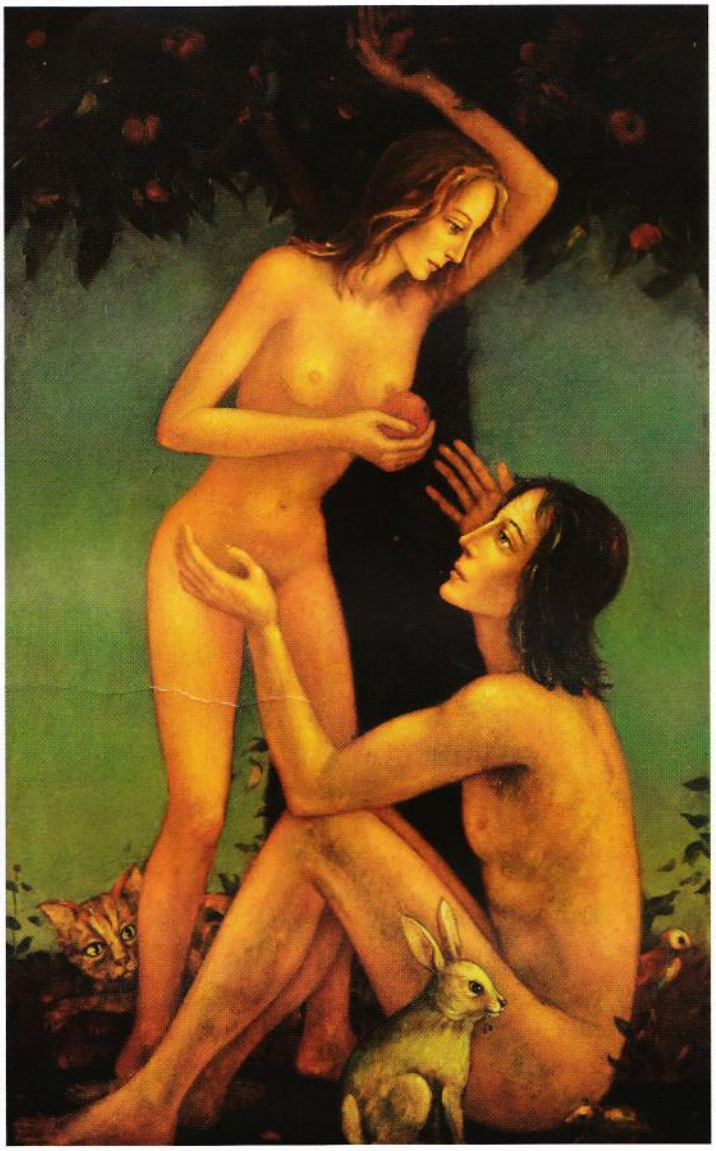
The Universal Message of MIHAIL ALEKSANDROV

BY JAMIE ELLIN FORBES

MIHAIL ALEKSANDROV'S retrospective covering his 30 year career at Alexandre Gertsman Contemporary Art in Soho, New York City was an indisputable tour de force of one man's prolific brilliance. Light, airy and spacious, this gallery setting was the perfect backdrop to immerse oneself in the creative maturity of this Lithuanian-born artists' broadly developed linguistic language. Throughout this powerful collection of paintings, Aleksandrov captures moments of beauty in compositions encompassing unique interpretive visions. They emanate from the imaginative and analytic minds' eye of the artist, purposefully placed and applied upon each of his canvases.

Mihail Aleksandrov is most often referred to as a Russian artist even though he was born in Lithuania and lived in Estonia. "The Baltic nations," commented Mr. Gertsman, who lovingly curated this immense undertaking, "have their own approaches to visual art, to literature, and to life in general. It wasn't until the 1940s that the Baltic countries became part of the Soviet Union and, for that reason, they had a much stronger relationship with Western culture and Western art than with Russian culture." Adds the artist, "It's true. There was a completely different atmosphere in the Baltic states than in the Soviet Union at large. This definitely influenced me. At the same time, I have always loved Russian art. Russian poetry had a much greater influence on me than Russian painting. It has been a great honor for me to be considered part of the Russian tradition, something that is always being ascribed to me, but in the end, I don't know that I belong to any national artistic lineage. I believe that art is greater than a nationality, or a state, or any kind of border, because art is something that unites different cultures and different historical periods. I would say that I have always been, first and foremost, contained in some personal worldview, that I have lived inside my own artistic vision."



"It was a big surprise for me that Alex selected 'Adam & Eve' for the cover of the book... for me it was like something from the past... he gave me this feeling that all my works actually have no age."

– Mihail Aleksandrov

Aleksandrov's works are informed co-equally by his Estonian Baltic heritage flavored with a Russian/Soviet cultural influence that infuses a diverse multi-national and encompassing art dialogue adapted within his ingenious Iconic historical story telling. Aleksandrov is one artist capable of uniting cultural perspectives and historical timelines to state his unique personal vision.

Aleksandrov's imaginative palette is distinct, reflective of his appreciation for the Early Renaissance, inclusive of influences from Mannerism, Brueghel the Elder, and Chagall, among others. Mythic compositions are combined by this painter with a unique geometric application of forms and patterns, stylistically attentive to bright colors and color blocks shaded in hues tonally often associated with the late Medieval and Early Renaissance periods. These elements are methodically used to frame out the compositional space, while creating the historic or spiritual statements this artist accesses with great expertise. Aleksandrov is at ease within his select media and compositions, while adapting a philosophical process rich in texture to heighten chiseled forms as iconic statement, each masterful in its refinement.

In the image *Adam and Eve*, Adam appears to be receiving the invitation to bite the apple Eve is offering as a beautiful maiden with seductive grace and beauty. While they are under the tree appearing more fable-like than Biblical, this story is personified by the artist's appreciation of the event. He often uses his wife's face as muse or subject and speaks of her as follows: "Through the harmony of her face, I see a window to a better world."

Captured within his understanding of the moment in time just prior the couple's expulsion from Eden, this image, as an interpretative not liturgical depiction, comes to life. It appears Adam is almost protecting her from the fall about to come. He is waiting, ready to catch her descent as he sits below, embedded amongst nature. Eve is illustrated with her hand above her head, in which she seems to be holding a small red bird. An intrinsic look molded on her face (as seen in her eye), may be a foreboding of what will be. An internal sense of loss appears to be evident. Knowledge has begun to filter through her being, reflected in her gaze toward the seated Adam, around whom the rabbit, small cat, mouse and bird are observing.

"...I believe that animals are like messages, each animal is a

message from God, so we have to be not just kind, but responsible…"

While elements are still balanced in utopian harmony, the hint of an angular stress, as if cables may be about to snap, is realized in the lines on the faces of all. With rich greens set off to form an almost bright background. Reds and browns (all fall seasonal earth tones) entwine behind the couple within a darker subdued core of the tree trunk to suggest the protected Garden has ended. The figurative forms of Adam and Eve are well illuminated in ochre and texturally worked to create a sculpturally cool effect, which could have been painted in an early Renaissance style as flat board wooden Icons, or utilized allegorically, in late Romanesque wall plasters painted to convey this emblematic story. *Adam and Eve* may be compared to, Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Peasant and the Birdnester*, 1584 with attention to detail and color for the purpose of the palette defining the artistic mood and configuration as an introduction to the portrayal of the artist's perception. Eras and concepts are connected, time lines blurred, as Aleksandrov's personal vision is united, emerging compositionally, posing to the viewer his unique imagery as a painter of figurative metaphor incorporating metaphysical overtones. As he so aptly puts it, "…for me it's also like a life experience, so I do not distinguish metaphysical from physical, because most of life is metaphysical for me."

"…for some artists, a wife is a window to a business world, for Aleksandrov, she is a window into the world…"



America and the Dragon

Aleksandrov shapes the figures in *America and the Dragon* employing the same look of alabaster illuminated from a light cast behind, as does the image of *Adam and Eve*. The subjects are emblematically co-joined in this representational image, which may be experienced in the way an operatic opus could sound; to illustrate what may be America's defining moment as viewed by Aleksandrov. In this story, a new picture of pure fantasy describing a unique, previously unstated theme is used to exemplify America pictorially, created by the artist as historical observer. Again his wife as muse, this time in a different role, and a Dragon slain, thrust through the heart with a sphere in mid flight while breathing fire, are placed against a luminous ball defined by a pitch-black background to illustrate this idea. The contrasts in the composition are startling, heightened through the use of bright color to create a beauty that seems untouchable and visceral at the same time. When compared to the "Angel" as simply beauty, the textural application of muted color defines the heroine in this image differently than to the Dragon slayer, or Eve. Although each image is a metaphor for a story, the face is recognizably the same. Aleksandrov deploys differing techniques to define the idea being embraced by each woman pictured.

"I do not distinguish metaphysical from physical, because most of life is metaphysical for me."

– Mikhail Aleksandrov



Godiva

After Aleksandrov moved to America, where he met his wife Lena, much changed for the artist. "The West affected my work indirectly; with its energy and the atmosphere it created. The Western art world itself couldn't have had any particular effect on me, and hasn't. On the whole, the 20th century hasn't had much of an effect on me, since every artist is born with his own concerns. And not only in terms of subject matter, but also in terms of the path that he must find for himself. He is like a man wandering through the forest, following secret signals that only he receives. This is how the artist searches for his path. This is why my intuition is like a compass that I use to find what I need while remaining immune to other outside influences. Lena really did change a lot for me. I would say that Lena's face is like an icon in that it is a window into a more perfect world. This is why I've been using this window for the past 25 years."

She appears triumphantly in *Godiva*, in which Aleksandrov's strong sense of space, along with dark and light contrasts to demarcate the sky above and the earth below suggests the duality of the Aristotelian Greek traditions, in keeping with Russian principles of Orthodoxy. Charging on her raised horse into the city, not timid but rather unfettered regarding her nudity, Godiva, an arm raised up, challenges the darkened sky, astride her horse which is reared upon hindquarters. United they appear to catapault over the shuttered windows. Her hair, composed of waves or ribbons of color, flies behind as does the horses' mane and tail. Almost matching, they are used as contrast against a static color field-like background in shades of red highlights and blond as accents to suggest hints of movement. The image is flat with the three-dimensional quality of Godiva and the horse arising from the hard line imposed in the figures against the textural background of an almost pointillist application of color. Here, the artist applies the techniques of Mannerism to the dappled color of the horse as illuminating texture is applied to the skyline of the city below.



"This is actually like a medicine for myself, because I need to see this work everyday."
(Aleksandrov on "The Island")

"Mannerism was important to me. I don't think about it much now, but when I was young, I was searching for some sort of peak where everything converged. By everything, I mean form, beautiful line and color. It is common knowledge that after the Renaissance, color lost much of its significance until Impressionism, although there were great colorists in-between. I always sought the point where all of this intersected, where color spoke and was able to embody an idea, where line didn't disappear into volumes, where you could find the lyricism. For me, this point is the early Renaissance. For a long time, this was the period I was most fascinated with, when I felt like art was in full bloom, whereas during the High Renaissance, Leonardo and Raphael had already lost interest in color. Anyway, this is why the early Renaissance had the greatest influence on me. On the other hand, I later learned to love art from almost every era, including even the most boring academism that I nearly hated when I was young—those 19th century artists before the Impressionists."

In *The Island,* Aleksandrov builds his image with arched windows of the buildings stacked in the shape of a triangle to comprise a restricted religious community rising above an atoll, out of the water. With an Angelic statuary atop as the pinnacle dome, reaching to the sky, a red light is seen in the central window. Two flags flank the angled sides and the shoreline completes the trine, dividing the top from the bottom horizon. A man sits in a boat with a dog, gazing at the distance, floating on the water. The image is fantastic yet subdued by the Gothic building, the late medieval, early Renaissance palette of color and the mannerism applied to the man's face. The dog is a humorous addition. Almost as if a tarot card had been painted from symbolic meaning, a cosmology unique to the artist is now linking one painting to the next. Never are the scenes duplicated, this and other pictures are at once familiar to the viewer, although unique, never having been painted by another, they are infused with the influences patterned by the artists to create image to image the threads of his visions becoming language. Elements become recognized, useful to employ in stating his message.

Duality is united within a trinity, as the geometry (when employed in each image) places the viewer inside the context of a sacred space to view that which is only imagined not as real, but as a possibility to unite the concept that this language is not merely a representation but encompasses the process of the ideal. Like a buoy, as the man in the boat in *The Island,* the trine is built to support the angel atop.

Aleksandrov is a literary man and has often mentioned that poetry is fundamental for his art, which is readily apparent to the viewer. "Poetry, as even Dostoevsky remarked, is at the heart of all the arts, including prose, painting, and music. The lyrical strain leads me from era to era, where I seek, in the various times and styles, whatever it is I need to make a poetic image materialize. It would be a mistake to become too enamored of various styles, since every style is tied to its epoch. In the end, the thing to express isn't one's love for old art, but one's artistic sensation of their time. That is why what I look for when exploring previous eras is some kind of cultural charge, an energy. The historical aspect interests me a lot less. The energy I am looking for is what will help me manifest what I feel and think today."

The images seen in both *Orpheus* and *Eurydice and the Trumpeter* are double sides of a coin, like two faces of Janus carved out of the space between each other, looking forward and back. Orpheus is said to have attempted to retrieve his wife through song from the underworld. In *The Trumpeter*, two figures may be falling in space, in an aerial dance whirl created by the leaping figure playing the horn. They may be colliding with or causing movement as the atmosphere appears to be joyous and chaotic at the same time, as with *Orpheus and Eurydice*, seen as Orpheus plays his song.



The Trumpeter

Quantum theory may be what holds the dimensions together. Clearly time is being set aside by the artist as the unifying force and a centrifugal field may be felt in *The Trumpeter*. The Harlequin pattern, used also in *Godiva*, is developed in the pant legs of the figures placed on textural background. As the Trumpeter's sound may be heard within the image created, so can the solitude and quiet be felt in the Aleksandrov's image of *Hope*.



Orpheus and Eurydice

"I am always learning and I now believe that this is the best position for an artist to take—not to consider himself a master, or to even believe that he has accomplished anything, but to always be a student. I try to be like a sponge and take in everything."

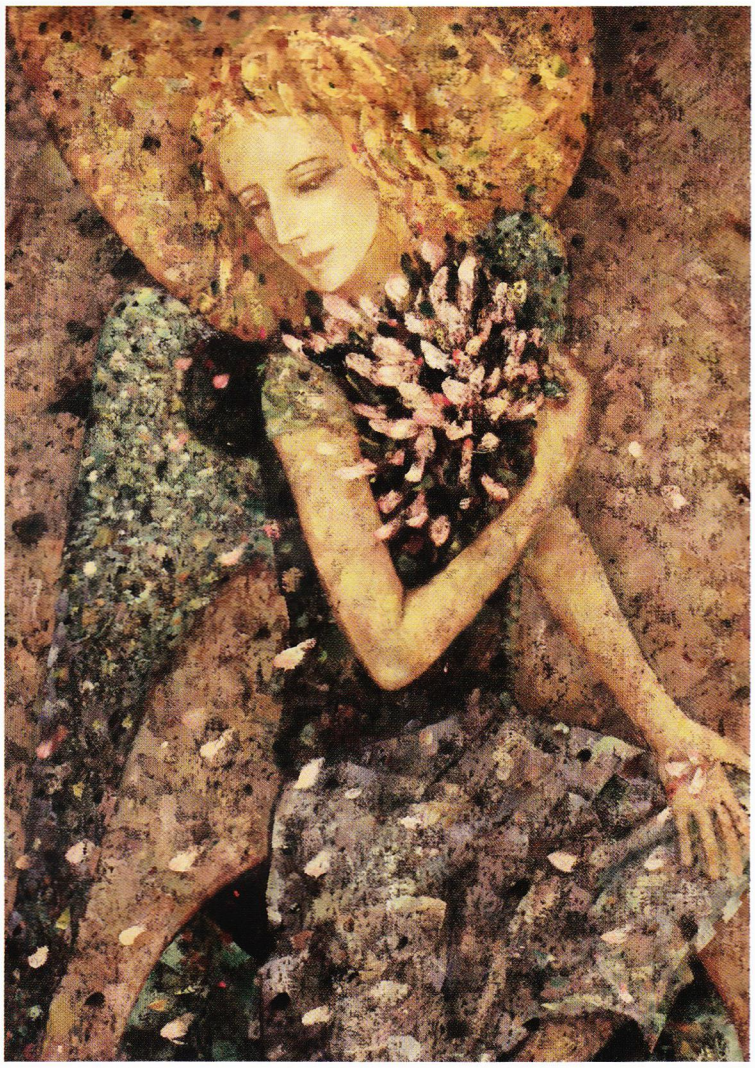


Hope

"I'm not trying to go deep in the psychological history of each person. I just try to bring out what is the spiritual message which any person has. In my opinion, psychology is not a subject for painting. The psychology we see in Rembrandt is not like psychology in Dostoevsky or Tolstoy; it is the revelation of the human soul, a different species of psychology. This is why I never attempt to show the psychological state or singularity of any particular figure. I would say that literary psychology not only has no place in the visual arts, but can also destroy images. Another reason I eschew psychology is that I have the sense that an individual opens themselves up much more when they are appealing to a Higher Power, to the Creator, God. It can be called many different things, but this Higher Power is something that we all feel, and it is precisely in that moment when an individual turns to Him that they may be 'taken'. My work attempts to capture this.

"This is why I avoid concreteness—when I am painting a face, I try to make the features as general and abstract as possible. A portrait can be very sketchy and distant from the model and at the same time resemble and convey the essence of the sitter. Finding this balance is crucial. Chaadaev believed that what the artist depicted was not a person or an object but that mysterious 'double' that can only be seen with inner vision, that this was what art was meant to do."

Out of the mystery the poet as painter—Aleksandrov—



Angel With Flowers

penetrates the veil of language that separates us all…or, all from the other side, allowing us to see both sides at once. Like Botticelli whose influence was said to be Ovid, when accessing a muse for his mythic work, *Birth of Venus*, a transliteral dialectal metamorphism occurs in the alchemy of Aleksandrov's work to state a message. This approach for crossing over of metaphors is cyclically restated and personally unique to the artist within the body of his work. Like Pousette-Dart, Aleksandrov's paintings access the rhythmic heartbeat of the universe unfolding and are never finished in the artist's eyes. Intended consciously or not, his thematic icons are used repeatedly to penetrate the veil and engender a common understanding. Simplicity emerges for his visions to be told in stories utilizing his developed symbolic language easily understood by all viewers. This is the genius of Aleksandrov's work. These masterfully executed artistic statements, which contain an anamorphic metaphysical synthesis through image stating the artists' universal views, required inspiration and compositional discipline to execute therefore enabling them to last the test of time when seen side-by-side over thirty years as a retrospective. The accompanying volume to the display was **Mihail Aleksandrov: A Retrospective**. It is a thought-provoking journey the viewer may take, clarifying and understanding the conceptual importance of the images as a complete overview of the artists' work seen at the Alexandre Gertsman Contemporary Art in the spring of 2012.

To view Mihail Aleksandrov's work and other information please contact
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