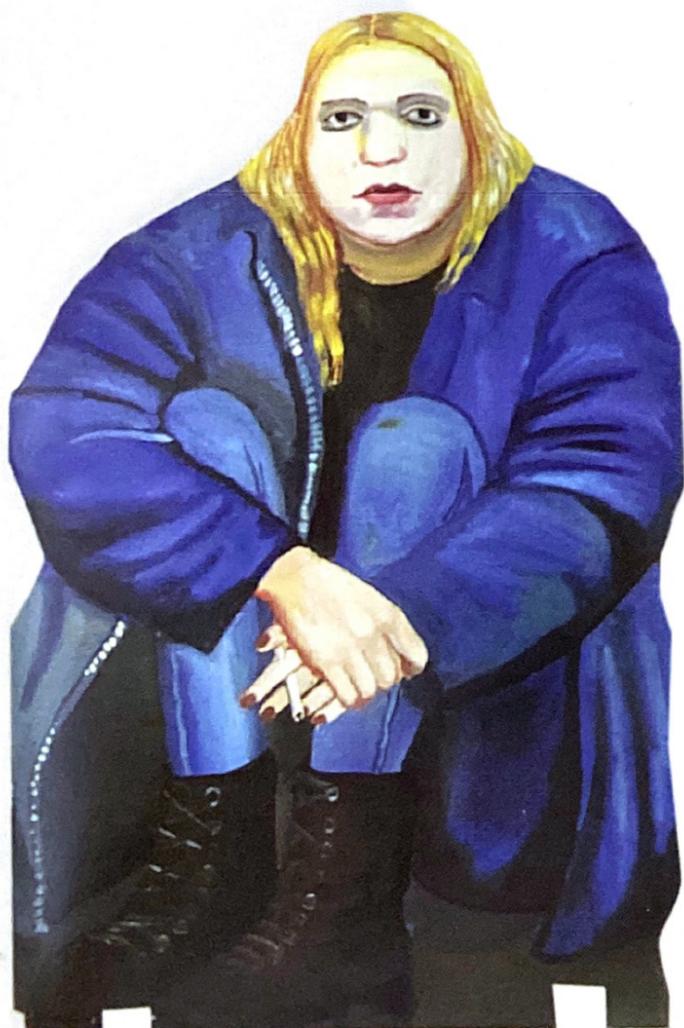


# tatyana nazarenko: transition



**tatyana nazarenko:  
transition**

*essays:*

*alexandre gertsman, curator*

*donald kuspit*

*judd tully*

**lehman college art gallery  
city university of new york  
new york:**

**october 16, 1997**

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of women in the arts  
washington, d.c.:**

**october 15, 1998**

**january 15, 1999**



ЛЮДИ!  
ПОМОГИТЕ  
АФГАНЦУ  
СОБРАТЬ  
ДЕНЬГИ  
НА ПРОТЕЗ

КУПАЮ  
ЗОЛОТО  
ВЕТХИЕ \$  
D.M.

РУССКОЕ  
Лото



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## foreword

A group of tattooed adolescents in denim and leather sits beneath a painting — in the painting a well-groomed museum audience is discussing a Renaissance painting of the Crucifixion. Weary pedestrians making their rounds, pause in front of elegantly attired department store mannequins. An elderly woman stands between four large soldiers in front of the Museum of the Revolution. Groups of people plead for food and offer to barter whatever they can for dollars. In each work by Tatyana Nazarenko, there is a sense of the familiar. These are scenes of contemporary Russia. Yet with each vignette there is a twist and a turn. The works are studies in contrast. Tatyana Nazarenko is a figurative painter who depicts ordinary people in public places. The impassive faces of her subjects are not those of heroes but are scenes drawn from real life.

Tatyana Nazarenko was accepted into the Union of Artists of the USSR in 1969 — an organization known for its rigid insistence on Social Realism which shaped artists' style and content. More recently, during detante, modernism gradually, once again, became a possible source for artists. Nazarenko's work shows evidence of both eras. She is a realist depicting Russian life in tableaus which allegorically weave a more critical narrative — a familiar strategy of artists working under an imposed aesthetic. Nazarenko's work pushes beyond description to explore the paradoxes of contemporary life. She resides in Moscow.

We are pleased to present the work of Tatyana Nazarenko 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 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.

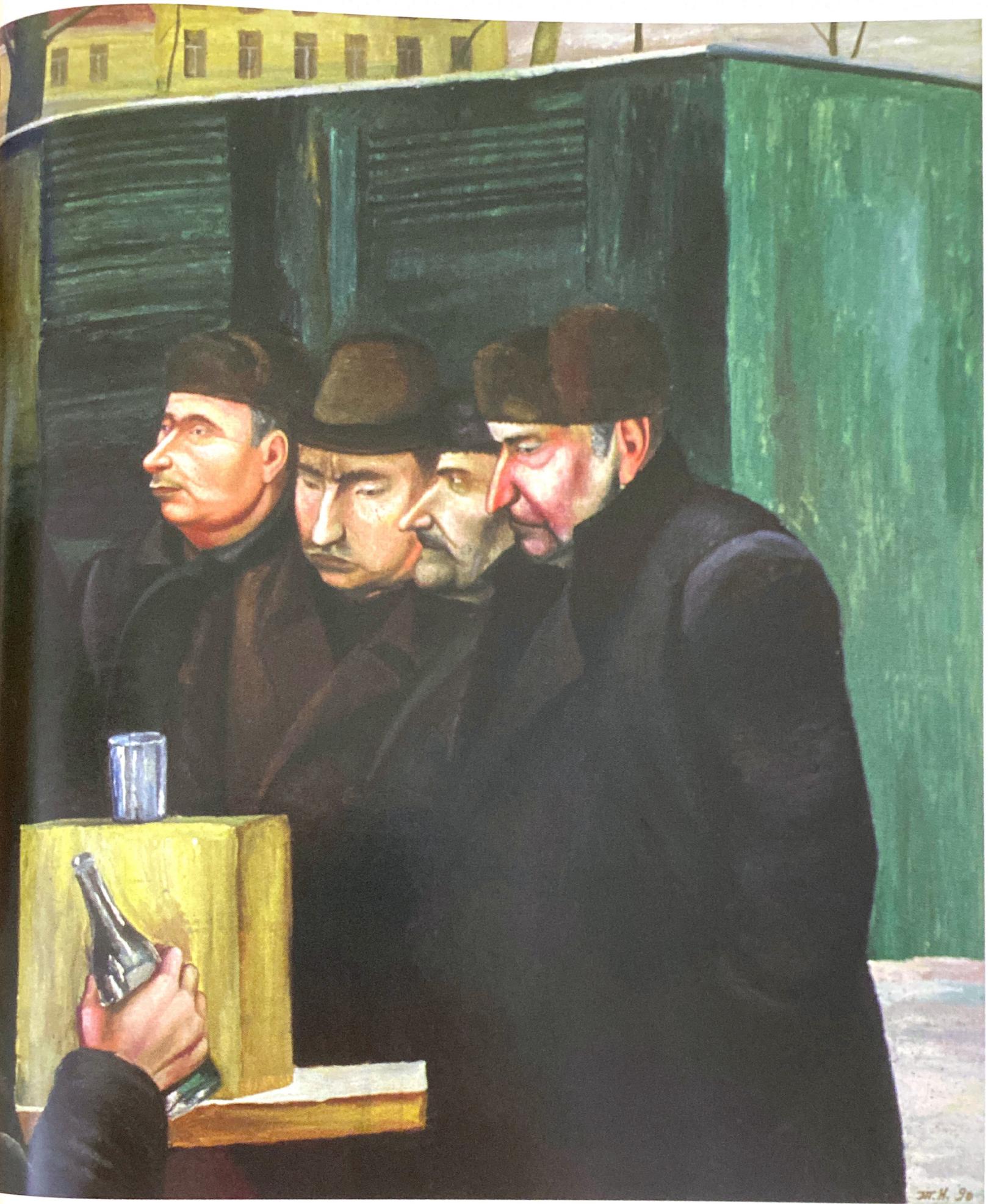
Exhibitions and programs at the Lehman College Art Gallery are supported in part by Bronx Council on the Arts; the NYC Department of Cultural Affairs—Bronx Borough President Fernando Ferrer and the Bronx Delegation; DCA Cultural Challenge Program, The Institute of Museum and Library Services; the Milton and Sally Avery Arts Foundation; the Greentree Foundation; The Edith and Herbert Lehman Foundation; the Robert Lehman Foundation, Inc.; The Joe and Emily Lowe Foundation; the Ronald McDonald Children's Charities; J.P. Morgan & Co., Incorporated; Bell Atlantic Excellence in Education Program; The New York Times Company Foundation, Inc.; The Travelers Foundation/Smith Barney Arts Investment Program; and the Friends of the Lehman College Art Gallery.

*Susan Hoeltzel, Director  
Lehman College Art Gallery*

*next two pages:*

*Company* (diptych), 1989  
oil on canvas, 60x80 in.  
Alan Grossberg Collection







## preface

The National Museum of Women in the Arts is very pleased to be able to present this exhibition of one of the best-known painters in Russia's both *pre-* and *post-perestroika* era, Tatyana Nazarenko. Described in the 1980's as the Queen of the Moscow art community, Nazarenko has been a very popular and important figure in that city's active art and intellectual scene for over a quarter of a century now.

An advocate for personal as well as public symbolism in "Soviet art" since the early 1970s, she has struggled to extend the boundaries of Socialist Realism to embrace a whole new dimension of Russian cultural identity. Her formidable portrayals of her country's revolutionary history combined with scenes from contemporary life are appreciated for their sense of immediacy and candor not only in her native country, but throughout Germany and other Western European countries. Nazarenko has yet to receive proper recognition in the United States, however, until now.

Thanks to this exhibition of recent paintings and three-dimensional figures, curated and organized by Alexandre Gertsman, Managing Director of SAUPRA, the Russian Art Foundation, Tatyana Nazarenko will now receive the wider U.S. attention her art deserves. We at NMWA are pleased to host this exhibition in the nation's capital and trust it will provide our audiences with a greater understanding of the solitude and endurance of the Russian people in the post-totalitarian age.

*Rebecca Phillips Abbott, Director  
National Museum of Women in the Arts*

## acknowledgments

Undoubtedly, Tatyana Nazarenko who has been in the very epicenter of Moscow artistic life for almost three decades realized her talent which enabled her to express herself with the maximum return.

In the seventies and eighties, as a member of the "left" faction of the Moscow Union of Artists, Nazarenko was trying to maintain her own creative style though she often was confronted with the politically correct Socialist Realism and paid for semi-independence by being excluded from some exhibitions.

Thus, at particular points of her creative life, she experienced both excitement and disappointment in regard to the dramatic social and artistic life in Russia under the Communist regime, and it was reflected in the themes of Nazarenko's art.

Art itself is a mirror of fortune and soul, a combination of the everyday reality and theater, tragedy and buffoonery, irony and grief — all this one can clearly trace in the art of Tatyana Nazarenko. The artist has been different in her emotional state and creative style during these three decades, but her reaction to that which was happening around her always had an inward intensity and psychological depth.

Both the Russian and European artistic public were able to appreciate and enjoy the art of Tatyana Nazarenko. For the American art connoisseurs, in spite of the few appearances by the artist in the artistic milieu this side of the Atlantic during the last decade, this exhibition is the first serious opportunity to see and find out what Nazarenko wants to tell her viewers. And the American public certainly deserves to be exposed to this great talent.

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

College Art Gallery, The City University of New York, Rebecca Phillips Abbott, Director, and Susan Fisher Sterling, Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C., who became interested in this project and whose knowledge and appreciation of art has helped its realization.

My very special thanks go to Donald Kuspit and Judd Tully for their great essays which help us to understand better and appreciate the talent of Tatyana Nazarenko. I also extend my appreciation to Andrey Barov for his professional art direction, Sergei Dusman for his help and dedication to the arts, Irina Barskova for her help with translation of the materials for this catalog, Ruth and Sidney Nearenberg, Members of the Board of Trustees of SAUPRA, for their patience in editing this publication, and deep thanks to Peter Gritsyk for his fine photography.

I would like to express my gratitude to Mr. William Strizever, Chairman of SAUPRA, and Mr. Allan Grossberg, a Member of the Board of Trustees of SAUPRA, for their efforts in bringing this show to the New York and Washington, D.C. public. My very special thanks to Ms. Marilyn Holmes, a Member of the Board of Trustees of SAUPRA, Mrs. Alice Wallace, Mrs. Barbara Gordon, Mrs. Wilhelmina Holladay, Founder of NMWA, and Mr. & Mrs. William Edgar for their support in organizing this Exhibition.

And, finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the Vienna Museum of Modern Art, National Museum of Women in the Arts, SAUPRA Foundation, Dr. & Mrs. Alexander Berezin, Ekaterina Berezin, and all other lenders to the Show for sharing the beauty of the artworks from their collections with all of us.

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

*next two pages:*

*Museum, 1988  
oil on canvas, 48x60 in.*

*Portraits, 1990  
oil on canvas, 56x46 in.*





## nazarenko's ascending passage

Alexandre Gertsman

Tatyana Nazarenko is one of the most successful divas of the Moscow art world of the last three decades. She has also experienced the full measure of the pernicious consequences of envy on the part of her comrades-in-art that was caused by the very same success. She used to attend exhibitions abroad at a time when many artists did not even think of sending their paintings anywhere. After this she was not allowed to go abroad for many years. She showed her works in the most prestigious official exhibition halls, and yet, her works were sometimes withdrawn from exhibitions in Russia before they would open. She was accused of lagging behind the vertiginous development of modern art, and yet, she managed to get ahead of this development. There are chapters about her in American and European books on modern art, and yet, American art connoisseurs are, in fact, just starting to discover her works.

So, what is the phenomenon of Nazarenko? Why is it that she is either admired or causes irritation, and, usually, there is no middle ground in the critique of her works? Why was it never possible to associate her with some definite artistic group or movement? Why is there something in her art that has always perplexed both the right and the left? Why was she never fully considered an official artist, and yet, she never "made it" to the status of a non-official artist? Why was her unusual realism not classified either under Socialist Realism, officially established under the Communist regime, or under any of non-official "pestilent" Western "Hyper-", "Sur-", "Neo-" and other realisms? It is, perhaps, because the artist herself never tried to affiliate with any group or artistic movement but

always was simply Tatyana Nazarenko who spoke to the world in her own artistic language.

Now, it is fashionable both among artists and Western journalists to determine the degree of the artists' talent by their past involvement in the non-official Soviet art. When one reads dead and annoying clichés that migrate from one article to another, one can not help the impression that the majority of artists of the 70s and 80s generation had been "fighters" for "something." However, hasn't the time come when, having done justice to the history of Russian Art, we should start determining the degree of talent by its actual existence and to apply the same criteria to Russian art as to the art of any other civilized country?

To give Nazarenko credit, she, unlike some of her colleagues, never tried to come up with a myth about her "heroic" past. She never tried to occupy a place where she had never really belonged. She just remained herself and determined her place in art with her work.

The artist has always depicted people who surrounded her. Her paintings have always been very personal, often biographical. One of paradoxes of the ever-smiling, ever-laughing Tatyana is that one can never see her characters smiling. It is even true of Nazarenko's *post-pere-stroika* art of the last decade which is free of the mandatory propaganda clichés and, therefore, supposedly bound to be happy.

One of the most interesting expressions of this could be found in her work *Spectators* of 1988. Shocked by the opening of her show in the German town of Waldenburg, where spectators had been completely indifferent to the human suffering depicted in her works and were simply enjoying the party atmosphere in a beautiful arty setting, Nazarenko recreated that crowd in her painting with herself

in the center, crucified — not with a cross, but rather with the spirit (if, indeed, there was one) of the contemporary society. In this work, she pictured fragments of her earlier paintings that depicted suffering: the portrait of her dying grandmother, the hands of the sleeping girl in her work *Naked* of 1986, and, from her *Self-portrait* of 1979, the artist's body crucified in the Christian manner, with her favorite flowers — white lilies (a symbol of purity, beauty, tenderness?) falling from the sky onto her.

A year prior to that, Nazarenko had also explored the notion of suffering in her *Museum* with its Renaissance painting of the Crucifixion with three crosses complete with museum spectators. The themes of suffering, loss, death and the viewers of these processes have been persecuting Nazarenko for years. Even in the most optimistic works, her characters — at carnivals and picnics — often look self-dismissed and observing a feast of life from outside the circle.

Nazarenko spent almost all of 1987 working on a huge panel for the Art Gallery of Birobidzhan that was established at the time with her great help. Birobidzhan is the Jewish Autonomous Republic which was created artificially by Stalin's regime in 1937 in order to show the entire world that Jews have their own republic in the friendly "sisterhood" of happy Soviet republics and have the same rights as all the other Soviet nations. The 50th anniversary of that questionable event afforded Tatyana Nazarenko a rare opportunity in the Soviet Union to explore and depict the history of its Jews, the story of the first Jewish migrants to that region that shares its border with the Chinese Far West. Could they be happy — faces of the people who had been forcibly torn away from their homes and driven into a desert, in order to create yet another desert, filled with tears and blood, a "memorial" to Stalin's tyranny? In the mid-nineties, Tatyana Nazarenko

develops these ideas more in terms of man's defenselessness before his voracious world. She creates a series of little naked people — a man and a woman, Adam and Eve — among antiques blown out of scale and gigantic lilies that resemble the jungles, suppressing frail and unprotected characters. In *Old Things*, *Three Graces*, and *People and Things*, she shows the viewers that the world in which they live is amazing and yet dangerous, romantic and yet cruel. She suggests, it might be God who granted them a blessing of being sent into this gigantic world where, afterwards, tiny Adam and Eve could rely only on themselves or destiny. This is the most postmodern series of Nazarenko where her fascination with the paintings of her beloved Brueghel and Bosch reaches its peak (ideas that we now call postmodern interested Nazarenko even in the early seventies which is reflected, for instance, in the above-mentioned *Self-portrait*).

And now — *Transition*. Transition from where? A passage to where? Is it Nazarenko's transition to a new coil of her artistic development? Is it a transition of the country, where she lives, from the dogmatism of communism to the freedom of capitalism? Or is it rather a transition of the majority population in the former Soviet country from the impoverished slavery to the poverty which this time is liberated? Is it not curious that *Transition's* painted canvases whose visual language is in a complete harmony with the characters made of wood (what is this — painting, sculpture or sculptured painting?) were created in 1989-90 whereas the inhabitants of a passage — in 1996.

*next two pages:*

*The Entrance*, 1990  
oil on canvas, 44x40 in.  
*Private Life of the Rich*, 1996  
acrylic on plywood, life-size

*We All Need Money!*, 1996  
acrylic on canvas, life-size







The late eighties were the very peak of the nationwide euphoria with Gorbachev's perestroika, but the widespread exultation didn't seem to touch Nazarenko's heroes at all; they remained deprived and unresponsive to the events around them. And her "cut-out" inhabitants of today's Moscow, Russia of the late nineties, the time of almost nationwide disappointment in the economic policy of the government, the time of multitudes of panhandlers in the streets and underground passages who peddle or trade or beg, and they are just as miserable, indifferent to everything and unsmiling as they were in the former communist times and just as preoccupied with procurement of money for booze and food. What would account for the ideal accord between the style of her works of 1989 and the structure of her works of 1996: an ingenious artistic foresight or just a recording by the sensitive eye of an artist of that which it observed? Could it be a direct mirror reflection of the huge country that has been skidding on the same spot during several years before the eyes of the West smitten by the "Russian reforms"? Or was it just a creation of the conceptual form of thinking, new for the artist, the environment of a new artistic space?

Nazarenko's paintings are literary, and she was often criticized for that. However, the literary quality is by no means contraindicated to Nazarenko. It is the source of her painterly thinking. Literature in her case is not a pretext for painting, and her painterly insights come directly from a literary subject that she has chosen. Origins of the way she sees the world as an artist are literary in their essence. Nazarenko, in a way, comes out of the traditions of Russian *Peredvizhniki* while, at the same time, she is close in her views to the works of Kustodiev, a member of *Mir Iskusstva* movement, as well as to Petrov-Vodkin, an excellent representative of the Russian avant-garde, with his powerful *Striding Workman*.

However, being an eclectic, she draws inspiration in the artistic pursuits of Masaccio, Botticelli and other artists of the Renaissance, and, of course, her favorite Brueghel and Bosch who were absolutely literary. One should note, however, that their works contained not only a literary but also ideological and symbolic meaning. Even Bosch — in spite of his painterly charm, his artistic objects are literary, and his plastic novelties are based on literature, on his religious perception of the world and the Last Judgment. However, the literary aspect of Cézanne, for instance, is a pretext for a new gigantic painterly vision of the world.

For Nazarenko, the first, non-Cézannist type of literary quality, is, of course, much closer. The same reason lies underneath her approach for the creation of protagonists for her "Plywood Gallery." It is as if her characters were cut out of her canvases and acquired an independent life. The only difference is that Nazarenko's paintings have a subject and reflect a certain social collision; they carry an element of spiritual contemplation and philosophical comprehension of the world, while her plywood figures are more illustrative and abstracted from a direct philosophical interpretation. It is no longer a painting, but not yet a sculpture — furthermore, it is an art that contains no promise of sculpture. After all, reliefs by Matisse or volumetric figures by Degas are very plastic, because these artists think like painters in their sculptures. Nazarenko is not even trying to get outside the painterly thinking; she is just mastering a new idea. Her figures are illustrative and decorative; their roots go to the traditions of Russian Primitivism and the Perm wooden sculpture of the 18th century. To be sure, Brueghel and Bosch whom Nazarenko followed with a truly postmodern adherence for two decades used the same painterly method in their almost planar compositions. Still, it seems to me that closer temporal paral-

els could be drawn between the "Plywood Gallery" of *Transition* and the works by Alexander Kosolapov of the seventies and eighties that are close in style to the ideas of Tatyana Nazarenko. Their figures cut out of plywood and timber came out of the depth of Russian folklore, and not only did they possess a certain plastic code, but they were also interpolated into the sarcastic ideas of the modern Sots-art. However, their ideas had totally different artistic as well as social goals. But Nazarenko who ingeniously balances on the verge between art and kitsch brings to mind that which became a peculiar element of the modern Russian kitsch-culture (or pop-culture?): the cut-out plywood figures first of Gorbachev in the eighties and later of Yeltsin in the nineties that were standing on the Pushkin Square in Moscow next to which tourists liked to be photographed for fun. As a reference to this, there was a plywood figure of Luzhkov, Mayor of Moscow, at the last Moscow exhibition of Nazarenko this year.

However, Nazarenko goes much further than the Russian primitivist painters, and, at the same time, she deviates from the artists of *Sots-art*. It is as if the artist uses a theatrical method — the method of making stage sets. On the one hand, she depicts attributes of a passage in Moscow (but it could exist in any other city of the former Soviet Union) — an underground passage (but also a street crossing, a viaduct and any other passage) and the characters that populate it. On the other hand, she creates stage sets of the daily life of modern Russia — the colored plywood dummies that could, unlike the plaything, showcase characters of Kosolapov, exist in any environment, both interior and exterior.

What's interesting is that when Nazarenko's "paintings on plywood" are exhibited in the vicinity of her works on canvas, the former totally lose their decorative aspect and acquire a more philo-

sophical meaning whereas the social aspect of her plywood figures — Saleswoman, Veterans of the Afghan War, Senior Citizens, Cripples, Fortunetellers, Sick Children, Beggars — absolutely interlocks with the withdrawn drunks of *The Company* and *A Mug of Beer*, sullen working women of *The Storefront* and *The Street and the People*, and the badgered old lady in a "ring" of policemen of *In the Street*.

Could it be that the same thing is happening at the exhibitions of her "wooden crowd" — the crowd of beggars, cripples, miserables, homeless, sales-women and prostitutes — that took place at the opening of the artist's exhibition in Waldenburg? No matter where an opening night happens to be — in Moscow, Paris, Washington, Cologne — there are always the same smiles, flowers and champagne and, in fact, nobody except for art critics cares about the suffering that pains the artist. Everybody is touched only by new artistic aesthetics of the new installation of Tatyana Nazarenko; many pass by her pain. Does our prosperous society, in fact, decay? There is no point in believing that Nazarenko's outsiders are some other society that exists God knows where. They are a part of our society where we all exist. They are us.

Tatyana Nazarenko once confessed that she creates her characters when she feels sad. I would be interested to see one day Tatyana's works that she would create when she feels happy. Could it be that her *Transition* leads to that?

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

next two pages:

*The Storefront* (diptych), 1989  
oil on canvas, 48x36 in. each





**tatyana nazarenko,  
absurd realist**

*Donald Kuspit*

Tatyana Nazarenko is a realist, not a Soviet-style socialist realist, nor an American type social realist, but rather what I want to call an absurd realist. By this I mean an artist who experienced firsthand the absurdity of social reality, and who recognizes its power to make human beings feel absurd. This is the inward link of her art and the Old Master Northern Realists as Pieter Breughel: a sense of the inherent absurdity, not to say folly, of human existence under certain dehumanizing conditions. W. H. Auden once said that the Old Masters were never wrong about suffering, and Nazarenko is never wrong about a more subtle suffering than the Old Masters ever depicted.

Nazarenko grew up under the dehumanizing conditions of Soviet Russia, and her figures have the depleted, reserved look — the drab look of obedience and self-suppression — everyday Russians had to wear to survive under that authoritarian regime. It is not exactly a look of life — not exactly the look of people blossoming with vitality — not exactly a fresh, happy look. Such an appearance is not just a necessity of social survival under totalitarianism; Nazarenko's figures mean as little to themselves as they do to the authoritarian society they live in: they are inwardly as well as outwardly inconspicuous. In a society in which life is cheap, to live is to die inwardly, slowly but surely. The physiognomies of Nazarenko's figures express living death — deprivation and frustration carried to an extreme, so that gratification has become meaningless, and all that is left is the unconscious feeling of the pointlessness of living. Nazarenko's figures have internalized the Soviet

regime's suspicion of its citizens, so that they have become suspicious of themselves.

And yet, undeniably, Nazarenko's figures are alive, and peculiarly intense. They have a forceful presence — a sturdy immediacy — as her 1990 image of a bulky proletariat indicates. Unshaven, holding a mug of beer, in rather stark contrast with his dark cap, he seems to exist in defiance of the grim brick walls behind him, hiding an implicitly labyrinthine social structure. In this no exit situation, he maintains his self-possession — a true survivor. Nazarenko brings him close to the picture plane, as though to engage him in conversation. Yet he is silent, indeed, seem to have resolved to be stubbornly silent. He wants no intonation in his voice to betray his thoughts and feelings.

Silence pervades Nazarenko's pictures — a deep, ingrained silence. One can almost touch it in another 1990 image, *The Two*, which also owes much to Northern Realist renderings of abject human figures, who nonetheless maintain their dignity and identity. They are figures who have been shrunk if not broken by life — figures who have lost the possibility of growing beyond the social roles prescribed by them. They have lost their destiny, for society have become their destiny. Nazarenko's couple are uncommunicative. Pausing in public for a drink, they keep to themselves, expressing nothing. Indeed, the startling thing about Nazarenko's figures is that even when they are doing ostensibly joyous things — such as playing music in a *Musicians* — they remain inexpressive, that is, show no feeling. They have been so used to minding tongues — to censoring themselves — they have lost even the most basic power of expression and self-projection. Darwin thought there were nine innate human expressions, and recent research holds that there are twelve; Nazarenko's figures seem capable of

none of them. They are militantly inexpressive — radically silent. And perhaps emotionally dead. This correlates with their peculiar lack of sociability and isolation, even when they are clustered in groups, as they are in many pictures. Nazarenko's Russians are a singularly unjolly, lonely group of people.

I find their silence overwhelming, beyond tragedy; completely keeping to themselves, they have lost any self to keep. They have become impenetrable, but it is not clear what one will find once one has penetrated their wall. And yet this impenetrability makes them real — real with an irreducible particularity, not to say implacable vulgarity. Silent concreteness—this is Nazarenko's old-fashioned Russian weapon against Soviet power. It is the weapon of an individual who has nowhere to go — who cannot develop beyond his or her conditions — but that represents the individual's will to endure. Silent endurance is what Nazarenko's pictures are about: static states of being, whose rigidity indicates a determination not to be crushed. The point is made with deceptive simplicity in *Portraits*, 1990: below, a small, simple dark figure, holding his own against the regal figure of authority, who takes up much more physical and social space. The work is a form of political defiance and condemnation, if not of open rebellion. But it is also a profound in human contrasts: on the one hand, a humble figure made of raw human substance, which however plain holds its own and survives; on the other hand, the ruling class's arrogant, narcissistic fantasy of itself, which clearly has become obsolete — the ruling class has perished, becoming merely of historical, "artistic" interest.

Nazarenko's famous life-size cutout figures, her most modernist works — they have a certain affinity with those of Alex Katz, although his are of metal rather than painted wood, and of sophisticates rather than raw humanity — appear in

*For the Sake of G-D, Russian Lotto, Punks, and Vodka and Bread.* Each is a little social narrative or anecdote. But to me their larger point is that they form a Potemkin village — a facade of figures that hide a void. They are a big lie. There may now be food and drink in Russia, and the handicapped may be cared for, and open protest and dissent may be allowed, but the human condition is still an absurd pretense. These flat figures are shadows of what human beings once were in Russia. They are the relics of almost a century of Communist oppression — the ghosts that have managed to live beyond it. Nazarenko may have been an official Soviet artist, but she revealed more of Soviet life than the authorities realized. She showed that is was neither modern nor traditional, but humanly bankrupt.

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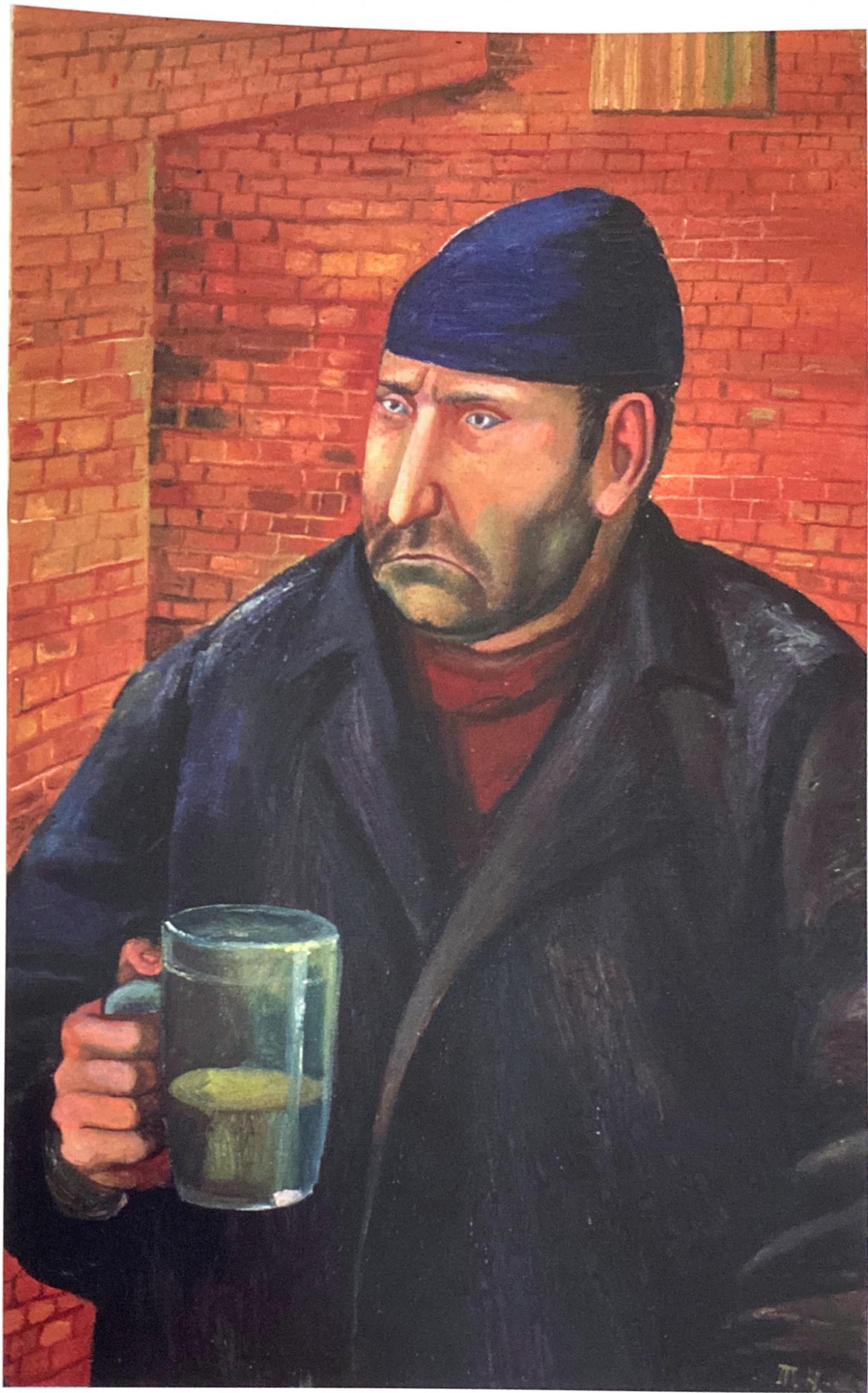
Donald Kuspit is a Professor of Art History and Philosophy at the State University of New York at Stony Brook.

*next two pages:*

*The Two*, 1990  
oil on canvas, 40x32 in.  
SAUPRA Collection

*A Mug of Beer*, 1989  
oil on canvas, 32x20 in.  
Alexandre Gertsman Collection







## tatyana nazarenko: a far cry from soviet-style realism

Judd Tully

The Moscow born-and-bred painter Tatyana Nazarenko (1944-) was often referred to as the "Queen of the Moscow Artists Union" before the Soviet Union broke apart and such lofty markers became a glinting shard of the historical past. A similar appellation was given to the late American painter Lee Krasner (the wife of Jackson Pollock) by critic Robert Hughes when he dubbed her (posthumously, of course) the "Mother Courage of Abstract Expressionism." Titles are always transitory and Nazarenko, at any rate, has broken out of her cubbyholed mold as a ruling member of the old regime's so-called conservative avant-garde.

Like fellow Russian artists Grisha Bruskin and Ilya Kabakov, who have since carved out new careers here, Nazarenko made her Western art market debut at Sotheby's remarkable auction of Russian contemporary art in Moscow back in July 1988. It was a kind of in-house revolution for many of those artists who participated in that decidedly capitalistic affair, whether or not they received the money they were due. In fact, Nazarenko's Renaissance-styled diptych, *The Town at Night* (estimated at \$7,500 -12,000) just missed vaulting over its high estimate and represented a rather bullish result for a virtual unknown to non-Soviet eyes. A great deal of Nazarenko's oeuvre is studded with Russian references. But even without the necessary historic background to decode older Nazarenko narrative paintings that so frequently culled the bloody battlefields of pre-Revolutionary Russia for visual metaphors, such as *Decembrists: Rebellion of the Chernigov Regiment* and *Pugachev* the new paintings on cut-out plywood are less history-

dependent. There's no overriding need to translate the Russian messages for alms held by some of cast members in Nazarenko's Dante-esque underground.

The faces and body language tell the story, filled in perhaps by contemporary media accounts of the upheavals in Russian society as a result of what we first learned here as an outgrowth of *glasnost*. Indeed, the bristling Brezhnev era that preceded it, seems like eons ago.

The huddled and shabbily dressed figures occupy the Metro labyrinths of the Moscow subway system, which oddly enough, served as a model for the much later and sleeker Washington D.C. Metro. The underground there became a sort of beggars' bazaar, crowded with displaced persons from warring republics or grizzled veterans thrown off the subsidized tracks of Soviet-styled paternalism. There are makeshift string-and-accordion quartets playing for a handout, and looking for the most part, glum, unshaven and shockingly out-of-place, like the Kolya's of the film world.

To American eyes, these figures bring to mind the cut-out installations of painter/sculptor Red Grooms (especially his painted cast of exaggerated ruffians lurching to-and-fro in the subway car of *Ruckus Manhattan*) as well as the white plaster, life-size cast figures of George Segal's alienated commuters. Whatever the associations, it provides a striking frontal assault as you take in some of their expressionistically-brewed angst.

From another cultural outpost, Nazarenko's plywood figures can be compared to the swarthy French cast of fruit-and-produce workers in Raymond Masson's remarkable ceramic tribute *Les Halles* permanently installed in Saint Eustace. It is interesting to consider that since The Cold War has ended, the U.S. media has mostly abandoned portraying

the impoverished darkside of post-Soviet life. Most images that are transmitted here in glossy magazines and television snippets, depict Russia's new multi-millionaires in their shiny Mercedes-Benz coupes or their radiantly slim wives working the "stairmasters" or shopping for Versace. So it comes as a kind of non-hyped shock to view these disturbing images, which at an earlier time could have been exported as propaganda to fight the (former) "Evil Empire."

Nazarenko is strongest when she mixes the signifier glories of the past with the more troubled present, as in the stunning painting *Museum* and the cut-outs *Punks* and *Vodka and Bread*. It features a crouching pair of tattooed and pierced wannabe Punk Rockers alongside a heavily layered, Gertrude Stein-sized matron, almost doll-like with her tied head scarf and motionlessly folded hands. The trio are hunkered down under a brilliantly colored subway poster advertising gold-ground masterpieces in the Hermitage. They, of course, are oblivious to the poster and cut off from its magnificent and bygone provenance.

With her assembled downtrodden, Nazarenko remains a formidable presence in the still burgeoning field of figurative painting and her misery-tinted subjects come in welcome relief to the more familiar and certainly dashing figures, of say an Alex Katz, who also has worked in the cut-out format. The purpose here in mentioning Katz is (certainly) not to criticize him or his designer-clad subjects but to contrast the refreshing blast from Nazarenko's more proletarian palette.

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Judd Tully is freelance critic and art journalist with a special interest in the international art market. A member of the International Association of Art Critics, Tully is a regular contributor to *Art & Auction*, *Artnews*, *Beaux Arts*, *Photography in New York*, and *The Washington Post*.

pages 26-27:

*Musicians*, 1996  
acrylic on canvas, life-size

*Vodka and Bread*, 1996  
acrylic on plywood, life-size

pages 30-31:

*The Street and the People*, 1990  
oil on canvas, 64x44 in.  
William Strizever Collection

*On the Street*, 1989  
oil on canvas, 60x48 in.  
Vienna Museum of Modern Art  
Foundation Ludwig Collection





## selected solo exhibitions

1997

*Tatyana Nazarenko: Transition*, Lehman College Art Gallery, The City University of New York, New York (also traveling 1998 National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C.)

*Mon Paris*, Central Exhibition Hall

Manezh, Moscow

*Tatyana Nazarenko*, Gelman Gallery, Moscow

1996

*Transition*, U-Bahn-Station Haus der Geschichte, Cologne; U-Bahn-Station Appellhoffplatz, Bonn; Galerie Henn, Cologne

1995

*Transition*, Central Exhibition Hall Manezh, Moscow

1994

Museum Dvoryaninovo, Dvoryaninovo - Moscow, Russia; Russian Art Gallery, Tallinn, Estonia

1993

State Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow

1989

Central House of Artists, Moscow

1988

House der Burgerschaft, Bremen; Opera House, Oldenburg, Germany

1987

Museum of Russian and Western European Art, Odessa, Ukraine; Museum of Russian and Western European Art, Kiev, Ukraine

## selected group exhibitions

1997

*The World of Perceptible Things In Pictures - The End of the 20th Century*, State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow

1996

*Here and There, Then and Now:*

*Contemporary Artists from the Former Soviet Union*, National Jewish Museum, Washington, D.C.  
1995

*From Gulag to Glasnost: Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union*, Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick  
*The True Russia*, Charles Summer School Museum, Washington, D.C.  
1994

*Russian Art*, Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art, Aachen, Germany  
1993

*The Dream Reveals the Nature of Things*, State Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow

*Adresse provisoire pour l'art contemporain russe*, Musee de la Poste, Paris  
*Art-Myth* (Moscow International Art Fair), Moscow, Russia

*Russian Art of the 1960-1990*, Osnabruck, Germany

1992

*Expo - 92*, Barcelona

*Tatyana Nazarenko and Natalya Nesterova*, Gallery Fernando Duran, Madrid

1991

*Figuration - Critique*, Grand Palais, Paris

*Artistas rusos contemporaneos*, Santiago de Compostela, Spain

*Pintura russa e soviética em Portugal de Nocolay II a Gorbachev*, Castelo de Leiria, Leiria, Portugal

1990

*The Quest for Self-Expression: Paintings in Moscow and Leningrad 1965-1990*, Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio (also traveling 1991 -

Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, NC.; Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock, Arkansas

*Frammenti d'arte contemporanea. 32 protagonisti dall' URSS*, Rome Moscow - Washington, State Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia; Carnegie Library, University of the District of Columbia, Washington, D.C.

*Moscow Treasures and Traditions*,

Seattle, Washington

1989

*Von der revolution zur perestroika*,  
Barcelona

*A selection of paintings from Moscow  
1958-1988*, Berkeley Square Gallery,  
London

1988

*Russian Avant-Garde and Soviet  
Contemporary Art*, Sotheby's, Moscow  
*Sowjet kunst heute*, Ludwig Museum of  
Modern Art, Cologne

1987

*Contemporary Soviet Art, Selection from  
Norton Dodge Collection*, Kennesaw  
College

*Six Moscow Artists*, Riga, Latvia; Tallinn,  
Estonia

1986

*Kunstler aus Moskau: Lubennikov,  
Nazarenko, Nesterova*, West Berlin  
Kunstlerinnen aus der sowjetunion,  
Kunsthalle, Recklinghausen, West  
Germany

1984

*Exhibition of Five Soviet Artists*, Ludwig  
and Nikolai, Cologne

1983

*Aspekte Sowjetischer kunst der gegen-  
wart: Sammlung Ludwig*, Kunstlerhaus,  
Vienna; Museum am Dom, Lubeck, E.  
Germany; Stadtische Galerie,  
Regensburg, W. Germany; Sonja Henie,  
Onstadt Hovikodden, Sweden; Tiburg,  
The Netherlands; Modernegalerie des  
Saarlan-Museum, Saarbrucken, W.  
Germany; Landesmuseum, Mainz, W.  
Germany

1982

*Exhibition of the Ludwig Collection*, Ludwig  
Museum of Modern Art, Cologne

*Russische malerei heute*, Galerie Levy,  
Hamburg

1981

*Twenty three Moscow Artists*, Central  
House of Artists, Moscow; International  
Images,

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

1978

*Drei Moskaver malerinnen aus drei gen-  
erationen*, Berlin, Rostok, Schwern, Halle,

E. Germany

1975

*Five Moscow Artists*, Exhibition Hall,  
Moscow

1966-present time

Participated in various All-Union,  
Republican and Moscow Exhibitions

## selected public collections

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

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

Galerie Nationale, Berlin

Ludwig Museum of Modern Art, Cologne

Ludwig Museum of Contemporary Art,  
Budapest

Museum of Modern Art, Foundation  
Ludwig, Vienna

Museum of Modern Art, Sofia

Museum of Russian and Western  
European Art, Kiev

National Museum of Women in the Arts,  
Washington, D.C.

State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg,  
Russia

State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

Slovak National Gallery, Bratislava

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

Frederick R. Weisman Collection,  
Los Angeles







## selected articles and reviews

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- Kennely, Eleanor. "The True Russia", *Washington Post*, January 1995.
- Kornetchuk, Elena. "Soviet Art and the State", The Quest for Self-expression, *Exhibition catalogue*, Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, 1990.
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- Lebedeva, V.E. "Tatyana Nazarenko", *Sovetski Khudozhnik*, Moscow, 1991.
- Lebedeva, V. "Paintings of Tatyana Nazarenko", *Soviet Union Today #10* (German Edition), 1987.
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- Petrosjan, Gawrill. "Tatyana Nazarenko", *Bulletin der Gesellschaft BDR-udSSR*, December, 1988.
- Richard, Paul. "Common Concerns", *Washington Post*, p.G1, G5 (Art), 1994.
- Russian Avant-Garde and Soviet Contemporary Art, *Catalogue*, *Sotheby's*, Moscow, 1988.
- Ausstellung in der Burgerschaft, *Bremer anzeiger*, January 27, 1988.
- Ein hauch von Glasnost zieht durch die Burgerschaft, *Kreiszeitung*, January 20, 1988.
- Sowjetische Kunst, *zum Sonntag*, February 6, 1988.
- Weiss, Evelin. "Sowjetkuns teute Museum Ludwig", *Ludwig Museum*, Cologne, 1988.
- Yakimovitch, Alexander. "Historical compositions and genre of Tatyana Nazarenko", *Soviet Painter #10*, 1982.

front cover:

*Museum*, 1988

oil on canvas, 48x60 in.

*Punks*, 1996

acrylic on plywood, life-size

pages 2-3:

Tatyana Nazarenko and her

personages from the series

*Your Fate is in Your Hands*, 1996

acrylic on plywood, life-size

back cover:

*For The Sake of G-D*, 1996

acrylic on plywood, life-size

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