

Moneyed crowds and imaginative wealth

VISUAL ARTS

The Future is Our Only Goal

Galerie Gmurzynska
Art Basel Miami Beach

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Miami Beach is a place of flying pelicans, tinsel-wrapped palm trees, parties with synchronised swimming go-go dancers and people in extraordinary shoes spending fortunes on large splashy art.

That's to put it at its crudest: there is much else. But even so, it's not the place you'd expect to find a rather scholarly installation devoted to the sometimes fragile remains of experimental Russian art from the decade surrounding the 1917 Revolution, a period, as curator Norman Rosenthal puts it, of "elation and bottomless optimism" for the arts.

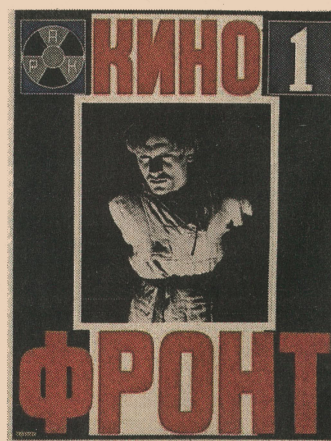
Galerie Gmurzynska, based in Cologne, has specialised in treasures of the 20th century for more than 50 years, and understands the power of curation. Enlisting the distinguished Rosenthal, as well as Claude Ruiz-Picasso as designer of the booth, it has showcased work that is often barely more than ephemera in a way that makes it glow with resonance.

In the midst of Miami's moneyed crowds, there is something hugely touching about rough crayon drawings on coarse brown paper, delicate survivors of a world of terrible material shortages but great imaginative wealth and aesthetic sophistication. A 1916 scribbled design for a handbag by Olga Rozanova, a Malevich pencil sketch (1917) or a cubist drawing of a male figure (1921) and a painstakingly hand-pasted photocollage for a magazine cover (1929), both by Varvara Stepanova, are eloquent witnesses. Alexander Rodechnko's "Spatial Construction No 9" (originally 1921), or Ilya Chashnik's

block-coloured crayon "Suprematism" (1922) show the Russians' rich experimentation with the modernist and abstract styles of then-contemporary art (Rosenthal suggests a small blizzard of -isms).

Meanwhile a few telling photographs — by El Lissitzky, Rodchenko and others, from one of which the unforgettable face of Mayakovsky looms furiously — display the fascination with new forms that included ambitious architectural projects, film and more.

It was truly a moment of experimentation and optimism — artistic, social, personal and political —



Gustav Klucis's design for the cover of 'Kinofront 1' (1926)

that still looks raw and fresh even on its centenary. There's a double irony, perhaps, in seeing a vibrant poster design in honour of Lenin, or for revolutionary cinema, in this city full of Cubans, just as Fidel Castro goes to his grave.

The aesthetic lesson of this presentation — take a few things, look at them hard and think about them properly — is also on show in quite a number of booths around this fair, but it works especially powerfully here.

To December 4, artbasel.com
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