

## RUSSIAN SUMMER

Ann Kodicek

Russian art specialists are ambivalent about the **National Gallery's** 'Russian Landscape in the Age of Tolstoy' show: "We've seen too much of it," they say, "it's too moralising, too nationalistic" – the 19th C. Realists were, after all, the benchmark for Stalin's Socialist Realist propaganda art. Most of London's Russian dealers confess that they "prefer Malevich" but what Britons seem to like (and buy) is not such highbrow avantgarde but the readable, well-crafted art of conventional figuration.

Matthew Cullerne Bown, Director of the recently launched **IZO Gallery** in Mayfair, perceived the British penchant for realism two decades ago, though it helps that he admires it himself. A well known writer and aficionado of non-conformist, contemporary and traditional Russian art, Matthew is regarded as a touchstone of the current market, his shows combining displays from his socialist realist holdings with a varied programme of exhibitions. Many of his clients collect the now much-sought-after Russian art of the 1920s and 30s, though his own tastes are more eclectic. "Although I'm a Russian art person, I don't think the contemporary art needs to be ghettoised. They hang together well. My last exhibition, 'White', was an entirely coherent show" and featured Russian and British art – including sculpture by Antony Gormley and photographs by Phil Klein – side by side.

Matthew does not see his gallery as exclusively a sales outlet. "Not everything I put on the walls I expect to sell," he says firmly. 'White' featured live performance in the gallery window on the opening night and included borrowed and video work. He is buoyant about the future of the Russian art market, believing that the art of the 1950s and 60s is the next growth area.

Also in Mayfair and specialising in figurative art (though styles and genres are diverse) is the **Hay Hill Gallery**, showing contemporary art from Russia and the Inde-

pendent republics of the former USSR. Run by ex-mathematics professor Mikhail Zaitsev and his manager, Maria Ivashin, with stock preselected in Moscow by the Arts Service Centre (the trading arm of the Tretyakov Gallery and the Ministry of Culture), their clients are mainly British or Irish, though they have a good number of buyers and an enthusiastic Saudi following. 'Masha and Misha' as they are affectionately known, find that their clients are especially attached to art that is meticulous (still lifes by Georgy Kichigin) or dramatically composed and lit (Plutenko's historic, tribal and battle scenes), as well as imaginative paintings playing out surreal or fantasy visions (Timur Ahmedov). "I see what people like, what they want," says Misha. "That's how we managed to survive three years."

Tucked away in a side street near Oxford Circus is the White Space Gallery, where Anya Stone-lake shows the latest cutting-edge art from Moscow and Petersburg. "The most interesting contemporary Russian artists are rarely shown in Britain", Anya says. Her exhibition programme aims to reverse that trend, exposing the work of both new and established artists, mainly Russian but also British and, increasingly, international. Like Matthew Cullerne Bown, Anya is concerned to represent a comprehensive vision and has an educational agenda that is not concerned with sales.

**Avantgarde Gallery**, which opened in September 2002, joined a constellation of distinguished galleries in St John's Wood's Boundary Road. Run by Catherine Marshall, previously curator at the Repin Academy of Arts in St Petersburg, she has shown ten exhibitions since March 2003. Representing about seven artists, whose style she broadly describes as "naive realism", Catherine now has 1500 clients, just under a third of whom are local. She also mounts exhibitions in association with **Ben Uri Gallery**, across the road



Ivan Govorkov 'On a Suburban Train in July' 1980, oil on canvas, 140 x 125cm. IZO Gallery

and has shown at art fairs, notably the Affordable. She considers that her best successes have been with travelling shows, touring annually to Manchester and Liverpool. "I like to show what's interesting, what's attractive", she says.

Tamara Demydenko, Director of **Danusha Fine Arts**, has been representing Ukrainian art internationally since Ukraine proclaimed its independence from Soviet Russia over ten years ago. This started with an overwhelmingly successful tour in Nigeria in 1992 and, more recently, a show at **Mall Galleries** as well as others in the Home Counties, Scotland and the Borders. Otherwise Tamara deals from her home in Maida Vale, though her main London outlet is the Avantgarde.

Representing half a dozen historic and established Ukrainian artists, including sculptor Valentin Znoba and painters Tetyana Yablonska, Petro Magro, Grigory Shyshko, and Tetyana Holembievskaya, Tamara finds that British audiences respond to the celebration of colour, light and folk tradition in which Ukrainian painters excel.

**Menier Gallery** is rapidly achieving a reputation as more than a rental venue, being much favoured by Russian dealers, such as Irina Ermtseva of Peace & Colour Gallery, who will be showing paintings (5 to 17 July) by Ukrainian artists E. Samoilik, S. Savchenko and G. Zaichenko in 'Emotions', which will be preceded by a showing at Cork Street's **Gallery 27** (till 4 July) ●