

THE ART-PROJECT “SUPERHERO” IN THE NATIONAL ACADEMY OF ARTS OF UKRAINE (2016, September–October)

GILBERT ALTER-GILBERT

Batman, Superman. Wonder Woman. Batgirl. Majestic men of steel, intrepid caped crusaders and their equally colorful retinue of cohorts and consorts. The populace of a new mythology is all about us. What are the origins of this extraordinary species?

The superhero's roots trace back to remotest antiquity. Thousands of years ago, during civilization's infancy, philosophical systems such as Manichaeism were already in currency. This intriguing system of thought held that humanity is hostage to an endless conflict between the forces of good and evil — or light and darkness — in perpetual contention at the heart of the universe. In the Manichaean scheme of things, many beings populated the world, including ancient ones, gods, demi-gods, giants and fallen angels, all of whom battled for the soul of humanity. The rich traditions of Graeco-Roman, Indic and Scandinavian mythologies boast entire pantheons of gods and goddesses, and are rife with monsters, heroes and villains who clash and struggle for supremacy. By the medieval period, sagas and legends recounted the exploits of such figures as heroic King Arthur and his arch-enemy Mordred.

Midway through the twentieth century, the modern superhero came into his own. Superman, with his superhuman strength, agility, speed, and sensory perception, not to mention invulnerability, made his debut in an American comic book in June of 1938. His adventures in foiling evildoers, averting disasters,

and rescuing those in distress while sporting a blue body stocking, silk speedos, red boots and cape and a yellow emblem on his chest emblazoned with the letter «S» renders him universally recognizable. Interminably challenged by malefactors such as supervillain Lex Luther, Superman enjoys permanent job security. His escapades «saving the day» for planet earth and all mankind have entertained generations of earthlings via books, comics, television, film, and video games.

Like Superman, Batman has a secret identity he jealously guards from discovery. Attired in a body-armor costume consisting of a bat-eared cowl, bat-winged cape, gauntlets, utility belt, and prominent bat insignia, Batman is an ingenious detective, an expert martial artist, and a technological wizard with an incredible arsenal of unique performance-enhancing equipment, weapons, and crime-fighting aids. Lacking superpowers, Batman must rely on his superior intellect and physical prowess and technologically advanced gadgets and paraphernalia. Like Superman, who keeps a remote retreat called the Fortress of Solitude, where he can take refuge when seeking seclusion or solace, Batman maintains a hidden subterranean sanctuary called the Batcave, which serves him as a control room and command center. Here, Batman and his deuteragonist Robin can conduct experiments and pursue research in a setting resembling a scientific or forensic laboratory.

Because of their good deeds in the interests of humanity, superheroes are often regarded as paracletes and saviors, and are worshipped and idolized. Perhaps it is the *deus ex machina* aspect of their function that satisfies a psychological need for many fans and accounts for the spectacular popularity and unique fascination superheroes exert. Superheroes occupy the top rungs of the hierarchy of modern mythology, and have become a cultural phenomena — launching vast franchises and closet industries. Their presence is international. Russian language superheroes resembling Superman and Batman and publications related to them are numerous, to cite a single example.

Fine artists are no more immune than anyone else to inoculation by popular culture and its progeny. The presence of superheroes in the cultural landscape became so pervasive and inescapable during the middle and latter parts of the twentieth century that certain fine artists took notice, embraced the superhero and other comic book characters, and transformed them into even more significant symbols in the prevailing visual vocabulary by elevating them through a process of meta-art.

Among the pioneers of this process of elevation was artist Mel Ramos. The first wave set in motion by Ramos when he created and exhibited a formal oil painting of Superman during the early 1960s has been radiating ever-widening ripples ever since. In subsequent years other artists, such as those featured in the present exhibition — Valentin Popov and Victor Sydorenko — took up the challenge and developed their own interpretations of the superhero and concomitant implications.

Ramos's approach to the subject is simple and direct and, although weighted with gentle undertones of irony and mockery, it is largely celebratory, as if an act of admiration or veneration. Popov's approach to his chosen hero — Batman — is to deify and beatify the Dark Knight in a perverse, tongue-in-cheek send-up of religion. While Popov's perspective is sarcastic and parodic, Sydorenko's is dark, enigmatic, and paradoxical in keeping with the world modern man inhabits and the psychological climate he reflects. Sydorenko inverts the conventional concept of the

superhero into an insignificant non-entity, a paltry pismire of a superhero antithesis who would be altogether pitiful but for his stubborn determination to endure his existence.

Stylistically, too, these artists differ. Popov, who paints with the fluidity and facility of an Old Master, and thinks nothing of tossing off an elaborate composition for a decorative border so lovingly detailed that it resembles a Byzantine mosaic embellishing a sacred book, has proposed doing a sculpture of Batman as a Buddha with six arms. He hasn't yet executed that piece but his provocative performance *The Crucifixion of Batman* carried substantial shock value and stirred much controversy, even eliciting censorship. Ramos's work is overt, effusive, each composition an ebullient tribute executed with vim and vigor. Ramos's superheroes, however, may have more affinity with Sydorenko's *Man in Pants* than first meets the eye: Belinda Grace Gardner comments that in recent woodblock renderings of superheroes executed by Ramos, his «early impasto paintings of solitary figures almost merging with the void surrounding them reveal...existential drama.» Nick Stone contends that Ramos's heroes «exemplify the powerless and vulnerable nature of the loner faced with a situation beyond his control while Paddy Harrington declares that «Mel Ramos painted a Superman who had lived through two world wars, and seen the beginning of the cold war. Things had become a little too complex for the solitary crusader to handle all on his own.»

While Ramos's treatment of the superhero is seemingly straightforward and candid, and Popov's can be termed humorous and sly, Sydorenko's is, in a manner of speaking, metaphysical. For him, the superhero is man himself — a Sisyphean cipher lost in an indifferent and hostile cosmos who struggles to define his own identity and his ultimate place in the cosmos...

Goodbat Nightman
Roger McGough

God bless all policemen
and fighters of crime,

May thieves go to jail
for a very long time.

They've had a hard day
helping clean up the town,
Now they hang from the mantelpiece
both upside down.

A glass of warm blood
and then straight up the stairs,
Batman and Robin
are saying their prayers.
.....

They've locked all the doors
and they've put out the bat,
Put on their batjamas
(They like doing that)

They've filled their batwater-bottles
made their batbeds,
With two springy battresses
for sleepy batheads.

They're closing red eyes
and they're counting black sheep,
Batman and Robin
are falling asleep.

MEL RAMOS

Mel Ramos is an American artist long associated with U.S. Pop Art. A charter member of the movement from its inception, Ramos continues to produce the «paintings and sculptures of superheroes and voluptuous female nudes emerging from cornstalks or Chiquita bananas, popping up from candy wrappers or lounging in martini glasses» that have brought him international renown.

With such works as *Virnaburger*, which depicts the glamorous actress seated *en deshabelle* atop a cheeseburger, Ramos has advanced the evolution of the nude through an arc traversing Graeco-Roman classicism, the veiled eroticism of 18th century French Romantics, the realism of Gustave Courbet's *Origin of the*

World and beyond the Pin-Up art of such exalted cheesecake-mongers as Earl Moran, Gil Elvgren, Art Frahm, Alberto Vargas, and Rolf Armstrong to achieve a post-modern synthesis. Blending classical and mythological motifs with imagery derived from contemporary consumer culture, Ramos achieves with his feminine apotheoses a seamless fusion of sensuality, commercialism, and satirical humor.

Ramos's earliest claim to fame derives from his depictions of superheroes such as Batman and Superman, which Ramos undertook during the early 1960s after taking leave from Abstract Expressionism. Ramos drew his first recognition during this period. «Along with Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol, he was one of the first artists to do paintings of images from comic books, and works of the three were exhibited together at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1963. Along with Claes Oldenburg, James Rosenquist, Tom Wesselman and Wayne Thiebaud, his early teacher and mentor, Ramos produced art works that celebrated aspects of *popular* culture as represented in mass media. His paintings have been shown in countless major exhibitions of Pop Art in the U.S. and in Europe, and reproduced in books, catalogs, and periodicals throughout the world.»

Pop Art emerged in the United States during the late 1950s and early 1960s and, at first, «presented a challenge to traditions of fine art by including imagery from popular culture such as advertising, news, trademarks and product branding. Pop Art employs aspects of mass culture, such as advertising, labeling and logos, comic books and mundane cultural objects. One of its aims is to use images of popular (as opposed to elitist) culture in art, emphasizing the banal or kitschy elements of any culture, most often through the use of irony. It is also associated with the artists' use of mechanical means of reproduction or rendering techniques.»

Pop Art employed the techniques of representational art to effect a detached affirmation of the artifacts of mass culture. Drawing inspiration from elements such as mass advertising, movies, product design, comic strips, science fiction and technology focused primarily on the imagery of American pop-

ular culture, particularly mass advertising, Pop Art sought to incorporate the diversity of mass culture in the fine arts.

Communist countries referred to Pop Art as «Capitalist Realism», and its detractors in the West objected to what they considered its substitution of the «vulgar» for the «noble». But the charm of Pop Art's formal qualities — large dimensions, startling composition, strident or sweet colors, skillful draftsmanship — ultimately won the acclaim of public and critics alike.

«By the early 1960s, Ramos's superheroes had gained traction, and the artist became indelibly associated with the phenomenal new movement. Ramos's virile superheroes and luscious nudes were soon shown alongside the work of his comrades Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, Claes Oldenbergh, James Rosenquist, Tom Wesselman, and others. Although Ramos's paintings participated in Pop's embrace of the new consumer culture, he and other Californians, most notably his friend and mentor Wayne Thiebaud, ultimately preferred a more traditional approach to painting. Ramos and several other of his Californian colleagues laid on pigment in expressive, personal strokes, showing the artist's hand, as opposed to exploiting more impersonal commercial techniques such as photography, silkscreen, and Ben-Day dots.»

In rapid succession between 1961 and 1962, Ramos painted full-length, thickly-impastoed portraits of Superman, the *Green Lantern*, *Wonder Woman*, *Hawkman*, the *Flash* and *Miss Liberty*. By the time Ramos painted Superman for the second time in *Man of Steel* (1962), the monochrome background had become a metal door that he bursts through, as if piercing the picture plane.

Warhol, Lichtenstein and Ramos exhibited together for the first time the following summer and the rest, as they say, is history...

As with his iconic superheroes, Ramos's female subjects are idealized and enshrined — goddesses to be worshipped as paradigms of beauty. «Besides signaling the beginning of Pop Art,» states critic Nick Stone, «Ramos's early superhero paintings — especially *Wonder Woman* — marked an important tran-

sition in the artist's subject matter. Once the de Kooning-inspired abstractions of his art school days gave way to the unambiguous figuration of the forementioned caped crusaders, it was only a matter of time before Ramos began painting superheroines. The advent of 1962's *Phantom Lady* and *Wonder Woman* ultimately led to the colorful female nudes for which he is best known.»

An indisputable master of the idiom, Ramos puts his stamp on the female nude with unmistakable verve. Whether poised atop a pack of cigarettes, straddling a bottle of orangeade, or lounging the length of a Toblerone chocolate box or Velveeta package, these demoiselles are altogether disarming and devoid of lubricity. Juxtaposed with delectable confectionary treats often with wrappers loosened or, as in the case of *Chiquita Banana*, partially peeled, to expose the luscious center, Ramos's goddesses cannot conceal a campy naivete — an effusive simplicity, innocence and joie de vivre — an abundant vivacity and vitality, an irrepressible exuberance that lights each of them with an indelible smile.

The *profondeur* of Ramos's reach continues to resonate around the world. Legendary playboy Gunther Sachs collected some of the artist's choicer specimens while Sachs epigones commission works from the esteemed artist in hopes that some of the same magic may rub off on them. Art star Jeff Koons cites Mel Ramos as the Pop artist exerting the greatest influence over him. Capping a career covering more than half a century, a stream of invitations to exhibit, media attention, and accolades continue to pour in.

Skirting every attempt to categorize, confine or re-define him as a «conceptual realist», «quasi-precisionist» or «new traditionalist», Ramos continues to prove that, above and beyond any commentary about commodification in contemporary life, the direct and sincere celebration of the artist's subject is the path to aesthetic verity and enduring value.

Quizzically enough, Ramos's superhero portraits not only epitomize the translation of the commercial and the commonplace to the plane of high art, they are personified paeans to principles of moral conduct.

VALENTIN POPOV

Valentin Popov, recently elected foreign member of the National Academy of Arts of Ukraine, is the classically-trained, transplanted-to-California Ukrainian who fathered Romantic Cynicism, a term for the attitude characterizing his elegant, conceptual-realist paintings treating sometimes tragic, sometimes comic, pop-existential themes in a lofty style reminiscent of the art of Renaissance allegorists and French Academicians. Popov consistently demonstrates the always-startling virtuosity of his trademark "etched-line" brushstroke and the richness and liquidity of a lush, ink-tinted palette. Apart from their undeniable poetry, Popov's compact-field monotypes and mock icons ooze radical technical refinement while his large-scale, dramatic works pack sheer visceral punch. With his unique blend of technical mastery and ideological innovation, Popov is a distinctly satisfying artist whose work is hauntingly evocative.

Popov, himself a product of traditional art education in the former Soviet Union, spent long years mastering conventions in the Academy of Art in Kiev. Equally expert at painting, etching, collage, photography, sculpture, and installation, Popov often mixes media within genres, and is as comfortable emulating Russian religious icons as he is contriving kitschy decorative imagery suitable for Liberace's dining room. Borrowing liberally from the greatest imagery in the classical canon, Popov practices a method of appropriation, adaptation, and transformation where he puts familiar images to unfamiliar uses or indulges in extremely novel exercises in technique. As a master engraver, he has done exquisite linocuts and monotypes based on classical literature and, as an extension of this skill, paints on aluminum using his brush as a stylus!

Formulated during the years he lived in the U.S.S.R., Popov's pet theory of "Romantic Cynicism" is a dualist philosophy blending the romantic ideals of an eternally optimistic socialist utopia which was the Soviet Union with a personal sense of cynicism about life's drearier realities. "In the former U.S.S.R.," Valentin explains, "everyone was supposed to love one another and help one another achieve the common good, by each taking according to his needs and giving ac-

ording to his abilities." Popov's large-scale painting *First the Apple...Then Us*, with its portrait-of-the-artist-as-worm emerging from a plump, ripe, red apple set in the foreground of a swampy prehistoric landscape, embodies the philosophy of Romantic Cynicism in its linkage of innocence and corruption, deceptive appearances, and twilight on the flimsy edifice of human "big ideas", hopes and aspirations. Though his work often takes this form of comic surrealism, Popov is deadly serious about his vision of the world as a rotten apple with subversive spoilage gnawing at its core. His yin-yang view of the positive-negative nature of existence is reflected by artworks in which he links all manner of polar opposites to create what he calls "electric power circuits".

Perhaps no segment of Popov's oeuvre is more "romantically cynical" than his Saint Batman series. An episodic satire three years in the making, the series eventually involved more than 100 pieces. Loosely patterned after the life of Christ, Batman, in Popov's take, is a figure fashioned from fragments of popular mythology, religious lore, and created pseudohistory. Popov artworks have depicted Batman as Columbus, Batman in Egypt, Batman as the subject of invented 19th century-style engravings. Batman is considered as an immortal, seen in diverse parts of the globe in every century. Batman's roots are endlessly examined in a cycle of falsified religion and myth extending from his supposed childhood and youth through his ultimate crucifixion and possible resurrection. The series culminated with a performance piece in which Popov had himself crucified in a Batman costume, documented the event with the help of assistants, then made a plaster cast of the martyr from a living model. These tributes were followed by the issuance of a Batman death mask postage stamp. Popov explains his concept of Batman as a savior in a world where beliefs are so muddled and the presence of God is so elusive that people want to retreat into a childhood mentality where everything is good or evil, black or white. Batman comes to the rescue whenever he is summoned. A simplistic, cartoon icon from American pop culture, Popov combines Batman with the serious tradition of Christ, mankind's sav-

ior, and the whole concomitant tradition in art. Popov portrays Batman as Cupid leaving the bed of Psyche, Batman as Frederick the Great, Batman as the namesake of an engraving titled *Heroism at the End of the 20th Century*.

Popov is big on the notion of heroes and heroism. Not only is he enthralled with the recurring heroes of art history such as Jesus, Saint George, Napoleon and Mickey Mouse, he is also concerned with the idea of the artist as hero and with masks, since masks are worn by everyone, heroes and artists most of all. Saint Batman is a sort of amalgam of all these obsessions, a masked crusader who is around to ensure that mankind keeps its moral balance. Popov's favorite philosopher is Nietzsche, creator of the Superman concept as well as the concept of a moral state of being "beyond good and evil".

Popov's classical training has endowed him with tools and technical strengths often missing from the contemporary Western art scene, while American pop culture and the whole lineage of post 1920s avant-garde art proscribed in the former Soviet Union where he spent his formative years, but which he can now freely assimilate, has given him a vast playing field for intellectual and artistic development, and has enabled him to synthesize a unique vision of the old and the new, of the corny, sentimental, and moralistic and the campy, ironic, sneaky, and surreptitious. Perhaps an appropriate tag for this vision is "pop baroque", inasmuch as it fuses elements characteristic of both these widely disparate schools.

Even though Russia was, during half of the twentieth century, isolated into a sort of aesthetic Galapagos, cut off from artistic developments in much of the rest of the world, artists like Valentin Popov have managed to evolve hybrid products unlike anything anyone else is doing. While fellow emigres Komar and Melamid, using high-handed methods of presentation, mockingly glamorize or debunk past symbols of Soviet socialism, especially political personages, Popov brings to bear the same sort of technical virtuosity to create images which explore the psychology underlying this human need for leaders, martyrs, and heroes.

VICTOR SYDORENKO

Victor Sydorenko is a Ukrainian multimedia artist, conceptualist and theoretician. Sydorenko's professional trajectory has catapulted him from a childhood still inflected by the oppressive atmosphere of Stalinism to a position as a leading avant-gardist and prominent figure on the contemporary Ukrainian art scene where he serves as promoter as well as arts practitioner. Haunted by the residual specter of totalitarianism, Sydorenko's chief preoccupations revolve around questions of identity and the place of the individual in society.

In such projects as *Amnesia* (1995), *Ritual Dances* (1997), *Cytochronismus* (2002), *Authentication* (2006), and *Levitation* (2008–2009), Sydorenko has explored the effects and implications of time, memory and history, and the dilemma of self-identification in an increasingly complex and unpredictable world.

Sydorenko's perspective on the subject of the superhero is even more sardonic and abstruse than that of his fellow exhibitor Valentin Popov. Sydorenko postulates the probability that humanity will be replaced in the future by manufactured intelligences which will have all the faculties and proficiencies of present-day homo sapiens, but with none of the physical deficiencies. This next step in human evolution will be a sort of superman. Without favoring or disdaining the advent of such a being, Sydorenko envisions contemporary man, meanwhile, as a prisoner of alienation and futility, but also as a hero in his own right merely by virtue of possessing the courage to exist.

This existential anti-hero is embodied by Sydorenko's peculiar creation *Man in Pants* who, instead of the mask, cape, leotards and wrestler's boots comprising the customary attire of the superhero, is costumed solely in a pair of breeches resembling thermal underwear. «People in white underwear,» according to Sydorenko, «look more stripped of identity. Drawers worn in the totalitarian 20th century by everyone — soldiers, prisoners and citizens — are the sign of equality and the generality of a shared destiny.»

Sydorenko poses this unlikely figure in a variety of pictorial representations: flexing, flying, and surrounded by the diagrammatic symbols of science and

mathematics, like Leonardo's *Golden Mean*. Sydorenko's programmatic human correlative is a cipher in an indifferent or hostile universe, a cog in an infinitely complex social apparatus designed to control, master, exploit and consume him. *Man in Pants* is a sort of Everyman whose primary task is to persevere.

In the words of one commentator, the *Man in Pants* «searches for his own identity in a social collective where the goal is the triumph of unification. This triumph of a body looks like the transformation of a trunk into a preform cast for the plaster dummy which will definitively replace the person in society. Only this dummy still has a chance to survive and find immortality.» Sydorenko himself explains that he has «tried to express the more general situation where, in every time and every place, whether under the aegis of totalitarianism or democracy, now, as five thousand years ago, people find themselves locked in a duel with time. Suspended in a state of vague presentiment, captives of uncertainty waiting, enduring, each tediously keeping his place in a monotonous, passive race. None can escape participation in this somehow intuited, yet not distinctly perceived, ritual...»

Another of Sydorenko's metaphorical creations is an eleven-foot-tall statue of a woman: a mock goddess, ideal woman, or heroine who, according to Victoriya Burlaka, is a: *four-meter high woman who stands in her underwear with arms outstretched. It is hard to grasp the motivation of her symbolic gesture: to whom or what it is directed. Maybe to a transcendental, ideological being or the idea of global communism, or a beautiful future in which she believes? The gesture is similar to automatic kneeling in front of highest authority: the attribute of a religious cult transformed into the totalitarian practices of a personality cult. Worshipers of icons pray for divine protection. In the Soviet version it is a prayer for Communist Party blessing. The adoring kneeling in front of authorities was embedded and strengthened in the mind of Soviet people. Logically preceding the figure of a kneeling man, "the big woman" stands still, out of time, resembling a somnambulist. In her static and awkward posture we can see an instant and painful effort to get rid of*

Soviet post-traumatic stress disorder. The syndrome spreads to the deep layers of our personality and psychics, so it is unknown for how long this dialogue with the past will last. "The mechanical woman" could be revived only by the "ideological transcendental", which inspires and drives the woman, substituting the Holy Spirit function, granting an eternal life.

Victor Sydorenko proposes a reply to the Soviet iconographic tradition, which has much older indirect origins. The statue of Motherland, the monument to the victory in the Second World War on the banks of Dnieper river, became one of the Soviet genius loci, the landscape milestone of Kyiv. The statue is similar to a massive column, holding the sword and shield. Heavy hypertrophy of statics and power, open pathos runs through the entire statue. The Soviet iconography of the Motherland did not emerge out of nothing; it appeals to the ancient tradition of the Mother of God, Oranta ("Advocate of sinners"). The mosaic image of Oranta, praying to God for protection against enemies, on the apse of the St Sophia Cathedral in Kyiv, links the temporal chain with the statue of Motherland. This chain is everlasting and lets us to dig as deep as to uncover the Scythian stone women sculptures (anthropomorphic Kurgan stelae found throughout Ukraine and dating to 4th millennium BC), to which Victor Sydorenko's sculpture is also traceable. The Scythian women are the embodiment of the Big or Phallic Mother Ancestor, the unconscious archetype that exists regardless of social context. Victor Sydorenko sets himself a task to create the synthetic, generalizing and, at the same time, concrete image of Mother as personification of the Ukrainian nation that combines all possible social and psychological senses and modes. To complete this task one should see actuality through the prism of history, see the objectivity through the prism of the traditional heroic canon. The artist ironically apprehends the tradition, creating a "perfect image", shifting it from the sphere of a "high pathetic" into the human dimension. Victor Sydorenko plays with a "rose-colored glasses", filters of the totalitarian style, of its giant mania that tends to idealization. By eliminating them the artist undertakes

a very interesting inversion, and the effect of a “naked king” emerges as new evidence. The high object of socialist realism, the Soviet person, “the master of life”, turns into the victim of the system, “human excrement” (G. Agamben).

The contraposition to the Hellenic canon lies in the fact that monumental four-meter sculpture looks absolutely natural. There are no idealizations: the body is not generalized, not turned into the mythic goddess. Specific features of her age and body — plump slack hips, breasts and abdomen — are exposed with no compromise. Through the layers of mythological senses referring to Mother Mary, Advocate of sinners, we see a specific person, a victim of the system. Her underwear looks absolutely natural. It is an important point for the artist: to uncover not a person, but a slavery system, where “obscene pleasure” from humiliating others makes a basic life reality. Military and prisoner’s pants of Sydorenko’s previous projects were

marks of a social outcast, since marginality in Soviet times soaked all society with rare exceptions. In this case the statue of an exposed woman looks awkward, despite its large size. Such nudity is not heroic but depriving towards the person as it strips her of her covering veil and the sense of self-importance.

The time perspective — from the past into the future and from the future into the past — is emphasised with the texture of the statue’s surface; polished “high tech” metal dismantles the form in the space and minimizes its grandiosity. Closing the temporal chain, Victor Sydorenko makes a comment on such phenomena: wide amplitude of the Soviet consciousness is not a remote historical fact; it has been already fixed inside us. The pendulum of the slave and heroic mentality could not be stopped as soon as we wish. Sometimes it seems that we got rid of our inheritance, but it still exists here and now, and the proof is the STATUE OF NON FREEDOM.