

MELNIKOV/PICTURES



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THE DOWNEY
GALLERY

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Design by Andrey **Anisimov** and **Igor** Melnikov



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HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT
The Art of Igor Melnikov

MANY ARTISTS

find fame early in life, but few achieve true power until the advancing years have seasoned their thought. Igor Melnikov, a Russian recently arrived in America, is a mature artist who is still in his forties, with half a lifetime yet to live. His is an ancient wisdom, yet his thought is as fresh and unclouded as that of a newborn child.



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His meditations on the soul arise from first perceptions, as fragile and clear as the still unmatched cave paintings at Lascaux. His art cuts to the quick, for it reveals the original truth that every adult carries within, however deeply buried beneath the incrustation of society and survival. In these extraordinary paintings, many layers of hidden meaning emerge into the light.

Melnikov finds his depth in his earliest recollections. He was born with an acute sensibility and has managed to keep it fresh and alive. He is a perpetual innocent with a sophisticated means of expression. His roots are in Russia, but his wings are

capable of carrying him across geographic and political boundaries.

Melnikov's art is truly international in its subject, content and impact. This is because the primal consciousness of youth is a universal experience. Like art and music, it transcends language. The artist invites his viewers to look within themselves in the same way that each of them, when listening to a classical symphony, attaches the most private dreams to that experience. When people weep in the presence of Melnikov's paintings, it is not from pathos but from recognition of a forgotten part of themselves. Their tears represent

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reconnection, which can be joyful indeed.

The content of this art reaches back to the great Russian literary tradition of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. The visual impact is more closely akin to classic Russian religious art. These fragile children are the saints of the future, embryonic icons set down in their purest form. They are oneself, one's ancestors, one's unborn grandchildren. They are the archetypal souls that exist intact at the core of each person. Very few of us can remember or reach those first delicate awakenings within ourselves. Melnikov excavates these almost unbearably naked faces from the depths of his own soul and

Black Table
1998
23" X 27"
Oil on Board
Morrison
Family Limited
Partnership
Florida/
Santa Fe
USA

exposes them within the safety of a work of art.

Melnikov's own childhood environment was far removed from the world of art. "Drawing or painting was considered something between an affordable luxury and an activity that no good person would pursue because it was not worth anything," he explains. "That is why, for many long years, I had a subconscious conviction that I could use only a very limited range of tools and methods for my work." This factor, paradoxically, did not limit his art at all. Instead, it allowed him to keep it to himself, to share it only with like-minded souls. Rather than subject his

most incisive perceptions to the authority of the Soviet state, he hid them and instead made a public career as a well known graphic designer, film maker, and illustrator.

"At that time, an artist was so designated by the state, which meant he first obtained a university degree and then joined a union. This was the route to exhibitions and subsidies. If you did not follow this prescribed path, then you were outside the official fine arts altogether," he says. "That made it hard to buy materials, and very expensive." Again, what seemed a limitation became a strength, for some of his best early work

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was drawn on scraps of paper with pencil stubs, the only materials he could find. Like his mature work today, these fragments have a just-born quality, a sketchy, prophetic energy all out of proportion to their humble scale and medium.

“This was not really unusual because almost all artists I know all tried to use any piece of paper, any surface for their artistic needs, almost to the point of making paintbrushes from their own hair, making stretcher bars from old wooden boxes, and stretching pillow cases over them for lack of canvas. Often there would be three or four



Towers 1984
Pencil on
Paper
Artist
Collection

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paintings, one on top of the other.”

He was not alone, of course. There was a healthy underground art scene in Russia during the Soviet era, for the simple reason that real artists make art because they must, no matter what the risk or hardship. Melnikov was able to be in touch with others, to talk about art with them, and to share in the effort to sustain the creative impulse, in an atmosphere that threatened it.

“All these circumstances created a two-sided situation for the artists,” Melnikov remembers. “Some of us fared better than others. Some were saved and some were lost. One of my acquaintances

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created a huge collection of pictures that he traded for a bottle of vodka or got from a dumpster. It is hard to imagine how many beautiful pictures have been lost or destroyed that way, then and now..."

The underground avant-garde artists also suffered from isolation. They were cut off from the currents of thought that flow through the art world in any era. New art was appearing everywhere else in the world, but they were not exposed to it. They had to invent it themselves, from scratch.

Later, they would discover that some of their ideas existed elsewhere. This was doubly frustrating. Not only did they miss

out on the recognition that their simultaneous invention would have gained them, but they had to worry about the specter of plagiarism. Melnikov almost had a complex about it. "Very often," he remembers, "I would reject a successful piece after long, difficult work on the subject, only because someone suggested that it looked like something that already existed."

In the fraternity of artists, objects were community property, but one's ideas were one's own. The inference that he might have copied ideas, rather than used commonly understood objects or themes as subject matter, tortured him

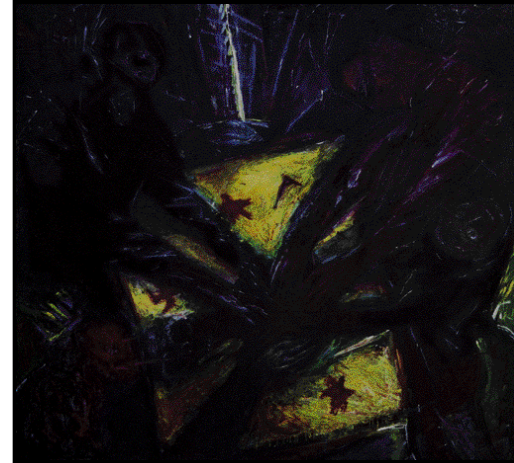
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unbearably in those days.

By 1990, he had decided that this desperation to be original was by itself damaging, and that in fact, “originality for originality’s sake was the worst kind of conformity.” At length, the avant-garde caught up with him. Today, the cult of inventing something new is not nearly as important as it once was. The subject, or lack of it, in an abstract painting or sculpture is no longer even an issue.

“The phrase ‘progress in the arts’ is almost nonsense,” says Melnikov. “It is impossible to recognize or define. Maybe it doesn’t exist. New gimmicks add almost nothing to a human’s emotional ability to

Spiritism
1989
48" X 47"
Oil, ink
charcoal on
masonite
Artist
Collection



see the world and the environment. If an artist does not have this ability, then new tricks will add nothing to his art.”

Melnikov was determined to avoid the artificial conventions of surrealism and symbolism, and to expose his ideas in the most natural way possible. He is very sparing with his images, placing a few carefully chosen figures and objects against a neutral ground. Unlike the Symbolists, he uses real-world objects in a manner that may be interpreted as symbolic but this is not required of the viewer. Each canvas functions first as a work of art, and then as a concept that addresses larger themes. The content is

accessible but not compulsory.

Simple does not mean simplistic in this case. The result of Melnikov’s refinement is an image so sharp that it runs like a needle through the viewer’s perceptions. He is somehow able to go so deeply into his subconscious memory that he can address primal experience in a primal way.

His studies of children deal with ideas rather than personalities. He is fascinated by the impact of the child’s environment on its newly formed perceptions. He views childhood games not as idle pursuits but as serious occupations directed toward the evolution of consciousness. He is intrigued by their use of toys and other



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objects as tools for this crucial work, and the methods by which children instinctively transform them into symbols for the lessons necessary to their survival and growth. "The objects are transformed in their minds to something else," he says. "They change meaning and value. A box becomes a house. A doll becomes a person. A broom becomes a horse."

At the same time, the object remains an object. Each detail is precise in its meaning. The informed viewer must master the language in order to read the painting and know what each detail means.

Only in the interpretation of details does it become symbolic. Melnikov's paintings

Fragment
From the
collection
1995
Mixed media

are packed with visual information that also can be read like a story. This process of decoding the language and interpreting it is very much like the artist's process of creating it. By casting an idea into visual language instead of simply stating it, the artist eludes geographic boundaries even as he creates a work of art for its own sake. A series of objects on canvas, like hieroglyphics, is presented for the viewer to decode in an intensely personal way. By making a painting, the artist communicates with each viewer in a way that is unique to that person.

Igor Melnikov's art is not traditional. It is already conceptual. It has gone from

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traditional to conceptual and then has come full circle, taking it a step beyond and recasting it into a realistic structure. Traditional subject matter, freed from the constraints of its typical language, can now be read as abstractly as conceptual art. The viewer who will make the effort to absorb it will experience a personal revelation.

“I am interested in a certain aspect that appears for one moment and will never come back in that same way again,” says Melnikov. “It may be only an impression, or even something that I imagined. I deal mostly with feelings. I don’t paint portraits, even if sometimes I paint

pictures of individual children.”

“The most important thing to me is to catch the uncatchable expression on the face. There is an instant when you don’t know whether it is going to be a smile or tears...”

“People often ask me the meaning of a painting or of a subject I have chosen. This I can only answer with the painting itself, not with words. A great novel is filled with subtle particulars, even to an extent that the author perhaps did not think about or intend. To read it, or to really understand a painting, is to get so many things that the writer or the artist didn’t even want to tell...”

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Мирта аз емергем. Нурбан белек кемебизге.

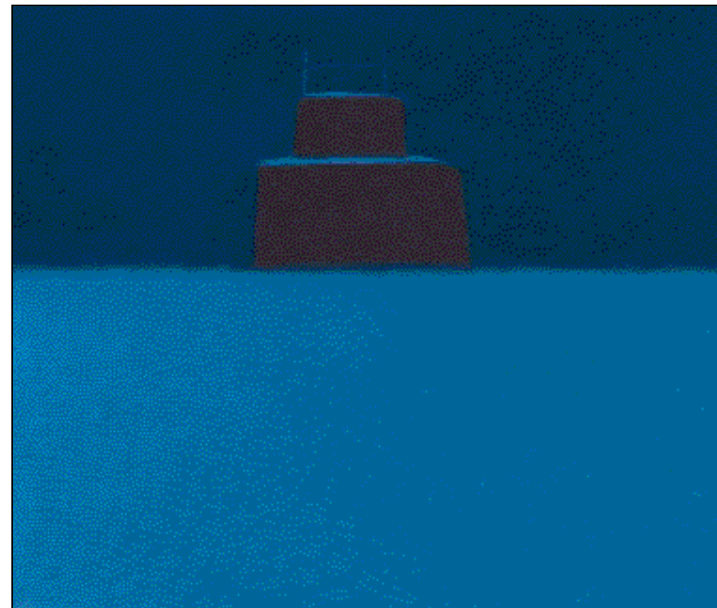
PICTURES

MEMORIAL

This image has followed me all my life. It looks like an enigmatic symbol, but in reality, it is an almost perfect depiction of a weather station located in the field in front of the windows of the house where I was born. It is probably the first landscape I ever saw in my life.

There are not many sunny days in the Moscow region. I was fascinated by the twilight, the period when the day edges into night. Painting these subtle gradations on a surface is not like the experience of the eye adjusting to the ambient light outdoors. It was very difficult to get the same effect. The painting had to look like a small window in a bright room, looking into the darkness where you can hardly see anything. The eye has to adjust in order to

Memorial
1981
34" x 42"
Oil on
Masonite
Artist
Collection



O m n i a
c o n j u n g o

S i c
s e m p e r



C l a r e s c i t
a e t e r e c l a r o

Q u o c u m q u e
f e r a r

N e i e
q u a e s i v e r i s
e x t r a

discern the forms that are being overtaken by the night, and you expect every minute to be your last glimpse of them.

To express this mortal uncertainty, this step into the unseeable or the unconscious, I painted the whole picture with one blue-green color of a very high complexity. It changes from different angles of view, sometimes seeming almost a deep red, although there is none. From another side, it somehow dissolves into the blue-black of the sky.

It is impossible to reproduce in print, but, because of the different ways I put the color on the surface, the monument actually seems to glimmer in the winter darkness...

T o w n
o n t h e
M o u n t a i n
1 9 9 5
1 9 " x 2 3 "
A c r y l i c o n
C a n v a s
P r i v a t e
C o l l e c t i o n
L i s b o n
P o r t u g a l

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EXCERPTS FROM INTERVIEW

Prague News:

Your painting is technically complex and has a classical appearance. That demands great skill. Who are your influences among the Old Masters?

Igor Melnikov: In all my works, I try to achieve perfection. This seldom happens. I am my own worst critic. Therefore, I repeat some compositions again and again in my effort to reach perfection. When I reach this goal, I lose all interest in the subject. I have only a vague, theoretical understanding of the technique of the Old Masters, but I admire it. The existence of pictures by Jan Vermeer, Gerard Terborch, Hans Holbein, J.M.W. Turner, Rembrandt - warms my soul. But it is better not to look at them too often, so as to preserve the "energy of delusion" and to support the desire to do my own modest work...

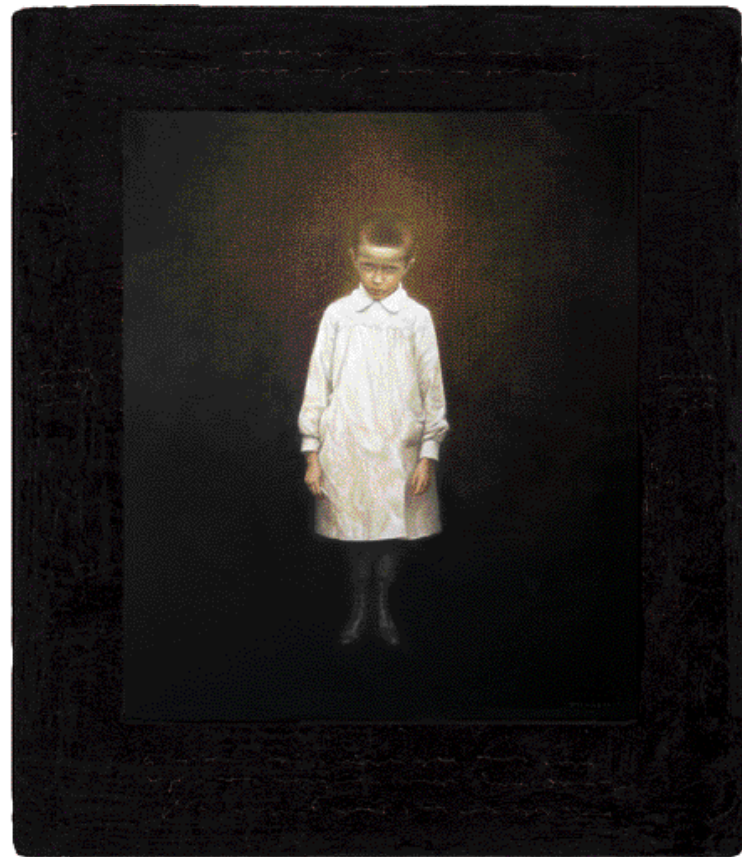
Dreamer
1996
10" x 12"
Acrylic on
Cardboard
Private
Collection
Santa
Fe, NM



JULIET I found her image, small and barely recognizable, in an old photograph taken in an orphanage at the turn of a century. Sometimes, when I paint, I think up a story about my protagonists. In this case, she became a Juliet of the steppes, feeling her first attraction to her Romeo, who might have been an urchin from the nearby foster home for boys.

Maybe they passed notes, with unpolished language and spelling, if by chance they could find a scrap of paper. Or perhaps her love was unrequited. This Juliet, with her wrinkled dress and her big strong boots and her head shaved to ward off lice during the typhus epidemic,

Juliet
1995
20" x 24" Oil
on Canvas
Private
Collection
Canada



impressed me with a tragic view of terror
and isolation...

A few junk belongings she carried in her
pockets... Her hope of finding something
to eat... Her constant hunger, unlike



children with homes and families... Her
wary, desperate look defies the mockery
of those around her. The whole brutal
twentieth century lies ahead of this girl. It
will be especially brutal in Russia...

Fly Away I I
1 9 9 7
34" x 38"
Acrylic on
Canvas
Private
Collection
Bellevue
Washington



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THE OLD FRIENDS Traditional narrative still life is usually a grouping of associative objects that, when combined, indirectly describe a person or an idea. But the thing that is most interesting to me is that sometimes the objects take on a life of their own and interact with each other. Three dry pears and a fresh peach could be transformed into "Susan and the Old Ones". A couple of rusted cans and a scrap of wrinkled paper might be "Return of the Prodigal Son". Blood red cherries inside a misted cellophane bag become martyrs languishing in prison, and two dolls in a music box seem to be passengers of a drowning ship, for me...

Old Friends
12" x 16"
Acrylic on
Canvas
Private
Collection
U S A



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Two Pears
1986
Colored
Pencil on
Paper Artist
Collection

Similarly, these fruits of an uncertain dryness become, in my mind, something more. They remind me of a pair of old friends who remained loyal to each other for many years.

In "The Trench", the masterwork of genius Andrei Platonov, there is a vagabond whose bag holds many small things, unnoticed and uninteresting to anyone else. He collects dry leaves, scraps of paper, small stones, twigs, rags, and pieces of rusted iron. It is not for profit but only out of compassion, to save them from dying without attention and love...

Two of my artist friends have carried