

Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid

Interview with Reba Wulkan, Contemporary Exhibition Curator, Yeshiva University Museum, 2002

R.W.: This series reflects a departure from some of your more well-known works which were based on political satire and criticism. For the first time, you are devoting an entire series to dealing with symbols. How is this body of work related to your previous Social Realism?

V.K.: What many people considered political was deeply personal and nostalgic for us. One of the most typical paintings of our Socialist Realism, *I Saw Stalin Once When I was a Child*, was not a political critique; rather it was iconoclasm against the old idols inside of me. I really did see Stalin once when I was seven. It was a “self irony” about the illusions that we share during our childhood.

We differ from most artists in that sometimes within the span of one year we do several, very different projects – from paintings and poetry to public sculpture and performances, from music and installations to photography and architecture. Most of them are not political, for example the collaboration in painting with elephants and Polaroid photographs by the chimpanzee shown at the Venice Biennale in 1999.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the most interesting phenomena in art were inseparable from the ideas that excited society. Many avant-garde artists sympathized with the ideas of socialism and based their rejection of traditional realism upon the new discoveries of physicists. At the end of the 20th century, art lost this connection with the intellectual life of society. The attempt to depict the Big Bang is an effort to return to a closer connection between art and society, to have the world be excited by science no less than you and I are.

Symbols of the Big Bang represent less of the “destruction of the golden calf” quality that one could have seen in our *Nostalgic Socialist Realism* series. Rather it is meant to express the qualities of the “serpent of brass” (Exodus).

R.W.: What do you mean by the qualities of the “serpent of brass”?

V.K.: Freud called the artist a self-healing neurotic. However, Moses proved that art can heal not just artists. Because of the second commandment, Moses destroyed the Golden Calf. Everyone remembers this act of iconoclasm, but not everyone remembers that a few pages later, Moses erected the Serpent of Brass to heal people. We believe that art can heal both social and physical ailments. By meditating upon the symbols of the Big Bang as though they are mandalas, one can heal oneself.

An intriguing question is what the Serpent of Brass looked like. One of the most famous paintings of 19th century Russian art depicts this topic. Even in my youth, I have always admired this canvas, but this naturalistic depiction of the serpent has never

satisfied me. I am sure that Moses created an *Ouroboros*-serpent swallowing its own tail, an ancient symbol of time and infinity. There are two features of a serpent, a positive one and a negative one. Its venom can either kill or heal. It has long been known that symbols combining opposites release tension in the viewer and play the role of magical homeopathy.

Every fraction of the first second following the Big Bang remains a mystery, and every attempt to create a visual image of these fractions is a symbol of the Big Bang. The symbols and emblems of the Big Bang are a vision of the words that are not yet spoken and of the concepts not yet created. New symbols are a visual of the terms without which we feel ourselves mute. This feeling of being mute is a kind of inexplicable stress on our consciousness, a spasm of our tongue, and a convulsion of our language; it could be alleviated by meditation on the symbols of the unborn words.

The first time we began to work on the conception of “the Healing Power of Art” was in 1974. We decided to open a factory for manufacturing geometrical figures, “Circle, Square, Triangle,” as the “Missing Link” in “the Evolution of Russian Avant-garde,” between fine art paintings and the production design of things for people and their dwellings. In drafting the text for that work, I suddenly realized for myself that the creation of these ideal forms was in fact an alternative to the everyday vanity of human life and could treat people for stress. Later in 1975, we created “Color Medicine” and then in the 1990s, one more parody of contemporary medicine and the deification of Van Gogh. “Light-Shadow Therapy” was a return to the old ironic iconoclasm. “Circle, Square, Triangle” was made 20 years ago.

Is there a contradiction between the destruction of the Golden Calf and the creation of the Serpent of Brass? No. Iconoclasm is also a type of “magical homeopathy,” especially if the actual destruction is replaced by irony, the only weapon we had discovered when trying to find a shield against the totalitarian elite.

I believe that there are two types of irony: divine and earthly, altruistic and egotistical. When God asks Cain, “Where is Abel, thy brother?” this is the best example of divine irony because the Lord knew what happened, and he asked Cain like a parent asking a child, “where is the candy?” This kind of irony can only be a result of the knowledge that Abel’s soul is immortal and will return to God. The best example of earthly irony can be found in Proverbs XXVII, 14: “He that blesseth his friend with a loud voice, rising early in the morning, it shall be counted a curse to him.” Here the irony transforms itself into the sarcasm of a person who does not believe in paradise for his immortality of the soul. Irony can destroy the “golden calf” but it can also heal, like the “serpent of brass.”

“The Healing Symbols of the Big Bang” – this is iconoclasm against our own “earthly” irony, against egotistical sarcasm, that ancient sickness inside of me.

R.W.: These works are obviously different in that they deal with symbols, i.e. the six-pointed star of the Star of David, the Swastika, the hourglass, etc. How did you choose these particular symbols and what did you intend to show?

V.K.: The symbols that you mentioned, were not a matter of only choice, but also of destiny. I was born in 1943, during the war with the fascists. Maybe that is why the images of the Swastika and the Star of David have concerned me ever since childhood. It is said that as people grow old, they regress into childhood. Recently, symbols have again started to concern me more than words. When I was two, my parents left for Germany, and their departure, as I understand it now, was a shock to me. I stopped talking for two years, and only started to talk again when they returned, in 1947. After a year, they were divorced. For a long time, my mother kept my drawing from that time, a three-headed horse. Now I think that this was a magical attempt to unite all three of us; a symbol of a united, nomadic family. It is possible that at this time, I first started to dream about combining different images into a new symbol, whose meaning is difficult to express in words. In my youth, I was still not very adept at learning languages. In school, I loved Euclidian geometry, but when I tried to study more complex topics, I fell asleep and my dreams were far away from the logic of mathematics. I decided that the Laws of Nature, in the language of mathematics, are new names for God, in a sacred language of the priests of science that is unintelligible to me.

In the Soviet Union, we were taught that there was no God and no beginning or end to our world. Later, we learned about the Big Bang Theory, a theory that proposed that there indeed was a beginning of the Universe. Now, I am an immigrant who speaks English as badly as most people can speak about the Big Bang in the language of higher mathematics. The gap between modern science and people has been continually increasing, and our desire to see the face of the enigma; to imagine the beginning of the world has intensified. According to Martin Buber, "*Imago mundi nova, imago nulla*," or, in other words, "the world today lacks its own image." We need to try bridging this gap in the language of symbolic images that are accessible to us.

Because the Big Bang is reminiscent of the first lines of Genesis (the Division of Light and Darkness), we are working with ancient visual symbols that have always fascinated me. Among them one can find circles (mandalas), squares (swastika), triangles (Star of David) ouroboros, Yin-Yang, images of Hebrew characters, emblems of Vanitas, etc.

We discovered for ourselves that if one meditates while looking at the intersection of lines in the Star of David, one suddenly sees a spiral that is reminiscent of the swastika. This implied to us that the Seal of Solomon miraculously contained an enigmatic prediction of the Holocaust, foreseeing a fatal clash of these two symbols that has made them inseparable in the historical memory of people, especially those born in the last years of the war, as my generation was. The history of the Swastika reminds me of the history of the fallen angel. For us, today, the Star of David is a symbol of light, while the Swastika is a symbol of darkness. This is why some of these visions of the Big

Bang represent the initial point of division of light and darkness when the two are still intermixed as a visual pun.

Combing two or more symbols, like I did in my childhood, we get a new symbol, one which cannot yet be expressed in words. When I discovered that the symbol of time and of vanity, the hourglass, was composed of the same two triangles that intersect in the Star of David, I understood that the combination of these two symbols would yield a symbol of the beginning of time, a primordial image of all stars and all flashes of light. These fantasies about the Big Bang united the symbols of different times and peoples: for example, the Ouroboros and Yin-Yang, the Shield of Solomon and Labyrinth, etc. The Big Bang, by definition, is the beginning of all things, ideas, and images.

In *A Dictionary of Symbols*, J.E. Cirlot writes, "...for in truth, the deepest meaning of the symbols is unequivocal since, in the infinite, the apparent diversity of meaning merges into Oneness." This "Oneness" refers to God in a meaning common to all religions.

After you start to search for visual images of the Big Bang, it is hard to stop. No drawing or painting can become the final symbol. The Big Bang is a scientific ghost of the burning bush, the face of the Beginning.

R.W.: How can one imagine and visualize, as you said, "the face of the Beginning?"

V.K.: Probably, everyone will visualize it in a different way. The most important thing is a love for mystery. I, for example, close my eyes and think about this; and sometimes from the darkness, I start to see different mandalas. To this enigma, there is not just one answer. So there cannot be a single symbol for the Big Bang.

We are often able to see the light and images of the past. If we look at the stars we see the past. We can imagine (even though it is scientifically absurd) that it is possible to move at a speed greater than light. Then we could travel past the light that was first emitted by the Big Bang and look back to see this first flash. Upon reaching the first light, we would be on the edge of being and not-being, day and night. This flash would look somewhat like a sunrise. In a work that I made with my son, we used a clip from an American western, which showed a cowboy sitting on the roof of a train and meditating on the sunset, then his horse galloped up to the train, he jumped on to the horse and galloped away to the west. This clip was run forward once then run in reverse. In reverse, the clip showed the cowboy catching up to the train going backwards on his horse, jumping out of his saddle onto the roof of the train, and having a moment of meditation while looking at a sunrise. The sunset became a sunrise.

The visual arts, unlike movies, always capture stills of moments of time, which is something that allows the visual arts to more closely capture the concept of the Big Bang. The Big Bang is a snapshot of the moment, but a painting is also a snapshot of the moment. There is not, and never has been, a moment more unique than the beginning of the universe.

When we are drinking Vodka, or something with a little less “spirit,” I like to discuss the enigma of the beginning of the universe and the birth of life on earth. These questions remind us of those that everyone has asked their parents: how are babies born and from where do babies come from? In Moscow, the favorite spot for these “non-professional” discussions used to be the kitchen. I noticed that both “here” and “there,” people who love these topics always love the visual arts. The desire to solve mysteries is natural to every person. That is why books and movies about crime solving, spies, and Sci-Fi are so popular. People who enjoy watching sports enjoy watching the skill of the team as well as the mystery of who will win.

The beginning of all mysteries, the mystery of all mysteries, has hypnotized me. When I read amateurish books and articles about this topic, the desire to see the face of the enigma, the visual image of the beginning of our universe and our world, intensified. This desire stemmed from my interest to imagine, represent, and see the main hero of history, more powerful than even Lenin or Washington. Thus, because of this desire, these canvases and drawings, *Symbols of the Big Bang*, came into being.

R.W.: You claim to bridge the gap between the mathematical Big-Bang theory and spiritual creation myths. Does the chaos of Hebrew letters that you depict recall Cabalistic reasoning and meaning?

V.K.: When I talked about the gap, I meant my personal problems. Language problems—this is the main reason for these symbols. Your question raises a very good problem that was studied by Nathan Aviezer, in his book *In the Beginning: Biblical Creation and Science*.

Neither I nor Alex have studied the Cabala as experts. However, I see that Hebrew letters, the same as Russian or English ones, combine to form words; in this way they, at the very least, may make order out of the chaos that, as my mother would say, is ruling my head. Science does not contradict religion. The argument between atheists and believers is merely one of terminology. According to the Judaic tradition, nobody can pronounce the real name of God, only pseudonyms can be used. From this point of view, atheists use a different pseudonym for God—Law of Nature.

Symbols of the Big Bang combine mysticism and science. For example, alchemists had often used the Ouroboros symbols when depicting the beginning of the universe. I had an occasion to recall this fact when, during our stay at Berkeley University, I became acquainted with a brilliant scientist named Julian Borrill. Julian used the supercomputer at Berkeley to graphically model the very early universe right after the Big Bang. It turned out that energy areas developed as a tangle of strings which were nicknamed “worms” by Julian. Occasionally, some of these “worms” then connected their two ends, forming circles. When the “worm” forms in to a circle and starts to swallow itself, it is very reminiscent of the concept of the Ouroboros. It struck me that the scientific symbols were no more correct and no less mythological than the

intuitive ones created in ancient times. This leads us to believe in our intuition in the same way that the pioneers of abstract art of the 20th century did.

R.W.: Is this series in any way an attempt to deal with your spirituality or Jewish identity and has it been awakened by recent events here and in Israel?

V.K.: Yes, it is. When I was arrested for the first time, during our performance in 1974, the Moscow police officer yelled to me that all modernists are Jews and enemies of the people. His words, as well as many other things, gave me and Alex a push toward immigration. Recent events are also very personal to me. My birthday is on September 11. All the events here, in Israel, and around the world were very shocking to us.

But before that, I received another shock, when I was in the hospital due to heart problems and was treated with electro-shock. When I regained consciousness, I thought that I was not in Beth Israel, but in the hospital in Moscow where I was born. I am not joking, but something miraculous happened with my memory after that. Suddenly, I remembered the previously forgotten first flash of light when I was born and first opened my eyes. That was my Big Bang. While lying in the hospital, for more than a week, I thought a lot about all beginnings and endings. Discontent with the mundane tasks and pleasures leads us to think not only about unavoidable death –about the enigma of the personal End, but also about the enigma of the universal Beginning.

R.W.: You have said that the Seal of Solomon otherwise called the Star of David contains an enigmatic prediction of the Holocaust, can you elaborate on this? How does your imagery comment on the universal question of the Holocaust? Does light against dark represent the forces of good and evil as well as do the Star and the Swastika?

V.K.: Out of the ten brothers and sisters of my grandfather, seven were killed in the Holocaust. Whenever I asked him about the Holocaust, he would always read the Book of Job to me. I think that the universal question of the Holocaust was answered in that part of the Bible. Especially strange is the conversation between God and Satan. The latter plays the role of an instigator—anti-Semite who provokes with the permission of the “Supreme Court”. In the context of symbols, this implies that darkness provokes light in people, the Swastika provokes the Magendavid, provokes suffering, tragedy, and the final victory of Job. I would be thrilled to find a publisher for the Book of Job with the symbols from this show as illustrations.

Darkness and light have nothing to do with the lightness and dark of color. In our consciousness, the Swastika has become a symbol of darkness and gloom, while the Star of David has become associated with a primordial source of light. If in the beginning was the Big Bang, a flash of energy and light, then it is understandable why light became the symbol of good and of life, while darkness became the symbol for evil and for death. You can see that from Job’s cry: “When I looked for good then evil came *unto me*: and when I waited for light, there came darkness.” (Job 30; 26).

What we call, like Job, “Darkness,” is a relative absence of light. The way I understand it now, according to the Cabala, there is no primordial, absolute darkness. All objects and phenomena in the Universe, including our egotism (or as I prefer to say, the “dark holes of egotism”), contain some sparks of the Light. These sparks make possible spiritual movement, from desire to only take, to desire to give as well. Therefore, spirituality equals selflessness or altruism. The black holes of the Universe, their ability to devour anything, in other words, to get everything and to give nothing, is my metaphor for egotism, the symbol of a lack of spirituality. When Alex and I began to work in collaboration, we were able to get away from artistic egotism.

R.W. Who are the real personalities behind Komar & Melamid? This series of works utilizes your actual skills as artists. Do you both work on the paintings and drawings? How does your collaboration work?

V.K.: We are quite different individuals. I am fat while Alex is skinny, I am an introvert while he is an extrovert. When we first met, in a morgue in Moscow during an anatomy class, we discovered that during our conversations, new and interesting ideas and images were born. Our first collaborative work was made in 1965 while we were students in the Stroganov School of Art and Design. The totalitarian system was spreading even in our class. Those who could not draw or paint the same way as the others, were simply kicked out of the school. Socialist education was free, and for every spot in the class there were about a dozen other applicants.

We have never worked on the same canvas or drawing at the same time. Our old methodology is very simple, we took a bottle of Vodka or something with a little less alcohol, and discussed our ideas and made many small preliminary sketches. After that, each one would choose which sketches he would like to develop. Once, using our sketches, dozens of artists from different countries around the globe worked. I am speaking of the series, “Most Wanted and Least Wanted Paintings” of various countries, based on the results of nation-wide surveys by professional polling companies. Even the paintings for Russia and America were not painted by us, which was an important component of the conception of the project “The People’s Choice.”

Of course, many artists have professional secrets. We also have some. Sometimes, we reveal these secrets. For example, a large part of our published texts are written in tandem. For example, the book “*Poems About Death*,” a kind of polyptich, is composed of various fragments. The first half was written by me, then Alex’s fragments, and at the end—mine again. But there are texts written only by one of us, and signed by both of us. It is not “classified information” anymore. Recently, Alex published an article in the newspaper under his name, after which we agreed that both he and I can reveal “old secrets” from the last century. For example, “We Remember...” in the catalogue of ICI, “Monumental Propaganda.” I have to admit, it was very difficult for me to describe the impressions of my childhood, using the pronoun “we” instead of “I” and to create the impression that everything was written by two authors, “We Remember...” in the same way as the text “Circle, Square, and Triangle” (which I have already

mentioned in this interview) and many other texts signed “Komar & Melamid” were written entirely by me.

The most engaging form of our co-authorship was the dyptichs and polyptichs in various styles which we began to do back in the 1960s. But even among these there were many exceptions. I recall one of the art critiques told me that one of the panels in the dyptichs “Double Self-Portrait” (from the Anarchistic Synthesism series) was made by me, and the second one was made by Alex. Alex, who has never been proud of any of our double self-portraits, revealed the secret to her: “both parts of the dyptich, both in the style of the Russian avant-garde and in the style of Expressionism, were conceived and painted by Vitaly.” After this, the critic (pointing to another painting, to one of our paintings from the “Yalta Conference” series) said that most likely, both Hitler’s face and Stalin’s face were painted by the same hand. In reply, I joked that mustaches are also a kind of dyptich and I always paint the left side of the mustache, and Alex always paints the right side.

Today, every artist works as a co-author, even if he or she does not admit this wisdom to himself or herself. For example, any abstract expressionist or abstract geometry painter works in collaboration with the already-deceased pioneers of these movements. Melamid and I started our collaboration as the founders of the *Sots Art* movement, a cocktail of Dada and Socialist Realism. If I were to continue and develop *Symbols of the Big Bang* without Alex, this does not mean that we will not work together on other projects in the future. When in 1977, in Jerusalem, we were working on *The Temple*, we recalled two ancient collaborators, Moses and Aaron. Because Aaron spoke with people better than Moses, their friendship became only closer. But, each collaboration is unique. For example, Alex is now on a business trip in London and my bilingual friend Matvey is helping me to correct my English. You see, not many artists can be present in different places at the same time. The whole universe exists because everybody and everything works in collaboration.

R.W.: How is this exhibition related to your project *Collaboration With Animals* at the Venice Biennale?

V.K.: After the work on the *Symbols of the Big Bang*, the apparent diversity of every abstract painting, even one painted by an elephant, merges in my mind’s eye, into a sketch of the symbol of the Big Bang. At this exhibition, there are two types of symbols. One type is figurative, and closer to the surrealism of ancient myths. The other is abstract and closer to geometric archetypes. The transition from co-authorship with the elephants to *Symbols of the Big Bang* became a nostalgic gesture, a regression, a return to personal history, because today, animal art cannot avoid becoming abstract expressionism and, at the same time, cannot become geometrical abstract or realistic paintings. Geometrical figures and realistic images only exist in the context of *human* history.

During the collaboration with elephants, the question was raised: what is the difference, if any, between abstract art crated by animals and that which is created by humans? There are two types of beauty, beauty in nature and beauty in art. The

paintings of elephants are in between these two realms. For example, slates of multi-colored stones such as marble often are reminiscent of abstract works. However, the beauty of these stones exists out of context of human history, while the paintings of abstract expressionists are among the symbols of the fifties. Now, their brush strokes became representative heroes of art, no less recognizable than geometrical or historical figures. Today, all human paintings have become figurative art.

During five years, the project with the elephants has completed its role. This Dadaistic idea turned into a pragmatic charity. A new tradition was created. The elephants paint, our friends take care of them, and the paintings are sold to tourists in Thailand, Bali, and other Asian countries, as well as online worldwide. Now, I am sure that they will have a future. They are no longer an endangered species.

In the beginning, I tried to develop the old concepts, for example, to teach photography not only to a chimpanzee but to vegetables. I made a special underground device and a potato, while growing, pressed the bulb of the photo camera. Later, I attached brushes to the branches of trees and when the wind blew I moved the canvas. The trees painted. I spent a lot of time on an attempt at architectural collaboration with beavers and termites. Hoping to rescue young trees from the teeth of beavers, I proposed giving the beavers many “two-by-fours,” and other geometrical forms made from wood, such as the perfect solids of Pythagoras and Plato. If these innate architects would incorporate into their dams these ideal geometric forms, we would see new images, a unique synthesis in the history of architecture. In the same way, you can give them elements of traditional classic architecture made from wood: for example, columns, capitelli, cornices, and so on. But I ended these ideas and dreams in the form of preliminary sketches.

The work on *Symbols of the Big Bang* has become the Big Bang of my new life. I feel like a young artist fulfilling my childhood dream. In trying to imagine the beginning of the universe, as I already told you, I remembered the previously forgotten first flash of light in my eyes when I was born. To imagine is to remember. From this moment, a choice was inevitable: to continue the work with the elephants, with its great publicity so common to post-modernism, or to start *Symbols* with its cocktail of science and mysticism, typical of the pioneers of the avante-garde.

Marchel Duchamp, in his day, made a similar choice. His *Given* reminds us of the latest works of many political refugees and immigrants. We can recall Nabokov’s *Lolita* and Courbet’s *Origin of the Universe*. The Freudian interpretation of symbols is well-known; maybe the next exhibition will be blatantly erotic.