasts, men and women stacked up as pyramids and columns – more titans! Such physical beauty and health, so well-fed, so happy. In 1940, in an issue of the magazine, *USSR Under Construction*, dedicated to Mayakovsky (1893-1930), Rodchenko proudly called himself a “journalist-newsboy.”⁹

The fact is, as the exhibit has told us, in 1929 Rodchenko had already been attacked as a “bourgeois formalist.” In 1931, he was expelled from the very October Group he had

⁶ Come to think of it, this also was the self-effacing credo of the iconographer of Byzantium: he didn’t “paint,” he “wrote” the icon, a tool to bend the heavens to earth.

⁷ Paul Mitchell, “Rodchenko: The impact of revolution and counterrevolution,” *World Socialist Web Site*, www.wsws.org, 10 April 2008, 2.

⁸ In Helen Luckett (from Alexander Lavrentiev), “Alexander Rodchenko: Revolution in Photography,” The Hayward, Southbank Centre 2008, 8.

⁹ Mayakovsky was Rodchenko’s first photographic subject. See it on the t-shirt <http://radicaljack.com>

once led, which was now labeled officially as “petit-bourgeois.” In 1932, the magazine *Proletarskoye Foto* even organized a campaign of stormy criticism from workers, denouncing his foreshortened photographs of Young Pioneers, shot from the feet up: “As a result of this ‘experiment,’ the face of a normal person has been transformed into the face of a freak, and for what?”¹⁰ A critic pounced on one of Rodchenko's most famous pictures, a close-up of the determined, uplifted face of one young girl: “The Pioneer Girl has no right to look upward. That has no ideological content. Pioneer girls and Komsomol girls should look forward.”¹¹ The attacks never let up.

In 1933 a new law required a permit if photographers wished to take pictures outside their own homes. This explains Rodchenko's obsession with parades, athletic and other official events, and his reliance on commissions, such as one from the magazine *USSR in Construction* to record the building of the White Sea Canal. Although it was being trumpeted as a feat of socialist construction – a 226-kilometre-long canal to be built in 500 days – Rodchenko went under duress and in a very bad mood. “In *Soviet Photo* it had become fashionable to hound me in every issue...it became creatively unbearable for me to work in Moscow...And I left. It was my salvation, it was a ticket to life. From that point on, the goal became clear. I wasn't afraid of the criticism, all the persecution dimmed”¹²

His persecution, perhaps. But the “workers” on the Canal were political prisoners, forced labourers under armed guard. They worked bare-handed, their feet wrapped in cloths, digging at the frozen clay with simple pickaxes, shovels, and makeshift wheelbarrows. Over 100,000 prisoners dug the canal in just twenty months and 200,000 died in the effort. It was the first massive construction project of the Gulag.¹³

Look at their faces: eyes downcast, heads resting in exhaustion against the proletarian's mallet. Not a single smile of heroic Soviet labour here. Even some luckless SOBs from an orchestra perform for their fellows in the pits of the canal. Rodchenko later wrote: “I just photographed, without thinking about ‘formalism’.”¹⁴

And well he might not have: he could only photograph scenes permitted by the Plan, he had to develop the film on the spot, then send all his negatives and prints to the GULAG administration for approval before publication. He could take no rejects home with him. His letters were intercepted. In 1951 he was expelled from the Union of Artists. He finally had his first solo exhibition – a year after his death.

About halfway through the exhibit, I began to feel prickly: why, in comparison with a similar exhibit of fascist or Nazi revolutionary and artistic photographs and images – assuming that such an exhibit would even be on view - I was not registering feelings of

¹⁰ In Lockett, 24.

¹¹ In David Walsh, “Alexander Rodchenko, an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art,” 29 August 1998, .
<http://www.wsws.org/arts/1998/aug1998>

¹² in Lockett, 27.

¹³ <http://gulaghistory.org>

¹⁴ in Lockett, 27.

shock, dismay and disgust, by *Stalinist*-era art. No pickets had attempted to bar my entry to the Gallery. No parliamentarian had threatened to freeze public funding. No newspaper editorials had warned of dereliction of morality should I expose myself to this profoundly *incorrect* art. Like the other visitors who moved slowly and thoughtfully from room to room, I was absorbing the message of this exhibit as a curatorially-serious review of an important European artist, and I took note of measured references to the tribulations of artists under Stalin, but finished by visiting the gift shop.

Why did the stench of odium not cling to this show as it might have done at an exhibit of Leni Riefenstahl's work, whose formal achievements have been duly noted but always severely contextualized? Compare our reading of, say, photos of the Nazi forced labour camps and how we view Rodchenko's "art" photos of the building of the White Sea Canal. (Can we imagine ourselves fussing over whether to buy the fascist tea towel or the Nazi fridge magnet in the gift shop?¹⁵) I do not say that Rodchenko himself, for all his demurrals, viewed them solely as an aesthetic project, but that *we* now examine them aesthetically without making a public fuss about their context. Repressions are acknowledged – magazines shut down, artists silenced, the howl of vulgar denunciations cranked up – but we do not search our souls for our relationship to these facts.

I thought of "Detained," the Jenny Holzer exhibit I had just seen, her obsessive collection of whatever she could get her hands on from declassified US government documents – memos, sworn statements, emails, directives, judgements – about the consequences of US power in Iraq, her fierce exposé of current practices of the American state – surveillance, interrogation, torture – and of authoritarian aesthetics. And I thought about how unexceptionable are such denunciations compared to the evasiveness of our response to notions of Soviet crimes against artists, let alone against humanity. Who do we even hold accountable for them?

The question stayed with me as I viewed the blockbuster at the Royal Academy, "From Russia: French and Russian Master Paintings 1870-1925 from Moscow and St Petersburg."

I hurry through the European paintings collected by 19th-century merchants to get to the 20th century Russian paintings in the last gallery, "Towards abstraction." They're all here: Malevich, Kandinsky, Burliuk, Rodchenko. These were no longer "inventive followers" of the latest developments in Paris, but innovators of abstraction who "emerged as the leaders of the European avant-garde." Hinted at, alluded to, in their work are the specifically Russian or Slavic visual reference points – icons, medieval frescoes, fairy tales, peasant life (e.g. Natalia Goncharova's "Peasants," two blocky figures stomping across the canvas like slaves across an Egyptian frieze in the Valley of the Dead.). These were complicated characters, these Soviet-era avant-gardists, bearing several zeitgeists at once in their imaginations. The panel text says,

¹⁵ "In the bookshop you can buy a book of posters from the [Maoist] cultural revolution. Hitler memorabilia is not on sale. They wouldn't dream of having a room full of artfully designed Juden Raus! Posters." Daniel Finkelstein, "Murderous dictators - kinda cool, huh?" daniel.finkelstein@thetimes.co.uk

“This intensely creative period continued throughout the 1917 Revolution and the early 1920s, gradually extinguished by the culture of the communist state.”

Let us analyze that last bit: “gradually,” as though stealthily and not so as you would be aware of it? A kind of fade-out, perhaps even voluntary, by the inevitability of cultural change? “Extinguished by the culture...”: How does this happen? Is anyone involved, responsible, implicated? Are there violent agents at work here or only some kind of miasma of cultural hegemony?

I go backwards a couple of rooms. Room #5: New Directions in Russian Art. This refers to the pre-revolutionary period when so many Russian artists were soaking up the influences of the Impressionists and Post-Impressionists. So we have vigorous still lifes, landscapes, and Paris streetscapes, but also Nathan Altman’s vivid portrait of the poet Anna Akhmatova in 1915 –the cantilevered bones of her face and shoulders, her body and chair pitched at severe angles, – with text references to her admirers Osip Mandelstam (who died in 1938 in the Gulag) and Amedeo Modigliani, but no mention of Stalin.

During the Great Terror, almost a third (some 600 published authors) of the members of the Union of Soviet Writers were arrested while the rest lived half-lives poisoned by fear and suspicion, and the demoralizing capitulation to self-censorship. Akhmatova’s husband, the poet Nikolai Gumilev, was executed August 25, 1921, with sixty other “counterrevolutionaries” accused in the anti-Bolshevik uprising at the Kronstadt naval base. After 1922 her books were no longer published –there was a brief reprieve in 1940 – yet she never left for the West, and remained in what was called “internal emigration” even while her son was twice immured in the Gulag. In her celebrated poem “Requiem,” she wrote: “Not under foreign skies protection Or saving wings of alien birth – I was then there – with whole my nation ...” In 1945 in Leningrad Akhmatova spent a night talking with the British diplomat Isaiah Berlin, for which indiscretion she was condemned in a special Resolution of the Central Committee: her poetry, they growled, “brings harm to our youth and therefore cannot be tolerated in Soviet literature.” Akhmatova “is either a nun or a whore.”¹⁶

And Room #4: “Diaghilev and the “World of Art.” After 1917, the ballet impresario Sergei Diaghilev lived abroad and Soviet art historians wrote him out of the books. But theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold, whose portrait is also here, stayed in Russia and paid a terrible price. For his experimentalism as a theatre [director](#), [actor](#) and [producer](#) and his vocal opposition to [socialist realism](#), his work – now considered seminal in the development of modern theatre anywhere - was proclaimed antagonistic and alien to the Soviet people. He was arrested in 1939, accused of being part of an “anti-Soviet Trotskyite group” and of participating in a “conspiratorial terrorist organization,” tortured, and forced to make a confession that he worked for a number of foreign [intelligence agencies](#).

¹⁶ Volkov, 164.

He wrote from prison to his tormentor, Vyacheslav Molotov, Stalin's deputy in the Politburo: "The investigators began to use force on me, a sick 65-year-old man. I was made to lie face down and beaten on the soles of my feet and my spine with a rubber strap... The pain was so intense that it felt as if boiling water was being poured on these sensitive areas. I howled and wept from the pain.... 'If you don't sign we will keep beating you leaving only your head and right hand untouched, the rest we'll turn into a piece of formless bloody chopped meat.' And I signed everything."¹⁷ He was shot in early 1940.

But in 1916 Vsevolod Meyerhold, as painted by Brois Grigoriev, is man about town in evening dress – top hat, white gloves, white waistcoat, black tails – his elongated arms bent extravagantly at the elbows: “Baby I’m the top.”

The website of the Royal Academy had promised: “*From Russia* is a testimony to the glorious history of Russian collecting and Russia's influence in the development of modern art.” But this felt like a façade, a sort of Potemkin village laid over the “testimony” of the rest of the story of modern Russian art – so much sorrow, suffering, and suffocated protests against the descending dark – so that we 21st-century viewers, boulevardiers of the galleries, may congratulate ourselves for our post-modern, not to say post-Soviet- cosmopolitan tastes.

In this we westerners of the impeccable centre-left or, better yet, left, connive with the Soviet apologists themselves. In the Chambers Gallery, a private shop near the Barbican tube station, paintings of Russian and Ukrainian 20th century Impressionism were on view, many simply stacked against the walls.. The postcard declared that these works “shine with vitality and optimism.” And so they do. *Crossroads Year 1945* c. 1986, by V Alikhberov 115 cm X 175 cm, selling for £15,000: The Red Army is on the march, remarkably well-dressed and fit for all the mud and rubble and smashed German-language roadsigns strewn around them. On to Berlin, boys! *Odessa Street*: blue, sunny, dappled. *Dnieper River View*: idyllic meanders, rowboats, wildflowers, church in the distance. *Peasant Houses*: sturdy steep-roofed dwellings, ramshackle fences, a snow-drifted dirt track. *Peasant Women*: in embroidered blouses, kaftans and big boots, hoisting hay up on cone-shaped ricks.

“Easy flowing brushwork moulds a romantic and energetic world,” the postcard text goes on, “compensating for the daily hardships of the time.” A curious formulation. Most of the artists seem to have lived to old age and a death in their own beds. No Gulag here. Nor even an industrial revolution on the collective farm, to judge from the “peasants” still at work with pitchforks, nor the “daily hardship” of mass famine during a Five Year Plan. The victorious proletariat is here - *Cranes, Factory, Colours of Industrial Landscape, Open Cast Mining, At the Oil Refinery* – and the normalization of the industrial landscape, its forms and functions, and the Soviet person in a workaday world, although “industrial colours,” carmine, indigo, and sludge, in our time signify toxicity not a new aesthetic. (Why haven't our Western artists been half so interested in our working class?)

¹⁷ In Volkov, 119.

They are good artists, well-educated in the Soviet academies, duly enrolled in the Union of Artists, patriotic even romantic, only rarely breaking free of the official canons of Socialist Realism. How we have sneered at them! But, really, it took the two of us to dance this tango: a gesture of solidarity with revolutionary heroics while the representation of tribulations of “really-existing socialism” were evaded if not erased. And – let’s all give ourselves the benefit of the doubt - perhaps for the same reason: unlike the ideology of fascism, especially Naziism, which held its promise only for the Master Race, Communism spoke hopefully, shinningly, of a liberation for the entire labouring human race.

“Grygoriy Shyshko (1923-1994, b Ukraine): Shyshko spent all his life in Kryvyi Rih, a provincial Ukrainian town in the centre of an area rich with iron ore. ..Kryvyi Rih, with its unusual beauty and tough miners’ life, nourished his enormous talent. In the 1960s Soviet art critics lauded Shyshko’s representations of his home town, its workers and environs as ‘courageous’ and ‘loving’ works... Shyshko’s art was a labour of love.” All is forgiven then?

I kept on going to galleries and eventually the sourness dissipated as I gorged on the goodies on display in this world city, from Doris Salcedo’s installation in Tate Modern’s Great Turbine Hall to a retrospective of Derek Jarman’s Super-8 films – this was my legacy too, after all and I may as well enjoy it – but the point of the traveller’s truism had been made: wherever you go, there you are, bumping into yourself in the splendid emporia of Western Civ.

Myrna Kostash
January 9, 2009