

Igor Tschay at work in the Prague apartment he and a dozen other fellow artists have made their home base for freewheeling creativity

R *The* Russians are coming!

By Arie Farnam

The Tender Russian Painters are neither strictly Russian nor necessarily painters and their tactics are not always tender. Six months ago this upstart artists' cooperative moved to Prague 10 from Khar'kov in eastern Ukraine. They claim to be the first in this country with "performance exhibits:" open-genre painting and photography displays complemented by musical and theatrical performances, poetry readings, art discussions and workshops.

Their base, an apartment in Vršovice, has no electricity yet and the walls are peeling plaster. The faded Persian rugs on the floor are constantly obscured by sheets of canvas, bolts of silk, paints, pallets, stencils, frames, scraps of texture materials, tracing paper, brushes and containers of multicolored water.

These sparsely furnished rooms serve as exhibition space, and often as temporary shelter, for 15 artists from Russia, Canada, Ukraine, the Czech Republic, France, America and Germany. Despite the name, the only requirements for membership are that the artists get along together and produce art.

"We leave our passports at the door," says Igor Tschay, the charismatic Russian organizer of the group. "Here we have no borders, no nationalities. The rules of the group are 'don't disturb people or objects around you' and 'touch art with love and a sense of fun.'"

The Tender Russian Painters are art fanatics. They don't play at being artists for a moment. They are too busy turning out paintings, photographs, crafts, silkscreens, drawings and musical compositions. They also stage regular "public collective performances."

For example, upon their arrival in Prague last December, the Tender Russian Painters held a tea ceremony in the middle of Old Town Square.

Art is where you find it

"Our group is about artists who love to make art," says Oksana Veber, one of the Ukrainian members. "I always wanted to paint. I had to paint every day as a child. I painted day and night and on trains, wherever. I fell ill if I could not paint." Her garish orange and turquoise paintings emphasize the human female form and cats. She now has 300 small pieces and 15 large landscapes on display at several Prague galleries, twice that many in Kyiv and works in private collections in Germany and America.

Other members include Greek sculptor Gregory Papakitsa, German poet Bernt Steinke, Ukrainian violinist Aleksej Sova, and Tschay's partner Natasha Bojko, who does silk paintings, ceramics and musical compositions.

Bojko, who was originally slated to become a thermal engineer in Ukraine, says her artistic work was inspired by the French impressionists and Chinese landscape painters. Tschay, the immensely energetic linchpin of the group, is both painter and poet, although he is a veterinary surgeon by education.

Silk revolutionaries

The group started to form in Cologne, Germany in 1992, when Tschay, who had left Ukraine to escape massive unemployment and general hopelessness to work as an electrician, was invited to take part in the Documenta 9 contemporary-art fair in

Kassel. There he made contacts with artists from around the world.

The name Tender Russian Painters emerged only after he and several others returned to Ukraine. "The name just formed of its own will. The original members were mostly Russian and mostly painters. We just never got around to changing it, and besides it sounds good," Tschay says.

"We are tender," he says, gesturing to a pastel silk tie-die blooming with sunset colors, "because we try to make everything very sensitive in texture, very gentle on the senses, like silk."

The styles employed by group members encompass Russian tropical avant-garde, post-impressionist conceptualism and koolism-ocho. Tschay readily admits that the first is a farce. "There is only a very small part of Russia in the tropics. Russian tropical avant-garde doesn't really exist. We just made it up."

Post-impressionist conceptualism sprouted from a Moscow group called Medical Hermeneutic in the early 1990s. It uses a similar aesthetic to impressionism, while the subject matter is the exploration to extreme depth of a simple concept, such as "book" or "green."

Koolism-ocho is a German creation, based on "going with the flow" and the idea that a piece is never completed, that it is "always rolling," Tschay says, holding a business-card-sized ink drawing of friends sitting at a cafe table. The image is enlivened by his characteristic lyrical line and overlaid with a geometric pattern in blue magic marker. "In five years or so, I may decide to put some red hair on this guy," he says, pointing to one of the figures.



COURTESY ART

Girl in the Wheat by Vitaly Komarov, a real Russian painter

Free spirits

Their independent, freestyle exhibits and performances describe what the Tender Russian Painters do far better than the artworks they've created. Bojko says it is independence that defines their work. "We have a contrary spirit. I can't do things the way someone wants me to do them," she says. "If everyone is working in one direction, I will inevitably try something different."

The members survive mainly through selling their art to private collections. Tschay shrugs and grins when asked about financial survival. "When money enters into art, everything breaks down. Art cannot live around money."

"It is very hard to get by as an independent artist in Russia and Ukraine," he adds. "It is the same way in America, too. There is so much propaganda. Here in the Czech Republic the propaganda is less pronounced; its voice isn't so loud yet. Prague is still very free."

The Tender Russian Painters will open their biggest performance exhibit yet at 6 p.m. on Sept. 18 in the courtyard at Na Spojce 2, Prague 10. The group's paintings and photographs are currently on display at the Dobrá čajovna tearoom in Tábor, south Bohemia.

... with
their
tender-
minded
friends
from
Ukraine,
Canada,
France,
America ...