

ARTEM NANUSHYAN
O-1

MAY 9, 2024 - JUNE 16, 2024

Artem Nanushyan's work is positioned at a juncture where memory obscures reality, and where historical fact meets personalized fiction. Nanushyan processes this thin line between the real and the unreal through an expansive visual index of images that register on a personal, political, and pop cultural level. "O1" is an exhibition that synthesizes this myriad index by means of watercolor, oil painting, and sculpture.

Born in 1997 in Moscow, Artem Nanushyan lives and works in Los Angeles as someone contending a native identity with an expatriate condition. The title of the exhibition itself is an allusion to the O-1B visa classification, a non-immigrant visa in the U.S. designed specifically for individuals who demonstrate exceptional skill in the arts. Furthermore, "O1" is a homophonic device that refers to the Russian translation of Odin, the Norse god of war and death, as well as the word for "one". Although sharing the same pronunciation, the words have highly different meanings and origins. The salon style nature of "O1" is in part gesturing towards the conceptual framework of Kazimir Malevich's landmark "0,10 Exhibition" of 1915, otherwise known as the "The Last Futurist Exhibition". However, in place of where Malevich negated figuration by virtue of the iconoclastic black square, Nanushyan instead offers an emblematic, stone faced portrait of Lenin surrounded by other preeminent symbols of the Soviet Union. The image of Lenin is continuously invoked throughout the exhibition not merely as a recurring motif, but more so as a perfect, Christlike icon, and therefore the perfect foil to iconoclasm. Like many of the repeated images and thematic groupings in Nanushyan's work, Lenin becomes a nearly serialized figure. His abundant presence in the exhibition space can be read as a reflection of his ubiquitous presence in the Russian landscape. The spontaneity, portability, and permeability of watercolor as a diffuse medium is fully embraced to reflect this greater idea of modularity.

Nanushyan operates from a self-described vantage point of "low resolution", in which the physical and technical elements that give shape to the works are forged out of a conscious naivete. It is through this distinctive lens that Nanushyan reckons with the enduring legacy and inherited memory of the Soviet Union. Working in dialogue with the digital world, Nanushyan culls from an image bank that hovers over the Soviet and post-Soviet divide. The sprawling array of images, which range everywhere from aspiring adult film stars to scenes of pastoral life, are chosen for their purposefully boring or banal qualities. They are selected strictly for their instant aesthetic appeal and for their malleability on paper. Christian and Pagan idols are paralleled by Communist leaders, buildings, and weapons. Nanushyan is neither critiquing nor moralizing these opposing figures, but rather likening all religious, military, and political beings to Lovecraftian specters of death.

“СССР!?” is a work that marks the artist’s first foray into video installation. An imaginary city composed of monochromatic, architectural renderings of realized and unrealized Soviet monuments transforms into a liminal world inhabited by marching units of mechanized bronze statues. Like the accompanying sculptures in “O1”, a monotone color scheme is maintained in this video as an act of unification, not for purposes of simply matting or muting. Aerial coverage of this fictitious city surveys the vestiges of the Soviet Union, highlighting the insidious ways in which a cult of personality can be inscribed upon the built environment. This virtual world is perhaps an animated interpretation of the surrounding works, where life courses through the sites, streets, and civil engineering projects memorialized through the paintings and sculptures. “O1” is an exhibition that can be viewed less as a collection of disparate parts and more as a way of envisioning a novel type of social sculpture. It functions as a set piece, with painting serving as a backdrop, sculpture as a form of prop, and video as a programmable device. Conjured from knowledge, memory, and experience, Nanushyan effectively crafts a new Russian mythology that emerges from these movable components.

Text by Simon Brewer