

AGA OUSSEINOV

PRESS  
(selected)



# BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

ArtSeen

September 5th, 2011

## AGA OUSSEINOV *In the Middle of Erewhon II*

by Veronika Sheer

AT THE PAVILION OF AZERBAIJAN IN THE 54TH VENICE BIENNALE  
JUNE 4 – NOVEMBER 26, 2011

The airy assemblage of contraptions hooked to a network of pipes postures as necessary infrastructure. Or it could represent rigid arguments materialized and haphazardly welded together. With each new weld, the argument abruptly turns in a newly self-confident, misguided direction, then twisting among other arguments with the same fate, it finally breaks off, loses the thread.

Beneath the doomed arguments, this tangle of metal, with enigmatic film clips flickering in eccentric housings, scratched fresco reliefs, a cube shaped globe, and other curiosities, tracks desires seeking fulfillment, desires as inchoate as the calls of birds, which often appear in the hundreds of archaically stained drawings and watercolors that flutter around this installation in its conception. We're awakened to where it is that we, like the birds, actually live—in remnants of the fleeting present hung on collapsing scaffolds of perspective, confused by lopsided trusses joining sounds, sights, and signs that enter the body through the various holes in the head.

Referring to Soviet “agit-trains” or “agitation machines,” even as it pretends to deliver a strong message that dissolves into twitters in the wind, this shadowy, involuted world also harks back to the artist's childhood in Soviet Russia. The boy Aga can make no sense of the barrage of bombastic propaganda that, when not spilling out flagrant lies, still projects a world that has nothing to do with everyday life, but the modernistic technology that suffuses it fascinates him. With his day-world slipping in and out of daydreams, the image of this delightedly gloomy submersible vessel is born.

Now the world's at sea again, signs and things become flotsam and jetsam swirling all around us.

But at least here and now, with friends on board, many more in the booths next door, we're safe to regress with the artist into a shared dream that it's some kind of game. We get to turn knobs, press buttons, peer through reticles at Lenin ranting in Chinese and other absurdities in a laughably incomprehensible adult world.

The bathyscaphe is organized around three symbolic, once functional objects the artists calls Periscope, Engine, and Weapon, each flickering with images (the detritus of present or immanent dysfunction). These images (many photographs by the artist's wife, Irina) flicker in magic lantern shows, one featuring a vintage stereoscope. Fictive mechanisms fail to explain the source of irrationally (perhaps) juxtaposed stills. One film clip shows the feet of tourists at Santa Croce in Florence as they relentlessly erode and efface the carvings on the tombs in the floor. Warning signs blip in the mind.

In front of the entrance, a map of the installation is etched into and painted on the surface of a drafting board; the artist has also carved fanciful drafting equipment. The map only loosely alludes to the mapped. As if etched into ice by an Olympic ice dancer, the line glides, swoops, suddenly stops scratchily as if with the serrated brake on a skate's blade, conjuring up fractured figures, gently, masterfully washed with tone.

In fact, in the artist's blissful surrender, his drawing hand going gracefully crazy well represents the installation, though not too literally. The installation in turn well represents the world today —*mechania* collapsing into *amechania* (ancient Greek for helplessness); and now this world we've run ragged slips into the slipper the drawing hand offers, as poetry once again recognizes the unlikely bride.

After thought has caught up, fusing with sensation in the fertile connection, the love that's being made to the dark world, as if to any of the dark spots in it, is real and passionate. This artist's healing humor and physical touch not only purify and justify, but realize Heidegger's claim that—"in the heart of the danger of technology lies the saving grace."

Water stops heating up in order to boil, just as a point falling down a slope by its own momentum stops to turn and rise. At this hiatus, the energy turns inward; there's only a change of heart in the heart of the motion briefly become stillness (the one transparent instant of the eternal now) where lies the saving grace, in the eye of the hurricane. Locate or recall the source where available, decode, then click in the names to reveal the ever more, but never quite focused image in the puzzle, then—quick, before the door closes—slip in to stay and dwell in the one middle of Erewhon and Erewhemos and Erewhyreve forever. (There is a smile of smiles that ends all misery though, alas, not all pain.)

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**CONTRIBUTOR**

**Veronika Sheer**

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**RECOMMENDED ARTICLES**

# sculpture

January/February 2008



Aga Ousseinov, *Landing (Airplane)*, 2006. Wood, wire, fabric, papier-mâché, gesso, and pigment, 90 x 30 x 104 in.

**NEW YORK**  
**Aga Ousseinov**  
Dinter Fine Art

The Russian artist Aga Ousseinov grew up along the shore of the Caspian Sea. Fraught with movement, mystery, and intimations of danger, seas give rise to dreams. They reflect the heavens above, hide wonders beneath their surfaces, and separate one land mass harboring one or more civilizations from another. Seas establish frontiers. They are, paradoxically, also avenues offering us the means to navigate from one world to another. Who has not wished to travel with Captains Cook or Nemo across or beneath the seven seas, in search of the unknown—which is what artists do. No wonder that the young boy growing up by what happens to be the largest lake on Earth turned out to be a dreamer. At the age of 10, Ousseinov was moved by

Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and at 14 by that other utopia, Tommaso Campanella's *The City of the Sun* (1602).

"Caspian Dreams," Ousseinov's recent exhibition, contained striking examples of his visions made flesh through the inexpensive, additive, and malleable media of stucco, papier-mâché, gesso, and rice paper, draped over frames of wood, cardboard, and/or wire (all of the sculptures but one were from 2006). Playful and unorthodox, with delightfully clumsy forms and heavy facture, his sculpture brings "art brut" to mind. However, it also alludes in select examples to other sources in the history of sculpture, ranging from antiquity to modern times. Witness the series of not always perfectly symmetrical stucco masks, with painted eyes, eyebrows, hair, and pink mouths. One mask is strongly reminiscent of a white plaster head with painted features from approximately 1275 BCE found at Mycenae. Another portrays the filmmaker Georges Méliès. A portrait bust shows Campanella looking a little like Giacometti, while a full-length statue hung from the wall like a marionette depicts a World War I *Wartime Cameraman*. The *Cameraman* and some of the masks bring the "primitivism" of Larionov to mind. When he is not traveling in his mind through space, Ousseinov travels through time.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, we find Ousseinov's ongoing fascination with machines. Machines allow us to bypass the limitations of our bodies, taking us to realms—the high seas, the sky, or the ocean floor—that we would not be able to conquer otherwise. To render machines of circa 1905, the period covered by Eisenstein's great epic,

Ousseinov appropriately uses a quirky take on Cubism—arguably *the* Modernist style—which he occasionally mixes with a healthy shot of Futurism, as in *Manifesto (Car)*. The title alludes to the mother of all manifestos, namely Marinetti's Futurist manifesto of 1909, which extols the beauty of roaring machines and favorably compares a racing car to the Victory of Samothrace. (Significantly, Cubo-Futurism became a Russian predilection only a couple of years later). Ousseinov's elongated gray car, with its three delicate wheels and its two wire-headed passengers, seems almost funereal. The vehicle resembles the spine of a dinosaur, and its uneven facets suggest that it has taken some abuse. Ousseinov's handmade sculptures convey longing and desire—dreams made tangible.

At the gallery, the rust-colored *Nautilus (Submarine)* was suspended high above the silver *Caspian Sea*, thereby reversing the order of things. The floor-bound "sea" consists of an irregularly outlined sheet from which rise numerous small sharp pyramids of roughly equal height, possibly hinting at the peaks rising from the sea floor or the highly stylized waves on its surface. Ousseinov the poet is a grand master of the willfully absurd. Submarines are smooth and elongated and navigate most often underwater. But his vessel floats through mid-air, shaped like an animal with a huge head rising above its horizontal torso and covered with pyramidal spikes. In his idiosyncratic figurative sculptures, Ousseinov alludes to larger narratives and strikes a melancholy chord tinged with humor.

—Michaël Amy

## Warhol Wigs and Eyeball Lamps Tease Window Shoppers With Art

By Linda Yablonsky

Dec. 22 (Bloomberg) -- At Barneys, Hermes, Louis Vuitton and Calvin Klein in New York, artworks that are totally unrelated to the holidays have driven away Rudolf and all the elves.

``Warhol-idays``: For more than a decade, Barneys has set the gold standard for Christmas displays. This year, the New York flagship's windows are dedicated to that great shopaholic, Andy Warhol. The dioramas, by Simon Doonan, offer theatrical assemblages of Warhol-related objects, images and epigrams from both Warhol and celebrity friends like Truman Capote, who observed that Andy was ``a Sphinx without a secret.``

As at every Barneys in the country, one window is reserved for portraits of Warhol by local schoolchildren, with sales to benefit their art programs. In New York, the small canvases look suspiciously -- and appropriately -- like self-portraits.

The platinum wigs, hand-drawn dollar signs and Studio 54 ticket stubs filling other windows make for even headier viewing. Oddly, on a recent afternoon I was the only person on the crowded sidewalk who seemed to notice.

Barneys New York, Madison Avenue and 61st Street. Information: <http://www.barneys.com/holiday/windows> .

### Cyclops Lamps

Vuitton's ``Eye See You``: It's not every day that the windows of a luxury-goods store like Louis Vuitton can instill quiet self-reflection, rather than desire, envy or outright resentment. For the season, the store has replaced the rich goods that usually populate its windows with monster heat-lamps on tripods.

Designed by the Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson, the faceted amber-and-violet lamps each resemble the pupil of a particularly jewel-like Cyclops eye and mirror everything on the street before them. In reality, they are cheap versions of the limited-edition lamps the artist created to raise \$1 million dollars for an Ethiopian orphanage.

``Eye See You,`` by Olafur Eliasson, on view through the holidays at Louis Vuitton, Fifth Avenue at 57th Street. Information: <http://www.121ethiopia.org> .

### Flying Contraptions

Hermes ``Inventions``: Though Hermes regularly features new video art in its windows, for holiday time it chose doll-like, painted-plaster sculptures by Aga Ousseinov to illustrate the store's hometown theme, ``Beneath the Parisian Sky.`` Ousseinov's objects all depict 19th-century inventions that moved both people and information into the 20th century -- biplanes, submersibles, movie cameras and the like. They have a cartoony folk-art appeal and would look equally right either sitting under a Christmas tree or flying around it -- especially if draped with silk ties, as they are here.

``Inventions`` by Aga Ousseinov, at Hermes, 691 Madison Ave., at 62nd Street. Information: <http://www.agaousseinov.com> .

### Icy Birds

Calvin Klein's ``Snowscape``: Anthony Goicolea is an artist best known for digitally altered photographs depicting multiple versions of himself in theatrically oversize landscapes. For the window of the white-on-white Calvin Klein store, he has installed one of these environments, a swooping, 60-foot-long winter wonderland complete with snowbirds and footprints. It looks a little like an icy tree house -- or a sleigh bed that shopped-out humans have abandoned to their confounded feathered friends.

Calvin Klein, 654 Madison Ave., at 60th Street. Information: <http://www.anthonygoicolea.com> .

*(Linda Yablonsky is an art critic for Bloomberg News. The opinions expressed are her own.)*

*To contact the reporter on this story: Linda Yablonsky at [fabyab@earthlink.net](mailto:fabyab@earthlink.net) .*

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Two Saudi women lead their country into the Venice Biennale

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FINANCIAL TIMES SATURDAY MAY 28 2011

## Venice Biennale

### AT VENICE THIS YEAR

## New kids on the block

The Venice Biennale hosts a record 89 countries this year, up from 77 in 2009. Its ever-extending global reach is reflected by several countries making their first appearances, and some interesting returnees.

The newcomers range from oil-rich Saudi Arabia to impoverished Haiti, from overpopulated India to diminutive Andorra.

The highest profile newcomer is India, which has been represented by collateral events in past years (1982 was its last appearance) but will have a dedicated pavilion for the first time. Its provocatively titled exhibition, *Everyone Agrees: It's About to Explode*, draws together artists of diverse regional and religious backgrounds from across the subcontinent and promises to include exponents who "have not already been valorised by the gallery system and the auction-house circuit".

Bangladesh, another new name, marks 40 years of independence with a show entitled *Parables* for which five artists have conceived site-specific installations that make use of the Venetian architecture.

Haiti will stage two exhibitions: *Death and Fertility*, housed in two 40ft shipping containers arranged to form a T, will feature works by three Port-au-Prince artists while *Haiti Kingdom of This World* will present the works of a further 15 artists.

Zimbabwe joins the select group of African nations with a Biennale pavilion. With *Seeing Ourselves* it hopes "to unlock the dialogue between Zimbabwe and

the international art scene". South Africa returns with a pavilion for the first time since 1995 – and not without controversy. Painter and photographer Zwelethu Mthethwa withdrew earlier in the year, citing what he

called the "opaque" selection criteria employed by South Africa's commissioner and gallery owner Lethole Mokoena.

Significantly perhaps – since this Biennale is an event that is all about nations putting their image across to the rest of the world – Iraq appears for the first time since 1976. Its show has been put

together by the US curator Mary Angela Schroll.

Entitled *Wounded Water*, it presents on-site works by six Iraqi contemporary artists and addresses the crippling shortages the country is facing.

Two Andorran artists will mark their nation's inaugural appearance with *ILLUMInations*, which plays on this year's Biennale theme.

However, there will also be notable absences from this year's event. Political turmoil has prompted Bahrain and Lebanon to withdraw. And, although most of the work is by living artists, Egypt will be present and will show work by Ahmed Basioury, a 31-year-old, Cairo-based digital and media artist who was shot dead while filming protests in Tahrir Square in January.

Other smaller countries with their own spaces include Azerbaijan, which has broken away from the Central Asia pavilion to host its own shows.

Raphael Abraham



'Brave Old World' (2010)  
Aga Ousseinov, Azerbaijan

ILLU

MHI

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IONS

Republic of Azerbaijan  
*Relational, of Baku*

Commissioner  
Cinghiz Farzaliev

Deputy Commissioner  
Vittorio Urbani

Curators  
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Beral Madra

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Zeigam Azizov  
Aga Ousseinov  
Khanlar Gasimov  
Altai Sadighzadeh  
Aidan Salakhova

*Relational, of Baku* will present two generations of artists from Azerbaijan who markedly represent the current stimulating culture of Baku, a city with a profound historical background and modernist and post-modernist strata of radical transformation through the Post-Soviet political, economical, and cultural transfiguration. The paintings, sculptures, installations, and video the six artists are presenting are relational to the socio-political and cultural environments they live in and they reflect intricate and complex statements and forms signaling their decisions and political involvement.



Aga Ousseinov, *Brave Old World*, fragment of the *In the Middle of Erehwon II* installation, 2010