

Bridget McDonnell Gallery

PRESS RELEASE *Post-War Russian Paintings on show in Carlton*

A RARE collection of intimate Russian paintings, selected over the last 18 years from the studios of artists in St. Petersburg by London dealer John Barkes is on exhibition at the Bridget McDonnell Gallery in Carlton.

The *Post-War Russian Realist Paintings* exhibition depicts such domestic scenes as a child reading a book, children skiing on a snow covered war memorial, the May Day parade, a farmers' market and artists sketching in a paddock. The paintings depict a Russia under communism in scenes that could easily be Australia; children playing football; still life of pots in the kitchen; landscapes; calves feeding; boys fishing by the hydro electric power station; and family portraits.

London dealer John Barkes has been cultivating his friendship with the very private Russian artists for the past 20 years. He is a good friend of the gallery owner Bridget McDonnell and spoke at the opening on Thursday evening.

In introducing Mr Bakes at the exhibition opening Ms McDonnell told the gathering that she was delighted to be able to bring both Mr Bakes and the exhibition to Melbourne. "We have been the beneficiaries of John's wisdom and knowledge for about 30 years so I thought it was about time I shared it," she said. "John was responsible for finding many of the works in my early Australian watercolour exhibitions and my early Australian paintings exhibitions. A lot of the paintings included in my modern shows over the past 28 years have also come through John in London. For the past 19 years he's been dealing in Russian paintings and we think they are terrific, too."

In opening the exhibition, Mr Barkes told the gathering about the Russian system for cultivating talented artists. the "Russia was very good at spotting talent and sending children from the age of 11 to specialist schools – language schools, music schools and art schools," Mr Barkes said. "These artists have all gone through that system and are now in the **Artists' Union**. It's a long haul from art school at 11 to the artists union. They're going to be 11 at art school, 18 at art college and then the academy. Then many are streamed off to the teaching academy and various places unless you're really top line. Then you're invited into the Artists' Union."

He said the system of producing creative people in Russia was different to the education system in the west. "This is the opposite of here where it was thought that the poetry of inspiration that young poets and artists have should be let out. They should be able to express themselves and not constrained from a young age. They shouldn't be controlled. What they have worked out over there is that in order to express yourself as an artist, you have to have the craft and the technique. Well, the results are (on the walls) around you.

"When I first went there 20 years ago, they (the artists) took my money, but they had no idea why I was there. I was buying paintings, sketches. Now, most of the paintings on the walls around here were not painted by these artist with the idea of them being shown. They were their own personal property, the tools in the trade for producing the finished work, that the system required. The finished works that the system required, I think, ought to stay in Russia, but the preparatory works to me show just how skilful they were."

On a lighter note, he talked about his work in the art world.

"I'm at the pointy end of the business," Barkes said. "I find the artist works, but it's up to people far more clever than I to sell them. I liken it to the fur trade. I have a friend in the fur trade who has a big shop where he sells lovely coats to all his rich friends, where as if I was in the fur trade, I would be up above the snow line trying to catch furry animals with pointy sticks."

The exhibition is on at the **Bridget McDonnell Gallery** in Carlton **until March 24**. Contact Bridget McDonnell for photo's and more information 0419 306593

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