



Family Affair Isupov and Pärnamets

IT IS INEVITABLE. AS WE WATCH AN ARTIST'S WORK CHANGE over time, we also watch the artist's life unfold. The two paths always run parallel as histories are told in the tracings of ideas and aesthetics, as the telling of events and feelings mark time and as the identities continually shaped and conveyed through art. Yet art is also artifact, the object, a signifier but

A Review by Anthony E Stellaccio

never a surrogate for its creator. Separated from its maker, art can be manipulated and it can also manipulate. Consequently, caution must always be urged in interpretation, for while the artist always belongs to reality, art is a vehicle for the myths and legends made when the creative impulse intersects with biography.

It is such a mix of art and biography, welded together by form and surface and drawn ever tighter under the veil of optical illusion, which has long compelled us toward Sergei Isupov's sculpture. It is almost 20 years ago that this began, when Isupov, divorced, eviscerated and vulnerable, dramatically emerged as an artist combining tantalising eroticism, unnerving surrealism and the primal anguish of raw emotion. Ever since, Isupov's journey through his relationships, and his relationship to his work, has been captured and displayed in clay.

Over time, Isupov's expert and charged depictions of the human condition, infused with sexuality and the deceptive mystique of biographical allusion, have not lost their allure. This was true in 2008, when Isupov undertook an extensive series of collaborative works with artist, and now wife, Kadri Pärnamets.

Pärnamets is from Estonia, the place where

Isupov studied ceramics and which is as much or more like home than anywhere for the thrice-expatriated Russian. By this I want to suggest that Isupov's relationship with Pärnamets is symbolic





of a homecoming, just as the combination of her abstract organic forms and his figurative imagery in 2008 was a metaphor for, and a foreshadowing of, their daughter Roosii's conception.

So began Roosii Isupov's uninterrupted presence in the studio and she has since aged six years in an environment much like the one her father was raised in: a household of accomplished and dedicated artists who encourage and effuse creativity. As Leslie Ferrin remarked, "Roosii's familiarity with the rhythm of professional art making and the craft of storytelling through art was a natural part of her day-to-day life." Last year, the Isupov family had their first group exhibition, *Family Affair*.

Ferrin, naturally, determined where the exhibition took place: her gallery on the MASS MoCA campus in North Adams, Massachusetts, US. Ferrin and Isupov, their names now virtually synonymous, began working together in 1996, even before Ferrin relocated from Northampton to her current location. At its present coordinates, Ferrin Gallery is just a

Facing page, above. Sergei Isupov. **Sight Unseen.** 2015.
Porcelain, slip and glaze. 11 x 19 x 6.5 in.
Facing page, below. Roosii Isupov. **Whale in the Ocean.** 2015.
Porcelain, slip and glaze. 8.5 in.
Top left: Sergei Isupov. **Shroud of Turin.** 2015.
Porcelain, slip and glaze. 12 x 9 x 10 in.
Top right: Kadri Pärnamets. **Past in Present.** 2015.
Porcelain, slip and glaze. 16.5 x 14.5 x 7 in.
Below: Roosii Isupov. **Zebra Zoo.** 2015. Porcelain, slip and glaze.

short distance from the building that houses the Isupovs' studio, Ferrin's office and the two families (or is it one?). Indeed, it is not just business but a strong familial bond that nourishes this long-standing partnership. Ultimately, Ferrin's presence in the exhibition as host completes a family portrait that is a testament to the kind of fellowship she has brought to the field of ceramics as a whole.

Roosii, in many ways, determined when the exhibition took place: June, 2015. After years of ferreting between Mom and Dad's worktables (she has worked with clay since she was able to hold a pencil), Roosii became, with oversight and over time, an assertive and capable young artist. With many more milestones to reach, *Family Affair*, scheduled to coincide with the end of the family's 2015 winter work session, marked the first time Roosii created a series of related artworks. By this time Roosii also began attending preschool, which allowed her parents, particularly her mother, to once again find time for dedicated studio work.

The new works made by Pärnamets during this period, surprisingly different from those of the past, are inhabited by the women of European art history – not the small handful of recognised female





Top left: Kadri Pärnamets. *Question of Honour – Lucretia, after Lucas Cranach the Elder*. 2015. Porcelain, slip and glaze. 11 x 10.5 x 5 in.

Top right: Kadri Pärnamets. *Bathing Day (Reverse Side)*.

Below: Sergei Isupov. *Chaos*. 14 x 9 x 5.5 in., *Order*. 9 x 8 x 6.5 in. 2015. Porcelain, slip and glaze.



artists but the female subjects of famous paintings by famous men. Each of these women, first rendered by the likes of Titian, Ingres, Manet and Cranach, represent a particular role: servant, victim, muse, icon and goddess. Each of these entries into the historical inventory reads as a referendum, and every appropriation appears as a rescue from the hard geometry of the male canvas. A point of this is made, perhaps explicitly, when the artist removes, from one side of a supple sculpture with mirror images on its front and back, the oft-debated male customer seen in the mirror of Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergere*. Though Pärnamets will not admit to any feminist ideology, one views her work and cannot help but think of the cherished yet consuming role of motherhood, her temporary relinquishing of the role of breadwinner to her husband and her slow return to the role of artist.

It is also hard to avoid contrasting Pärnamets' quieter commentaries with works by Isupov. If the latter's work could ever be described as confrontational and nightmarish, works by Pärnamets could be described as tactful and bucolic. Isupov assembles quasi-anonymous characters by thrusting them together, almost aggressively, into uncomfortably uncertain emotional tenors and even physical conflict. Many of his forms accentuate the work's content with deceptive bends and angles that force interactions between illustrations and audience. Pärnamets more amicably levels her otherwise organic forms for the sake of a largely

frontal and centralised presentation of a single figure or small group. The retention of this formality reveals the challenge of extrapolating from canvas to sculpture and highlights the risk posed to form when it is limited to the role of a framing device. Pärnamets is successful in avoiding these dangers to the same degree that her forms add expressive depth to her chosen images and the relationship between the two successfully creates tension.

Pärnamets' mode of presentation is emphasised in pieces where the depiction of environment has been subtracted and the objects that remain, monochromatic and cumulus, cede even greater precedence to the figures they host. These are also the works in which Pärnamets appears freest and Isupov's apparent and, perhaps, inevitable influence appears weakest. One of these notable works is *Lucretia*, accompanied by a pair of cloud-like, wall-mounted masses, who ominously and sensually merges with the billowing black form from which she seems to appear and disappear simultaneously. Described as more of a haunting apparition than an objectively fixed subject, Cranach's *Lucretia*, upon whose rape and suicide Rome pivoted, has been given a greater degree of agency, urgency and empowerment by Pärnamets.

Although the exhibition does in many ways rest upon the artistic bedrock of his signature





style, Isupov's artistic evolution and ongoing experiments are also evident in this exhibition. There is, first of all, a new addition to the recent series of wall works begun in Estonia in 2013. In this series, which extends the distance and elevates the tension between object and illustration, busts in the round burst forth from large-scale, loose, childlike drawings done directly on the wall.

Also included is a form of architecturally oriented sculpture that is entirely new for the artist. In one such work, an almost mundane pairing of nude figures emerges into the round from a dark, scenographically drawn sauna set in Estonia. While rendered in a recognisably expert, signature blending of two- and three-dimensions, the dramatic juxtapositions and fault lines of figure and ground, image and form, have here been unfolded: flushed out by a straightforward geometry and reduced to complicity in a form almost completely comprehensible from a single



Top left: Sergei Isupov. *Shroud of Turin (Reverse Side)*.
 Top right: Sergei Isupov. *Secret Service*. 2015.
 Porcelain, slip and glaze. 8 x 7 x 4 in.
 Below: Kadri Pärnamets. *Bathing Day*. 2015.
 Porcelain, slip and glaze. 10 x 12 x 5 in.

vantage point.

Another feature of the new works is that they are effectively monochromatic, appearing more like low-relief charcoal drawings and contrasting the artist's more typically bold and sometimes flamboyant use of colour. Here colour is reserved almost exclusively for the backsides of the sculptures, which provide the canvases for gesturally drawn, Matisse-esque vignettes of bathing figures. These loose illustrations read as treble: the stylistic and expressive antipode of the artwork's anterior baseline. By being wall-mounted, however, these posterior illustrations, and some of the most interesting views of the form itself, are hidden from sight. When Isupov used this kind of trickery before (and he is well known for illustrating the oft-unseen undersides of his sculptures), the ploy was largely anecdotal. The same strategy in these new works appears more antidotal.

Being more obviously stage-like and straightforward in both form and content than anything else from the artist's oeuvre, many of the admirers of his signature works may, understandably, see these new works as lacking a familiar sense of consequence and potency. Yet to their credit, these architectural forms offer a







revealing take on the theatricality of Isupov's art and are, in this larger context, intriguing as a new mode of disclosure and concealment. Moreover, these tableaux are unusually quiet, tender and, without the legitimising endorsement of anguish, maybe even a bit sentimental. A different mood also permeates the black and white 'face-jug' that is featured in the exhibition. With a current of uninterrupted illustration both consuming and defining an organic form, Isupov is still employing illusion. At the same time, in its sense of resolution, humour and easy narrative, wholeness and playfulness seem to be taking precedence over the more severe dualities and liminality of his previous work.

The emerging or seldom seen tendencies on display in Isupov's work for *Family Affair* are not so much new directions as they are part of the artist's range. And it is apropos that this range should be demonstrated in an exhibition that also highlights the defining roles of husband and father that Isupov has assumed. The exhibition appropriately humanises and circumscribes an artist who, like his work, has often been cloaked in marketable illusions. Seen in a greater totality, one can imagine they are watching Isupov re-aggregate in the present moment, perhaps emerging more whole and more mature from a rite of passage. All this while Pärnamets explores the multifarious, even politically fragmented facets of the female guise.

In *Family Affair*, Sergei Isupov and Kadri Pärnamets both contrast and complement one another. Much in

Facing page: Nymph of Spring. 14 x 13 x 7. White Cloud. 20 x 22 x 11.5, 21 x 17 x 14.5 in. 2015. All are porcelain, slip and glaze. Above: Plate Installation. 2015. Porcelain, slip and glaze. 8.5 in/ea.

their individual works and in the exhibition is easily associated with their roles as man and woman, as husband and wife and as parents. But the pairing of these two artists in yet another shared space and the fact of their relationship may well feed myths of interpretation. Consequently, any drama found in the juxtaposition of their personae may fail to accurately measure the happy banality of their real lives. Lofty analyses also obscure the innocent playfulness that is an increasingly acute aspect of their art.

In this exhibition, that happiness and playfulness – sublime in its simplicity – is best captured by Roosi. Her works, the visual and symbolic balancing point of the show, consist of a series of sculptures and illustrations on plates that are divided into three thematic sections: the farm, the zoo and home. The works are what we might expect from a child, drawn unhesitatingly from the immediate corners of her life and mind, unpretentious and a welcome, almost joyous respite from the intellectual and emotional burden of high-minded art. But what we can expect from Roosi Isupov in the future, only time will tell.

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All photos by John Polak.