

JEFFREY HOGREFE

## Komar & Melamid's Dreams; Dannheisser's Prima Donnas

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid have been plagued by some pretty bizarre dreams involving George Washington and Vladimir Lenin in a variety of intriguing tableaux. Sometimes Washington and Lenin appear together in the same dream as puppets in a store window, sometimes there's only one. Soon after they realized that they were both having the same dreams, Mr. Komar mentioned the coincidence to his wife, Anna, a psychologist. "She said, 'Don't think you are crazy,'" Mr. Komar recalled, "'I have a patient with a similar dream. He is a Russian émigré taxi driver.'"

Mr. Komar and Mr. Melamid, who are better known as Komar & Melamid, the TriBeCa-based artists who have a keen grasp of the absurd, decided to do something with their dreams. The result is *Naked Revolution*, their first opera. Composed by David Soldier, who also provided the orchestrations for the movies *Basquiat* and *I Shot Andy Warhol*, and written by Maita di Niscemi, who has written the librettos for many Robert Wilson productions, the opera is playing at the Kitchen in West Chelsea through Oct. 18. Komar & Melamid provided the sets, which include monumental gold statues of Washington, Lenin and Czar Alexander III, done in the spirit of Soviet Realism. There are some trained operatic voices in the opera, but the gestalt of the production is what Mr. Komar refers to as "parody of opera."

A little bit of Marx Brothers and a little bit of Fireside Theater, the opera presents the dreants of a Russian émigré taxi driver, played by Tony Boutte, who is troubled by his historical dreams. "Washington, Washington, why Washington? Why should I dream and dream about that old fool?" he asks his doctor. The poor guy has wild dreams that jump back and forth in history, not only about Washington but Lenin, the Czar and even England's King George III. The statues that Komar & Melamid pro-

vided for the production come tumbling down, and new ones appear. "It is really about the destruction of monuments," said Mr. Soldier, the composer. "When I first approached Vitaly and Alex and asked them if they had an idea for an opera, Vitaly wanted to do one about Washington. I suggested that we weave in other historical figures."

Weave them in they did. Molly Pitcher, the Revolutionary War heroine, has a role. Isadora Duncan is seen trying to arrange a meeting with Lenin, a little known histori-



**It's the Komar & Melamid show! Artists Vitaly Komar, left, and Alex Melamid turned their dreams of George Washington and Vladimir Lenin into iconographic statues for *The Naked Revolution*, a parodic opera being performed at the Kitchen through Oct. 18.**

cal fact: She did try to meet him when she went to the Soviet Union, but he avoided her because he thought she was a dilettante. Even Dadaist Marcel Duchamp makes an appearance, having flexed his revolutionary muscles in 1917 when he climbed to the top of Washington Square Monument with a group of artists and declared the independence of the republic of Greenwich Village.

"In our mind, this performance made the connection between three different revolutions," said Mr. Komar, who wears a dark beard, shaggy hair, thick glasses and carries around the satisfied girth of a latter-day Marxist. "The revolution of modern art because it has Marcel Duchamp. The American revolution because it was Washington. And the Russian revolution because of Lenin."

In a quiet moment at the end of the preview performance on Oct. 4, Mr. Komar, who was forced out of the Soviet Union in 1979 with Mr. Melamid, continued to expound on his strange dreams. "My dreams, which began to appear after the fall of the Soviet Union, were maybe prompted by the feeling that we lost something—the loss of the father figure," he said. "Alex and I, we both call George Washington our stepfather. These men are our heroes. We try to create the cult of personality in George Washington in our own style." On Oct. 18, the two get to show

a more two-dimensional view of their hero-inspired art when an exhibit of their Soviet Realism-style paintings of Washington and Lenin goes up at the Ronald Feldman Fine Arts gallery in SoHo.

Mr. Komar also revealed a historical fact that he has mulled over many times. "Both Washington and Lenin were called 'father of the nation' and yet both had no children of their own."

### 'ARTISTS ARE SUCH PRIMA DONNAS'

In 1993, Elaine Dannheisser was ridiculed by Morley Safer on a *60 Minutes* episode entitled "Yes—but Is It Art?" Ms. Dannheisser, a contemporary art collector who is a force of nature in the art world, was widely respected for having stood up to Mr. Safer, who attacked her for supporting the work of various contemporary

artists, such as Jeff Koons and Matthew Barney. That does not mean that artists will always stand by her, as she discovered when she attempted to designate how certain works would be installed in an upcoming exhibition of her collection at the Museum of Modern Art.

Her main gripe is with Matthew Barney, the former J. Crew model, whose sexually

charged videotapes and display art using props that are normally found on the football field has made him the darling of the downtown art scene. In the show, *On the Edge: Contemporary Art From the Werner and Elaine Dannheisser Collection*, Mr. Barney is represented by a video of himself dressed, as a satyr in different permutations, a photograph of himself dressed in a 1950's woman's bathing suit, matching turban and high heels, and an art piece that consists of a football player's blocking sled. Ms. Dannheisser said she had originally wanted to install the sled and the video in the same room. But when Robert Storr, who is the curator of the MoMA exhibition, called Mr. Barney and reported what they were planning to do, Mr. Barney nixed the idea: He insisted that his video be put in a separate room.

"Artists are such prima donnas!" Ms. Dannheisser exclaimed over the phone. "Everybody wants everything just exactly the way it is supposed to be." Mr. Barney got his way.

Ms. Dannheisser also said that Bruce Nauman caused some commotion before the show, too. She had wanted to install a Nauman sculpture a little bit higher than Mr. Nauman had specified. Now, she said, "The animal piece won't be in the show when it opens because it has to be a certain height, and he wouldn't have it raised. He doesn't want it to be raised a little so it doesn't knock people's heads. What can I tell you? I wanted it raised so it wouldn't hit people's heads, and he said No." Mr. Storr refused to comment.

### BACK AT THE ACE

The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum has installed a portion of its Robert Rauschenberg exhibition at Ace Gallery New York in SoHo. (In fact, the Guggenheim went so far as to temporarily dub the installation "The Guggenheim Museum at Ace Gallery.") But before the exhibition plans were finalized, the Guggenheim might have done a little more research into the background of Douglas Christmas, the Ace's owner. According to a Sept. 15 article in the *Los Angeles Times*, Mr. Christmas, who also has a gallery in Los Angeles, pleaded no contest in 1986 to charges that he stole a number of artworks. As it turned out, a couple of those works were Rauschenbergs. Thomas Krens, the Guggenheim's director, had no comment on the slight irony of the situation, and neither did Mr. Christmas.

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