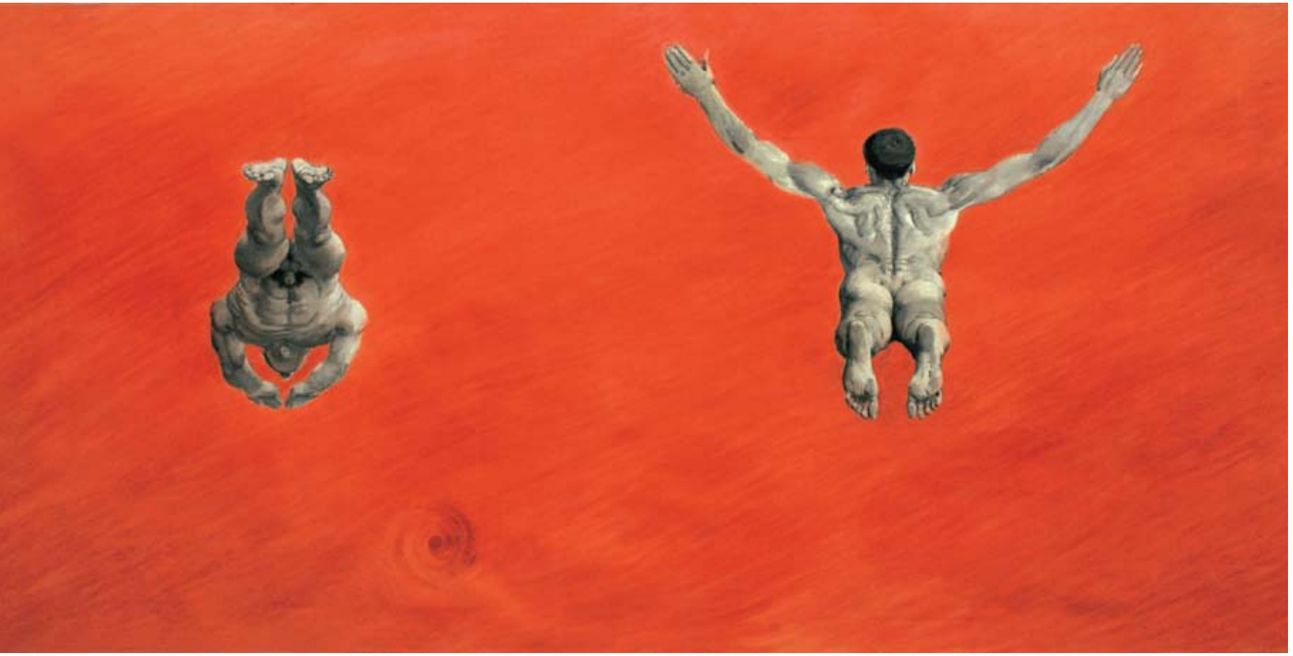
Alexei Kallima:

“I’ve never held a machine gun”

Alexei Kallima is one of the few Russian artists who came of age in the early 2000s. As a refugee from Chechnya in the 1990s, he never imagined the successful career that awaited him in Moscow. Kallima started with installations and experiments in nonspectacular art, and then moved on to his epic paintings, where the heroes were bearded Chechens with Adidas tracksuits and machine guns, or fire-eyed houris flying like Valkyries over the battlefields in search of fallen warriors’ souls. In 2005 Kallima had one of the hits of the 1st Moscow Biennale—a fresco of a Chechen rebel about to cut the throat of a young federal soldier, where the figure’s bodies compose a hammer and sickle. In 2006 the artist surprised Moscow’s art world when he won the first-ever Innovation prize, awarded by the National Center for Contemporary Art, for *Chelsea v. Terek*, a fluorescent painting of an imaginary football match between the British and Chechen teams. **Maria Kravtsova** met with the artist to discuss his more recent works.

1

1. Alexei Kallima,
The Fold, from *Charcoals*, 2003. Charcoal on paper, 60 x 60 cm. Art4.ru Museum. Courtesy of the artist and M&J Guelman Gallery



2

2. Alexei Kallima, *You are Standing on a Steep Shore*, 2007. Charcoal and sanguine on canvas, 210 x 1,340 cm. Detail. Courtesy of the artist and M&J Guelman Gallery

Q: The first thing mentioned in any story about Kallima is that he's a refugee from Grozny.

A: I'm not a Chechen. I didn't live through two wars. I've never held a machine gun. I left before the fighting started. I fled pre-war Grozny, its violent excesses and mass hysteria. I only saw the war on television. I left because I wanted to be a free man and make art. When I settled in Russia, I felt as though I had returned to my ethnic homeland. But I soon discovered that my neighbors thought of me as a Chechen. At first this upset me, but after I considered the situation more closely I decided I wasn't interested in conforming to middle-brow ideas about what it means to be Russian. To this day I don't understand why Russia couldn't have chosen a different scenario, why it couldn't come up with a way to prevent the war from getting out of control, why the government didn't try to befriend the Chechens and reach an agreement with them.

Q: Don't you think that if there wasn't an artist with a biography like yours—a refugee from the Caucasus whose work deals mostly with the war in Chechnya—then that artist would have to be invented?

A: I see what you're getting at, but I made my first work about Chechnya before I ever met Marat Guelman. It was an action at Art Moscow, the fair. My friends and I dressed up like terrorists in a restroom at the Central House of Artists, then crouched in a circle, the way men usually do in the Caucasus.

Q: Nonetheless, your first works exhibited in Moscow in the early 2000s didn't have a hint of acute political topics. You made installations from disposable cups, spoons and forks. You were one of the several artists making nonspectacular art.

A: I have a friend whose life is very similar to mine. He thought my installations of forks and spoons and my performances were incompatible with the pain of war. We talked a lot about it, and in the end our conversations pushed me toward drawing and painting, and eventually I realized that this kind of work was more intense. I found it far more interesting to search for something new in traditional art forms than to toy with new media. I quickly got tired of gluing sculptures together from cigarette packs and doing performances. I like to study strange combinations of colors on a canvas. I got a decent education. My profession is mixing pigments with brushes. I don't understand why I should do something else just to conform to the latest notions of what contemporary art is.

3

4

3. Alexei Kallima, *The Metamorphosis*, 2005. Charcoal and sanguine mural in the former Lenin Museum for the 1st Moscow Biennale. Courtesy of the artist and M&J Guelman Gallery

4. Alexei Kallima, from *Origin of Species*, 2002-2007. Digital print. Courtesy of the artist and M&J Guelman Gallery

Q: Is Kallima a pseudonym?

A: It's a pseudonym that my children now carry. I once read in the code of the samurai that a samurai can change his name and his homeland once in his life. And that's what happened—my life changed, so I changed my name. In 1992 I was looking at *Yuny Khudozhnik* magazine. There was a spread of ten pictures of butterflies with labels of their names, and I liked the name "kallima" most of all. And I wanted to have a last name that did not indicate an unambiguous ethnic affiliation. The word Kallima sounds Baltic, Indian, Mexican. When I came to Moscow, I signed my name as Kallima and introduced myself as Kallima. Then I started to encounter unexpected problems. The artist Kallima would get an invitation to be in a group exhibition abroad, but I'd have to get a visa in the name that was in my passport. So I decided to be consistent and officially change my name.

Q: Do you try on purpose to look like the figures in your paintings—bearded highlanders in tracksuits?

A: As with any artist, my figures are partially self-portraits, but I just picked this as a style, the least appropriate look for the current context. I would describe my look as ethno-punk, and it seems rather artistic to me, though the construction workers at Winzavod often take me as one of their own, and old ladies in the metro suspect that I have a bomb in my bag. But actually there's a book in there.

Q: Packs of Marlboro cigarettes can often be found in your work. Why do you love this brand so much?

A: For a long time I saw the pack of Marlboros as a symbol of invincibility—for many years it never changed. For "Instead of Art" at the Zverev Center, an exhibition that became a manifesto for nonspectacular art, I made a pack of Marlboros a bit larger than actual size, which I thought of as an act of terrorism. But today the designers at Marlboro have started to experiment.

Q: You escaped from Grozny, which, as you say, suffered from violence and hysteria. But it's obvious that you have always sympathized with the so-called rebels.

A: "Inspiration" would be a better way to describe it than "sympathy." I've been inspired by the rebels, the Chechens who were so desperate they feared nothing. But over time the image of the battle of resistance changed, and it became a tapestry of both beautiful and ugly —>

5. Alexei Kallima, *Sliding*, 2007. Charcoal and sanguine on canvas, 320 x 160 cm. Art4.ru Museum. Courtesy of the artist and M&J Guelman Gallery

traits. Now the image of a heroic man has been totally devalued, and I am busy looking for a new hero. Maybe it will be a woman. Men do a lot of stupid things—politics, wars. But in spite of all that, women give birth, stoically showing that they are above circumstance.

Q: Sergei Bugayev-Afrika showed a video at I-20 gallery in New York that was made by rebels during their war against the feds. Your works don't have any overt violence—your rebels look more like courtly shepherds.

A: It would probably make sense for me to go to the Caucasus occasionally to gather material and then make works based on that. But I haven't been to Chechnya for about fifteen years, and my image of it has become a phantom, a utopia. At the same time I don't think I have the right to show violence. Art should be above circumstance. I am confident that it can work and be convincing without documenting horror, blood and gore. If my characters have become manneristic over time, it's because the Chechen problem has become more virtual, my story has become more personal, and my characters have become more subtle.

——
"I've been inspired by the rebels, the Chechens who were so desperate they feared nothing."
——

Q: Are there requests for Chechen-themed art?

A: Yes, galleries ask for it. But if a gallery that knows my work gives me an invitation, then it would be silly for me to posture and say: "I'm actually a very multi-faceted artist, how about instead I come to you and turn your gallery into a barbershop for a month and you'll have to give free haircuts to everyone." Besides, I try to avoid monotony in my interpretation of the subject. Instead of rebels with machine guns I might paint swimmers, or instead of a battlefield I'll paint a peaceful breakfast on the grass.

Q: You're not tired of the Chechen theme?

A: I didn't always like being perceived exclusively in the Chechen context, even though I pushed the theme myself. But my imagination is constantly coming up with new subjects, and I want to put them on canvas.

Q: Spanish viewers have called you the Russian Goya. Is this comparison accidental, or do you truly consider this painter to be one of your heroes?

A: In my youth I was struck by Goya's *Capriccios*, but for the most part that artist was never an idol for me. The Spaniards saw that my

5 6

6. Alexei Kallima, *Chechen Women's Team of Parachute Jumping*, 2008. Charcoal and sanguine on canvas. Detail. Courtesy of the artist and M&J Guelman Gallery

7

8 9

works depicted heroic, staged drama and they connected that to Goya's art. But *Open Space*, which was displayed at ARCO in 2006, with its two riders looking down from above at the site of a recent battle, is something I made more in reference to Velázquez.

Q: Why do you think nonspectacular art was a brief vogue and was hardly developed in the art of the 2000s?

A: Art is a spectacle to begin with. It can't be nonspectacular and aloof and conceptual all the time, or it will die out. But I think nonspectacular art was more than just a brief fad. It left a trace on the state of all Russian art.

Q: Much in your painting refers to the aesthetics of comics and contemporary animation. Where did those cartoonish perspectives come from, the bird's eye view?

A: It's true, animation has been a major influence on me. In my youth I thought that being a director or an animator was a more fitting profession for our times, and I even tried to make primitive cartoons.

Q: Are you interested in purely formal aspects of painting?

A: I don't see great difficulty in painting water in a glass or creased fabric. For me the artistic statement has little to do with whether or not the image matches reality. I'm more interested in chaos theory and the possibility of recording that chaos. That's why I'm interested in the formal qualities of an abstract category like fire. Depictions of it often look decorative. But I try to achieve an image that looks like a film still, one that has everything—movement, sparks, falling logs.

Q: Today you are a well-known and, as I understand, commercially successful artist. Are you still true to leftist ideals?

A: I think that leftists today have to demand the impossible, look for horizons beyond human consciousness, break down stereotypes and existing conditions. I try to conceive a world of a higher level. One hundred years ago the people who are usually called utopians proposed fantastic yet realistic models for the world's development. But humanity stubbornly selects the worst-case scenario, the depressing, dystopian one. We're surrounded by falsehoods that serve the interests of those who can't think in abstract categories, and instead think in packages and standards. A big influence on me was Anatoly Osmolovsky. He opened my eyes to how the contemporary art system is constructed. He described the institute of stardom and helped me understand how that path isn't right for me. ■

7. Alexei Kallima, *The Ring of Allah*, 2002. Installation on the shore of the Klyazma Reservoir for the ArtKlyazma festival. Courtesy of the artist and M&J Guelman Gallery

8. Alexei Kallima, *Chechens at Art Moscow*, 2001. Documentation of an action. Courtesy of the artist and M&J Guelman Gallery

9. Alexei Kallima, From *Beards*, 2002-2007. Digital print. Courtesy of the artist and M&J Guelman Gallery