



Oleksandr Semenov, *Without a Face*, 2004.

Orange crush

Young Ukrainian artists build their country's contemporary-art scene

By Ruth Lopez

The works in “Artists Respond: Ukrainian Art and the Orange Revolution” were created during a turbulent period following that nation’s 2004 presidential elections. Demonstrators thronged the Maidan—also known as Independence Square—in Kyiv protesting the rigged elections that put Viktor Yanukovich, the government-backed candidate, in power. Protesters donned orange—the campaign color of opposition leader Viktor Yushchenko—in a powerful visual display of collective displeasure.

During that time, the nearby Center for Contemporary Art in Kyiv opened its doors to artists who transformed the space into a giant studio, meeting place and crash pad they dubbed the Revolutionary Experimental Space (REP).

On view at the Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art are 17 pieces by 13 young artists (the oldest was born in 1976) selected from about 100 created during that short, potent time. More than political art, the work is laced with humor and defiance.

Nicholas Sawicki, an adjunct professor in art history at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the volunteer art chairman of UIMA, cocurated this exhibition with the Kyiv center’s director, Yuliya Vaganova. Sawicki, a specialist in East European art, did not have the funds to travel to Kyiv to see the work and had to rely on images. He chose well.

This energetic, diverse collection manages to impart a sense of the feverish activity at play in the REP.

Oleksandr Semenov’s *Crowd*—an installation of nine thin and worn single mattresses, rolled up, bound with tape and placed on their sides—has a forlorn yet vital quality. During the 24/7 two-week protest, hundreds of mattresses were dragged into the square, providing a measure of comfort during the cold nights. There is no wall text to clue us in and there doesn’t need to be; Semenov’s piece

is visually arresting and holds its own. *Crowd* manages to speak out, as if to say, “We are still standing despite our fatigue.”

Artur Bielezovov’s wall sculpture, *Victory*, is composed of 36 square egg cartons—each with peculiarly unique neutral shades of cardboard grays and beiges. News junkies will recall the dioxin poisoning of Yushchenko, which left him disfigured. Yanukovich, in a pathetic attempt to portray himself also as a victim of political terror, staged an egg attack on himself. The stunt backfired, leaving him, if you will, with egg on his face, and the butt of endless jokes. *Victory* is a majestic work of found-art minimalism on its own, but it has a wry dimension.

In the mixed-media installation *Altar*, Kseniya Hnylytska has taken a commercially produced white curtain panel with a traditional embroidery and lace border and festooned it with an embroidered slab of bacon and a loaf of bread with a pickle floating overhead. On a wooden shelf below the textile, small candles fixed in dried puddles of wax are flanked by pink, yellow and red artificial flowers in plastic water-bottle vases. Stuck amid one bouquet is the opposition party flag, which reads, TAKI [“yes” in Ukrainian] YUSHCHENKO. Hnylytska continues to tweak the folk arts in *Take Me*—a painting of a woman’s white blouse with traditional floral embroidery on its billowy sleeves. Embazoned on the chest in T-shirt mode are words that translate roughly to “Let’s have a fuck.” Both joyfully irreverent works provoke us to consider all the things that sustain us, no matter

what the political climate.

Contemporary art making in the Ukraine is recent—it took until the 1990s for artists to

shake off Soviet social realism. And until the Center for Contemporary Art opened its doors in 1995 (with funding by the Soros Foundation), no exhibition space existed. These young artists add conceptual art to their slightly older peers’ neo-expressionist output. To support this vital scene, these artists are charged with the difficult task of reflecting on their experience while at the same time transcending its boundaries. If you are wondering if they have managed to pull that off, the answer is, Tak! ■

Review

“Artists Respond: Ukrainian Art and the Orange Revolution

is on exhibit at UIMA through February 28. See Museums & Institutions.