

# Art Paris shines a spotlight on Russia

PARIS

Fair glances eastward, and history and politics meld across many genres

BY CELESTINE BOHLEN

Art Paris Art Fair, the contemporary art fair just closed at the majestic Grand Palais, didn't have to look far to give historical context to the homage it's paying this year to Russian art.

It was under the same giant glass roof that at an exhibition in 1906, Sergei Diaghilev initiated Parisians to the Russian artists of his generation, starting a fashion that was to produce his wildly successful "Ballets Russes."

This history spoke to Guillaume Piens, now in his second year as the Art Paris curator, as he looked for ways to promote his theory of "cosmopolitan regionalism," which views art in its local context, rather than through the lens of the international art market.

"Now is an interesting time to look at Russian art," said Mr. Piens in an interview on opening day last Wednesday. "From 2000 to 2008, there was a bit of a boom, and then collapse. These days, Russian art is having trouble exporting itself, even being seen."

So to put the spotlight on a contemporary scene that has a special cultural context, different from any other, the Art Paris fair invited 10 Russian galleries, and urged others to bring works by their Russian artists, some 90 in all.

The show, which closed Monday, brought together a total of 144 galleries from 20 countries, mostly European, but also Asian, Australian and just one U.S. gallery — Galerie Blue Square, now of Washington, formerly of Paris, well-known for its list of established and emerging Russian artists.

The Russian works at the fair spanned several generations and genres — from brawny Soviet workers wielding hammers, painted by Nikolai Zagrekov in the 1920s, to the Pinocchio figures of Igor Makarevich and delicate geometric shapes of Edik Steinberg,

both heirs to the Suprematist school.

Steinberg was just one of many Russian artists drawn to Paris during the dark days of Soviet censorship, when abstract and nonconformist art was literally bull-dozed in public parks, or hidden in private attics.

Claude Bernard, whose Paris gallery had 15 Steinberg works on display, each priced at €35,000, or \$45,000, still vividly remembers the day 25 years ago when he walked into Steinberg's Moscow atelier, stacked high with hundreds of canvases.

"I felt the emotion of a historic moment," Mr. Bernard said. "It was a dazzling moment."

It took Mr. Bernard five years to get legal permission to export Mr. Steinberg's works out of the Soviet Union. Steinberg, who died last year, eventually divided his time between Paris and Tarusa, an artist colony south of Moscow.

There were also examples of Russian political art — satirical such as the mammoth blue and white canvas, by Andrei Molodkin, with the logo of



GALERIE CLAUDE BERNARD, VIA ART PARIS ART FAIR



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Gazprom, the giant Russian gas company, beneath a two-fisted Statue of Liberty, or acts of protest, such as the dress with a Pussy Riot message sewn on it, in support of the jailed Russian demonstrators, by the St. Petersburg ART, PAGE 12

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artist Natalia Pershina, or Gluklya.

Then, there were works with a certain whacky charm, another Russian specialty, like the crowd-pleasing kinetic sculpture by Alexander Shishkin-Hokusai, made of wood and steel with moving paper figures, including a dog that says "gav" (Russian for "woof").

The Paris-based Galerie Christian Berst had works by the late Alexander Lobanov, a key figure in Russian "Art brut" who drew self-portraits with imagery drawn from Soviet mythology.

The Russian galleries, collected in a one quadrant in the sprawling fair, were not only from the main cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg, but also from Rostov-on-Don and Vladivostok, a testament to the vastness of a country that defies centralization.

Olga Kisseleva, an artist of Russian origin who is based in Paris, said her links to the Arka gallery in Vladivostok, a city on the Pacific, had helped to give her access to Japan and China, both ma-

jet art markets. Ms. Kisseleva, who brought a collection of work that ranges from digital displays to exquisite "still life" photographs mimicking Dutch paintings, is no stranger to the contemporary art circuit, but welcomed a chance to have her work put in its own historic framework.

"My work is clearer in this context," she said. "When one grows up in the U.S.S.R., then things are different — the language is different, problems are different. The context is not exactly the same."

Mr. Piens's intention with Art Paris is to turn attention toward continental Europe, away from what he called the "Anglo-Saxon" axis associated with the International Contemporary Art Fair (known as F.I.A.C.) held in Paris each autumn, also at the Grand Palais.

"The strategy is different," he said. "We are looking across the Continent, eastward." The choice this year was Russia; next year's will be China, he said.