

Kyiv sculptor-painter celebrates the 'Carnival of Life'

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It's fitting that the title of Kyiv artist Oleksandr Ahafonov's new exhibition is "Carnival of Life," since he views the world as a series of theatrical episodes.

It's not that his subjects are always dressed in costumes or masks – but rather that Ahafonov says he is a spectator of the theater called life. He notices everyday objects through the prism of the theater – in which plots unfold and he is left to speculate about their conclusions – and reproduces what he sees in bronze, wood, oil, gouache and watercolor.

Like the episodes of life he witnesses, Ahafonov's works encompass a range of moods. They're comic, as in the sculpture "Horsewoman With Umbrella" – riding atop a human rooster. They're dramatic as in the "Dangerous Game," showing a skeleton playing the role of an exotic-looking king seated on a "horse," which is comprised of two men. And sometimes they're romantic, as in the sculpture "Lone Angel," depicting an angel walking on stilts who has either lost the ability or desire to fly but who still wants to remain above the earth.

"The theater of life, the theater of beauty is my world," Ahafonov said in an interview before the Feb. 15 exhibition opening.

In the last decade Ahafonov has staged nearly two dozen exhibitions in Kyiv, New York, Toulouse, London, Moscow and Chicago. The current exhibition presents his latest sculptures, watercolors and oils

In an introduction to "Carnival Catastrophe," Pavel Fishel warns viewers that in order to understand his friend Ahafonov's creations, "first impressions should be suppressed" and that "the viewer should refrain from any close association with the works of other talented artists because these associations may limit an in-depth understanding of Ahafonov's works."

In other words, take Ahafonov for what he is.

Tall, handsome and possessing an abundance of energy and a wealth of ideas, Ahafonov works out of a studio with a strikingly similar personality. It's in a small attic room packed with tools, art works, the smell of fresh paint and the sense of barely controlled creative chaos. A group of Ahafonov's friends congregate there, as does his artist wife, Halyna.

Born in 1947, Ahafonov graduated from the Kyiv National Art Institute. By the sixth grade he had already learned to work with oils – and was encouraged to be original. Far from imitating the masters, students were forbidden to copy the style of classic Western artists like Rembrandt.

"Such an approach was justified," Ahafonov said, "since it forced students to discover their own visions."

Ahafonov remains as enthusiastic an artist today as he was as a young man. He said that friends teasingly call him a "madman" for the passion that often keeps him working through the night.

"It often frightens people," he said, laughing. "People have to take me with small portions just as they would take poison in small doses to

build up immunity."

Things didn't always go so smoothly, however. Ahafonov's spirit of independence also contradicted the homogeneous and mainly socialist-realist approach to art advocated by the Soviet authorities. Attempting to remain apolitical, both Ahafonov and his wife went through a period in the 1970s when the state refused to sanction or show their work. As a result, the couple survived largely through the support of their friends from the sale of their work at private, closed exhibitions – as well as through illustrating books and teaching.

Ahafonov continues to teach art classes, which has helped him win friends and valuable contacts. Canadian admirers Bohdan Kopeck and Teal Gayovsky helped finance the printing of the catalogue for "Carnival of Life" – and they were among the family, friends and guests who attended the exhibition opening.

"Friends open their hearts and become as crazy as you are," Ahafonov said.

The Khibnya Exhibit Hall, located on the grounds of the St. Sofia Cathedral at 24 Volodymyrska, operates daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. and is closed Thursdays. Admission is Hr 2 for adults and Hr 1 for students and children. The exhibition runs through Feb. 28.

More information about Ahafonov and his work can be found on the ArtEast Gallery Web site at www.arteast.org/ahafonov.html as well as at www.okna.com.ua/ahafonov.



Standing behind one of his sculptures, Oleksandr Ahafonov, left, speaks to a guest at the opening of his exhibition Feb. 15. (Post photo by Dima Gavrish)