

**michael odnorlov:
a l i c e
from the lower east side**



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essays:
alexandre gertsman, curator
robert morgan
elizaveta plavinskaya

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After Shower (detail), 1997
oil on canvas, 32x48 in.
Alexandre Gertsman Collection

back cover:

After Shower (detail), 1997
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foreword

Inspired by Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, Michael Odnoralov's series of paintings, *Alice from the Lower East Side*, presents an adolescent girl in a period of passage. The setting is a Manhattan neighborhood with a long tradition as a starting point, an environment of new and unfamiliar cultural presumptions as well as one with a myriad of possibilities.

Like Alice's passage through the looking glass, these paintings operate with the logic of dreams, metaphorically providing connections. The imagery is fragmented. The young girl is depicted with the symbols of childhood innocence. Whether somnambulant or in peaceful sleep, her eyes are closed or averted, never confronting the viewer's gaze. The Lower East Side neighborhood, where Odnoralov settled after moving to New York in 1980, is present in the paintings — it appears as shards of building facades which appear to geometrically fracture the space. These works describe a transition and entry into a new life which draws upon the old and completely reconfigures it.

We are pleased to present the work of Michael Odnoralov and would like to thank guest curator Alexandre Gertsman for organizing this exhibition. Gertsman and the SAUPRA Foundation have provided an invaluable service in terms of bringing artists from the former Soviet Union, both emigre and those still living in Russia, to the attention of the American public.

I would also like to thank the gallery staff, interns, and volunteers for their part in realizing this project, particularly MaryAnn Siano, Denise Mediavilla and Elisabeth Ruyol. The gallery is very fortunate to have the support and enthusiasm of its Board of Trustees and of Lehman College

— both share the belief that arts programming is a significant part of education.

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*Susan Hoeltzel, Director
Lehman College Art Gallery*

preface

Life does not always award us with what we expect from it. We can wish, plan, desire — but not necessarily fulfill our dreams. For thirteen years, Michael Odnoralov almost disappeared from the New York art scene. Life circumstances thwarted his artistic desires but not his creativity. After his last one-man show in New York in 1984, he was exhibited in the nineties in the major exhibition spaces in Moscow — State Tretyakov Gallery and the Central House of Artists, as well as at the National Jewish Museum in Washington, D.C., but this is his first major solo exhibition since then.

Those who know the artist's works will be amazed by a creative metamorphosis that has happened to the artist during the last decade. At the exhibition at the Lehman College Art Gallery, everybody will see the totally renewed artist whose freshness and novelty of artistic vision is highly impressive. Of course, *Alice from the Lower East Side* constitutes an entirely logical development of the inner alter ego of the artist himself, and one could detect the same Cézannist tradition and ability to observe that had been instilled in Odnoralov by his teacher Robert Falk. However, truly amazing is that the artist who was born in the first half of the century now communicates with the spectator in the artistic language of the 21st century. The style of Odnoralov's language could be accepted or rejected, but, in any event, nobody could accuse him of stagnancy. And now, at the end of the nineties, he still remains an avant-garde artist.

It took the artist almost five years to prepare this exhibition. I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who helped bring to life this perennial project.

I would like, firstly, to express my gratitude to Susan Hoeltzel, Director of the

Lehman College Art Gallery, City University of New York, who became interested in this project and whose knowledge and appreciation of art has helped in its realization.

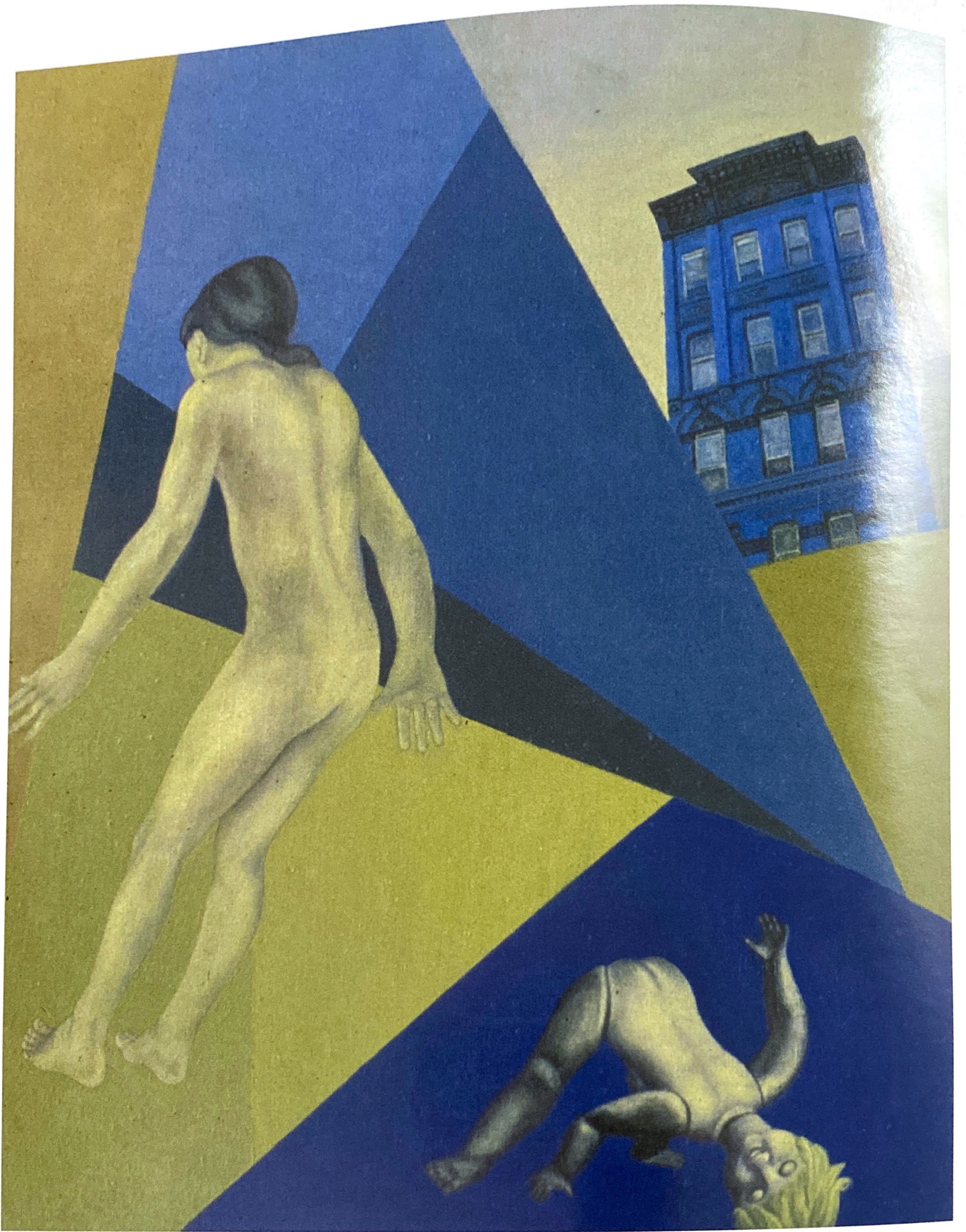
My very special thanks go to Robert Morgan and Elizaveta Plavinskaya for their great essays which help us to understand better and appreciate the talent of Michael Odnoralov.

I also extend my appreciation to Andrej Barov for his professional art direction and dedication to the arts. I also extend my appreciation to Irina Barskova for her help with translation of materials, Ruth and Sidney Nearenberg, Members of the Board of Trustees of SAUPRA, for their patience in editing this publication, and deep thanks to Arkady Lvov and Peter Gritsyk for their fine photography.

I wish to acknowledge the help of Mrs. Haia Shteinfeld whose everyday emotional support and understanding have helped in realization of this project. Without her, both Michael Odnoralov and I would not have been able to cope with the reality of this world!

And, finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the Members of the Board of Trustees of SAUPRA Foundation and especially to Mr. Allan Grossberg and Mrs. Dorothy Needle for their efforts in bringing this show to the New York public.

*Alexandre Gertsman, Curator
Director of SAUPRA, Russian Art
Foundation*





approaching his time

Alexandre Gertsman

Alice from the Lower East Side... What a strange title for the show of an artist who was born in Moscow and had spent two thirds of his life there. One can perceive here various multi-cultural connections — with American history, with European culture — but does that have anything to do with the traditions of Russian art?

In order to understand where this comes from, one has to examine the artistic career of Michael Odnoralov that has lasted for almost four decades. It has been a career full of paradoxes brought into it by sarcastic history and the communist regime, by the artist's admiration for the great French artist Paul Cézanne and Russian avant-garde fame, by Odnoralov's immigration and hard work to achieve the American dream, and finally, by him finding satisfaction in the never-satisfying creative process.

The artist has a most interesting, and yet, according to both artists and art critics, most underestimated involvement in the avant-garde life in the Soviet Union. As the artist Natalya Nesterova told me in one of our conversations, art life and the artistic circle in Moscow of the sixties and seventies would be difficult to imagine without Michael Odnoralov. The unusual, kind of cubist development of space and "tracer" lines in his paintings attracted a great attention at the time. Accidentally for the development of art history, but logically for Odnoralov, he became a pupil of Robert Falk, one of the last important Russian painters of the early twentieth century avant-garde era. Falk spent more than a decade (from 1927 through 1938) in France where his passion for the school of Cézanne was refined and where Cézanne's ideas produced a strong impact on his works. Thus, studying

under Falk, Odnoralov received a rare opportunity for the time to experience a direct influence of the traditions of Cubism and Cézanne's religious-mystical explorations that were not welcomed and, therefore, not really well known in the Soviet Union. The young artist then went on to try to realize the image of the spiritual construction of subjects rather than their Cézannist physical construction. However, the most important thing that his teacher gave to Michael Odnoralov is the culture of painting, a certain French-Russian Cezannist tradition, the tradition of the *Knave of Diamonds*, which provided the artist with an excellent "eye's setup." Falk instilled in his pupil an ability to select, an ability to see.

At the same time, Odnoralov began studying the idealist philosophy of Immanuel Kant, frowned upon by communist ideology, and later became interested in the theories of Father Pavel Florensky whose books had been removed from general circulation due to their "seditious" ideas. Interest in philosophy determined the artist's spiritual quest for his entire life. One should remember that the master thesis of Michael Odnoralov, graduate of the Moscow Historical-Archival Institute, was the treatise called *Influence of the Philosophy of Kant, Hegel and Fichte on the Formation of Russian Ideology in the Nineteenth Century*.

Odnoralov was one of the organizers and participants of a number of avant-garde exhibitions in Moscow which were important to the development of the modern Russian avant-garde movement. With the so-called "Khrushchev's thaw," artists received a kind of freedom — to the extent that freedom is possible under a communist regime — to reveal their artistic ideas. From the sixties on, Odnoralov's metaphysical spiritual realism became an inseparable part of the new wave of Russian avant-garde. The golden age of Russian avant-garde in the early decades of the century gave the

world such great artists as Kandinsky, Malevich, Rodchenko, Tatlin, Gabo, Popova and Larionov, whose art developed together with the Western avant-garde and who participated in the same shows in Paris and Berlin where Picasso, Delaunay, Kupka, and Klee exhibited their works. Banned in the late twenties, the Russian avant-garde had been dead until 1956 (during which period some avant-garde artists, such as Alexander Deineka, became renegades and practitioners of the official communist art) when the first exhibition of Picasso was held at the Moscow State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts along with the shows of Cézanne and impressionist painters. That exhibition which displayed works of art that had been hidden from the public view in the back rooms of the Soviet museums for more than two decades, suddenly showed to the Soviet artists the direction and pace the development of contemporary art had taken during that time.

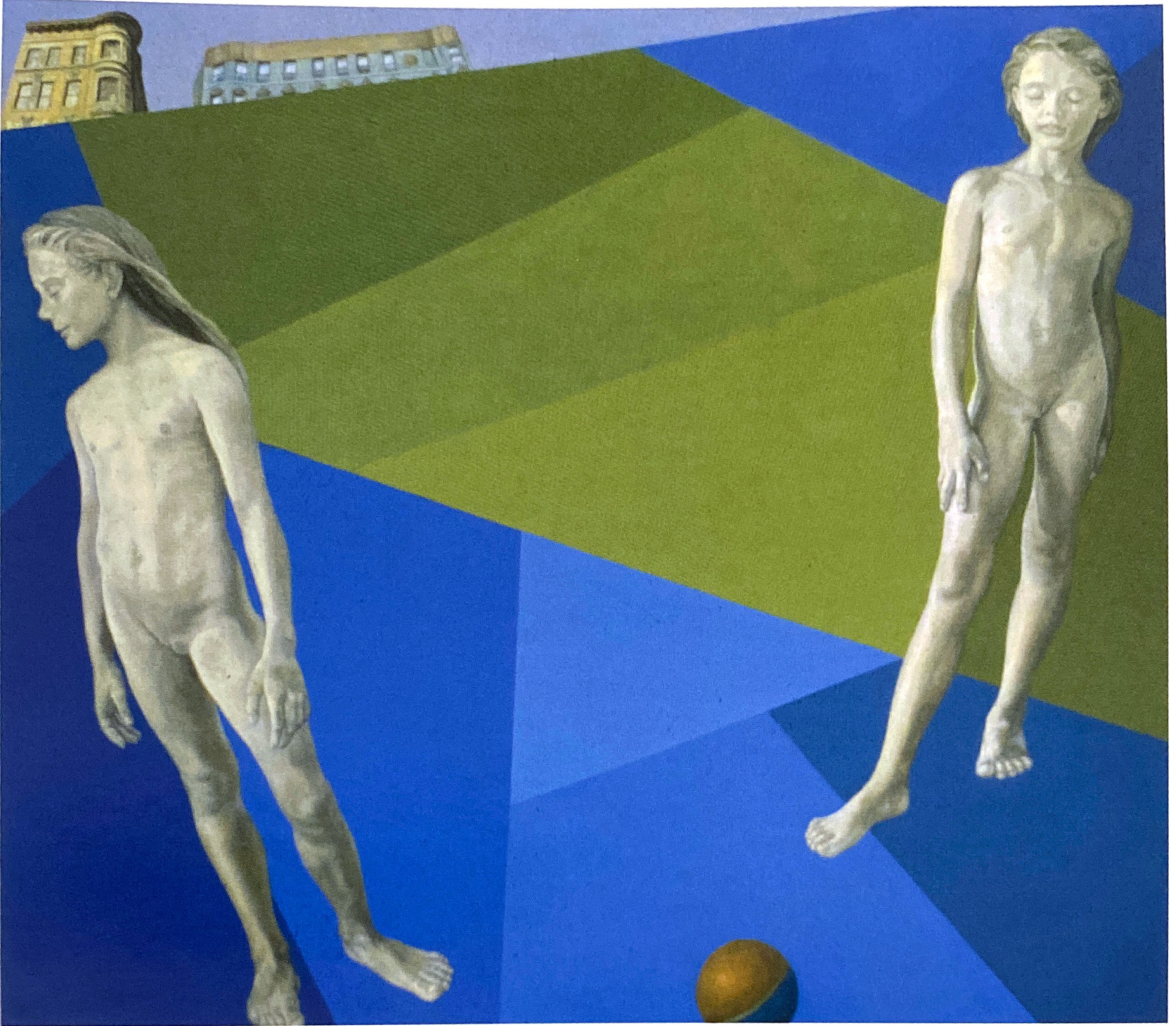
Soon after that, the Festival of Youth and Students came to Moscow. Both artists and the public discovered the existence of Jackson Pollock and became fascinated with abstract art, Tachism, Neo-Plasticism and Surrealism. Odnoralov, together with other young artists, gained access to contemporary art while attending the festival's artistic workshop. There, the young generation of Soviet artists could communicate for the first time in their lives with foreign artists while absorbing new ideas with extraordinary passion and interest and having thus started the development of a new wave of Russian avant-garde. From then on, the post-festival life became punctuated with small one-day avant-garde exhibitions.

Nevertheless, even having discovered contemporary Western art, Soviet artists remained isolated from the art of their great Russian predecessors, and they did not have access to their works that were kept in museum storage rooms.

Odnoralov became one of the happy few who, "by way of nepotism," was taken to the storage of the State Tretyakov Gallery in the early sixties where he was able to admire works by Kandinsky and Malevich — the masterpieces that the preceding generation had been accustomed to appreciate at exhibitions open to everyone.

The first official appearance of Michael Odnoralov in the heavenly vault of Moscow artistic avant-garde took place in 1961 in the town of Tarusa near Moscow, even though a year earlier, a group of artists including Odnoralov, Kropivnitsky, and Konyshchev, had tried to organize an exhibition in the Moscow Gorbunov Club. That exhibition had been closed by the City Party Committee even before its official opening. Interestingly, the curator of the exhibition was the future dissident Vladimir Bukovsky who, at the time, was a member of the Komsomol Bureau of the Gorbunov Club. He tried to pass the exhibition for a show of amateur artists in hopes that party bosses, not too literate in the art of painting, would perceive an avant-garde exhibition not as an artistic development which opposes the official trends but rather as art by artists "who can't draw." Alas, the trick did not work.

Odnoralov participated in the first exhibitions of the new Russian avant-garde in the sixties and then appeared regularly in a number of shows through the mid-seventies, including the exhibition with Eduard Steinberg at the Moscow University in 1964; a one-man show in 1969 in the Gorky Street bohemian and westernized "Blue Bird" cafe — the soul of the avant-garde free spirit; the exhibit of Young Soviet Artists in Germany in 1968 and USA, Canada and Latin America in 1973. One should note that, after the scandalous encounter between the country's premier Nikita Khrushchev and the sculptor Ernst Neizvestny during the Youth Exhibition at the Manezh





Exhibition Hall in 1962, exhibitions of this kind had been forbidden until 1966. After 1966, Odnoralov became a member of the Moscow Union of Artists joining its left, progressive and relatively independent wing that was later joined by such currently famous masters as Grisha Bruskin, Tatiana Nazarenko and Natalia Nesterova.

After the historic Bulldozer Exhibition of 1974, that had taken place in the open space in the newly developed Moscow borough of Belyayevo, many thought that it had been the first and the last surge of freedom for the non-official Soviet art. However, the organizers of the Bulldozer Exhibition Oscar Rabin, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid invited Odnoralov and organized the *Initiative Group for Protection of Artists' Rights*. Odnoralov became its chairman. The group organized a series of apartment and studio exhibitions that became no less significant for the development of the Russian artistic life than the Bulldozer Exhibition. For Western journalists, they became the only official fixed connection with the non-official Soviet art of the time.

In fact, the fame of the Bulldozer Exhibition due to its coverage in virtually all the leading American and European newspapers resulted only in two significant events. The first one was the exhibition in the open space in the Moscow Park of Izmaylovo which, unlike the one in Belyayevo, was officially permitted. The second one was the show of underground artists with only twenty participants selected by the Ministry of Culture at the Exhibition of Achievements in National Economy of the USSR in the Apiculture Pavilion (only Soviet art *apparatchiks* could come up with an almost conceptual idea to exhibit avant-garde paintings at the place that was during many a year used for demonstrations of achievements in bee-keeping). As for the activity of the *Initiative Group*, it was regular. The exhibitions of avant-

garde artists that had begun in the studios of Odnoralov and Rabin radically changed the state of artistic life in Moscow. After the exhibition of 20 artists in the Apiculture Pavilion, the *Initiative Group* managed to get permission for a huge exhibition — this time at the Culture Palace of the Exhibition of Achievements in National Economy. It was virtually the first official opportunity for a large group of Moscow avant-garde artists to make themselves known. Interestingly, the matter of whether or not to hold this exhibition was decided on the level of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (so important was the ideological dimension of art under the communist regime that matters of culture were regularly deliberated on par with first-priority political issues by the highest governing agency of the state).

Before the exhibition matter was referred to the Politburo, Odnoralov as the chairman of the *Initiative Group* had had to coordinate this matter with the three most important artistic authorities in the country: the Ministry of Culture, the Moscow Section of the Union of Soviet Artists and the Academy of Art (later on, the Politburo, having forsaken the principle of Soviet hierarchy, asked only for the opinion of the Academy of Art, thus deeply "hurting the feelings" of the Ministry of Culture). Curious as it may sound, the main question that interested Pavel Reshetnikov, Vice-president of the Soviet Academy of art — who had a reputation of a rather decent person that, unlike many a colleague, was not sullied by the destruction of artistic careers of free-thinking comrades-in-arts — was this: "Will anybody be buying it?" The answer of Odnoralov was quite frank: "Nobody, of course" (in those years, principal buyers of the avant-garde art were foreign diplomats, reporters with foreign newspapers and Western tourists, even though, after works of the avant-garde artists had been reproduced in such pub-

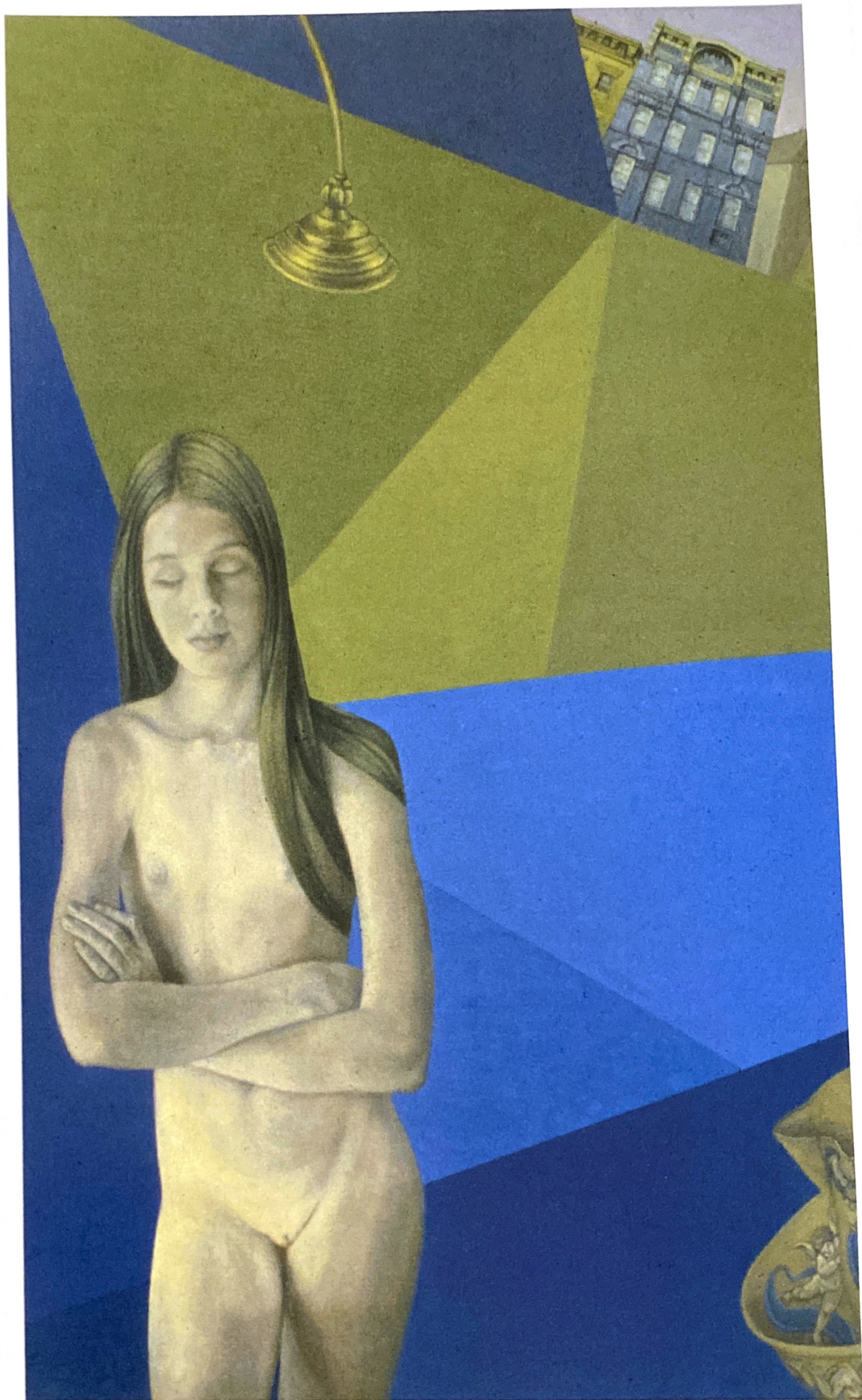
lications as *Life* magazine, the removal of works of art out of the country was officially forbidden). Therefore, no threat to the market for works of the seasoned members of the Academy and champions of Socialist Realism was perceived, and the *maîtres* expressed their favorable attitude to the idea of the exhibition.

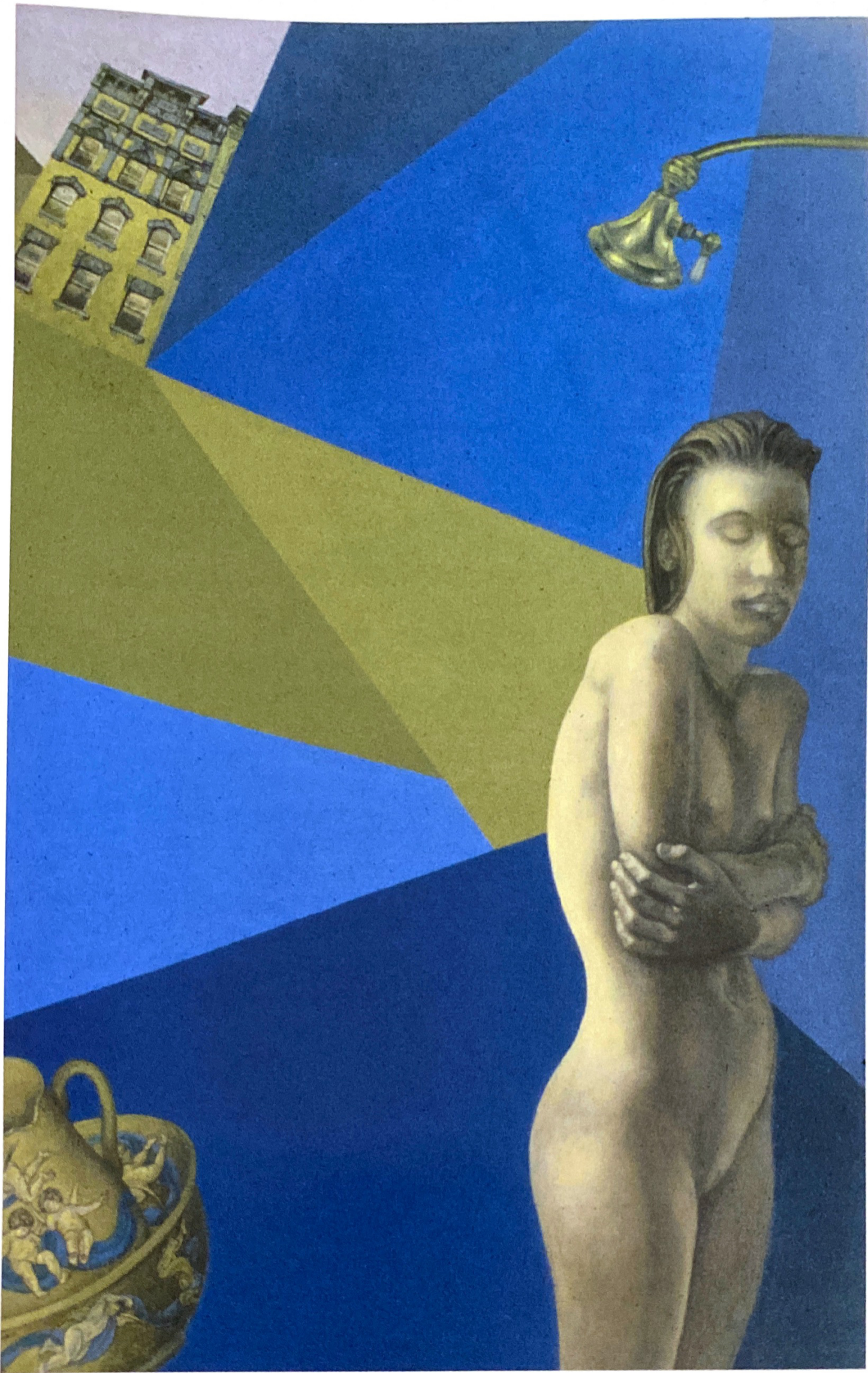
However, the most important result of the apartment exhibitions organized by the *Initiative Group* was the creation of the City Committee of Graphic Art at the Ministry of Culture by Soviet art officials. It was created in order to establish at least some control over the disobedient, but it turned out to be a rather positive factor for the financial aspect of the artists' life. One of the most significant actions of Michael Odnoralov was an exhibition that he organized in 1976. It was the exhibition of members of the Union of Artists in the building of the Moscow Section, and it was the first non-censored exhibition since 1932 — the year of official oblivion of the Russian avant-garde. Crème de la crème of the Moscow avant-garde participated in it, including such artists as Roginsky, Konyshcheva, Dryuchin, and Berlin. For the first time, Russian avant-garde artists, following the example of their great predecessors in the first half of the century, exhibited that which was the true result of a long creative process hidden in the artistic studios, and they exhibited it within the walls of the stronghold of communist art.

However, by the end of the seventies, when the government once again began "tightening the screws" of cultural life and when many of the avant-garde artists with whom Odnoralov had worked over two decades found themselves abroad, the artist realized that Moscow artistic life became boring for him and, in 1979, Odnoralov immigrated to the U.S.A.. For the Moscow art community, this was an abrupt move. For Odnoralov himself, his decision resulted in nearly a decade of creative disappointment.

Nevertheless, in the early nineties, Michael Odnoralov began working on the amazing series *Alice from the Lower East Side*, inspired by Lewis Carroll's masterpiece. This is a series about the "inter-cultural" co-existence of adolescence with the neighborhood where the artist had lived until recently and where he still works, the Lower East Side. But Odnoralov's "obsession" with the Lewis Carroll's books: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* is much deeper and more complex than one might think. At first glance, it might seem that the artist deals more with Nabokov's *Lolita* than with Carroll's Alice. But you can see that the buildings depicted in the paintings still exist, and here, in the environment of New York's ghetto, Odnoralov places his Alices (or Lolitas). And it is essential to keep in mind that these buildings were built a century ago, and they are an American version of the late Victorian architecture. Carroll and his Alice belong in that time — near the turn of the century — with its characteristic decadence, nostalgia and stern standards of morality. Odnoralov's Alices — in *The First Kick*, *Empty Jug*, *After Shower*, and *Jump* — are a reminiscence of the Victorian Alice and her time.

Yet, Alice is a contemporary figure, too, for Carroll's book, we must admit, can be more popular among adults than among children. Her eroticism — connected to Carroll's own conflict between his Victorian morality and the *Lolita* complex which tortured him his entire life — is common in our time which is also a turn of the century as well as that of the millennium. And, much like the Russian literary group *Oberiuts* of the twenties and thirties, that included such Russian luminaries as Oleinikov and Harms, grew with their plurality of perceptions out of Velemir Khlebnikov's Futurism and Alexei Remizov's and Lewis Carroll's paradoxical creativity, so does Odnoralov with his *Alice* series, where the interrelation between space and objects is also based





on the paradox. For many years, the constant companion of the artist was the book *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* by one of the founders of Sentimentalism, paradoxical Laurence Sterne. This book was of great influence both for Pushkin (because of its sentimentalism) and for Gogol (because of its "idiotic" paradoxes). In fact, the entire Russian literary avant-garde developed later, on the one hand, out of Carroll and Sterne, and on the other — out of Gogol. Therefore, the literary base of the avant-garde artist Odnoralov is totally obvious, and it issues logically out of English-Russian traditions of the literature of paradox.

As for the metaphysical realism of Odnoralov's *Alices*, it is close in spirit to the metaphysical realism of Francis Bacon or Giorgio Morandi despite all the differences between the latter two. Their art, spiritual in its essence, deals with metaphysical issues and not just with pure visual symbols or Surrealism and, within the framework of figurative art, it accomplishes an analysis of the world which is precisely metaphysical. For Odnoralov, this analysis could be traced to his old passion for philosophy, and especially to his affinity with the ideas of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, a precursor of modern existentialism, and allows to trace the development of the artist's philosophical views that were present even in his works of the sixties that, at the first glance, seem so different in terms of artistic style from the series *Alice from the Lower East Side*. Odnoralov has always been an artist of the contemplative vein. Therefore, he — much like his teachers Robert Falk and Moisey Khazanov (both of whom were VHUTEMAS graduates) — was always closer to Cézanne, and closer rather in terms of temperament than form. It is through this contemplative dimension that Odnoralov interlocks with two great masters — Morandi and Bacon who are contemplators as well rather than storytellers.

This metaphysical interpretation of the world is also responsible for the method of creating spatial environment in the paintings of Michael Odnoralov who, during his entire artistic career, has been trying to solve the problem of object in space, the former being a metaphysical entity within itself, and the latter having an ambivalent nature. And it is unclear whether this space is two-dimensional or already three-dimensional that is transforming into some kind of temple environment. This temple environment is conditionally metaphysical — it is that very temple construction or temple cone that takes its origin in the famous philosophical *Iconostasis* by Pavel Florensky. It is, in fact, not even a three-dimensional space, but rather a certain environment in which one could arrange metaphysical objects. That is why, in spite of all the apparent visual and thematic differences between Odnoralov *Alices* of the nineties, his *Madonnas* of the eighties and everyday household objects of the sixties and seventies — the differences that, without a doubt, exist and determine both the level of the inner state of the artist during various periods of his life and the world of his creative interests — Odnoralov constantly remains within the single metaphysical spatial environment which is the subject of his investigation and research.

The compositions of Odnoralov have the same basis as the Plasticism of Piet Mondrian. In fact, the early abstract works by Mondrian are abstracted actual three-dimensional landscapes. The same is true for Odnoralov — a withdrawal into the abstracted environment, some ambivalent metaphysical sphere in which the metaphysical essence of an object is revealed much more vividly. Or, the case is not unlike that with *Saint Sebastian*, a late work by Titian (Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg), in which the spectator seems to see a landscape with buildings on the horizon, but, after a closer look, sees just a certain painterly abstraction. Odnoralov, too, maintains in his works the

same ambivalent fluctuations of the eye between familiarity and unfamiliarity of the object, between the real and unreal spheres.

If the role of the real sphere was earlier played by Moscow or Paris, now, in *Alice*, it is played by the Lower East Side of Manhattan. Odnoralov's real environment is three-dimensional while the metaphysical environment that occupies the chief ground of the paintings is two-dimensional. It affords the artist an opportunity to perceive the object as a self-contained metaphysical entity. At the same time, it gives Odnoralov an opportunity to fill his environment with eclectic objects, thus creating the single spatial metaphysical whole. The space of the artist's works is filled with objects that are metaphysical as well. At the same time, he also pays a certain tribute to the artistic tradition. Fish is a symbol of Christ; pomegranate is a symbol of fertility; apple, the biblical fruit, is a symbol of sin. All this, not being purely symbolic or decorative in its nature, creates allusions in the spectator's mind. Unlike Alices and buildings, fruits and other objects of Odnoralov cast shadows. In this case, they could be viewed as both real and unreal elements. The environment of his works is paradoxical, and it has an element of otherworldly mysticism. The lighting of figures and objects is unreal. The impression is that the light falls from different angles, and, in spite of all the laws of physics, it is totally unclear where its source is located. However, Alice is supposed to be in the space accessible through the looking-glass, isn't she? The theatrical production of the artist's canvases is complete, thus bringing the visual cycle back to the beginning of action.

It is as if Odnoralov, in his *Alice from the Lower East Side*, performs a double-play with the spectator. First, having represented his Alice-Lolita that combines opposite foundations of the spiritual and the earthy, the artist demonstrates to

everyone that there is a Lolita in every Alice, and there is an Alice in every Lolita, because Lewis Carroll himself wrote that a girl of twelve is one on whom no shadow of sin has fallen, but one who has been touched by the "outermost fringe of the shadow of sorrow." The artist thus encourages the existential ambivalence of visual perception and provokes the spectator to see whatever is closer to him — Alices or Lolitas — forcing the spectator to see that which the artist either did not have in mind at all or only sensed subconsciously. Second, Odnoralov creates his unique metaphysical space which is unlike anyone else's — maybe two-dimensional, maybe three-dimensional - and by this "multi-dimensionality" he once again provokes the spectator with the next puzzle: where does Alice really exist?

Odnoralov's Alices are the girls in a borderline state — they are no longer children, but they are not yet women. We, too, are now in a borderline state between the 20th and the 21st centuries. Mankind has always tried to understand the future through the past, and this has always been especially characteristic of traditions of the Russian art. At the turn of the century, Leon Bakst and Victor Borisov-Musatov drew the romanticism of their art in the Ekaterinian era. Now, we are fascinated with the Victorian era. It is as if Odnoralov is "getting ready" through his art for the coming century. And he is trying to bring it closer because it will also finally be HIS time...

I think that the main purpose of contemporary art is to provoke the spectator — to provoke his/her thoughts, intellect, feelings and even the subconscious mind. The art of Michael Odnoralov fulfills this purpose ideally. For it is contemporary.

Alexandre Gertsman is an independent curator and an art critic, living in New York





**alice from the lower east side:
new paintings
by michael odnoralov**

Robert C. Morgan

The term "dissident art" is rarely heard nowadays. Since the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in the late eighties, the term has lost its true ideological context. Yet in 1974 when the artist Michael Odnoralov participated in the "unofficial art" exhibition in Belyayev Park, Moscow, with a group of his colleagues, it was a term that every Russian artist understood. Later known as the "bulldozer exhibition" — because a bulldozer was used to remove the exhibition from the park — it was an event heralded in the international press as an example of how avant-garde artists in the former Communist state were being deprived of freedom of expression. Ironically, this was fifteen years prior to another event in Cincinnati where police forcibly closed an exhibition of photographs by the late Robert Mapplethorpe claiming that some of the work depicting nude children was indecent! Ironically, the Mapplethorpe event occurred in the United States — in a presumably democratic free state — the same year Communism fell.

Odnoralov was an important presence among the "unofficial art" circle of Moscow prior to his move to New York in 1981. Here his point of view did not so much change as did the quality of refinement that he brought to his subject matter. *Through the Looking Glass* — the great allegorical novel by the British mathematician Lewis Carroll — had become an obsession for Odnoralov, and the current series of paintings has become the fruit of that obsession. The paintings are not at all related to the history of the American avant-garde. There are virtually no traces of Abstract Expressionism, Photo-Realism, or Color Field painting.

Odnoralov's style is coming from another place, another tradition, and another ethos.

One may speak of a certain kind of Formalism in Odnoralov's painting, but it is not an Anglican or American style of Formalism. It is not the kind of aesthetic Formalism espoused by critics such as Herbert Read or Clement Greenberg. When one studies (or simply enjoys) a painting by Michael Odnoralov, the viewer may become aware of a different kind of stylistic approach, a mixture of styles that is both representational and abstract, a hybrid of perceptual and literary effects. It is a synthesis more typical of Russian Formalism that tends toward the conceptual or linguistic, rather than the purely aesthetic.

Whether in the poetry of Khlebnikov, the semiotics of Roman Jakobson, the graphics of El Lissitzky, or the films of Dziga Vertov, Russian Formalism deals with a type of reduction and specificity, a sequencing of image-effects, an overlay between the image and its counterpart, or vice versa. For that matter, one might even consider the novels of a more contemporary Russian, Vladimir Nabokov within the tradition of Russian Formalism — not only for their subject matter, as in the obvious example of *Lolita* — but for their sense of structure and their delicacy of form. Nabokov understood how to provoke strong visual and emotional effects through the structure of language. Yet, at the same time, his language carried a sense of lightness, a liberation from the burden of the effects that he created in the mind of the reader.

I recall some years ago reading an interview between Nabokov and the publisher Maurice Girodias in which the writer claimed that he was seeking the precision of art and the intuition of science, not the opposite. This paradigm might be useful in coming to terms with the visual art of Michael Odnoralov as well. As one exam-

ines a painting, such as *Dream with Pomegranate* (1994) or *Dreamy Big Fish* (1992), one can see a certain precision in terms of how the artist has established a perception of his subject, the young girl. It is a precision of the hard-edge, the planar contour of pictorial space, that appears segmented and colliding as in the effect of sunlight being cut by a hard shadow.

The architectonic presence in these paintings is inescapable. It appears as a burden to the subject, yet it is also a point of resignation. The blue, yellow, purple, and orange planes cut across the pictorial space. The nude girl is suspended in the space, caught within the mechanical assemblage of the fragmented shards of lights. One sees the buildings outside, yet the window is not so far removed from the subject. While the buildings of the urban environment in the hardened section of lower Manhattan appear removed from the gaze of the subject there are clearly within the mind's eye. There is no escape. It is a nemesis, a situation, a condition of being, an element of growing into an urban world that also is capable of lending itself to fantasy.

Just as Sartre in his famous study of Jean Genet discusses how the writer/actor/thief is caught within the confines of his prison, his existential world, there is also the projection of fantasy as a liberation from these confines. The mind offers its own precision in the form of a fantastic reconstruction of reality — what from the outside appears as an illusion. But from the position of the artist-voyeur it is a precise construction of a substitute reality, a sense of reality that is not entirely divorced or separated from the external reality the subject who is represented in the painting already knows.

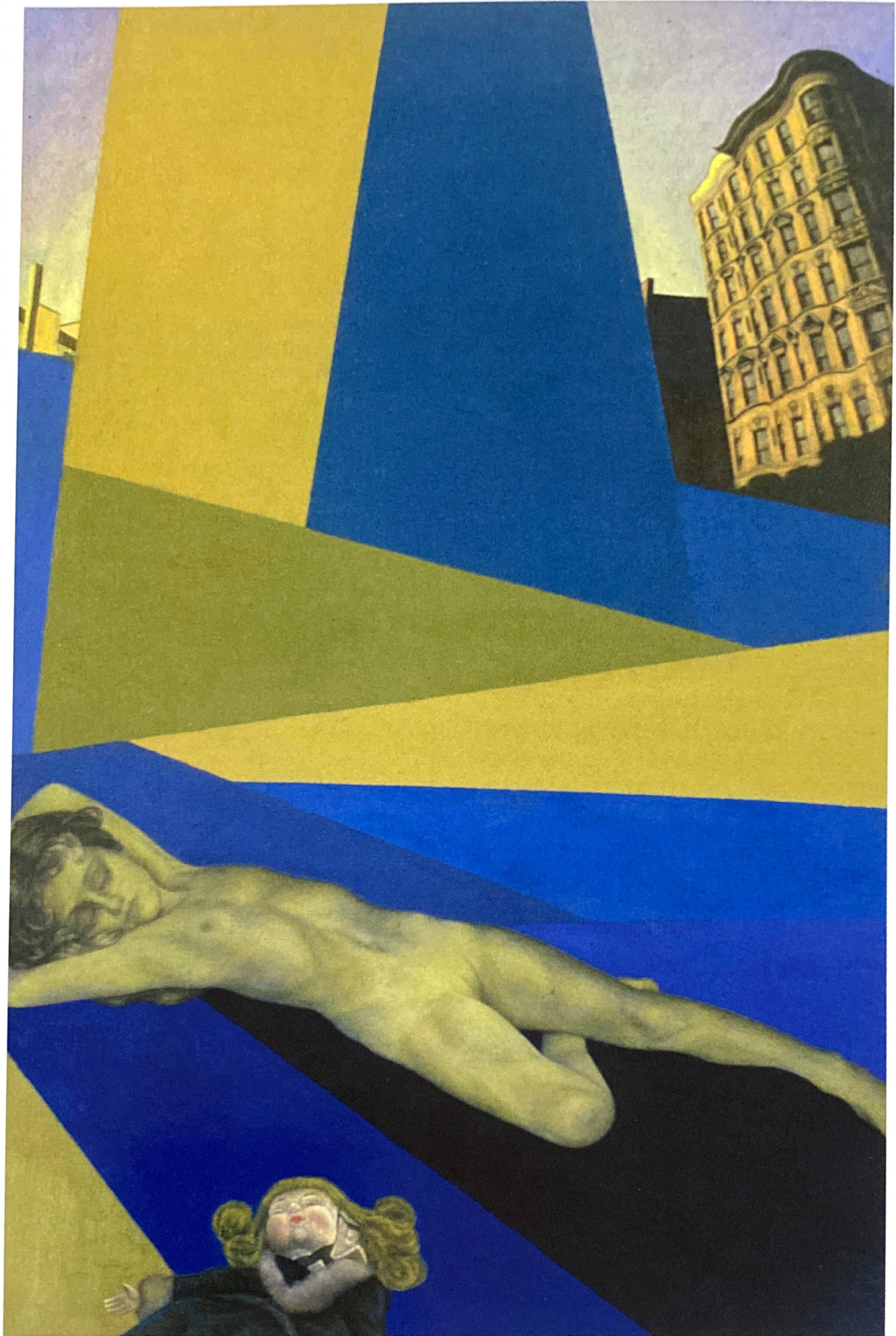
As the young girl dreams in the lower space of Odnoralov's painting, she is also bearing witness to a transformation from

her exterior urban reality into the realm of fantasy. The construction of the young girl's fantasy is not separate from the reality but is rather based on its acceptance. Her understanding of reality is a significant factor in her existence. Yet here is another element — a third representation — in both paintings that we must take into account.

In *Dream with Pomegranate*, between the reclining young pubescent girl at the bottom and the two buildings framed in the left and right corners at the top of the painting, one notices the pomegranates. A plate holds one piece of the fruit cut in half while the other pomegranate is whole and separate from the plate. The pleasure disclosed in the subject's face as she reclines in a dream-state seems in reference to the fruit. The fruit of the body, the fruit of her body, the happenstantial fruit. There is the hope that is symbolized in fruit as the pomegranates function as a sign of nature in reference to the light that is, in turn, symbolized by the irregular yellow polygon that cuts between the girl and the fruit below and the framed architecture above.

One could make a similar interpretation in reference to *Dreamy Big Fish*. In both the pomegranates and the fish we find the subtext of sexuality as an unconscious awakening, a painful pleasure of what exists in the moment — the fusion of the moment, the conflict between interior and exterior, dream and reality — and a premonition of what lies ahead. This tripartite arrangement of signs within the construction of diagonally posed planes is pervasive in Odnoralov's work. It exists in *Dangerous Games* (1994) and in *Angels' Game* (1996) as well. In the latter case, there is yet another complexity of representation given to the formal arrangement in that there are two pubescent girls instead of one. Both of the young girls have sprouted wings and they recline in a state of dreaming. This transformation suggests that the fantasy has





become more removed from the reality, yet still a part of it. The transformation from earthlings to cherubs suggests a blend of religiosity and romance, an alluring voyeurism, the gaze of the father and therefore the inscription of the *nom du pere* on the memories of the two children.

One can explore Odnoralov's paintings as having a certain psychological depth within his system of semiotics. In addition to this post structural method, one cannot ignore the placement of Odnoralov within a relatively recent cultural and historical aspect that takes his art beyond the purely post structural into another aspect of continuity that is tied to his Russian Jewish heritage.

The omnipresence of angels is not a Jewish theme but a Christian one, a theme that conceivably was borrowed from the art of Byzantium. Being surrounded by this art, Odnoralov cannot help but perform according to the position of the voyeur — the outsider looking in. Culturally, there is the precision of art within this history, the desire to come to terms with the reality-fantasy paradigm that is so inculcated within the traditions of Western art.

Then there is the question of Alice and what goes on inside her head. What delights! What questions! The inexorable passion of waiting within the confines of one's room as one grows, one makes the passage from youth into adulthood, and as one waits for the pleasure of knowing the fascinating and fulfilling dialogues of the mind, awakening to pleasure and to the life of sensory objects that still bearing the authenticity that connects these sensory experiences to the body.

It is discourse of the transformation of the body and the delights of the gaze that has encapsulated the memory of the artist. It is a projection of fantasy that speaks of life in an uneven

secularized world of fleeting impressions — a world where memory is consumed unless protected.

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art of remembrance

Elizaveta Plavinskaya

Recent paintings by Michael Odnoralov are links of one chain, parts of one cycle, details of one painting. This art is that of fragmentation and formulation of memory images. Remembrances, however, do not simply form the foundation for a metaphor — they are independent and active; they are the subjects of Odnoralov's paintings.

A natural chain of memory, experience, and depiction begets the images that always unite the artist's life, philosophical and religious ideas, and history of art. The images of dream, revelation and fairy tales are a paradoxically organic symbiosis of a clouded and yet elucidated mind.

Odnoralov "reconstructs" a subject of remembrance in its entirety, and transforms it into a subject of depiction — a depicted object. Nevertheless, the new, artistic space renders even a familiar object devoid of its common functions and connections — an emptiness (or a neutral zone, or a cosmos) that surrounds the object is perceived as a factor that always allows us to distinguish remembrance from reality and imbues the subject of a painting with new meanings.

Meanwhile, the artist's personal experience, analysis and intuition create a special tension, a controversy and even a sense of catastrophe that are intrinsic to the world of remembrance which is being explored through a prism of reality. Both factors are distinctly discernible in the paintings of this cycle: a mechanical rustle of remembrance in the background, similar to a blasting of dead air, and a physiological danger of the real world.

The background of the painting *The Japanese Rabbit* (1995), against

which the subject unfolds, combines notions of time and space, geography and history, art and metaphysics. Two small modern Alices who have fallen asleep in New York are now falling together with a toy rabbit through the *Suprematist Space*. This journey fairy tale is leading them towards the new, the unbeknownst. (Designated as the ideal perspective by Malevich and the first avant-garde artists, this space is being inhabited today as a space of metaphor, fairy tale, and, at the same time, as a space of everyday life). Yet, the harmony of movement is restrained here by the exclusion of an opportunity to demonstrate the will — the unknown result of the fall is fatally predetermined by the absence of air, footing, weight compensation for the bodies that are falling in a vacuum, as it occurs during a physics experiment in high school.

Significant and, at times, polysemantic elements of each painting and the possibility to juxtapose them enable us to speak about the "carpet of remembrance" of Odnoralov. We are not talking about any specific work, but rather about an artistic method. The artist does not simply combine particulars — as would be done by a person who constructs virtual reality — he creates a field open for interpretation. Thus, the artist visualizes memory by segregating key fragments out of the dense material of common notions that are incorporated in the pithy plastic forms of the background. Their meanings and interpretations, acting in opposite directions, permeate the painting densely — the unity and integrity of the results are always held in balance between the author's intentions and the viewer's potentials. The space of abstraction "gleams" between figurative images. This is precisely the space which allows us to perceive and complete "texts of the oeuvre" and which purges the possibilities





of perception and recreation of a remembrance.

The unity of Odnoralov's cycle of paintings and the flowing of ideas and technical methods from one work into another do not negate the significance of each of the elements that make up his works. The plastic detachment allows us to contemplate figures, landscapes, objects and abstract compositions from various viewpoints. Even such definition as a "genre," much too archaic for the art of the late 20th century, appears to be reflected and deliberated by the artist. It turns out that, in order to represent the entire genre of, for example, still life, one object would suffice — except that, due to these circumstances, the viewer now sees the remembrance of a still life rather than the real thing. A single object becomes a still life; a single house becomes a landscape; a single person becomes a composition of figures — and all of them co-exist within the space of one canvas. Therefore, the remembrance of a genre is an effect which is akin to the *postmodern* quoting.

If we are to examine the painting *Angels' Games* (1996), we would be able to discover that it consists of fourteen color planes, three houses, two figures of angels and seven apples. This "analysis of content" by itself does not reveal any meaning. It does, however, allow us to concentrate on important details: the houses represent the genre of landscape and, at the next moment, they stand for the image of a city — the image of reality. The figures of angels embody the genre of allegory; not only they are sacral — they are also physiological. The apples are the subject for a still life, but they are also a numerical symbol for the passage of time and futility of being. The blue and green surfaces are not just a sign of abstract art, but also a conjecture of the sub-

tracted yellow — an oblivion of sacredness. Following these fragmented observations, more complex contextual connections necessarily emerge: for instance, the landscape and abstraction create a unified space of "outside world" and culture, while the scattered apples and angels are linked by the code of the game. Even the fact that the city is located in the upper part of the canvas (as in other works by the artist) could be read as an ironically modified reference to the *Celestial City* of the medieval icons.

The most important quality of Odnoralov's works is that, following the fragmentation and formation of semantic connections within the painting, a notion of the artist's intention emerges — an appeal to modernity. Such an appeal could be called a "remembrance of things present." Reading the codes for each painting and each fragment invariably leads to the point where the subject of the artist's judgment is no longer "somewhere," "sometime" and "something," but the emphatic "now."

History of the avant-garde, personal memories of ideals that were followed by the Soviet Underground Movement of the sixties and the seventies, the presence of that art in museums and on the market today — all this is a code for the interpretation of 20th century art.

Classical art, that is symbolized, as a rule, by plastic forms and poses of female figures, has been presented as if in anticipation of a connoisseur who would be capable of partaking in the persistent notion of "classical" as of something departed (and actual only as information) and yet constituting everlasting genuine values.

The everlasting values are coded by Odnoralov the same way as in the religious symbolism, iconography and sub-

jects, whose meaning becomes obvious through the process of interpretation. The erotic dimension, more often than not, is indicated by the artist as a notion rather than a feeling. Eroticism here is aloof or unrealized and yet necessary.

Coming into contact with modernity on the painted surface, all these ideas, important for the artist, acquire a specific duality. On the one hand, the convincing plastic forms and quality of execution represent a positive assertion of artistic position. On the other hand, this very position turns the meanings upside down: the pure becomes licentious; the lofty turns into fallen; the inviolable gets depleted.

The white pitcher — a symbol of the purity, inviolability and fullness of the Virgin Mary's vessel — turns out to be over turned and empty in the painting *The Empty Jug* (1990). *Dangerous Games* (1994) could hardly be interpreted so simply. Here, the back ground is both flat and in perspective. The three apples make us see in this simple combination a reference to the Trinity. The young girl is harmonious and full of hope. Yet, the basin is empty and purity becomes but a temptation while the obstacle turns out to be edible.

The paintings by Odnoralov are the result of the dialogue with his own life: "Everything is ambivalent: reality, sexuality, architectonics. The viewer is free to choose his own point of view." This is how the artist himself states his position: "A new vision of the world could be achieved only through eclecticism, metaphysics and quotations. The art of our time is nostalgic and pessimistic." The art of our time is nostalgic because while calling itself "art" it is not recognized as such. It is pessimistic because, seeing a resolution of the crisis not in new subject but in the olden art of illusion, the art

itself does not believe in the possibility of success. Nevertheless, in spite of the pessimism of declarations, it would rather appear that the programmed eclecticism of Michael Odnoralov is a search for an "ecological niche" in the postmodern system of modern art.

Elizaveta Plavinskaya is a member of Moscow Art Critics Association.

selected exhibitions

1997

Michael Odnoralov: Alice From the Lower East Side, Lehman College Art Gallery, The City University of New York, New York

1996

Here and There, Then and Now: Contemporary Artists from the Former Soviet Union, B'nai B'rith Klutznick National Jewish Museum, Washington, D.C.

1994

Artists to Russia, Literaturnaya Gazette Exhibition, Moscow

1991

Paintings Return to Russia, Central House of Artists, Moscow

1990

Different Art, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

1988

Russian Contemporary Still-Life, C.A.S.E. Museum of Contemporary Russian Art, New Jersey

1984

Michael Odnoralov, TAT Gallery, New York

1983

Unofficial Art from the Former Soviet Union, Cannon Rotunda and Russell Rotunda of the Congress Building, Capitol Hill, Washington, D.C.

1982

Religious Motifs in Soviet Unofficial Art, C.A.S.E. Museum of Contemporary Russian Art, New Jersey

1976

Exhibition of Moscow Avant-garde Artists, Union of Artists of the Soviet Union, Moscow

1975

Avant-garde Art Exhibition, Pavilion at the National Economic Achievements Exposition, Moscow

1974

Open Air Exhibition of Unofficial Art - Bulldozer Exhibition, Moscow

Open Air Exhibition of Unofficial Art, Izmailovo Park, Moscow

1974-1979

Numerous unofficial art exhibitions in

Moscow, including first private apartment exhibitions

1973

Exhibition of Young Soviet Artists, USA, Canada, and Latin America

1969

Michael Odnoralov, Cafe "Blue Bird", Moscow

1967

Exhibition of Young Soviet Artists, Germany

1966

Michael Odnoralov, Union of Artists of the Soviet Union, Moscow

1964

Michael Odnoralov and Eduard Shteinberg, Moscow University, Moscow

1961

Exhibition of Moscow Artists, Tarusa

1960

Avant-garde Art Exhibition, Moscow

selected public collections

B'nai B'rith Klutznick National Jewish Museum, Washington, D.C.

Duke Museum of Art, The Duke University, Durham, N.C.

Hofstra Museum, Hofstra University, Hempstead, NY

Museum of Contemporary Russian Art, Montgeron, France

State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick

list of works exhibited

Jump (diptych), 1993

Left panel, oil on canvas, 40x32 in.

Private Collection

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Jump (diptych), 1993

Right panel, oil on canvas, 40x32 in.

Private Collection

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The First Kick, 1997

Oil on canvas, 48x52 in.

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Angels' Game, 1996

Oil on canvas, 60x60 in.

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After Shower (diptych), 1997

Left panel, oil on canvas, 48x32 in.

Alexandre Gertsman Collection

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After Shower (diptych), 1997

Right panel, oil on canvas, 48x32 in.

Alexandre Gertsman Collection

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Empty Jug, 1990

Oil on canvas, 36x46 in.

SAUPRA Collection

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Dangerous Game, 1996

Oil on canvas, 36x42 in.

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Dreamy Big Fish, 1992

Oil on canvas, 50x36 in.

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Broken Doll, 1992

Oil on canvas, 54x36 in.

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Dream With Pomegranate, 1996

Oil on canvas, 44x36 in.

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Japanese Rabbit, 1995

Oil on canvas, 46x60 in.

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