ART. KAMINKER’S IMPROBABLE CREATION.

...uses fellowship to make much out of "nothing".

When Joseph Brodsky Memorial Fellow Dmitry Kaminker arrived at the American Academy in Rome (AAR) in September 2011 from St Petersburg, he often introduced himself as a Russian sculptor who hadn’t brought any tools or materials along with him and who planned to spend his three-month long fellowship enjoying his first vacation in 40 years. By mid October, his “Rome Sustainable Tower Project” had become the community’s conversation piece and a powerfully vivid example of the Academy’s potential to inspire beyond and across fields.

Ever-wry and self-deprecating, the puckish Kaminker gives a distinct impression of productivity even at rest. He arrived in Rome intending to relax, but instead began making small sculptures out of cardboard salvaged from the dumpster. He made so many at the outset that he had to fashion shelves out of cardboard to display the resulting figures. Once he ran out of space he made more shelves and stacked them together—the utilitarian and serendipitous act behind the work’s columnar shape. To embellish the empty spaces in the fantastically fanciful resulting frieze he began soliciting the work of other Fellows. “I specifically sought out the work of non-visual artists because I wanted to communicate with those who can create something that I can’t,” he explains. “What’s interesting is what’s on the border between disciplines.”

“The importance of sculpture is that it’s a meeting place and a source of conversation,” he adds, “which, as I understand it, is the idea of the AAR. To meet with spirit and inspire each other from different fields and countries. So in essence it’s a communication tower.”

Within a few weeks, Kaminker’s unanticipated cardboard creation had evolved into an arresting 12-foot high tour de force of narrative whimsy and political commentary inspired by the symbols and monuments of the Eternal City and undergirded by references to Mother Russia. His towering tableau features mythological subjects vivified in high relief, placed in anachronistic settings and imbued with playful irreverence—from the prostrate businessman suckling on the She-Wolf to the bullhorn-wielding charioteer labelled “The Unknown Organizer”. It’s an ingenious iconographic mash-up shaped by a mordant wit and an X-Acto blade and held together with a decoupage of odes, musical scores and masking tape.

Before the Russian Revolution of 1917, there was a long tradition of Russian poets seeking inspiration and working in Rome (among them Gogol and Dostoyevsky), and from St Petersburg in particular, which was culturally European. Poet Joseph Brodsky, RAAR ’81, advocated a Russian Academy in Rome modelled on the AAR that would revive the tradition following the breakup of the Soviet Union. Unfortunately he didn’t live to see his idea come to fruition. Following Brodsky’s death in 1996, a group of his friends established the Joseph Brodsky Memorial Fellowship Fund to sustain the vision. Since then the Fellowship has expanded to include nurturing composers, architects, and visual artists as well as writers.

In addition to Rome Prize Fellows, the Academy has long hosted recipients of fellowships and awards offered by educational and cultural organisations around the world. These Affiliated Fellows reside at the Academy for periods from four weeks to 11 months and, as demonstrated by Kaminker’s example, add significantly to the diversity of the artistic and scholarly community.
After attending art school in St. Petersburg, Kaminker worked in the Russian art industry for many years as a realist. Today his preferred mediums are bronze, wood and granite and his yard is littered with examples of his prolific output. "I don't have a particular style – mine is abstract, realistic and humorous. Mainly I'm flexible."

This is his first work in cardboard. "It’s light, cheap and easy to cut – it’s also not forever, which I like. It grew slowly over three months and the studio dictated its size. If I had had four months, it would be different... It’s a pity I must destroy it before I leave, but that’s also good – if it’s a pity, then it means something and has value."

Notwithstanding his prodigious creative talents, Kaminker insists he’s not an artist. "Michelangelo was an artist, I’m a craftsman who invents and makes real things." And he doesn’t mince words when it comes to defending his technique. "The lives of young people are increasingly informed by screens and they lack three-dimensional vision," he asserts. "Even 3D modelling can’t provide a sense of volume, perspective, texture and materiality... There’s a war going on today between the real and the fake and I’m among the last warriors of the real standing with a stone axe against the digital tanks... Someone has to save traditional practices."

For Kaminker, eating dinner with different people every evening was a distinct highlight of his Academy experience. He also found his fellowship inspiring on another level. "If egocentrics like artists can live in a community and get along, then there’s hope for the world. It proves that peace is possible."

What’s next for this irony-embracing craftsman warrior with Neolithic leanings and a website? "It's time to go back home," he opined on the eve of his pickled herring-and vodka-punctuated sendoff in December. "Being Russian is hard, but someone has to do it," he noted, pointing out that many of his artistic comrades emigrated following the breakup of the Soviet Union. "Russia is funny like a Charlie Chaplin movie where cakes are being thrown in everyone’s face. But you have to be ready, because one’s coming for you too. If you can still laugh when the cake is on your face, then you can survive."

This article first appeared on the American Academy in Rome website. www.aarome.org.