

NEWS DEC. 13, 2012

## In Kiev, Award Anxiety

by Courtney Fiske



In December, the temperature in Kiev rarely ventures above freezing. It's the sort of cold that numbs your legs and leaves your toes half-frozen. But last Friday outside the Pinchuk Art Centre, a line of 20-somethings, bundled under layers of fur and down, stretched to the block's end. Friends and schoolmates talked excitedly through chattering teeth, awaiting their turn to enter the Centre's white-walled interior. If, as Pinchuk's artistic director Eckhard Schneider likes to joke, the age of most museum visitors falls "between 50 and death," the fact that 80 percent of the Centre's visitors are aged 18 to 30 is striking. Free of charge and open until 9 p.m., the Centre feeds a growing demand among the city's youth for contemporary art and the vision of modernity it conveys.

The fortunes of Victor Pinchuk, the Centre's namesake and bankroller, were forged on the Soviet Union's grave. Trained as an engineer, Pinchuk amassed billions in Communism's wake, when well-connected businessmen gobbled up privatized assets at a fraction of their value. After dabbling in politics, Pinchuk turned to philanthropy, creating a foundation in his name in 2006 on the model of George Soros and Bill Gates, whom he counts as friends. The Pinchuk Art Centre opened that same year. Housing no works created before 1990, the Centre quickly became a cultural hub in a city where galleries are scarce and art museums musty. The space enabled Pinchuk to display his expansive collection of works by the neo-Pop triumvirate—Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami—many of them acquired at the height of the art

market's pre-crash bubble from mega-dealers Larry Gagosian and Jay Jopling.

It was at Pinchuk's expense that I flew to Kiev to attend the second iteration of the Centre's biennial Future Generation Art Prize. Along with five European journalists, I was put up in a luxury hotel for a long weekend of activities crafted by Pinchuk's PR team to fête the man and his mission. At \$100,000, the prize is one of the art world's most lucrative, and the only one devoted to artists aged 35 and younger. From a pool of over 4,000 applicants, 21 artists from 16 countries had been shortlisted, the majority of them already boasting gallery representation and international exhibitions. The winner was to be decided that Friday in Kiev by a seven-member jury comprising such heavyweight curators as Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Massimiliano Gioni, Hans Ulrich Obrist and Nancy Spector. Hirst, Koons, Murakami and Andreas Gursky were to serve as the prize's "mentor artists," a title whose role was vaguely defined.

The projects, each installed in its own room, were anything but the slick, seductive surfaces of Koons & Co. Ambitious and conceptually diffuse, the best dwelled on imperfection and lapse, their forms provoking quiet reflection. The show coalesced around the diversity of its mediums, with analog technologies predominant. Gravelly slides, spools of film, and gelatin prints were ubiquitous: not for reactionary reasons of preciousness, but for the engagement with texture, materiality and process that such forms afford. Archival images, abstruse texts and little-known historical figures threaded through several rooms, as artists recoded the past as a clue to the present.

There was much work to applaud. Beirut-based artist Rayyane Tabet multiplied a wooden block set from his childhood into 12,000 concrete casts, each composed with others in miniature structures that joined in a sprawling, floor-bound landscape. Tabet's compatriot Marwa Arsanios took a popular Egyptian magazine from the 1960s as inspiration for a performance-installation that explored the collapse of colonialism and the gendering of revolution. Joining a rusted worker's cabin from the early 1970s to a pristine, functionalist facade typical of Soviet architecture, Ukrainian Mykyta Kadan questioned the dissonance between Communism's heroization of labor and bleak realities of working-class life. Portuguese duo João Maria Gusmão and Pedro Paiva showed five grainy 16mm films, the show's understated highlights. Cast on the wall by a whirring projector, oneiric, slow-motion scenes met regular-speed shots of spinning wheels whose pulsating momentum recalled Duchamp's rotoreliefs.

The awards ceremony, held at Kiev's planetarium, was an odd, glossy affair. After being greeted by two slender girls in skin-tight dresses, I ascended a ramp to an airy landing. Pinchuk, speaking in an animated Russian, stood in the center of the space, his skin practically iridescent under the spotlights of three television cameras. I spotted Amalia Pica in a cluster of other artists, all attempting to avoid the room's roving cameramen. I asked her thoughts on the prize's "mentor artists," all of whom were absent from the proceedings, and whom she admitted to never having met. Judging from her remarks, echoed in the comments of her fellow artists, their presence was not sorely missed.

Fifty minutes later, we were ushered into the planetarium's theater, whose LED dome emitted an unearthly shade of cobalt. The show opened with a histrionic video display paying homage to the prize and its three-year history, its whirling graphics dizzying after two glasses of champagne. The video over, Tim Marlow, director of exhibitions at London's White Cube, took to the stage. Punctuating each announcement with pauses, his hosting style lent the event the campy feel of reality television. Special prizes totaling \$20,000 were awarded to Tabet and Arsanios, as well as to Brazilian Jonathas de Andrade, Italian Micol Assaël, and Amsterdam-based Turkish artist Ahmet Özküt. The grand prize went to British artist **Lynette Yiadom-Boakye** for her gestural oil paintings of black men unmoored in abstract environments.

Despite the conceptual nature of Yiadom-Boakye's practice—if a canvas is not completed within one day, she destroys it—the choice of an artist working in a traditional medium was surprising. At the press conference that followed, Christov-Bakargiev was quick to dispel notions of a "return to painting," as in the 1980s vogue for neo-geo and expressionist styles. Speaking for her fellow jurors, she criticized the unnaturalness of awarding prizes to artists and lamented the power asymmetry between artists and curators. "I hope that next year we're not on the stage," she remarked.

Speaking to journalists after the ceremony, Pinchuk affirmed his belief in contemporary art as "one of the most revolutionary forces in the world," possessed of the power to open minds and disrupt staid modes of thought. The unspoken target of his words was, seemingly, the Soviet mentality that persists within certain socioeconomic circles in the Ukraine still nostalgic for the predictability and purposiveness of Communism: that system so antithetical to Pinchuk the arriviste. Of the complexities of his position as a collector, Pinchuk appeared largely unaware: the fact

that his exorbitant expenditure on Hirsts and Murakamis confers value upon these works rather than reflects it, or that the nihilism of neo-Pop belies his belief in art's capacity to transform and transcend.

Yet Pinchuk's desire to understand, and his openness to new forms, was genuine. "Fun, not always. But education, always," he quipped of the younger artists' esoteric productions. For the moment, Pinchuk, like so many others in the art world, felt comfortable inhabiting his own contradictions.

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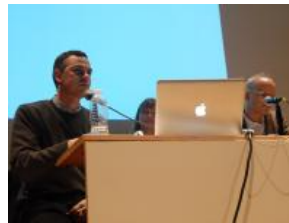
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