



HERE AND THERE: NEW WORKS BY SERGEI ISUPOV

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Grounding, 15 x 10 x 4.5"; Gravitation, 17 x 14 x 8"; Mediator, 9 x 6 x 4", 2013

Ukrainian Dance, 8 x 7.5 x 5", 2013



There are always limitations. Particulars are decided by place.
To flourish everywhere is a mark of true genius.

For two decades in the United States of America, Sergei Isupov has prospered, the artist's fertile mind nourished by a consistent market for his prolific ceramic sculpture. In a time-lapse picture of his work's progression over these twenty years, shifts sometimes seem dramatic. In a more careful study, observable changes - the discard of functional forms, an increase in scale, the expansion of subject matter - appear more cautious, more calculated. Arguably, the measured manner in which Isupov's artwork has evolved testifies to the governance of the same market-environment that sustains him.

In the summer of 2013, Isupov left America for Europe, spending two months in residence at Guldagergaard International Ceramics Research Center in Denmark and two-week work periods in Roja, Latvia and Hiiumaa, Estonia. The art made at these locations - Guldagergaard providing a standard of technological conventions and the others limited to wood-firing - was combined in an exhibition first organized in September, 2013 at HOP gallery (the gallery of the Estonian Artists Union), in Tallinn. Reinterpreted for the Vallauris Biennale in 2014, the unanticipated work made for this bombshell exhibition reveals the greater dimension of Isupov's already immense talent.

Embedded in this display of prowess is the fact that in recent years, with the growth of his family on one side and the continued growth of his career on the other, Isupov's life has been more deeply divided between the US and Estonia. The two countries, each like home in some way while neither place is home in some way, are very different creatively. In America, there is the market for works we recognize as the artist's and

there are its rules. In Estonia, the lack of a market provides the room in which to play and experiment. These two spaces inform and balance each other, but there is a great rift between them. The exhibition, aptly titled *Here and There*, operates as a powerful metaphor for this personal and professional fissure. But this is a multidimensional metaphor.

The world knows Sergei Isupov best for his highly refined and emotive illustrated sculpture – an innately dualistic conundrum of perception and interpretation that seamlessly pits the *here* of real objects against the *there* of two-dimensional illusion. With our minds unable to dissolve the union, but not quite able to fully



Soaring Power, 9 x 6.75 x 4.75", 2013

Flying in a Dream and in Reality, Porcelain, slip, glaze, 12 x 16.5 x 11", 2014



resolve it either, we maddeningly submit to the power of the art. In the new work, the range of Isupov's approach and its effect is much broader.

As the lynchpin of the *Here and There* exhibition, a small number of large sculptures demonstrate the artist's signature integrations of two- and three-dimensions and their predictably meticulous execution. Standing out from these are smaller pieces with a greatly reduced color palette and a dramatically looser performance. Here, the simple lines and fluid brushstrokes of competent but simple renderings populate swaths of bare clay. There, the specificity and precision of forms and marks recede as a more visceral expressionism emerges.

At the farthest end of the spectrum, expert but economical busts are mounted to the wall, and the wall is where their bodies are executed, in the freest fashion. We have never seen work like this from Isupov, which is shocking from such a stylistically stable artist, but the potency of the work lies far beyond a laudable disregard for convention. Not merely separating the objects and the illustration, the artist isolates the theatrical stage of the face, the head, and, with them, the mind. Together they are pushed far from their corporeal binding by elementary descriptions of the body. Without letting the two completely untether, the artist widens the gap between principles and dimensions to their greatest possible extent, maximizing the tension of their near thread-thin bond. Somatic and self-reflexive, Isupov annihilates the collusion of form and surface in a questioning self-deconstruction of his artistic identity – an undertaking that reverberates with broad philosophical inquiry.

At the same time, the artist abandons his anecdotal characters and his recurring, self-referential actor(s) - these spurned mostly in favor of mythological beings and Jungian archetypes. With their

stark descriptions, their ritualistic display in the gallery, and their complex of expressed, ambivalent emotions, the artist excavates something primal and uncomfortably psychoanalytical in these otherwise familiar and, in some cases, more trusted icons.

As a case in point, the monochromatic busts of two Medusas mounted to the wall hover in mid-air. One black and one white, each rendering is grotesque enough, and each is tender enough, to be exactly what this archetypal character has always been – a lamentable portrait of a viciously bitter and suffering femininity. Arranged ceremoniously around the “King” figure freestanding in the center of the gallery, these women are also forced to participate in a portrait of a brutalizing patriarchy. The female bodies are rudimentary, regressive, and almost farcical drawings - they are phantoms, non-realities, and, above all,



Belief and Hope, Porcelain, slip, glaze, 18 x 20 x 9.5", 2013

Ukrainian Dance, 8 x 7.5 x 5", White Dance, 10 x 9 x 5.5", 2013





Belief and Hope, Porcelain, slip, glaze, 18 x 20 x 9.5", 2013

they are denials. The bodies are also constricted, terribly and comically constipated, they are base and degraded vehicles for the mind and the soul. In their totality the figures are laughable, pitiable, and infinitely dark and disturbing. True, they are art and they are elevated, but are more like demeaned and exploited captives trapped on stage for the audience of incongruously modern and voyeuristic viewers that is described in two-dimensions on the wall beneath them. This is a moral clash of times and cultures, of realities, and it is a real spectacle of tragedy. Yet the animated observers are themselves non-realities, and the only real voyeur is you. Harder to bear is that this is but one fragment of a compelling exhibition heavily loaded with such self-reflection, existentialism, and grave accusation – its traumas made all the more distressing by the innocent, storybook simplicity of its depictions.

Farewell to the Theater, Porcelain, slip, glaze, 22.5x10x7.5", 2013

Of course, we can find respite in the fact that we now know Isupov's work well enough to see that his narratives are not necessarily premeditated. Rather, it is more common that these stories are intuitively assembled, ambiguous, and manipulative allegories that we project meaning upon – the difficulty in accurately deciphering them being part of their great appeal and potency. In this respect, these new works are decidedly those of a recognizable artist and there are other intrinsically Isupovian features one can identify as well. However, the artist's inversion of familiar conventions is incredibly candid, the demands for participation that are placed upon the viewer are far more burdensome, and the severity of the new work's implications is almost unbearable. Free and unfettered, this is Sergei Isupov at his most powerful. This is the present, a high point for an unstoppable and relentless artist.

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Sergei Isupov is represented by the Ferrin Gallery www.ferrincontemporary.com and demonstrating at the Ceramics Ireland International Festival 5th - 7th September.

Farewell to the Theater, Porcelain, slip, glaze, 22.5x10x7.5", 2013

