

8/16/2001

Ilya Kabakov's concepts are worth seeking out

Art Scene by Bill Van Siclen

A red glove lying in a field. A pile of books lying on a table.

At first glance, the work of Russian-born conceptual artist Ilya Kabakov doesn't look like much. Blink, in fact, and you might miss it.

But Kabakov, two of whose quietly subversive and whimsically poetic installations are on display in Providence through September, is worth seeking out. Indeed, his work remains as fresh today as it did when he was dodging the watchful eyes of the KGB.

As an introduction to Kabakov's less-is-more approach, it's hard to beat Monument to a Lost Glove, a 1997 work that popped up last month on the Canal Street side of Roger Williams Memorial Park. Co-sponsored by the RISD Museum and the Convergence 2001 arts festival, the installation consists of a single red glove placed inconspicuously on a shady patch of lawn.

Arrayed around the glove, like a minimalist Greek chorus, is a series of free-standing metal plaques. Printed on the plaques are parts of a rambling memoir that may or may not be about the glove's owner.

"A lost red glove near the jogging path," begins one passage. "When I was young, I also ran along these paths. We would run next to each other, we always ran together. . . "

In keeping with Kabakov's elliptical style, the identity of these mysterious joggers is never spelled out. Instead, the narrative meanders from romance ("We went for just two days, two days which we decided to spend together") to loss ("Tears from a sad book which she had brought with her and left, without finishing it") to hints of a crime ("Oh, my God, I have found the evidence").

In one of the funniest passages, Kabakov offers a critique of contemporary installation art: "It's a shame that the time of drawing from nature has passed forever. No one needs this now -- there are 'concepts' all around, abstractions, 'installations' and other such talentlessness and frivolities."

As for the glove, its meaning is also ambiguous.

Was it dropped on purpose or by chance? Does it symbolize death or some less permanent kind of loss? And what about the title? Is it a wry comment on the Soviets' mania for monument-building? Or is it, like Cinderella's glass slipper, part of an older tradition of tributes to lost pieces of clothing?

(By the way, don't bother trying to pick up the glove: it's actually a cast-bronze sculpture held in place by spikes embedded in the ground.)

Twenty years before *Monument to a Lost Glove*, Kabakov created the series of fable-like stories and drawings that make up *10 Albums/10 Characters*. Again, the premise is simple: each album describes the life of a resident of an imaginary Soviet-era apartment building.

Most have habits or personality traits that touch on aspects of Soviet life.

The hero of *Sitting-in-the-Closet Primakov*, for example, spends his days sitting in the closet. Eventually, his worried family opens the door and finds the closet empty. In *The Flying Komarov*, a man looks out his balcony window and sees thousands of people flying. As he leaps off the balcony to join them, the people disappear and become a flock of birds.

Such tales, with their quirky blend of Aesop and Kafka, have a long history in Russian literature. But what sets Kabakov's work apart are the beautiful drawings (Kabakov was trained as an illustrator) that accompany the stories.

The albums in the RISD show are lithographic copies of Kabakov's originals. Nevertheless, the illustrations, especially in stories like *The Flying Komarov*, with its echoes of Marc Chagall's flying peasants, and *Decorator Malingin*, about a Soviet commissar who doodles at official meetings, are marvelous.

Monument to a Lost Glove and *10 Albums/10 Characters* continue through Sept. 30. Roger Williams Memorial Park is located on North Main Street, between Meeting Street and Smith Street. The installation is on the west (Canal Street) side of the park. The RISD Museum is at 224 Benefit Street. Museum hours are Tues.-Sun. 10-5 and Gallery Nights (third Thursday of each month) 10-9.