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Thoroughly modern Moscow

By Gareth Harris

If you're going to rebrand a city, why not throw in an art biennial for good measure? Moscow has Dior in Red Square, while Versace and Paris Hilton dominate billboards all over town. The second Moscow Biennale (until April 1) taps into another aspirational product – contemporary art. But post-1980s painting and sculpture are not yet the must-have accessory for the very very wealthy in a metropolis that boasts 25 billionaires. According to one dealer, although the “poor rich” may shell out a million roubles for choice contemporary pieces for the office, the country's oligarchs are still sticking with impressionist and early 20th-century Russian art.

Yet buying tastes are starting to shift towards the late 20th century. At the Sotheby's sale in London last month of modern and contemporary Russian art, the most sought-after work dated from the 1970s. Sergei Khripun of Moscow's XL Gallery says Russian collectors are starting to buy contemporary art. “It's not a boom situation but it's growing,” he adds.

A dozen international-level private contemporary art galleries are dotted around the capital, and late last year Moscow opened its largest outlet to date, reportedly a non-commercial venture, owned by Leonid Blavatnik, the Russian-born Access Industries billionaire. The Moscow-based Club of Contemporary Collectors, founded six years ago by the financier Mikhail Tsarev, has more than 40 members.

In the context of the burgeoning art market, Joseph Backstein, the Biennale's so-called “commissar”, cannily says he wants to plug this second edition into the “modern market economy” under the overarching theme of “Footnotes on Geopolitics, Market and Amnesia”. Backstein, leading a team of eight international “superstar” curators that includes Hans Ulrich Obrist of London's Serpentine Gallery, aims to explore the role of contemporary artists in today's globalised, capitalist world.

This championing of cultural values over commerce is conveniently, even ironically, set against a distinctly commercial backdrop. Take the TSUM department store, one of two unlikely principal venues for the Biennale. Visitors enter the show alongside the Dolce & Gabbana children's clothing section to see a lazy selection of US video art. Only works by Christian Holstad (“Shake the Baby”, 2006) and Aaron Young (“Freedom Fries”, 2005)

stand out. People plonked in front of plasma screens look as if they have walked into an extension of the shop's electrical goods department.

The Biennale's second flagship space, another mercantile mecca, is the Federation Tower on the other side of town in the city's planned Moskva-City business district. The video works here – especially the Afghan artist Lida Abdul's balletic film of a group of men dismantling a set of ruins (“What We Saw Awakening”, 2006) – are among the strongest pieces on view in four shows, along with Luchezar Boyadjev's photomontages of melded advertisements and monuments in European cities.

Mirax Group, the property developer behind the tower, which is set to be Europe's tallest building when it opens next year, is a Biennale sponsor, along with some of Russia's biggest companies, such as the natural gas giant Gazprom. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Gazprom, which has expanded into the oil sector, is not listed in the Biennale catalogue as a backer of “Petroliana” at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, one of 34 “special projects” that complement the main programme. This exhibition focuses on the power of the petrodollar, with work by eastern European artists being among the most engaging on show. “Oil Letters” (2004) by Moscow-born Yevgeniy Fiks consists of correspondence from seven petrol companies. They all refuse his request for five gallons of crude oil for use in an installation; oil and artists, it seems, just don't mix.

Russian artists also take wry, intelligent swipes at art-world awards such as the Turner Prize and, more surprisingly, Soviet customs and the state (which has pumped about \$2m into the event) in two other fringe shows, Yuri Albert at the Era Foundation and *The Woes of Wit* at the Literature Museum respectively.

So what is the Moscow Biennale experience? Just like Russia's attempts to embrace a free market economy, it is faltering, chaotic, aspirant, exciting and determined to thrust its native talents into the international arena. As with any other biennial, it is a sprawling multi-site monster – but its multiple personalities are stimulating rather than frustrating.

Sometimes, to be sure, it promises more than it delivers. Why, for instance, do obvious Russian artists far outweigh Chinese practitioners in what should be the Biennale's most significant show, *Political Art in Russia and China* at the State Tretyakov Gallery? Yet, ultimately, this Biennale does more than enough to justify its existence. Its addition to the booming biennial circuit should be welcomed.

