

NEWS RELEASE

Uima
Ukrainian institute of modern art
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Things Greater Than Stars: Jurij Solovij Retrospective

January 27 – March 16, 2008.

Opening Reception: Sunday January 27th (2-5pm)



Chicago, IL – The Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art presents a retrospective exhibition of Ukrainian painter Jurij Solovij. This is the first exhibition of his work to be held in the United States since his passing in April of 2007. Solovij was most active throughout the 1950s, 60s and 70s and was renowned for his large, vibrant, and violently abstract canvases, as well as for an incredible series of paintings, drawings and sculptures entitled "1000 Heads". His work combines the intensity of American Abstract Expressionism (e.g. Jackson Pollock and William De Kooning) with the psychological depth and sentiment of 20th century European Abstractionism (e.g. Frank Auerbach and Francis Bacon) – yet to all of these Jurij Solovij adds a unique and powerful *Ukrainian* essence.

Solovij (b. 1921, Lviv Ukraine) graduated from the Lviv school of Arts and Crafts in 1944 and soon after fled to Germany where he met his wife Liselotte. In 1952 Jurij, Liselotte, and their young son Jurij Jr. immigrated to the United States, moving first to Detroit and later to New York City. In 1965, after living and working in Brooklyn for thirteen years, Jurij and his family finally moved to Rutherford NJ where his studio remains to this day. Solovij had been in poor health from 1993 until the time of his death due to a household accident.

The powerful and haunting effects of Ukrainian diaspora are quite prevalent in Solovij's work. Often expressing existential themes such as those of birth, suffering, transience, death and motherhood, his art is cathartic in its expression of the darker and more horrific aspects of the immigrant experience. In this sense, his visionary and progressive painting style can be taken to represent a form of cultural healing.

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Solovij was able to successfully express the trauma and pain experienced by his generation. The essence of such experience could be contained neither by linguistic structures nor concrete forms, thus beginning in the early 1950s Jurij boldly set forth into the realm of painterly abstractionism.

Besides metaphysics, Solovij also made work exploring themes of modern politics and social life – these works are often imbued with a keen sense of irony and satire. It should also be noted that Solovij was an avid theorist, writer and critic of Art. Over the course of his career he became very closely associated with the members of a group of avant-garde Ukrainian émigré writers known as the “New York Group”. In 1978, a collection of his writings was published as a book under the title *Pro rechi bil'shi nizh zori* (About Things Greater Than Stars). Although some early critics charged him with being too progressive and abstract, in retrospect we can now see that Juri Solovij ranks among the greatest abstract painters of the 20th century. His oil and canvas will be forever alive with the essence of Ukrainian American identity.

Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art

The Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art is located at 2320 West Chicago Avenue, Chicago IL. UIMA is open to the public Tuesday – Sunday from 12-4pm. \$5 suggested donation for admission. For more information call (773)227-5522.

UIMA was founded in 1971 by Dr. Achilles Chreptowsky in the heart of Chicago's Ukrainian Village. Three storefronts were transformed into a viable museum serving the local community and the greater Chicago area with an ongoing program of cultural exhibitions, literary events, film screenings and music recitals.

Five to six major exhibits, often supplemented by catalogs, are held in the main gallery which occupies 2100 square feet. One large side gallery houses the permanent collection which includes the work of Chicago artists as well as that of sculptors and painters of Ukrainian descent. UIMA is also home to a professional storage and research facility.

Operational Support for UIMA is provided by: The Illinois Arts Council, The Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley Foundation, Chicago CityArts program, Self-Reliance Federal Credit Union, and the Ukrainian Heritage Foundation.

For more information see: www.uima-chicago.org

Images (left to right): From *1000 Heads*, Mixed Media on Paper (1971-72). *Pregnant*, Oil on Canvas (1959). *Creation*, Oil on Canvas (1962).

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JURIJ SOLOVIJ

, the most forceful and singular promoter of modern art among Ukrainian artists after the Second World War, was born (1921) and educated in the Ukraine.

In the years before immigrating from Germany to the United States (1952) he was involved with non-objective art with a metaphysical motif. It was a productive period. However, not many paintings survived, being continuously overpainted because of postwar materials shortages, especially canvas, cardboard, paper, etc.

After coming to New York, where art galleries at that time were overflowing with non-objective art, his creativity focused on art with strong humanitarian themes: pains of birth — pains of existence — pains of death. Christian heritage (Creation, Nativity, Stoning of St. Stephan, Martydom of St. Sebastian, Pieta, Crucifixion ...); childhood experiences (Fire-eater, Sword-swallower, Man jumping into water, Drowned one, Procession, Catafalque ...); and images of war (Marching man, Dictator, Hanging, Zovti Vody ...) dominated his work till the emergence of the "Thousand Heads" period in 1970.

Since then, Solovij has immersed himself in developing the Thousand Heads theme, producing the first thousand paintings of the series in six weeks. If there is any message in these paintings, sculptures, and drawings, it is not obvious. Solovij believes that: "A work of art informs. It conveys information about the spiritual and physical world of the artist. It conveys information about the artist's values; it conveys information about the quality of those values. It conveys information about the artist's interest in certain components of the work of art at a given time or instant of the creative process; it conveys information about the physical and emotional characteristics of the work of art itself."

Jurij Solovij
50 Years of Creative Work*

by

Yuriy Tarnawsky

Jurij Solovij is one of a handful of Ukrainian émigré artists of his generation -- a handful in all genres of art -- who, upon leaving his homeland during the last World War, managed to cut the umbilical cord of patriotism and traditionalism that bound him to his past, got up on his own two feet, and walked the modernist road of contemporary European art. It became the road which the best artists of the next generation of Ukrainian émigré artists followed, and remains to this day one of the main thoroughfares of contemporary Ukrainian art.

On finding himself in Germany, Jurij Solovij left the ghetto of the DP camp and settled among the Germans. He developed his own, Ukrainian version of expressionism, and achieved some success among the German public. After emigrating to the United States, he continued along the path he charted in Germany, but proceeded to incorporate into his work the innovations of contemporary abstract American art. His favorite -- his only, to be precise -- themes were the existential ones -- birth, suffering, death. Crucifixion and martyrdom became the emblematic subjects of his paintings. But he also painted portraits, frequently portraits of well known figures of the past and the present -- Shevchenko (with a club in his hand that doubled up as the male member), Stepan Bandera, Vasyl Barka, Pope John XXII (in the shape of a space capsule), and perhaps his best known -- a group portrait of the avant-garde Ukrainian émigré writers, the New York Group (two versions).

Although an artist, he became a virtual member of the New York Group, by doing the art work for many of the Group's publications, in particular all twelve yearly publications of *Novi poeziyi* (New Poetry). His modernist graphics became the face which the Group presented to the indifferently hostile Ukrainian reading public.

The few landscapes Jurij Solovij did emit the same intense, existential air as his works with human figures -- the empty space in them is just as tortured and disfigured as the miserable land and buildings beneath it. His most ambitious realized project was "1000 Heads," which resulted in works more than twice that number. In these Jurij Solovij explored many different techniques, including those of sculpture. Even more ambitious were his designs for church frescoes, but remained just designs for lack of support. Ukraine and the world came out the losers as a result of that.

Jurij Solovij's work didn't stop at visual art. He has authored many articles on art and related topics, which were collected in the book *Pro rechi bil'shi nizm zori* (About Things Greater than Stars, 1978), and which are charged with the same fierce modernist spirit as his works of art.

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