

# ARTS & BOOKS

## Return of the landscape

Two London exhibitions breathe fresh life into a faded genre. By Jackie Wullschlager

(...)

Jones distils the experience of being in a landscape while 77-year-old Oleg Vassiliev paints the remembrance of it. His visually scrupulous, controlled renderings of Russian rural scenes are best seen round noon, when their pallid, wintry luminosity is illuminated by strong natural daylight. In "Early Spring/High Water", a frozen stretch of water beginning to melt flows out of a misty hinterland of light and shadow, fringed with ice-coated reeds, each delineated with photo-realist precision. "Churchyard" jumbles tilting byzantine crosses against bare trees in a diffuse, caressing light which offsets fake pink and red flowers dotting the graves.

Vassiliev's first and last show in the Soviet Union took place in 1968; deemed too "artistic", he did not exhibit again until 1997. During those years, he looked back to the prisms of light and colour of the revolutionary avant-garde, experimenting with what he called "interactions between space-surface-light". Such abstracted models, he says, "protect me from too much sentiment and from a stickiness with the object". Crucially, objects are not painted from the motif: since Vassiliev emigrated to America in 1990, he has painted memory and exile as a series of composite landscapes, collaged from photographs and recollection. Themes of loss, dislocation, an exploration of multi-layered Russian history link him with 19th-century landscapists Isaac Levitan, Ivan Shishkin and Aleksei Savrasov. Savrasov's "The Rooks Have Returned", chronicling the beginning of spring as snow melts, earth reappears, buds sprout on scruffy trees, was the favourite work of museum founder Pavel Tretyakov. It is referenced in all Vassiliev's wintry scenes here,

which also share the 19th-century Russian idea of landscape as social construct. "Let it be a dirty puddle if only it has the truth," said Tretyakov. "Early Spring in the Country" depicts glistening puddles in a street of churned-up mud, fences and wooden shacks receding in the distance: a stark portrayal of rural Russian isolation, with lines of telegraph poles formalising the composition and hinting at human communication.

Vassiliev called his 2004 retrospective at Moscow's Tretyakov Gallery *Memory Speaks*, recalling the autobiography of another Russian exile, Vladimir Nabokov. These landscapes are visual equivalents to Nabokov's life-into-art memoir - memory not as an imprint, but as a construction built on the shifting grounds of identity. Concluding his 1949 study of landscape at a time when man had lost faith in nature, Kenneth Clark wondered "Can we escape from our fears by creating once again the image of an enclosed garden? No. The artist may escape from battles and plagues, but he cannot escape from an idea." Vassiliev and Jones put concepts, as well as sensations, back into landscape, and in doing so get away with paintings whose sincerity challenges the ironies and subterfuges of a post-landscape age.

*Lucy Jones, Stepping Out Into A World Beyond*, Flowers East, London, to January 3, [www.flowerseast.com](http://www.flowerseast.com)

*Oleg Vassiliev, Recent Work*, Faggionato Fine Arts, London, to February 13 2009, [www.faggionato.com](http://www.faggionato.com)

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Oleg Vassiliev, Churchyard, 2007