



CRUDE OIL IN THE FORM OF MALEVICH BLACK SQUARE | 55 X 55.5 X 6 CM | EDITION OF 5 | 2006

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CRUDE OIL IN THE FORM OF MALEVICH BLACK CROSS | 58 X 58 X 6 CM | EDITION OF 5 | 2006

# ANDREI MOLODKIN



FROM THE SERIES COLD WAR II | MIXED MEDIA | 2006

Andrei Molodkin, a young Russian artist who shares his time between Moscow, New York and Paris, is best known for his three-dimensional pieces consisting of oil barrels and pipes connected to transparent acrylic boxes half-filled with Chechen or Iraqi oil. Each has a hollow sculpture or phrase inside. The phrases ("Support our troops," "Democracy," etc.) are subversive in the sense that, in the court of art, official demagoguery cannot "take the Fifth" to avoid testifying against itself. Although the images tend to be deconstructive, they nonetheless skillfully combine anarchy with order, or defiance of the status quo with aesthetic standards, thereby turning the opposites into connected vessels. What this artist aims to expose is the *export of democracy for oil's sake* – a gauntlet Molodkin throws down in the face of the political establishment and the culture industry, knowing that the biggest art collectors in Russia (and not only in Russia) are oil tycoons who often sponsor political extremism and identify with the powers that be.

On one hand, oil is the most ancient of resources; on the other hand, oil is in demand by modernity like no other commodity. It is an ideal model for art, which aspires to be something that already exists and at the same time be something new. The sign of our times is the "demographic explosion" of vacant forms easily filled with equally vacant content, including any ideology or any discourse, provided that an empty form is a prop for mimesis. In Molodkin's case the empty form is "a hollow matrix that you can fill with oil." For him, "culture is an emptiness we have to fill and affirm with economics." Hence, it comes as no surprise that in order to reaffirm the value of Kazimir Malevich's *Black Square*, Molodkin chooses to pump oil into it.

Molodkin has always contrived to spill oil from the pipes that connect his art objects (*The White House* (2005) or *Democracy* (2005), for example) to the barrels standing on the gallery floor. The artist relates such spills to notorious "leaks" of sensitive information (caused by White House officials). This gives the viewers an opportunity to experience some of the physical qualities of oil; according to Molodkin, Chechen and Iraqi oils smell different. In a way, he challenges Magritte's warning that the visual representation of a pipe "is not a pipe," by adding a proviso: unless it smells like one.

Molodkin's most recent series, *Cold War II* (2006), consists of photographs he took while working on a project in Russia's oil-producing north. According to the artist, his "attention was drawn by enormous steel cisterns that look like cathedrals on the inside, with a hollow echo and barely penetrating light. The oil industry is the flesh and blood of the country's economy, and in this context one recalls media images that connect national resources to national identity ('Russian Orthodox oil')." At the same time, oil is the newly reinvented apple of discord, rife and competition (and possibly confrontation) between the West and the East, given that hawks like Dick Cheney have already used Cold War II rhetoric in their political speeches.

I was struck by the complicated technology involved in the production of Molodkin's works and by the quality of their execution. The artist uses a technique conducive to the differentiation of optical perspectives. Thanks to these different perspectives, the viewer's first impression scatters into various interpretations. According to the artist, "the plan was to make a sort of negative of the sculpture, so that we could see emptiness in some kind of neutral glass cube – an emptiness intended to be filled with something 'global,' some sort of product of waste of globalization."

Victor Tupitsyn



DEMOCRACY | ACRYLIC BLOCK FILLED WITH IRAQI CRUDE OIL | 40 X 180 X 15 CM | 2005