

The POSITIVE

Oleg Vassiliev – memories of a recent past

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Prairie Grasses, Reflections (2012), Photo courtesy of Faggionato gallery

A retrospective exhibition about the work of Russian artist Oleg Vassiliev is currently on show at Faggionato gallery in central London. The exhibition, which has just been extended until the 17th of January 2014, presents some of the most recent works and production (the majority of the paintings is from the 90's and the last decade) of the recently passed away Russian artist.

Vassiliev is well known as an exponent of the so called Soviet Nonconformist Art Movement (or Unofficial Art) which rose in the post-war period in opposition to the canon of Socialist Realism imposed by the government. The movement was active from 1953 to 1986, a relatively more open time for the Soviet Union towards the western culture and characterized by a more tolerant attitude for artistic expression.

Oleg Vassiliev took part to the Stretensky Boulevard Group in Moscow in the late 60's and started his career working as an illustrator for children books – along with his colleague and friend Erik Bulatov – which allowed him to have space and material to practice his own painting work.

This exhibition (simply titled “Oleg Vassiliev – paintings 1967 – 2012”), is the second that the Faggionato gallery uses to celebrate the Russian talent following the solo show in 2008 and includes works which are exhibited to the public for the first time such as “Lusja with Tulips” (1967), the only early year's work of the show, and “The Aisle” (2004).

Considering that the majority of the paintings exhibited are from the last two decades – and therefore realized after the artist emigration to America in the early 90s and the end of the mentioned art movement – what is more remarkable of his late work is the aesthetic research on the use of light and color and the shift towards further abstraction.



Nevertheless Vassiliev's work, which is usually praised for bringing together the apparently opposed trends of Russian art of modern times (the 19th century realism with the Russian avant-garde of the 20's) cannot be dismissed as a mere formal investigation. On the contrary certain formal aspects of the artist's work such as the obsessive control on the composition, exercised on the space of the canvas through the use of symmetry for instance, are means to convey more symbolic messages.

The painter often talked about his work as a representation of memories as landscape; "*light is the very essence of remembrance...the deeper one delves into the past, the more powerful the stream of light*". Time is in the artist work both frozen (as a memory) and recovered through a journey that goes always backwards, excavating in the artist images of the past. This spiritual character of the paintings or expression of the "inner life" of the artist seems inherited by Wassily Kandinsky's experience and theoretical work about abstract painting.

In this sense Oleg Vassiliev's work completes and synthesizes the experiences of the avant-garde and reconciles the modern dispute of abstraction vs. figuration. As he said: "*the visible and tangible world is more a thing of remembrance than of perception of reality. The present is saturated with the past..*". When reality equals remembrance it also equals that inner life of the artist in a process that goes from the unconscious to the conscious level of perception (which seems the reason why he defines light as "light of consciousness"). Among the works that seem more explicitly on this line of thought there are "Space and Landscape" (1994) and "The Aisle" (2004).

In some of his latest works such as "Horizon" (2008) and "Welcome" (2012) the artist completely abandons the landscape background to achieve pure abstraction. In these examples the author focuses exclusively on contrast between light and darkness and shades of colors; if formally he seems to get closer to the language of minimal art, conceptually he excavates even further in time to transcend the past memories in a "river of golden light". The author erases any trace of the real and therefore of his own presence; "*In that river my life*

[\(http://thepositive.com/oleg-vassiliev-memories-of-a-recent-past/the-aisle2004/\)](http://thepositive.com/oleg-vassiliev-memories-of-a-recent-past/the-aisle2004/)

The Aisle (2004), Photo courtesy of Faggionato Gallery

drowns, and everything that was before lives".

<http://www.faggionato.com/> (<http://www.faggionato.com/>)

How has the rediscovery of Vassiliev's work cast light on the past experiences of the historical avant-garde and at the same time of the contemporary art scene in Russia? And how can his work be read in the broader global cultural framework?