

Oleg Vassiliev¹

Born in Moscow in 1931, Oleg Vassiliev was one of the leading figures in the Russian "unofficial" art movement. Like his colleagues Ilya Kabakov, Eric Bulatov, Ivan Chuikov and Francisco Infante, Vassiliev is essentially a conceptual artist. Yet he differs from these other artists in the realism of his imagery.

Vassiliev has described his work as an attempt to "combine the energetic space of the painting ... with the depiction (as realistic as possible) of the subjective world." Vassiliev thinks of the canvas (the picture plane) as a dividing line between the visible, tangible world we live in and the world of memory and subjective feeling. Yet the picture plane somehow also serves as a window or bridge between these two worlds.

To accomplish his objectives, Vassiliev uses light, space and other devices to alter an otherwise realistic scene so that he can "capture" and show the subjective world. For example, Vassiliev frequently paints trapezoidal shapes on the left and right side of the central image in the painting, or above and below it, so that it looks as if swinging French doors that open in the middle are opened midway onto the scene presented. In our mind's eye, we can imagine the painting both with the doors completely open and then with the doors completely closed. In some paintings, the doors are transparent; in others, they are solid black or white. Depending upon the type of door (solid or transparent) and their positioning (whether they are open, closed or in between), the central image may be either seen or completely blocked out or altered in some other way. The doors, therefore, highlight the dual nature of the picture plane as both a barrier and window between two worlds.

Another device Vassiliev sometimes uses is to paint what appear to be spotlights that start at the corners of the canvas and meet at the center in a radiantly white or ominously black light. The glowing white or black spaces usually obliterate the center of the image and underscore the impossibility of directly showing the subjective world. These glowing spaces also act as visual magnets that draw the viewer through the picture plane into the world of subjective feeling that exists behind the canvas.

Many of Vassiliev's recent paintings pertain to memory. In these paintings he sometimes uses "dusty" colors tinged with white or grey that give the impression that there is a faint haze or mist that separates the viewer from what is shown on the canvas. The image is given an other-earthly aura that separates it from the visible, tangible world that surrounds us.

The painting shown on the cover of this card, *From the Past* (1994), contains several of the elements discussed above. On either side of the central image, colored transparent doors are opened midway onto the scene presented. If the doors were closed, the painting would be in color. If opened, the painting would be in black and white. The painting also includes spotlights that would result in a glowing, white center if the doors were closed.

From the Past is based on a famous painting by the 19th Century Russian painter

¹ © Contemporary Collections 1995

V.D. Polenov titled *Grandmother's Garden* (1878). Vassiliev copies Polenov's image very closely, but transforms the image into black and white. The center two figures--the old woman, bent with cane, contrasted by her granddaughter, standing upright with back slightly arched--capture the essence of old and young and the cycle of generational change. We know now, over 100 years after Polenov painted his work, that the woman who was young became old and, in fact, is now dead. We know that Polenov's world, which was once extraordinarily real, is also now gone. The fact that the image is repeated in black and white reminds us of old photographs and distances us from Polenov's world.

But the colored "doors" given by Vassiliev to the painting revive that past world, or at least revive a hint of it. That world itself cannot be completely revived: the industrial age, World Wars I and II, the use of nuclear weaponry and other events between then and now make that world irretrievable. But even though Polenov's world cannot be completely retrieved, Vassiliev's painting reminds us that that world once existed, with trees and plants and sunshine, with love and confusion between young and old, just like today. Just as the young woman of Polenov's painting loves and tries to learn from her grandmother, but, in the end, cannot completely understand her grandmother's world, we today can have some limited understanding of what it must have been like to have been alive in 1878, even though we can never fully understand. Vassiliev's painting isolates a moment "from the past" and makes the "edges" of it alive and real. The painting simultaneously puts us in Polenov's world and yet shows us the distance between that world and ours. We think of what once was but is no more and of how what is today will one day be no more.

About the painting, Vassiliev says simply: "space and past time, memory about it, humanity."

The artist Eric Bulatov, Vassiliev's close friend, once wrote:

Two traditions exist in Russian art: the tradition of turn-of-the-century Russian avant-garde, and the tradition of 19th Century Russian realist painting. Essentially, these two traditions have not yet merged; they exist simultaneously, each denying the other. Oleg Vassiliev is just the artist who, first, connects these two traditions, and, second, connects them to modern art.

Although Vassiliev's work was first shown in the West in 1977, it did not receive much attention outside the Eastern Bloc countries until the advent of glasnost. Since then, Vassiliev has been recognized as one of Russia's leading painters. His work has been shown throughout the world, including the United States, Italy, France, Norway, Canada, Spain, Chile, Japan, and Germany. His work is included in numerous public and private collections.