Russian revolution

The work of artists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid caused a sensation when it was first exhibited in the Soviet Union in the 1970s. As a show of their seminal installation, Yalta 1945, opens at London’s Ben Uri Gallery, Zinovy Zinik says their art still has the power to shock from above by the cultural bureaucrats.

Having graduated from the same Stroganov School of Art in Moscow, the artists (nicknamed the Marx and Engels of Russian conceptualism) started to actively collaborate at the end of the 1960s: a period of Soviet history when the conservative forces headed by Leonid Brezhnev had driven the country towards total stagnation and corruption.

And yet, alternative forms of independent existence were created in private spaces, such as a kitchen table or in a seedy cafe. Both Melamid and Komar were part of my circle of friends who got together every Thursday in my Moscow apartment. Here, a new attitude to officialdom developed. By that time, Soviet iconography was already an empty shell, a crust under which home-brewed connotations of different religious and political trends, fads and obsessions had started bubbling.

It was in this atmosphere, during the early 1970s, that the pair developed their notion of Sots-Art (Sots is a compression of the Russian words for ‘socialist realism’). Sots-Art treated the omnipresence of Soviet ideology with the same regard American Pop Art showed to the overproduction of material goods.

The duo’s first memorable painting in this new genre was their Double Self-Portrait (1972). The classical faces of Lenin and Stalin or Marx and Engels that look at you from the fresco in the Moscow underground were replaced in this work by Komar and Melamid’s own profiles. It was an apt illustration of how official art was omnipresent in the private life of every citizen. One version of this double portrait was literally bulldozed: in 1974 the duo’s notorious unofficial open-air show in Moscow was smashed into smithereens by the Soviet Union.

In New York, they became the talk of the town with their ironic conceptual projects (such as ‘auctioning’ the souls of famous artists) and with their major exhibitions of the 1980s in the USA. Artistically, Komar and Melamid were employing a conceptual style that had featured in their early works, notably in The Biography of Our Contemporary (1973), in which the daily life of an ordinary Soviet citizen was reflected in different artistic styles depending on the ideological phase the character was going through.

The artists’ second series of Yalta paintings was exhibited in 1987 at the German art show documenta 8 in Kassel. It is these panels that are now on display at the Ben Uri Gallery in London. Here again, the duo contemplates the world’s history as a conglomeration of styles and symbols of each epoch: the swastika is transfigured into a severe branch menorah; Churchill is depicted in the Impressionist manner while Stalin next to him remains loyal to his socialist realist style.

Ben Uri claims to be the only art museum in Europe whose raison d’être is to address universal issues of identity and migration through the visual arts. The migration of styles and the fluidity of Komar and Melamid’s work (they ceased collaborating in 2003) make their Yalta project feel perfectly at home in London. •

Yalta 1945 by Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid runs from 16 September – 18 December at Ben Uri Gallery. See ben-uri.org.uk and What’s Happening p61. Zinovy Zinik is a Moscow-based author who has lived in London since 1976. He contributes to the TLS and BBC Radio. His new novel Sounds Familiar or The Happening p61. Zinovy Zinik is a Moscow-based author who has lived in London since 1976. He contributes to the TLS and BBC Radio. His new novel Sounds Familiar or

“Yalta 1945, 1986-87, mixed media on 31 panels; Yalta Conference in February 1945 with (from left to right) Winston Churchill, Franklin D Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin.”

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