

Being and Beings. Anthropomorphism of Felix Lembersky

Yelena Lembersky

When Galya asked her father, artist Felix Lembersky, to help her understand poetry, he recited Vladimir Mayakovsky's "Comrade Nette—Steamship and Man." He spoke about metaphor as the vital instrument of artistic expression, and anthropomorphism as a means to reveal the human condition through things transformed into symbols. He argued that art cannot be explicit or didactic, as mandated by Socialist Realism, but must evoke emotional responses and create awareness. For Lembersky, the poem conveyed the spirit of the avant-garde and the direction he was taking in his own art.

Into the port
as hot
as molten summer
came steaming
and strolling
comrade "Theodor Nette."

It was him.

I know him.

Wearing lifebelts-like jam-jar glasses.

Hello Nette!

How happy I am
you're alive—

the smoky life of pipes
and cables and winches.

—Vladimir Mayakovsky¹

During the 1940s and early 1950s, Lembersky had created realist canvases, mostly portraits—laconic, nearly monochrome, and focused on the emotional experiences of his sitters. By the 1960s, he moved to non-mimetic art, in which still objects became proxies for the living world. It may appear that his later work was the negation of the earlier one. In fact, it was part of his evolution to find more precise and powerful means to reveal the human condition. In the earlier years, Lembersky represented people as an empathetic observer. Later, he showed them through metaphor.

The full experience of Lembersky's art requires a sustained effort from his viewer, both emotional and intellectual. At the center of this experience is the vision of the world, in which physical and spiritual realms exist in tandem, expressed through anthropomorphism converging with Judaism and Christianity, with Russian magic tales and pagan myths, with recent and distant historic events and a wide range of references. This vision in Lembersky's art is part of a larger context one finds in the twentieth century Russian literature, poetry and art—in the work of Vladimir Mayakovsky, Boris Pasternak, Vasily Grossman, Pavel Filonov, and in the later work of Second Avant-Garde.

¹ From "Comrade Nette—Steamship and Man," unpublished translation by James Womack.

The columns of flame and smoke looked at one moment like living beings seized by horror and fury, at another moment like quivering poplars and aspens. Like women with long, streaming hair, the black clouds and red flames joined together in a wild dance.²

—Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate*

And the woods are undressed, uncovered,
And at the service of Christ's Passion,
Like the ranks of people praying,
Stand trunks of pine trees in a crowd."³

—Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*

Anthropomorphic view of the world is predetermined by the structure of the Russian language that takes a gendered approach to objects and precludes the use of non-living "it." Much to the befuddlement of non-native speakers, everything comes to life through the assignment of gender. Language determines the masculinity of the house and the femininity of the stair. Suffixes ascribe qualities to things, whether animate or inanimate. "*Chelovek*" (man) becomes "*chelovecheshe*" (giant man), and "*dom*" (house) becomes "*domishche*" (giant house), bringing together dissimilar entities into a common phonetic and conceptual set.

This linguistic fluidity finds its way into Lembersky's visual expression. The "*dom*"/"*domishche*" of his *Khozmag* is transformed into "*chelovek*"/"*chelovecheshe*," integrating the two into a complex and versatile symbol that unites habitation and inhabitant. His blast-furnaces, fences, huts, windows, clouds, rugs, pails and ficus plants morph into beings. In *Midday*, the fence turns into a figure transforming this eerily empty countryside into the site of Crucifixion, the second title of the painting, refracted through modernist lens from the post-war vantage point.

The deliberateness of Lembersky's process of transmuting object into symbol illustrates his concept of a two-tiered reality, in which "the first layer" (Lembersky's term)—the immediately recognizable subject, such as a house—coexists with the second layer—the subject's inner meaning. For the artist, this concept does not serve formal or conceptual ends, but reflects his overarching vision of the world as operating within two parallel realms. The work of art "must . . . uncover inner springs and reveal new worlds," he stated in 1956.⁴ In his 1960 autobiography, he wrote: "I attempt to find the hidden spirituality in nature and reveal it through a metaphor."⁵ The material world is easily accessible through representation, while the spiritual one requires the viewer to see beyond the obvious. In 1912, the Russian avant-garde artist Pavel Filonov proposed the concept of "analytical realism" or "anti-Cubism,"⁶ in which objects revealed reality through their 'inner soul.'

...Every object is not limited to two predicates, form and color, but has a world of visible and invisible conditions, emanations, reactions, engagement, genesis and being, known or hidden qualities that, in turn, possess endless predicates of their own; therefore I reject in

² Vasily Grossman, *Life and Fate*, trans. Robert Chandler, (New York Review Books Classics, 2006)

³ Boris Pasternak, "Holy Week: The Poems of Yuri Zhivago," in *Doctor Zhivago*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010).

⁴ Felix Lembersky speech, 1956, transcription published in Yelena Lembersky, ed., *Felix Lembersky. Paintings and Drawings* (Moscow: Galart, 2009), 126.

⁵ "Felix Lembersky o sebe i svoem tvorchestve" (1960), *Felix Lembersky*, 123.

⁶ Pavel Filonov, "The Canon and the Law" (*Kanon I Zakon*), 1912).

its entirety the faith of contemporary realism and all its sects on the left and on the right based on 'two predicates,' as they are non-scientific and dead."⁷

Lembersky's art is compatible with Filonov's philosophy, the two men had an opportunity to meet in the 1930s in Leningrad, where Lembersky studied at the Academy of Art and Filonov taught privately having rejected the mandates of Socialist Realism. As the older master, Lembersky insisted that his own art was *realism*, even when he clearly moved to non-mimetic expression. "Every epoch creates its own realism and adds its own criteria to this concept," Lembersky wrote in the early 1960s.¹⁰ He created images that could evoke the response and raise awareness in those who came in contact with his art. At the discussion of his exhibition in 1960, he said:

I call upon the young people who will come after us to create works that people will want to see again and again, and then, after coming home, to think about them, and then, having thought about them, say to themselves, "I have not seen everything yet."⁸

In his art, Lembersky recreated life in full complexity, reaching beyond self-referential game of form and color, compressing time, expressing the world in the continuum, and offering it to us, his viewers—to contemplate and ask ourselves, Have I seen everything?

Biography

Felix Lembersky (b. Lublin, Poland, 1913; d. Leningrad, 1970) was a painter, set designer, teacher, creator of artistic groups and an active proponent of freedom in the art in the Soviet Union. His visual context is grounded in Poland, where he was born; in Ukraine, where he was raised; in Leningrad (St. Petersburg), where he lived; and in other cities in Russia and the Urals. He became a refugee at the onset of World War I, grew up in the crucible of the Bolshevik Revolution and the Civil War, and lived through World War II, including the Siege of Leningrad and the murder of his parents in occupation. He studied in Kiev from 1928 to 1934: at Jewish Art school "Kultur-lige" and Kiev Art Institute, and in Leningrad: at the Academy of Art from 1935 to 1941, graduating in the besieged city in December, 1941.

Lembersky's work appeared in major exhibitions in the United States and Russia. Recent catalogues include *Felix Lembersky. Paintings and Drawings* (Galart, 2009) and *Torn from Darkness. Works by Felix Lembersky* (University of Richmond, 2012). His work is in the holdings of the Russian Museum (St. Petersburg) and Dodge Collection of Soviet Nonconformism, among others. Current solo shows include *Being and Beings: Work by Felix Lembersky* (Pushkin House, London, April 24-May 17, 2013) and *Felix Lembersky: Soviet Forms, Jewish Context* (Jewish Museum Milwaukee, WI, March 17-July 14, 2013)

For more information visit www.lembersky.org and

Felix Lembersky in Color on Youtube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C9ZHCqKpSHk>

Biography of the author

Yelena Lembersky is a co-author of *Felix Lembersky. Paintings and Drawings* (Moscow: Galart, 2009), a curator of exhibitions and frequent lecturer on the art of Felix Lembersky. She lives in Boston, Massachusetts

⁷ Pavel Filonov, "Declaration of 'Universal Flowering,'" *Life of Art* 20 (1923), 13, quoted by Evgeny Kovtun in *Pavel Nikolaevich Filonov* (Leningrad: Avrora, 1988), p. 54.

⁸ Felix Lembersky, speech at the discussion of his exhibition at LOSKh, Leningrad, 1960, stenographic record, published in *Felix Lembersky*, 127.