

From Gulag to Glasnost

Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union



unlike St. John, Kalinin's holy man does not appear to be proof against temptation.

Kalinin's deliberate intermingling of the spiritual and the sexual is most vividly apparent in the oil lamp that appears in the foreground of this print. In a work so full of liturgical objects, the lamp retains its traditional religious symbolism, but thanks to the bulging curves at the base of its shade it has acquired a phallic character as well. (Spirituality is further compromised by the presence of flies perching on it.) Kalinin's insistent imaging of the erotic and the spiritual is in sharp opposition to the austere rationality and self-discipline held up by the Soviet authorities as models for human behavior. A similar juxtaposition of spiritual and physical extremes is to be found in the art of Ernst Neizvestny (b. 1925); both Neizvestny and Kalinin envision pain, spirituality, and sexuality in terms of bodily extension and excitement.¹⁰

When a Western viewer attempts to describe the unofficial Soviet art of the 1970s, the term "Surrealist" inevitably comes to mind. In some cases, the association with Western European art of the 1920s and 1930s has a fairly obvious basis. It would be difficult to deny, for example, that the paintings of Juris Dimiters (b. 1947) have a Surrealist flavor. The limp, organic forms that appear in his still lifes (Fig. 13:4) bring to mind the work of Salvador Dalí and Yves Tanguy. Dimiters's use of a hard-edged "magic realist" technique is also a familiar hallmark of Surrealism. Perhaps most truly in the spirit of Surrealism, however, is the type of situation he creates: the objects in his paintings appear real, concrete, and tangible, but they nevertheless defy definition. What are these limp, yet somehow aggressive forms, which seem constantly to be escaping from boxes and vases? The ambiguity and uncertainty of Dimiters's work transforms the still life from a simple domestic genre into something suggestive and unsettling.

Dimiters is almost alone, however, in offering such a direct imprinting of Surrealism. There are other artists whose work suggests parallels with or even imitation of European Surrealism, but rarely in such a consistent and single-minded way. The painting *Cliff* (1963) by Nikolai Vechtomov (b. 1923) resembles the decalcomania landscapes of Max Ernst; *Bells Are Ringing* by Mark Klionsky (b. 1927) might almost be taken for a lost Dalí; and much of the work of Mikhail Brussilovsky (b. 1931) presents a vision of nature's violence and lawlessness (Pl. 13:4) comparable to that of André Masson. But such examples are relatively rare. Perhaps the most emulated of the Surrealist painters, however, was René Magritte. Reminiscences of Magritte's imagery may be found in prints by

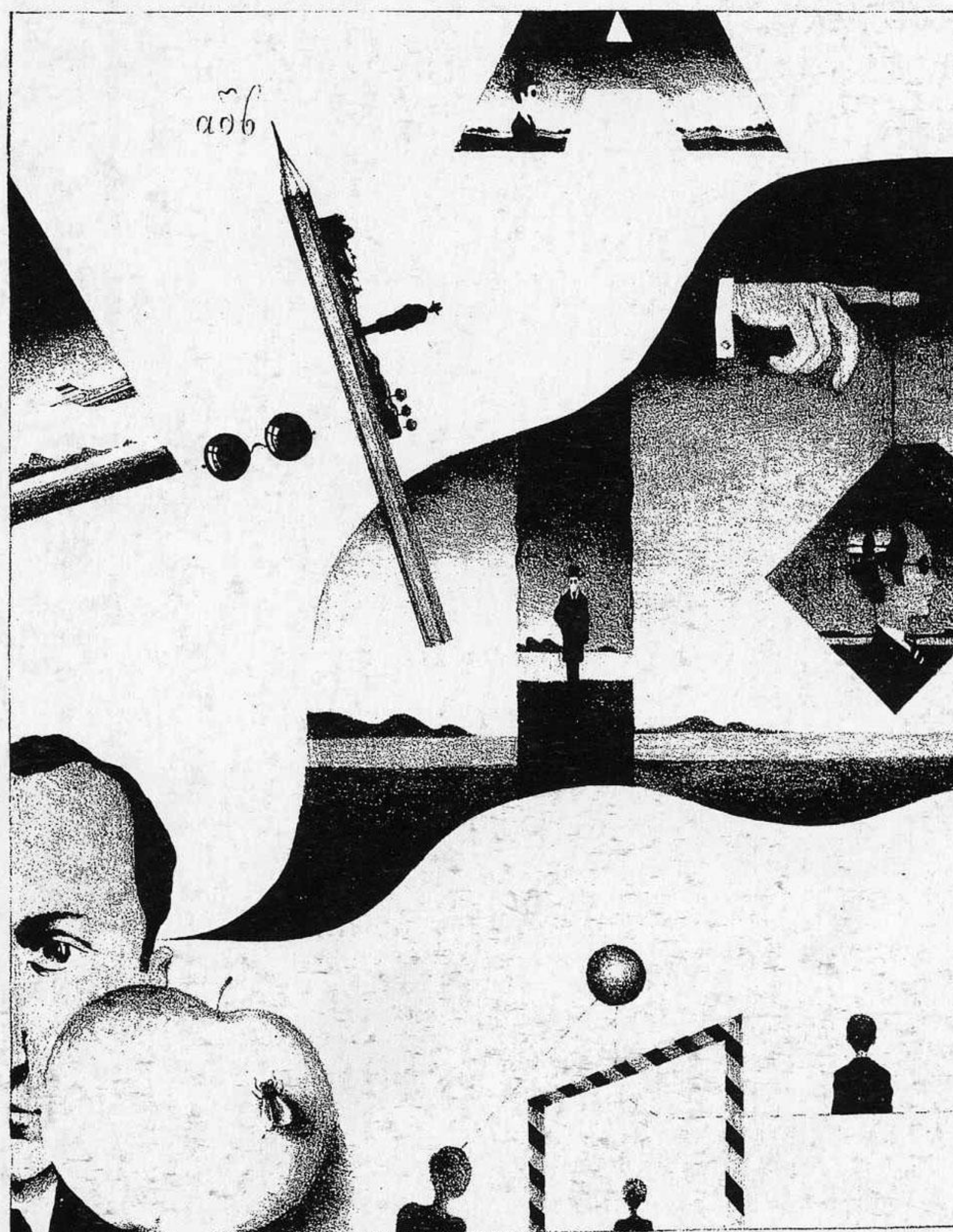


Fig. 13:5
Viktor Pivovarov
The Fly on the Apple, 1972
Lithograph
31.6 × 24.7 cm

Valerii Mishin (b. 1939) and also in the paintings of Brussilovsky.¹¹ Oversized apples—presumably in homage to Magritte—appear in the work of Eduard Zelenin (b. 1938) (Pl. 13:6) and Viktor Pivovarov (b. 1937).¹² More generally, the mismatched objects of Pivovarov's *The Fly on the Apple*, 1972 (Fig. 13:5) obey the Surrealist principle of displacement perfected by Magritte. Objects appear out of context, altered in scale, and unexpectedly juxtaposed: the white of the page is suddenly interrupted by a landscape; a hand appears in the sky; a large pencil supports a small figure. Overall, however, perhaps because of Pivovarov's deliberately naive style of drawing, the effect is more playful than dreamlike or hallucinatory.

There are other artists whose work has something in common with Surrealism (the principle of displacement, for example), but who remain so peculiarly themselves that comparisons scarcely seem profitable. Petr Belenok (1938–1991), for example, takes fragments of so-called "reality"—usually figures—from photographic sources and sets them adrift in space (Fig. 13:6). Belenok refers to his paintings simply as "panic realism" and claims that his closest affinities are literary rather than artistic.¹³ Nino Morbedadze (b. 1957) makes theatrically constructed landscapes (Fig. 13:7; Pl. 11:9) that demonstrate the persistent attraction of Soviet artists to the Surrealist

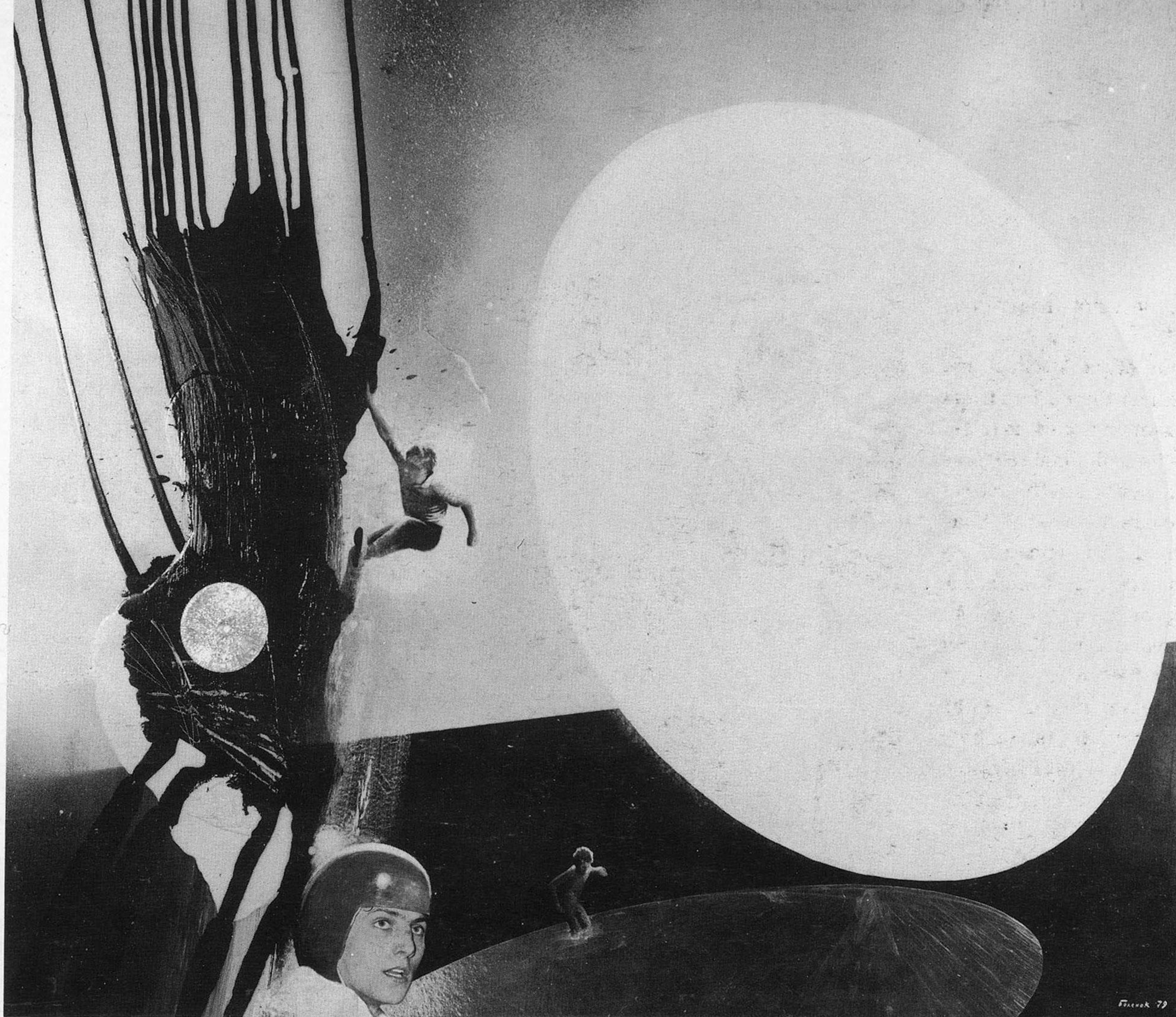
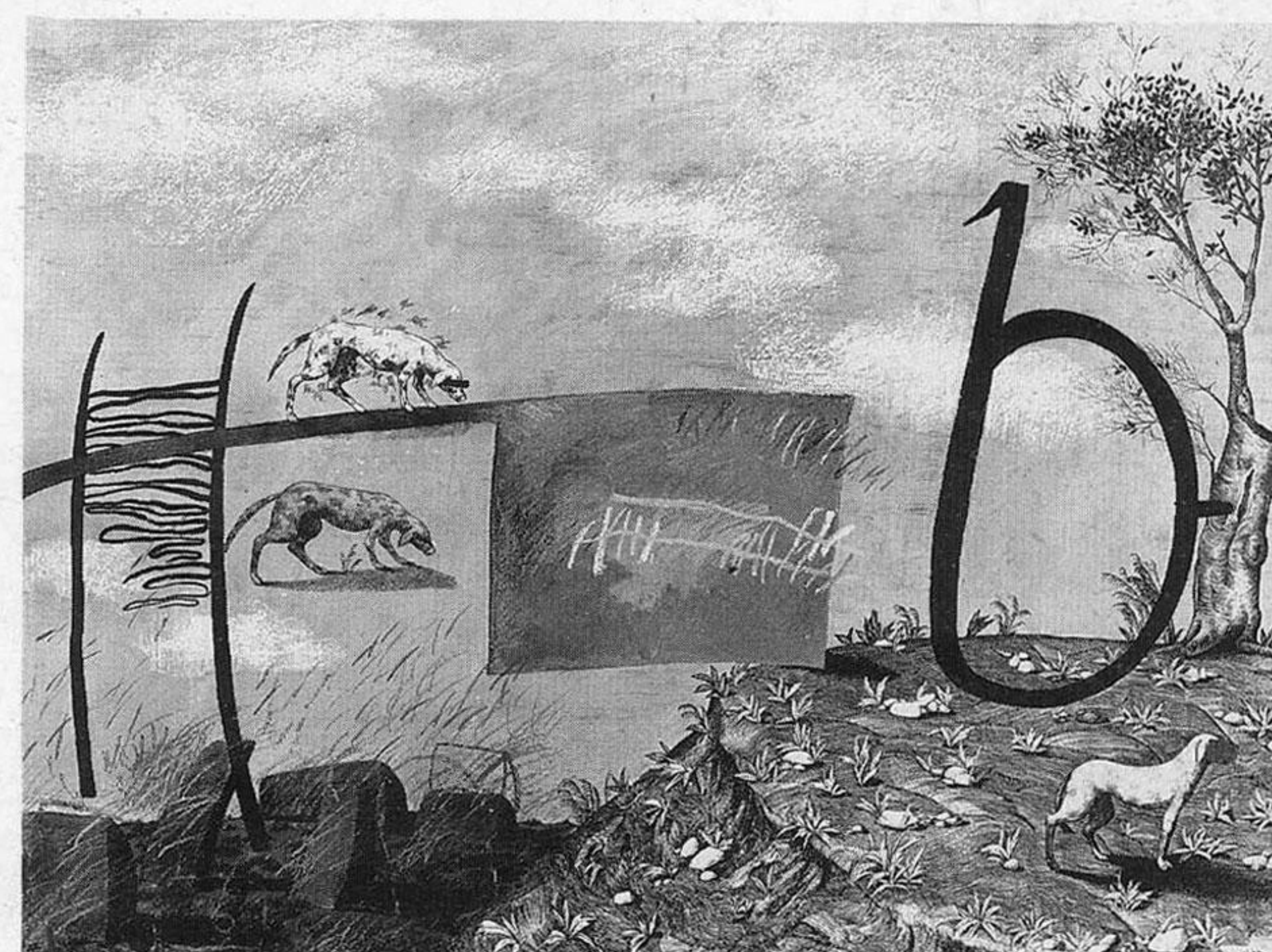


Fig. 13:6
Petr Belenok
The Source, 1979
 Mixed media on
 fiberboard
 123.2 × 141.8 cm

Fig. 13:7
Nino Morbedadze
 (Untitled), n.d.
 Pen and ink and gouache on
 paper
 55 × 75.2 cm

principle of displacement, but there is nothing precisely like them in the original Surrealist movement. Thus, though some comparisons can be made, a search for exact correspondences between Soviet artists and their Western European predecessors is for the most part unrewarding. Even after information about Surrealism became widely available, direct copying was the exception rather than the rule.¹⁴

In fact, the importance of Surrealism as a category for understanding unofficial Soviet art has less to do with stylistic borrowings or direct imitation than with broad parallels of attitudes and ideas. It is the thematic content of unofficial Soviet art that runs parallel to the central preoccupations of Surrealism. We have already seen that the first generation of unofficial artists, like their Surrealist colleagues, attempted to reintroduce into art a feeling for the sacred and the erotic—instincts that had been repressed, the Surrealists believed, by the utilitarian imperatives of twentieth-century progress. In Soviet art of the 1970s, there was also a response to the more cerebral side of Surrealism; this manifested itself particularly in the work of Leningrad artists and was reflected in the adoption of two images—the eye and the mirror—in the work of Ilya Murin (b. 1942) and Igor Tiulpanov (b. 1939). The eye, understood not as a passive receiver of information



but as the chief organ of the imagination, was a key Surrealist image.¹⁵ Mirrors, too, when they appear in Surrealist paintings tend to defy the laws of physics by reflecting things that should not logically appear. Metaphorically, of course, the transformations of the eye and the mirror in Surrealist art allude to the new possibilities available to painting. Painting, too, was to abandon its mimetic role and become an agent of the imagination.

In Ilya Murin's prints, the Surrealist notion of vision as an active agent of desire acquires quite a literal form. In