



SERGEI

CHEPIK





Photograph courtesy Guillon

Front Cover: Procession II 1988-90, Mixed Media on Canvas, 130 x 130cm

Sergei Chepik  
(1953 - 2011)  
Exhibition September 2019

CATTO GALLERY

100 Heath Street • Hampstead • London NW3 1DP  
Tel: +44 (0)20 7435 6660 • [art@cattogallery.co.uk](mailto:art@cattogallery.co.uk)



# THE GENIUS OF SERGEI CHEPIK

by Godfrey Barker  
London, July 2019

“What can Russia teach the world?” asked Solzhenitsyn. It was a state in putrefaction. But he found an answer. The chief cause of his country’s ruin, he asserted in his 1958 work *The Gulag Archipelago*, is that “Man has forgotten God - that’s why all this has happened”.

I do not know if Sergei Chepik read that forbidden book, or Boris Pasternak’s *Dr Zhivago*. But he knew about them. His father could have bought both on visits to Paris; and these masterpieces on the destruction of Russia by Communism are the foundation of his art. Solzhenitsyn’s next novels denounced Soviet Russia as a *Cancer Ward*, then as the *First Circle* of hell in Dante. Chepik, seeing his country to be governed by the devil, signed up to all of this. He was first among Russian artists to make his contempt explicit - and alone in doing so.

The major paintings of his life are about the disintegration of truth in Russia after the Revolution, about the unaccountability of monster dictators and about Russia’s psychological ‘war against reality’ (the words of Peter Pomarantsev in a brilliant 2019 book).

Chepik’s “lived experience” - born in Russia in 1953, died in exile in Paris in 2011 - began not with imprisonment but with days as close to sunlight as the USSR afforded. He was taught art in Kiev (a pretty city) by his father, a member of the Art Union and the recognised painter of *Flowers for Stalin* (1951) and of plein air landscapes in early 20th century World of Art style. Pretty girls and heroic coalminers naturally followed. Chepik’s father supplied these to Russia’s state market of hospitals, schools and regional Communist headquarters; all paid little but paid dependably. These were halcyon years by Soviet standards for the Chepiks, troubled only by the stifling conformity forced on artists by Socialist Realism.

It was Chepik’s choice to be offended by this boredom, to uproot himself from his privileged upbringing and head for trouble.

Needlessly he left Kiev for Leningrad. At the Repin Academy he found better art teaching, true belief in pre-Communist culture before 1917 and, most valuable of all, professors too important to be brought under party control. As a student Chepik quickly announced his own independence, openly admiring Old Masters above Socialist Realism. Students thought him too clever and confident and touched with a distinct smell of danger; but in his years at the Repin, he and his work were protected by a broad-minded teacher, Prof Andrei Mylnikov.

But after graduating in 1978, Chepik was on his own. He put firm feet on a road that led to exile. There appeared a *Michelangelo Triptych* that revered the Renaissance master who confronted Popes, disdained princes and defied authority. Chepik’s paintings stood him next to blocks of marble, exuding unconquerable temper, proud, severe and obstinate. They caused outrage. This provocation was followed by *The Battle of Kulikova*, the 1380 triumph over the Mongolian hordes from which Russia emerged as a nation. Chepik depicted the victors not as heroes but as sufferers. Patriotism, even at this early date, was tainted. Then, in a series of folktale paintings that greeted state perestroika and glasnost, the happy-sad puppet Petrushka, famous in Russian theatre, repeatedly appeared, the character who fights injustice and evil and speaks truth when all others are silent. Every Russian understood what this meant. Finally, most alarming and most predestining of all Chepik’s works, there came a painting named after Dostoevsky’s novel *The House of the Dead*.

The novel was published in 1862. The painting was horrifying reality. Chepik, who knew doctors, gained entrance in 1979 for three months to a Leningrad psychiatric hospital to study mentally ill people in Russia. What he saw he did not dare to paint. Six years later he completed a sketch, one of the most important works in this Catto exhibition. The

resultant painting came in Paris in 1988. It was art’s first authentic revelation of a Soviet Gulag, seen from within: haunted gazes, paralysed idleness and stillness among prisoners told by officials that they have gone mad. Chepik saw two questions on their faces. Why was I born? What have I done with my life? He replied with an inscription on a pillar, for officialdom to read: “look carefully, for this is your face”. The sketch for *The House of the Dead*, is an unforgettable painting, one of the defining achievements of Chepik’s oeuvre.

Chepik was no activist, but a philosopher. As an artist, he spoke the moral conscience of Russia. In the final years when the monstrous Soviet edifice creaked and collapsed and Chepik’s derisive art became known in the West, he resisted all attempts by Western art magazines to label him, like the nuclear physicist Sakharov and the novelist Solzhenitsyn, a protester or “dissident”. Absolutely he refused to be linked with politics (accurately foreseeing the bankruptcy of the Yeltsin-Putin decades ahead). Chepik was an introvert, a man driven by laws of his own making. He responded to the evils of the USSR intellectually, not on the street.

Nonetheless the street was his awaiting fate. The Young Artists Union, which he joined on leaving the Repin, promptly alleged his disobedience to State rules.

It strangled his exhibitions and commissions and denied him paper, canvas and paints. Chepik, at its mercy, was penniless and thus homeless, sleeping with tramps in basements and empty houses and washing at railway stations. He left the city for Lake Ladoga and an immersion in Old Russia in the towns around its shores.

But here he found worse. He made friends with peasants and villagers, delighted in their traditional life, but found everything in ruin - churches and countryside above all. Poverty and ignorance ruled the day. The bureaucracy and insanity he had met in Leningrad now looked more like naked power.

The experiences of this wandering artist now echoed those of Pasternak’s *Dr Zhivago*. Russia was a prison, lies were multitudinous. Officials everywhere talked of “the dawn of a new world” but no one Chepik met was free. The People’s Commissars spouted at him what they said to Zhivago in his railway carriage to Siberia in 1917, “destruction is the right and essential first stage [of the Revolution]. Society has not yet disintegrated enough. It must collapse completely. After this, the Revolutionary Government will rebuild it on a wholly new basis.” Zhivago, wrote Pasternak, “felt sick.” Chepik, revolted by a life of pretence and of constant, systematic duplicity, vowed to escape Russia altogether.

It took him three years to succeed. His route out of the country came via a French teacher at Leningrad University, Marie-Aude Albert, whom he met in 1986, who brought him to Paris in 1988, and who he later married.

Chepik’s happy life began. This exhibition celebrates it in pictures that express joy in his new home and in the multi-faceted culture of France. Darker images suggest his soul stayed behind in Russia. Its landscape haunted him; so too its eternal contradictions. Russia before 1917 was the second richest state in Europe after England. Dismembered by Josef Stalin, “the most mad, the most cruel of tyrants... the cause” (wrote the composer Shostakovich) “of more harm than Ivan the Terrible and all abnormal kings and tsars put together”, Russia became a heap of ashes. Stalin, who banned *Hamlet*, died with Mozart’s 23rd Piano Concerto on his gramophone.

What a country! The seat of genius and mental derangement; endlessly fascinating, its problems still unresolved, its extremes now laid bare by this extraordinary artist.





The House of the Dead (Sketch) 1984 (The Madhouse), Mixed Media on Board, 168 x 176cm





The Three Clowns 1998, Mixed Media on Canvas, 40 x 80cm



The Bench 1989, Mixed Media on Canvas, 66 x 102cm

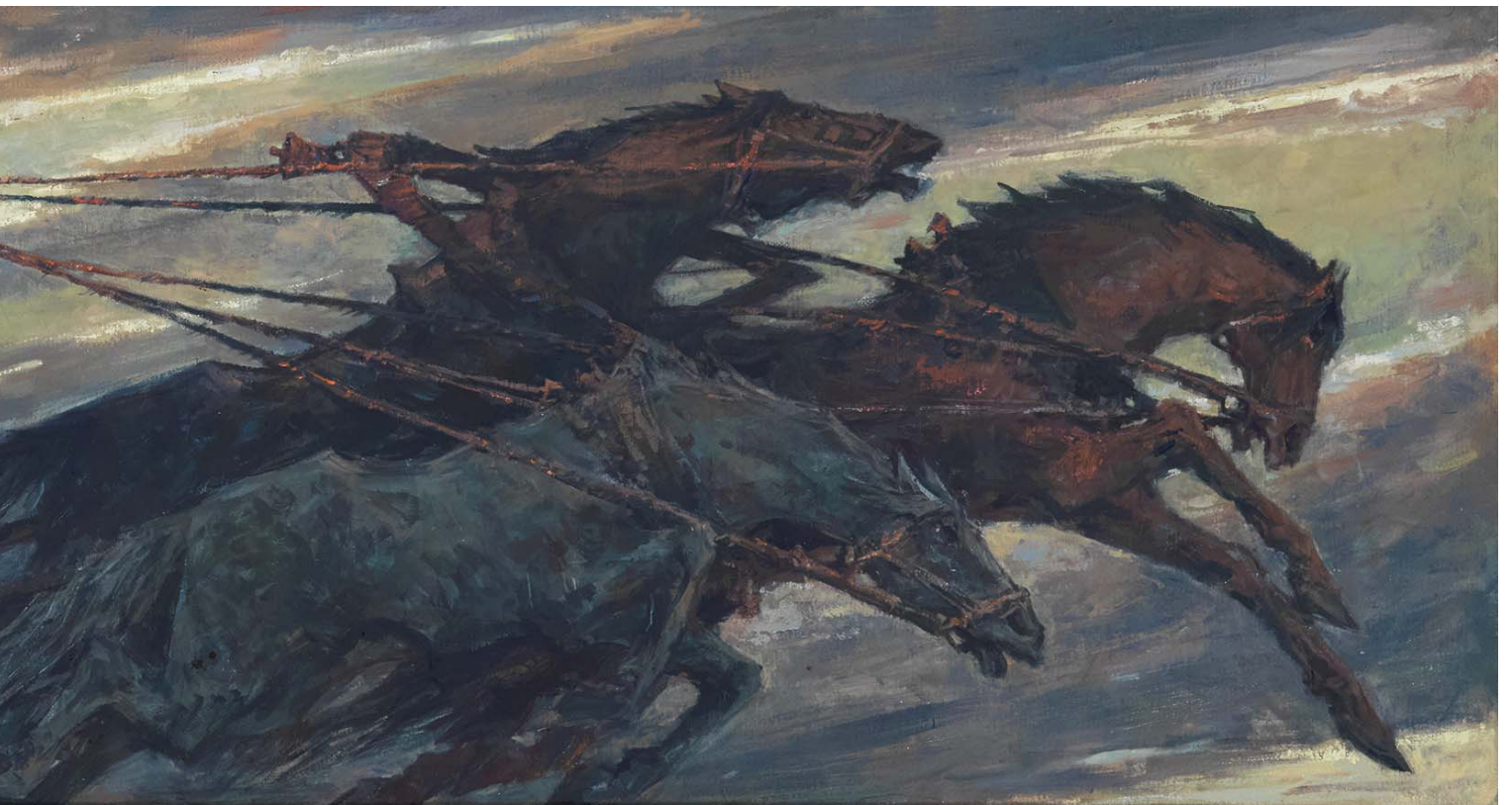


The Refugees (Bezchency) 1999,  
Mixed Media on Canvas, 50 x 136cm



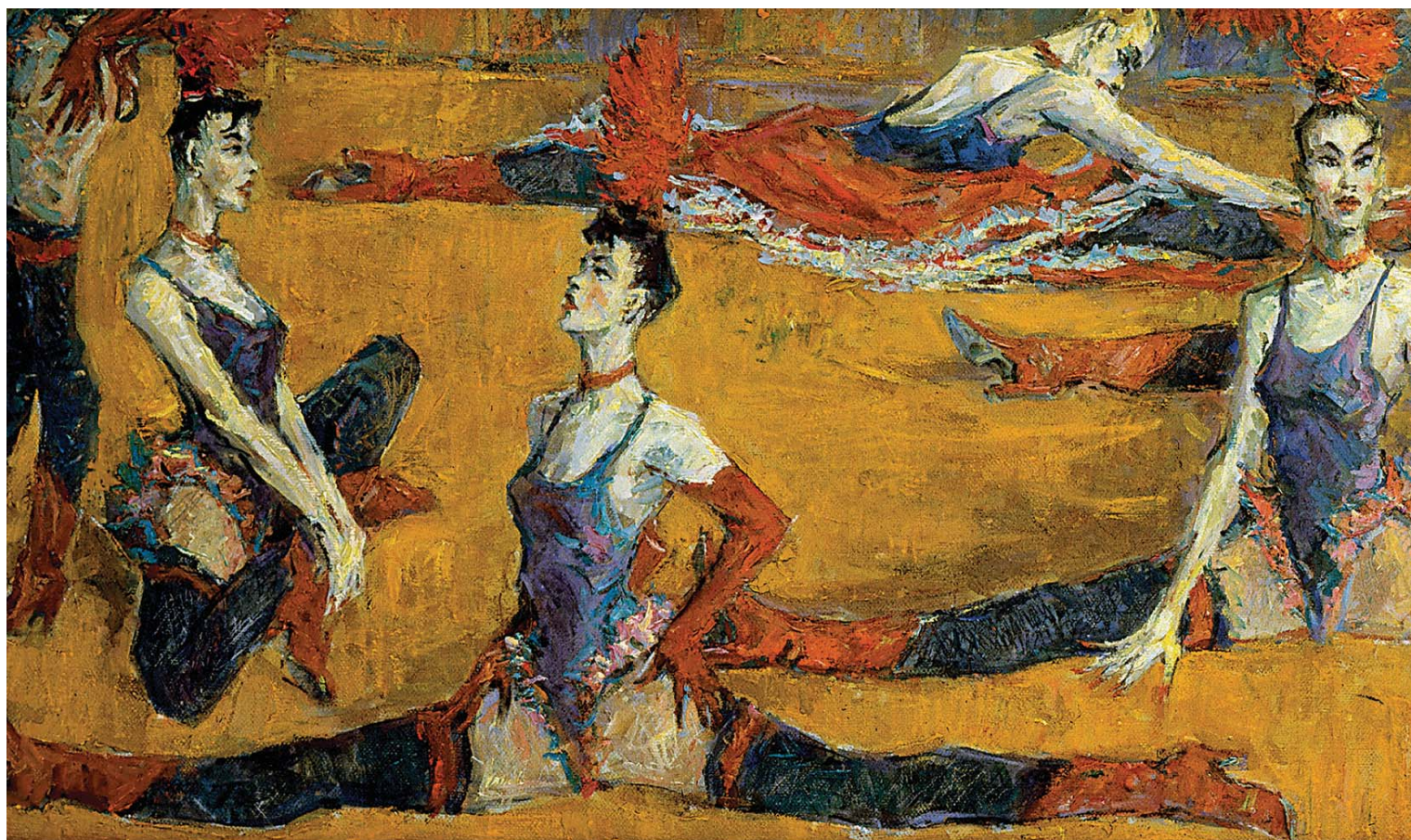
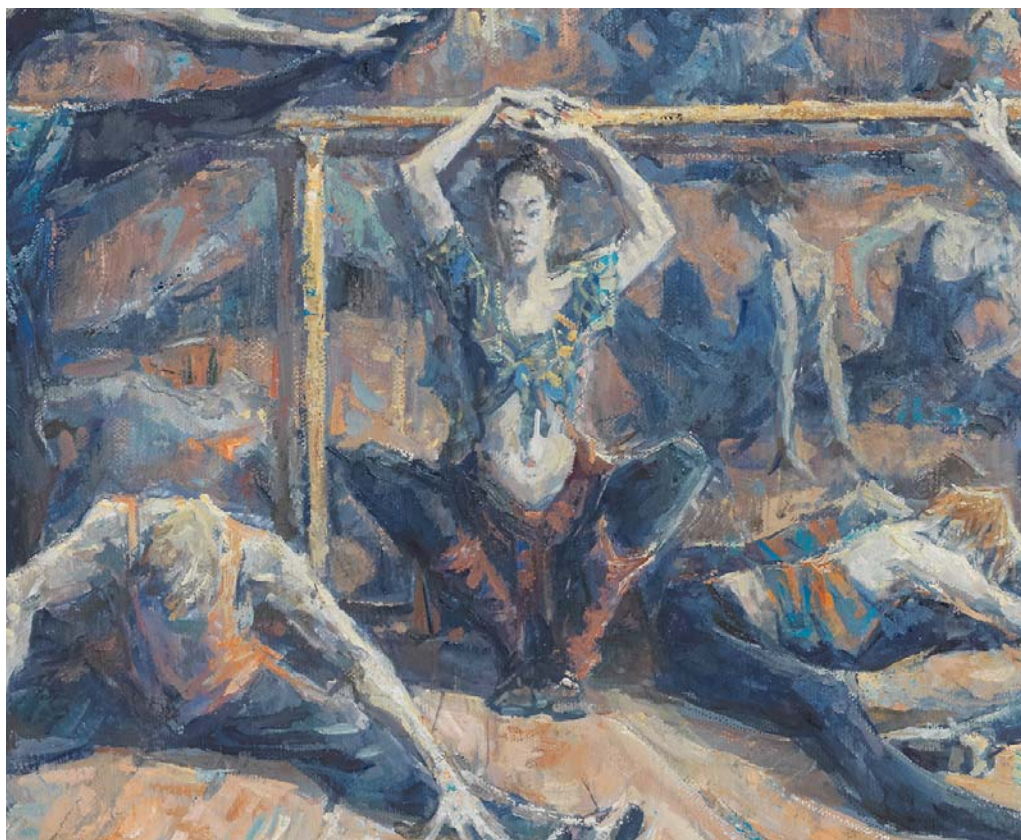
Troika 1999, Mixed Media on Canvas, 46 x 178cm







La Barre 2000,  
Mixed Media on Canvas, 40 x 122cm



Before the Cancan 2001, Mixed Media on Canvas, 48 x 150cm









Kabak 1999, Mixed Media on Canvas, 109 x 48cm





Morituri te Salutant 1997 - 03, Mixed Media on Canvas, 119 x 51cm



Procession III 1992,  
Mixed Media on Canvas, 100 x 100cm









Rio di San Lorenzo 2000, Mixed Media on Canvas, 41 x 50cm



Haute - Provence 3 2001, Watercolour, 21 x 48cm





Rio di Verona 2000, Mixed Media on Canvas, 25 x 60cm



Capri 2000, Watercolour, 28 x 58cm





Le Tambour, Feraï in Arles 2002 - 2003,  
Mixed Media on Canvas, 80 x 40cm





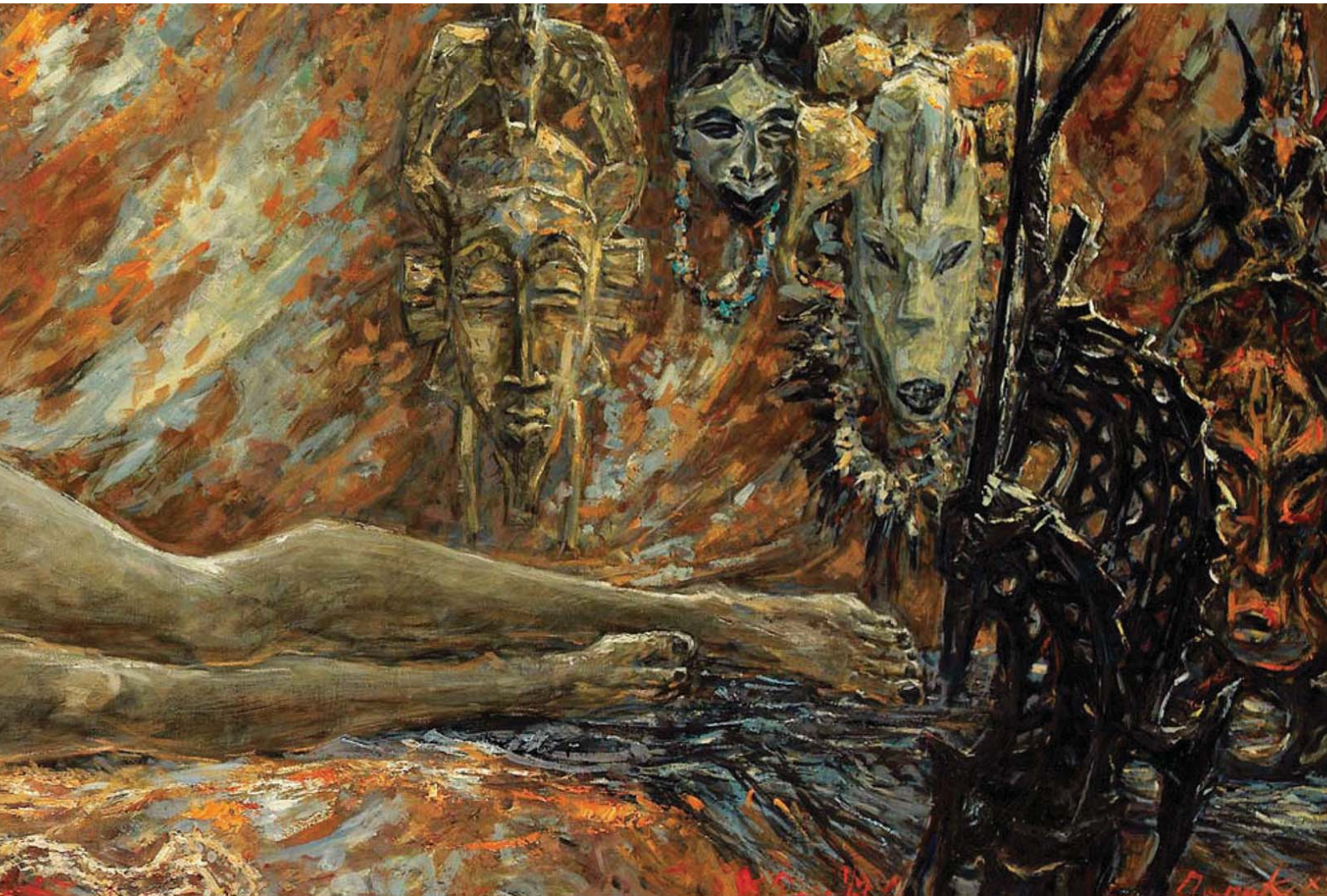
La Strada 2005, Mixed Media on Canvas, 99 x 74cm





The Black Venus 2010, Mixed Media on Canvas, 71 x 221cm









Summer Flowers 1996, Mixed Media on Canvas, 100 x 65cm





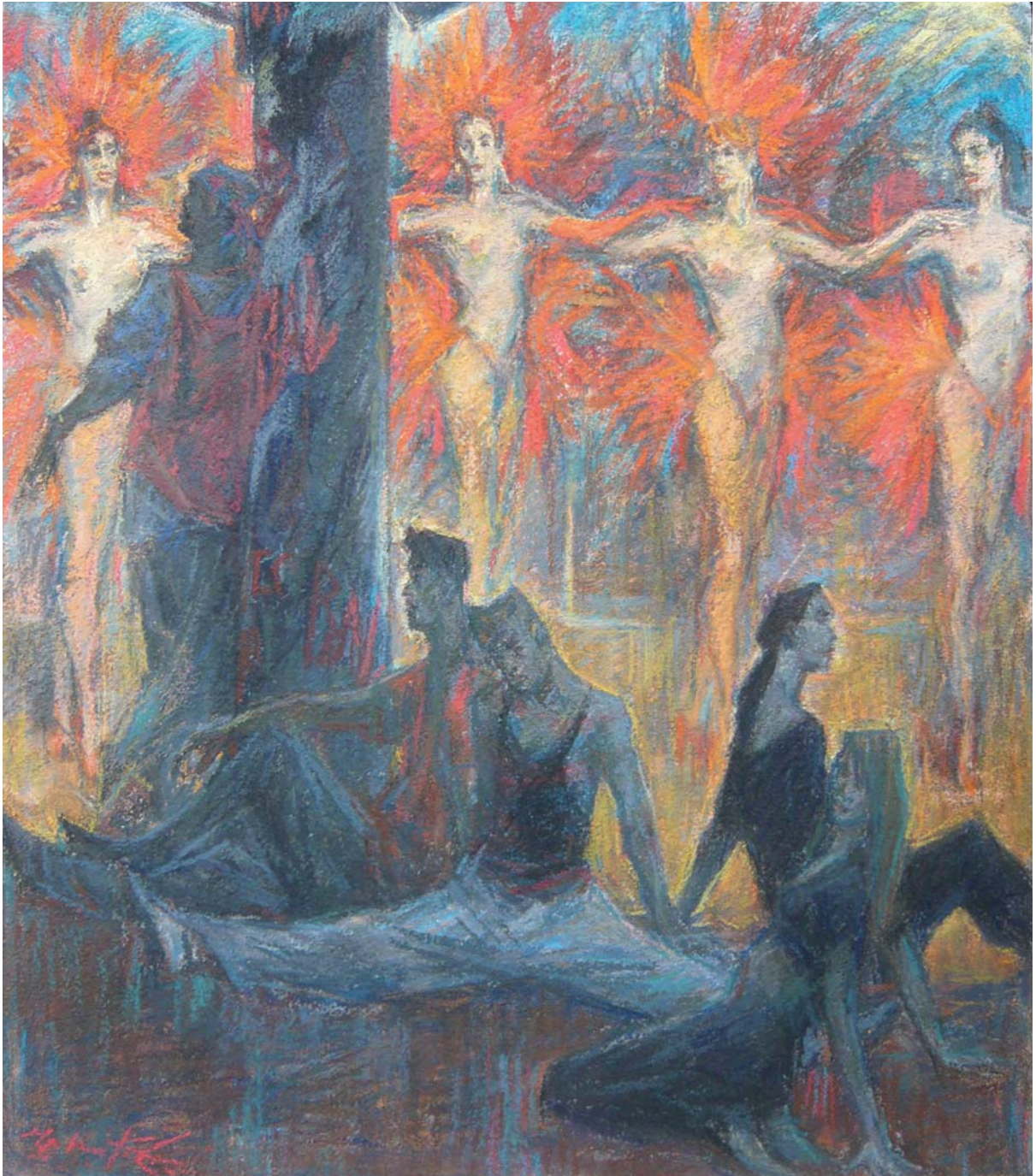
Sunflowers from St Remy de Provence 1997, Mixed Media on Canvas, 75 x 65cm





Le Rideau 2005, Pastel on Paper, 41 x 85cm





Repetition at the Moulin Rouge 2001, Pastel on Card, 71 x 61cm





Voznesenya Church 1982, Mixed Media on Canvas, 41 x 33cm



St Sophia in Vologda 1977, Mixed Media on Canvas, 44 x 44cm



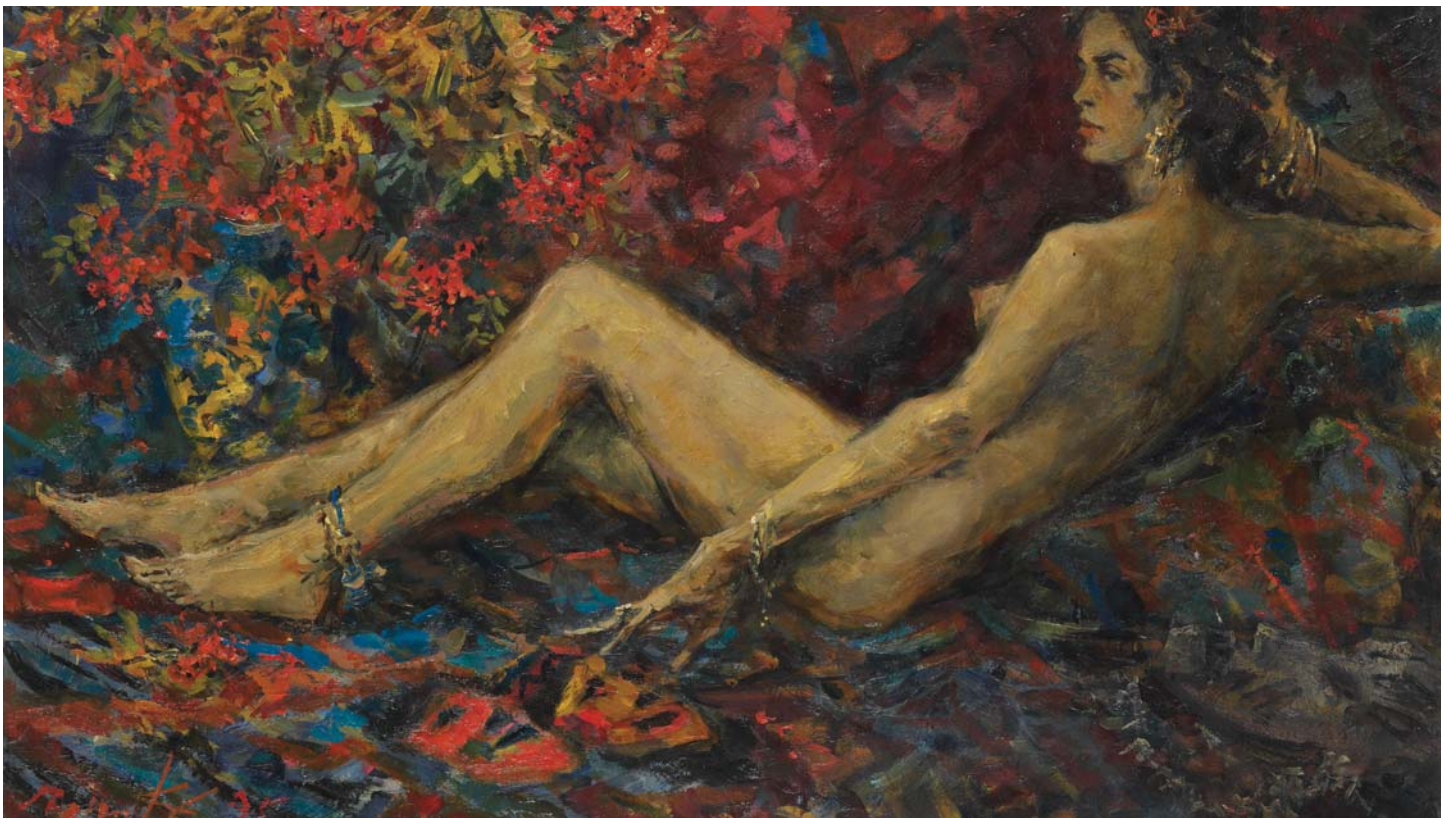


Winter Snow 1980, Mixed Media on Canvas, 71 x 71cm





New York 1993, Mixed Media on Canvas, 73 x 50cm



Small Odalisque 1995, Oil on Canvas, 33 x 55cm





The Three Boys 1999, Mixed Media on Canvas, 80 x 75cm





The Warriors 1983, Monotype, 50 x 28cm



The Sorcerer 1991, Monotype, 39 x 29cm





Village Corse 2002, Watercolour, 30 x 42cm



Saint Malo 2003, Watercolour, 24 x 43cm





# CATTO GALLERY

100 Heath Street • Hampstead • London NW3 1DP  
Tel: +44 (0)20 7435 6660 • [www.cattogallery.co.uk](http://www.cattogallery.co.uk) • [art@cattogallery.co.uk](mailto:art@cattogallery.co.uk)  
Opening times: 10am - 6pm Mon - Sat • 12.30pm - 6pm Sunday • and by appointment

Exhibition dates: 12th - 30th September 2019