

How I Became an Artist

(Instead of Autobiography)

By: Oleg Vassiliev

How did I become an artist? How do I perceive myself as an artist? How did I find myself in the circle of unofficial artists? Have I become someone I dreamed of becoming? I have previously written on similar themes in the text to my work *Substitutions and Transformations* - 102 pages. An article on my attitude toward painting was published in *A-Ya* magazine. Reflections on my encounters with the painter V. A. Favorsky were included in a two-volume set dedicated to Favorsky's life and work. Reflections on my collaboration with Eric Bulatov on children's book illustrations were published in *Pastor*. Other writings have been about memory, about friends and colleagues. It is possible now that I will be repetitious, inconsequential, or worse, forgetful.

Memory, after all, is not a simple imprint, but a "metaphysical, creative memory." It selects and intensifies some aspects of the past, erases other, transforms them, spruces them up and even dramatizes them. The theme of memory is one of the most important for me.

Fallen Leaves is the name of one of my paintings. Leaves naturally reappear each spring. But before their appearance there is a brief flurry of withered leaves from the previous year - a metaphor for personal memory. Life continues as long as memory exists.

"Poetry comes as naturally as leaves to a tree" (Keats). this does not pertain to me. I do not feel like a "creator." For me, each painting is a labor filled with doubt, bordering on despair. Only much later in life did I realize what my professor had in mind when he used to tell me: "You are lazy, Vassiliev, plain lazy!" At that time, I was completely absorbed in my work, I thought, even more so than others. I was at ease as long as I didn't begin "to ponder." Later, due to my "pensiveness" in Plantonov's sense, I turned out to be an "unofficial."

In childhood, I loved to copy postcards. I liked Shishkin and Germashov: Germashov especially, because his work was comprehensible and not as busy as Shishkin's. I fondly remember postcards of Germashov's pictures: one, a winter evening, as small house in a forest, and a light in its window.

Another: late autumn, a yellow house, windows with white casings, a birch-lined walk, and puddles on the road all surrounded by a white border. A third: also in autumn, a courtyard, a fence iwth a stone gate, yellowish-red trees behind the fence and, in the foreground, a little old man sweeping away leaves from the path.

At the Tretyakov Gallery, I liked Shishkin, Vasnetsov, Levitan and, standing by itself, Ivanov's *Christ Appearing to the People*. Later, when I was in the Moscow Secondary Art School, Levitan overshadowed them all.

War, evacuation, and return to Moscow changed the nature of my pursuits. I became indifferent to my previous interests. Painting departed my life completely. In the courtyard I was teased for my Vyatsky accent, which I had acquired in Kirov (our evacuation place; now it is Vyatka again). Fortunately, my biggest "tormentor" was weaker than I and we became friends. Our main activity was "playing war" - battles with sticks and a salute after each of our victories at the front. We blew up cartridges and grenades, which we stole from the nearby military depot. Incapacitated German tanks had been brought there from the front line. There was no guard.

I refused to go with my father to the District Pioneer House to enroll in an artist's club. I decided that it would be boring and, more importantly, I did not want to sacrifice my friendships in the courtyard. Shortly thereafter, two friends - one, my former tormentor - suggested we join the club together. I was very surprised when they explained that they would

wait for me in the hall. Such attention from my peers overcame my fear of boredom. The accompanied me again to the next class, heroically keeping vigil at the door for more than an hour. I suspect that my father secretly conspired with my friends. I should say that my friends always liked my father. He was sincerely interested in our activities, knew how to listen, and enjoyed going with us to the pond at Sokolniki to fish for crucian carp. In so doing, he received no less pleasure than we did.

Later, I went to the studio alone. Although classes followed a schedule, we managed to visit the studio almost every day. The door could be opened easily with a penknife; a cleaning lady who appeared at the door now and then would leave upon seeing us drawing.

I remember our teacher well. His name was Pyotr Petrovich (his last name does not remain in memory). Apparently, he was among those who were not favored by the Soviet authorities. Our District House of Pioneers was his place of refuge. Tall and a little slouched, he was always dressed in a black suit with a narrow black tie. His sleeves and lapels were shiny from intensive cleaning - like those of my father. He always analyzed our work with a smile and never berated anyone. In a conversation about me with my father he said: "He has a God-given talent as a landscape painter," by which I was very flattered.

I grew to like going to the studio. New friends there talked about books and music. Everything was fresh and engrossing. among the studio-goers, a spirit of "obsession with art" reigned, which many of them maintained for a long time.

Soon Pyotr Petrovich disappeared from the studio. A young energetic man took his place. He ordered a new lock for the studio door. Now one could only draw during the established days of the schedule.

About that time, my father and I went to Moscow Secondary Art School for consultation and to show my drawings. I was advised to enroll in the studio of Alexander Mikhailovich Mikhailov in

the Central House of Pioneers. The studio was very crowded and the teacher did not pay sufficient attention to most of us. He was seriously engaged by a few, while others settled for infrequent comments. I was among the "others." I complained about this at home. My father came to talk to Alexander Mikhailovich, asking whether it was worth my studying there. At home, Papa retold the unexpected answer: "Your son," he said, "is already smitten by all of this, and one way or another will be around. So, do not worry, father. Let your son study further."

At that time and, subsequently, after I had already enrolled at the Moscow Secondary Art School (entering in the fourth grade of an eight-grade intermediate school, losing a year), I did not think seriously about the profession of being an artist. I was convinced of the impossibility of an ordinary person doing something comparable to that which I loved in the Tretyakov Gallery, where, incidentally, we students spent a lot of time when we skipped classes in unspecialized subjects. Levitan and the young Serov were our idols. Secretly, I continued to love Shishkin.

After the Moscow Secondary Art School and an unforgettable summer practicum in Polenovo, there was no way out - I had to be an artist! I selflessly rose at dawn to paint studies. A forest, a field, fog from the Oka River or distant quarries became dabs on a piece of cardboard. The world was seen from a distance - like in the studies of Polenov, Korovin, and especially Levitan. It was easy to paint, since colors, vegetation, and sky appeared as the phenomena of one natural order. I walked around covered with paint and was not aware that I was happy. A sketch of *The Oka River*, 1949, is one of the few remaining works from that happy time. As a reflection of that time later I made a painting *1949* in 1999, depicting gray reality with fear hanging in the air, accompanied with a text. The text reads, "I didn't know that I was happy."

I dreamed about the Painting Department at the Surikov Institute but was accepted to the Graphic Arts Department instead. After the third year, I attempted to switch to the Painting Department.

Director Madorov had promised to transfer me if I got all "A's." I got the "A's" and had an exhibition of my works, mainly summer oil studies, in the auditorium of the Painting Department. But I was not transferred. Madorov said: "It's OK! Now you'll be a great graphic artist."

I stayed with the Graphic Arts Department. Evgeny Adolfovich Kibrik was the head of the studio. The atmosphere in his studio was drastically different from that to which I had become accustomed in the first three years. For my thesis project I chose to do a series of linocuts, with Moscow as my theme. Retrospect reflection of the diploma work are my paintings *Conductor of Crows*, 1988, and *Performance 88*, 2000. I made the guache sketches easily and received the approval from my Professor. And then, I got lost. Evgeny Adolfovich said, in his usual way, "Look, everything is so simple!" But advice and instruction did not help.

I called my condition: "The unity of the world has fallen apart." Previously, a flood of light and colors unified the world of painting and the real world. It had been a world of Levitan everywhere. Now everything had changed. Of course, the changes didn't occur immediately, but somehow I experienced a catastrophic divergence between my acquired skills and my perception of the world...especially when I worked in nature. I wanted to include in the picture not only what was in front of me, but also impressions of a passageway to a selected place.

This is how I described my condition: "everything was visible and alive until the moment of my involvement - then what was living immediately curled up, turning into dabs of disgusting paint when I looked at the motif 'professionally.'" This would happen from time to time. I spent many hours and days in search of a motif and, as I began to draw, life invariably died under my glance. I ended up rendering a motionless, depressing picture.

I began to "experiment," in order to find the means of overcoming this discrepancy. Kibrik

understood my state and didn't impede me. I barely received my graduation diploma. My struggle emerged from this state manifested in the search for support in the art of the early twentieth-century avant-garde. My friends had similar experiences. There was a need to communicate with the remaining artists of this trend, a trend that was repressed and not yet rehabilitated by Soviet official art. We were convinced that it held knowledge, giving us the possibility of entering the "sacred realm" of art.

My friend and I were grateful for our meeting with V. A. Favorsky, R. R. Falk, and A. V. Fonvizin. I was especially grateful to Favorsky. In his art and philosophy, I found a base upon which I, invariably, would later rely. In detail, and perhaps too naively and frankly, I described the significance of my conversations with Favorsky in my texts, *Substitutions and Transformations - The Sequences and the Variations*, 102 Sheets, 1981-1986, and my reflections, as mentioned before, were included in a two-volume work about Favorsky, published in Moscow in 1990. Conversations with these artists, seeing their work, the endless discussions with friends, and the Tretyakov Gallery - all helped me to find my way in painting.

Before graduation from the Institute, one of my works was reproduced in the journal *Youth*, and was criticized as too complex and "artistic" in the press. After graduation I made a linocut series of nine images titled *Metro* (linocuts printed on paper, 1960-1961), which I myself called Favorskist - as I similarly referred to my work from the late 1950s and early 1960s as Falkist, not cubist. Cézannist Falk, but in a way foggy and shimmering, (*Self-Portrait*, 1960; *Country, Spring (Blue)*, 1961; and *Country, Spring (Green)*, 1961).

Upon examination by the Reception Committee of the MOSKh (the Moscow Department of the Artist's Union), the linocuts were referred to as too preoccupied with formal issues, so I remained a candidate for the Union for seven years. Later, I became a member of the MOSKh as a book illustrator, together with Eric Bulatov. At that time, Eric Bulatov and I only showed our works

that were connected with children's book illustration. I had become an illustrator with the assistance of Ilya Kabakov after a few attempts to earn a living in the graphic center "Izogiz" at the VDNKh (Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy). Eric Bulatov and I worked together illustrating children's books as a team for thirty-three years.

Time not spent on book illustrating - approximately six months a year - was devoted to our personal work. I wanted to investigate painting itself, as an instrument: to explore its space, its relationship to surface and border, the energy flow in the picture, and the transformation of subject and space, using Favorsky's system as the basis. Later, when I came across a transcript of Favorsky's lectures, I understood that in our discussions, he had set forth all his main ideas, although he, on principle, only spoke about things he had been directly asked about.

For the first time I saw in nature reflections of the light and understood the laws of energy in the white canvas during our trip, together with Eric Bulatov, to the North of Russia on island Anzer in the White Sea.

A House on the Island Anzer, 1965, is the first painting that I decided to sign as my own. I consciously put aside everything and began to work on the interactions of the surface-space in the canvas. That was the beginning of my so-called "abstractionist period." Five paintings, *Space Compositions*, 1968. Now they are in the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum (New Brunswick, NJ). They were exhibited during the opening of the new wing of the museum in 2000.

I wrote about my understanding of the interactions between space-surface-light and depicted object in an essay that was included in a 102-page work (now it is in the Kunstmuseum Bern in Switzerland). The triptych, *Horizontal, Vertical and Cross*, 1988, illustrates interactions of an object with different kinds of spaces. I permanently turn to the models of painting that I made in 1968 and which I continue to develop during 1970s. It protects me from too much

sentiment in my paintings and from stickiness with the object. My dialogue with the painting is continued till now without interruption.

The moment when a person first feels the urgent need to express something, when his perception of the world first takes the shape of something akin to an image - that is, becomes a form that describes - this is one of the most important moments in an artist's life. That is the beginning of all beginnings. Wherever the circumstances of his life's journey may lead the person later on, in the end he will have to turn to face his "home," his beginning. Without that, he cannot avoid a feeling of loss; a sense of deficiency will continue to haunt him. The circle of his journey must be completed at any cost, must close and become self-sufficient.

In 1968, I showed twenty-five of my paintings at the youth café *Blue Bird*. It was my first and last solo exhibition in Moscow. After a few rejections, I stopped bringing my works to the exhibition committees. Internal censorship was operating and I realized that I was producing something that could not be exhibited.

Officially, Bulatov and I were still functioning as book illustrators. What we created for ourselves in the studio, we tried not to show to the officials. Our only viewers were friends and a narrow circle of acquaintances.

Of course, we felt a need to see our personal work gain public exposure on gallery walls with the works of other artists. I admire and give credit to those artists who defended the right to show their works. However, the path to social-political struggle - and I assess it as such - was impossible for me. I would not have been able to combine this with my professional work. Thus, I did not take part in the movement and even actively avoided it. I concentrated on my personal work instead. However, in our social system, even this pursuing of one's own work was criminal, according to the principle: "He who is not with us is against us."

Officially, therefore, I found myself in the circle

of "unofficial" artists, winding up in the pages of the magazine *A-Ya* in Paris, and afterwards being criticized at the MOSKh by "The Troika" (the three: the director, the Communist party, and the artist trade union leaders). Earlier, as official artists and illustrators of children's books we have been labeled "formalists" on the pages of *Pravda* - after the destruction of the Manezh Exhibition in 1962 - which resulted in our temporary dismissal from the field of illustration, but not for long. Everything after this is already well known. Everything in the Soviet Union became "open." Everything has been described in the catalogue for the exhibition "The Other Art: 1956-1976," featured in 1991 at the Tretyakov Gallery.

Now I have emigrated and I work abroad. I now proceed according to my own agenda as it has evolved during these long years.

My childhood dream was to see my work on the walls of the Tretyakov Gallery. As in Nabokov's poem, "Fame," I have temptations and second thoughts - "Not once, not once will my name come up briefly..." Perhaps there is hope. "Genuine foliage has a place to fall: there's the soil, there's Russia. But my unfortunate paintings..."

This is what I have recalled...

February 1997