

Modern Painters
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PIERRE ALECHINSKY AT 90

The last surviving member of the CoBrA art
movement is still experimenting

BY TOBIAS GREY

It has been an eventful fall for the Belgian artist Pierre Alechinsky. The last surviving member of the CoBrA experimental art movement celebrated his 90th birthday in October at the same time that his work received a timely presidential boost. The nine million French television viewers who watched their youthful president Emmanuel Macron address the nation now know that an immense Alechinsky tapestry hangs above the fireplace in the Elysée Palace. Furthermore, on November 15 the Centre Pompidou planned to inaugurate a special room dedicated to his works. The artist in question was not slow to respond: "I waited until I was 90 to become famous!"

This is a slight exaggeration. In 1976 Alechinsky became the first recipient of the Andrew W. Mellon Prize for Painting. He has also had career retrospectives at the Museum of Art, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburg, in 1976; at the Guggenheim in 1987; and at the Musées Royaux des Beaux Arts in his native Brussels in 2007. But it is true that Alechinsky, who moved to Paris in the early 1950s, is more reputed for being an artist's artist than a hot, blockbuster ticket. His latest exhibition of paintings at Le Salon d'art gallery in Brussels, through December 23, is a typically intimate and quirky affair.

The booklet for the show, "Les Barbiers de Saint-Gilles," has a photograph of Alechinsky on the cover being shaved by his barber friend, Jean Marchetti, whose salon doubles as an art gallery. Alechinsky has been having an exhibition there every five years since 1987. The inspiration for this latest show is the Belgian spice shortbread cookie known as speculoos. He has produced acrylic paintings using ink rubbings of 50 different models of the cookie dating back over 100 years.

I meet Alechinsky recently at the Galerie Lelong in Paris, where he was having an exhibition of 14 paintings done in his studio in the Alpilles in the south of France. He pulled up in his Mercedes and parked out front. Still nimble and spry, he wore a pair of tortoiseshell spectacles that lent him an owl-like countenance. Immediately he set about inspecting a pile of books with his name on them. The latest to be published is an updated version of "Roue Libre" (Freewheel) in which he recounts his affinity for the work of friends like Asgar Jorn, a founding member of CoBrA; André Breton and Alberto Giacometti.



PHOTO: ADRIEN IWANOWSKI, 2009

Pierre Alechinsky
at work

Galerie Lelong & Co.

Paris – New York



Pierre Alechinsky's L'Été 17, 2017. Acrylic on paper mounted on canvas. 100 x 200 cm.



The paintings on the whitewashed walls were multimedia works. Alechinsky began each of them by etching a tondo, or circular artwork, dominated by a central square suggesting a portal of some sort. The etchings were then printed onto large sheets of Chinese paper using aquatint. "The tondo provides a leitmotif around which I can let my imagination run wild and each time find a different solution with my painting," Alechinsky said.

He has compared himself to a spinning-top, which "can never measure its dexterity or its clumsiness and has no power of stopping." This spontaneous approach dates back to the CoBrA art movement, which flamed for three years from 1948-1951. Alechinsky joined the Northern European group, whose name invokes Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam, in 1949 after being invited by Jorn. He was the youngest member. "I've always said that CoBrA was my school," he said.

Unlike the PopArt Movement, which appropriated the symbols of advertising and consumerism, the 30 or so CoBrA artists embraced a communist outlook by seeking inspiration in everyday objects with no hierarchy. In his paintings, which meld abstraction and figuration, Alechinsky has always looked to represent humble things: plants, manhole covers, wheels, the sun, volcanoes, and the like. "We all came along just after the War," he said. "All of us had communist sympathies because without Russia we would have lost. But we were communists of a different kind because we knew what the regime in Moscow was really like. In the end political disagreements brought about the downfall of CoBrA."

Alechinsky has remained viscerally opposed to any kind of social realism in art. As a teenager

Pierre Alechinsky's L'Été 17 - VII 2017. Acrylic on paper mounted on canvas. 150 x 100 cm.

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L'Es 17 -XII- 2017
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he witnessed the 1944 bombing of Brussels by the US Air Force. He still vividly remembers clearing debris from the bomb sites and in his writing has recalled "the mixed smell of shit, blood and decay." He believes art created from such experiences poses a moral problem: "Picasso painted 'Guernica' but he never sold it. I don't like the idea of profiting from other people's misery – I think that's shameful."

Instead Alechinsky constructed a world of fantasy and ephemera in his paintings ranging across caves and mountains, children's drawings, graffiti, comic doodlings, discarded fliers, postcards and pamphlets. In the 1960s he did a series of phantasmagorical paintings, "Avec Lewis Carroll," inspired by the author of "Alice in Wonderland." One wonders if the silvery portal at the center of these new works represents a looking glass. Alechinsky's answer is typically enigmatic: "All my paintings are done left-handed so I never stop crossing through the mirror. When I paint the movement of my hand goes from right to left, which is the opposite for someone who paints or writes right-handed."

His enduring fascination with the art of writing helped him develop as an artist. In

1955 he traveled to Japan and made an award-winning documentary on calligraphy. His fascination for the East deepened when he became friends with the Chinese-American artist Walasse Ting in Paris.

It was after studying Ting at work that Alechinsky ditched his easel and established his technique of painting with his paper-mounted canvases on the floor. "By dominating the surface on the floor, standing up and bent over it, I felt a much greater sense of physical freedom," he said. He also learned about acrylic paints from Ting, which he continues to favor over oils as they dry faster. The culmination of these influences resulted in one of Alechinsky's most famous paintings, "Central Park," which he did in New York in 1965.

This painting set the stage for the rest of Alechinsky's career by introducing his first "marginal remarks." These were a band of comic-book-like ink panels drawn around a central painting. In the late 1960s this style of work caught the attention of Alechinsky's compatriot Hergé, whose early black-and-white Tintin comic strips had made a big impact on the artist.

The two men exchanged some of their art. Hergé gave Alechinsky two sheets of pencil drawings for a project he was working on. In return Alechinsky gave him an ink drawing titled "Sources of Information." He inscribed it with: "To Hergé, sources of pictures, with admiration from Alechinsky, Jan. 4, 1969." Hergé objected to the spelling of his name. Alechinsky, whose father had fled from Russia after being persecuted for his Jewish faith, said, "I excused myself by saying there are so many names with a similar sound ending in 'er' like Braumberger or Schlumberger."

Years later Alechinsky recounted this incident in his book "Lettre Suit," at the same time criticizing Hergé for creating an anti-Semitic villain called Blumentstein in one of his Tintin adventures. Years later, Alechinsky still marvels at how things played out with his childhood hero. "When I wrote Hergé not Hergé it wasn't intentional," he said. "No doubt it was my unconscious striking out."

Alechinsky's latest paintings are similarly constructed. Instead of beginning with a meaning and finding the symbols to suit it, he began with a symbol which left him only to find a meaning. MP

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