

## Soviet emigres win a dubious affection

REVIEW

### Art

GARY CATALANO

**Komar and Melamid** (Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Dallas Brooks Drive, South Yarra; until 31 January); **Chris van der Craats** (70 Arden Street, North Melbourne; until 23 December)

**W**E HAVE been hearing a great deal about Komar and Melamid of late. If the noise their collaborative paintings generate is any guide, these two Russian emigres have displaced another duo, Gilbert and George, in the dubious affections of the art world. The works of few artists have been as widely exhibited as have theirs since they emigrated from the Soviet Union in the mid 1970s.

Back in the USSR, their rebellion against cultural orthodoxy took an unusual form. For instead of working in one of the condemned and allegedly decadent styles, as did most of their fellow underground artists, Komar and Melamid parodied the officially sanctioned style of social realism.

Parody is, I suppose, a mode often favored in ages which have lost their belief in the benevolence of history and the inevitability of its progress. Through parody the comic spirit appears to resign itself to the idea that all possibilities have been exhausted.

Komar and Melamid have certainly found the dubieties of history a congenial theme: an earlier work not included in their show at ACCA neatly inverted artistic convention by depicting Stalin presenting Clio, the muse of history, with a volume containing his account of events. I dimly recall a proverb (presumably not Russian) which goes: those who give may also take away.

Komar and Melamid's show is actually called 'Painting History' and deals with the work of the last three or four years. Each of the 12 paintings on display is composed of two or more divergently-handled panels. Contrast, rupture and opposition — the forms of historical experience, so to speak — are in one sense part of the very fabric of these works.

Often the images on the individual panels are not as immediately comprehensible as they should ideally be. I'll note two examples, the first being the panel on the extreme left of 'Family Treasures'.

In his catalogue introduction, Michiel Dolk, who musters far more enthusiasm for these works than I am able to, describes the single detail in this panel as a "red star-shaped gash" and suggests that the panel recalls the abstract paintings of the earlier Russian artist, Rodchenko.

He may well be right. The painted gash is certainly star-shaped and the panel on which it occurs could, at a pinch, be a reference to Rodchenko. But what of a second signification which is likely to occur to most viewers, and especially so when they notice that two of the four panels in the work deal with those acts of historical violence known as wars? Quite simply, viewers are likely to see this detail as a hole torn by shrapnel — and note this — in a piece of metal.

I don't want to get into an argument about ambiguity here so I'll put my further point very simply. It trivialises the reading I've outlined if we are asked (even by Komar & Melamid) to see that small panel as the depiction of a hole in a painting. Surely there are orders of experience which should be kept separate.

The second perplexing detail occurs in 'Fairy Tale', one panel of which depicts three soldiers grappling with a post adorned with the initials of the USSR in the Russian form, CCCP. All this takes place among flowers, one which supports a fairy. So far, so good.

But much as you understand this immediately you are also baffled as to whether the soldiers are inserting the post in the ground or extracting it. And this ambiguity, I suggest, is a needless one, for either reading fails to inflect — appreciably inflect — our reading of the panel. We are, in short, waylaid and distracted by what is in reality an imperfectly realised image, and we're left to wonder whether Komar and Melamid possess the necessary depictive skills in order to make either action immediately comprehensible.