



In The Artist's Own Words

Dada and Surrealism were much more than stunning images, objects and poems, explains Alex Berdysheff...

Writing this article I tried to remember the things people ask me most often. I also tried to avoid political or social aspects, although they determine pretty much everything in my life.

From the very beginning, drawing for me was an opportunity to express myself, my feelings and ideas, in an indirect form. It was my way of escape, of expressing resistance, in fact, it was a substitute for free speech. I came to understand the immense power that lay hidden within a pencil – a couple of lines on a piece of paper and a doorway would open to a parallel reality where anything was possible.

When I was young, my family was not in a position to support my artistic experiments, and I remain grateful to friends who advised me to study graphic design. It was the best option available to me at the time and meant that I could do what I wanted to do, without dealing with the established art scene in Tbilisi, where my individualistic works had little chance of being accepted.

Thus it was that I found myself liberated of the prevailing dogmas, free of the need to produce something acceptable to the establishment. My studies equipped me with the professional skills I needed and provided me with modest income. I was



also fortunate enough to visit the best art colleges and design studios as a post-graduate in Scotland. This happened at just the right time for me – seeing contemporary art in the many museums and galleries gave me the confidence to continue doing things my own way.

It came as quite a surprise to me that my works could be hung on a gallery wall and actually be sold! The encouragement came from two exhibitions which took place almost simultaneously in Barcelona and Glasgow, where several of my early collages were exhibited and sold. Encouraged by the success, I began searching for a way to produce something more serious than my early ink sketches, watercolours and engravings. I was limited by the fact that I had been working on an almost miniature scale, so I wanted to change the format whilst preserving the quality of the work.

I began to work in three-dimensional collages, and this allowed me to take something and change its qualities the way I wanted. This, in turn, led me to an understanding of the substance of painting. Colour, texture, shape: everything could be explored and interpreted. In the first works I didn't even use paint, confining myself to monochrome objects on a dark background. The results were fragmented and seemed to me representative of the collapse occurring in my country at that time.

When I started these experiments in the late 1980s, there was very little information available in Georgia about collage art and modern art in general. There was no living artist sufficiently influential to mentor me, and I was too alienated to join a group of young artists. All I had to go on were books, and I spent a lot of time searching in secondhand stores in Tbilisi and Moscow. Eventually I came across the works of

Max Ernst and Joseph Cornell, and was duly impressed. Other artists came to my attention later, but these were the first. Dada and Surrealism were much more than stunning images, objects and poems: to quote Richard Huelsenbeck, "... I believe that all creative people have a great resentment either against the country they live in or against the civilization in the period of history that they live in." Many years after I first read these words, they continue to ring true for me.

The next thing to influence me was Russian avant-garde. Very little was known about it during my years of study, which only served to make its discovery all the more exciting. Today, I can't imagine anything more mysterious and powerful than Prehistoric Art.

Working in collage in the 1990s required little investment as I could find the materials I needed at home, or even on the street. This was important during the Civil War in Georgia and later, when there was simply nothing available for purchase. I would have been happy enough spending the rest of my life scouring a junk yard, but I was also looking for something else.

I started to work on paper, although I was sceptical about this vulnerable medium because of the need to frame the finished work, something I could not afford. But paper-based work seemed the only viable

alternative to collage-construction. I would stretch large, damp sheets of paper on panels, with the result that water-based paints and glue did not warp the paper after drying out. This was important, because I wanted to use layers of paint and then wash them out. In the summertime those sheets dried out quickly, which allowed me to make many changes; it was a fascinating process, almost like printing photographs in a darkroom, except that this was happening directly under the rays of the sun.

At the same time, I started using natural rust in my work. It was enough to drop some iron into water for a few days to develop this beautiful colour. This is a method I still use to make rust as a pigment.

As so often happens, the decision to stretch canvas and start painting in oils was a spontaneous one. A fellow artist consulted me on technical issues, and, to my delight, everything worked. I know now that oil is the best medium. My palette transformed and became more varied. I like to change certain things, but the main principles remain the same. There's a thick red line dividing my art and any commissioned work I do as a graphic designer and illustrator, where I usually accede to a client's wishes, even if I happen to disagree. As for my paintings, however, I reserve the right to destroy them if I am not happy with the result, but this is just another aspect of creativity, an inevitable part of the overall process.

People often ask me where I get the ideas for my pictures. The answer is, I really don't know. Maybe I have the ability to enter a state of mind where images and concepts appear and transform themselves. It is often difficult for me to separate imagination from reality, but without that any creativity would make no sense at all. I won't reject a sudden idea, even if it is markedly different from my usual style, after all, who knows where this open door may lead? Many of my best works are the direct result of mistakes, and each mistake makes a painting unique and closer to real life. In a way, it's like the process of evolution. My work *Flaws* is an attempt to visualise this idea.

As for the future, the tricks of Fate and fortune have taught me not to make too many plans. I have some ideas for new works and these will, no doubt, find expression soon.

opposite left: Alex Berdysheff

opposite right: Pub Scene

below top: Flaws

opposite right: Metaphysical Still-Life



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