

LETTER FROM THE ISLAND

The Necrorealists: Serp, Yufit and Kustov

8 October – 22 December 2009

Cementing its reputation as one of London's most innovative galleries, Orel Art UK breaks new ground with the first ever exhibition of Necrorealist art in Britain, one of most radical underground movements in recent Russian history. With major shows devoted to Necrorealism coming up at the State Russian Museum in St Petersburg and the Museum of Modern Art Moscow, Necrorealism is finally acknowledged as an artistic movement after years of debate and controversy. *Letter from the Island* brings together an astonishing and unsettling combination of paintings, installations and films, spanning from the 1980s to today, by the movement's three great representatives: Sergei Serp, Evgeny Yufit, and Vladimir Kustov.

Necrorealism grew out of the Soviet Union in the early 1980s in St Petersburg. As the regime started to crack, a rebellious underground movement by very young artists challenged attitudes to life, death and social norms through absurdist performances in film, and later, paint. Obsessed by an old forensic pathology textbook, the Necrorealists recreated violent deaths using a crash test dummy, often to the horror of passersby. The group soon turned to filming their performances, populating their work with reanimated corpses. Although very much an underground movement the Necrorealists nevertheless began to be recognised more widely as artists. The works often have a strong sense of homoeroticism; early on the Necrorealists had depicted eroticised versions of stereotyped Soviet heroes in order to undermine their power. The movement aimed to poke fun at the state ideology of these supposedly immortal heroes by confronting the viewer with the reality of death.

On entering the first gallery in the exhibition the visitor's eye is drawn to the centrepiece by Serp: a wooden cabin. Once inside, the visitor can look out through the windows onto the Necrorealists' world as expressed in Yufit's films, which are projected onto the wall. In addition, there are paintings and photographs by Serp and Yufit, brilliantly executed. Serp's *Letter from the Island I* (2009) depicts the rear view of a reclining male torso. Headless and limbless, the figure resembles an internal organ or piece of offal, blurring the division between living flesh and dead meat. In Yufit's *Egg* (2007), distorted humanoid figures penetrate one another with phallic tails in an echo of the Ouroboros, the snake that eats its tail, denoting an endless cycle of death and regeneration.

The second gallery focuses on Kustov's paintings and photographs, with four lanterns on plinths in the middle. These lanterns, containing photographic slides of cemetery lanterns, symbolise the communication between the world of the living and the world of the dead. In the *Skull* (1999) series, the skulls are depicted as having been riddled with bullets, restoring their tradition role in visual art as *memento mori* by the clear evidence of violent death.

The third gallery will return to the medium of film, showing extracts from Yufit's work. Among the excerpts shown will be the award-winning *Daddy, Father Frost Is Dead* (1991), loosely based on a story by Alexei Tolstoy, and *Wooden Room* (1995), a meditation on the complex relationship between filmmaker and subject. Yufit uses elements from early silent cinema to explore humanity's relationship with decay, and reveals the possibilities for finding beauty and companionship in death.

Growing as it did from the counter-culture movements of the St Petersburg underground scene, Necrorealism is full of influences from earlier artists. A fascination with death and murder was

already found in the writings of Russia's most profound novelist, Dostoyevsky, but Necrorealism also emphasises the camaraderie and carnivalesque humour of death along with its darker side. Influences also came from other creative disciplines, such as the films of Fritz Lang and Germaine Dulac and music from the Soviet punk scene.

This exhibition reconnects the rest of the world with paradox at the heart of Necrorealism: the attraction of death and the beauty of its portrayal, the utopian desire which highlights the overwhelming humanity, sensuality and companionable humour linked to death.

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Private View, October 8th, 6pm

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