

An Artist Explores New Ways to Capture Truth of Ordinary Objects

By Siobhan Peiffer

Even as a child in the former Soviet Union, Shimon Okshteyn knew that image—or as he says, “surface”—is everything.

“I wanted to be an artist because I wanted to look like an artist,” he said half-jokingly. “The long hair, the beard...”

Mr. Okshteyn has both now, and plenty of other artistic trappings, including a house and studio in Southampton and a spot in a recent Elaine Benson Gallery show in Bridgehampton, “Paper Works.” And the child’s preoccupation with surface has matured into the artist’s questioning of how ordinary objects—and people—can be presented.

As he explained in an interview at his Sebonac home, “I’m interested in the transformation of objects into something else.” Several of the collages on view in “Paper Works” show the kind of transformation the artist has been able to effect.

Zippers and buttons become body parts, for example, and a compendium of corsets, magazine photos, wallpaper, and other scraps become a female torso. Mr. Okshteyn traces these works, most from the 1980s, to an immigrant’s fascination with material culture. When he first arrived in New York in 1979, he was “shocked” at what he saw. “I was inspired visually. America was something I saw in win-



“Derby Hat,” a 72 by 70-inch pencil and graphite on canvas done in 1995.

His canvases gradually grew larger as they depicted smaller objects.

dows,” he said. “Only objects. America is a materialistic country, so material things became important.” Women, he found, were one locus of materialism: “Women became mannequins of all the beautiful things.”

In his observations of his new home, Mr. Okshteyn said that he “took nothing for granted,” partly because of the novelty. Russia to New York, he said, was like “Earth to Mars.” The trip was about as difficult, too: He and his wife and son were able to leave because Okshteyn is Jewish, and therefore could plan a trip to Israel. “This was one of the excuses.”

From Russia the family traveled to Vienna, then on to the United States. Life in the new world was a far cry from Okshteyn’s government-supported existence in the Soviet Union, where artists were treated comparatively well once they passed arduous training programs. “Artist was elite,” Mr. Okshteyn explained. But Soviet job security soon seemed secondary. “When I was 18, I didn’t understand,” he said. “But soon I started thinking

what was more important: money or freedom?”

Though Mr. Okshteyn already had some American collectors at the time of his move, he remembered feeling “lost” upon initially moving to New York. He soon found a home gallery, however, in Eduard Nakhamkin Fine Art, the first space in the west devoted to promoting Russian artists exclusively.

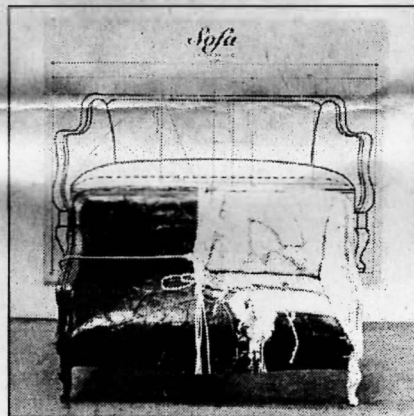
This gallery “was where we all met,” Mr. Okshteyn explained—“all” meaning a band of high-profile émigrés including Mikhail Baryshnikov and Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. “New York is the place everyone in the world wants to show,” Mr. Okshteyn said, “and Russians did very well in the 1980s. Everybody knew about Russia.” Though the gallery was “not new, it was interesting. Thousands of people just came to see us.” The artist remembered, with a laugh, that Russian immigrants were curiosities—“like big bears.”

From his first paintings and collages of American materialism, Mr. Okshteyn’s canvases gradually grew larger as they depicted smaller and smaller sections of the object or face he was painting. Many collectors, he remembered, were surprised that his work in the Soviet Union never had much political or societal commentary.

“In Russia I was so far from politics,” the artist confessed, adding that political work was more likely in cities like Moscow and Leningrad, whereas he came from a small town near the Romanian border. “I think my art became much more social—with social messages—in America.” He likes the label “conceptual realism.”

“It’s realism,” he said, “but there’s meaning behind the surface.”

After he left the Nakhamkin gallery, Mr. Okshteyn showed in a variety of spaces before joining Ivan Karp of the OK Harris gallery in 1994. The artist has since turned from color, creating most recently large (more than 70 inches square) pencil-and-graphite drawings of ordinary objects: clocks, shoes, spools of thread, a camera. “Colors overpower image,” he said. In his black-and-white work, “the image



“Sofa,” a mixed media and ink on canvas work by Shimon Okshteyn completed in 1995.

became very pure, much purer than with color."

The works are so large, detailed, and life-like they could be taken for photographs. But Mr. Okshteyn bristles at



"Woman's Shoe," a 70 by 76-inch pencil and graphite on canvas done in 1995 by Shimon Okshteyn.

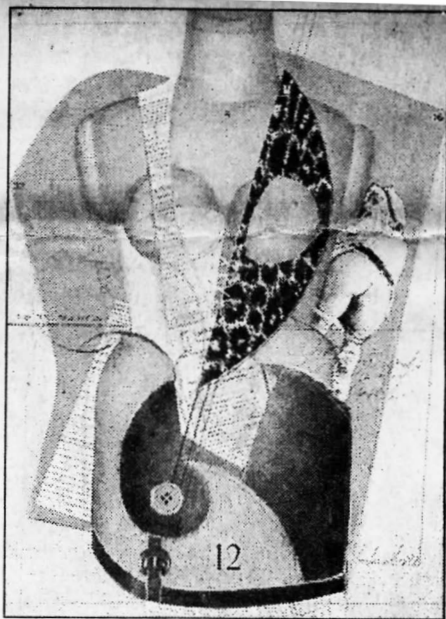


the term "photo-realism." "I don't want to copy what is reality," he said. Instead, he compares his work to that of a geologist or archaeologist, one who scrutinizes an object for details of its past and uses these details to draw conclusions about the object.

To Mr. Okshteyn, the ordinary objects he draws are "like a new planet"; he sometimes spends three to four months looking at, for example, the fingerprints on the shiny surface of an old telephone. He isn't sure where this fascination comes from. "My work is very nostalgic about old objects," he said. "I don't know why I'm touched. Maybe because we live in a crazy time; nobody has time to stop and look around."

Except maybe in Southampton. Mr. Okshteyn is drawn by the leisurely pace of life here; he and his family first summered in the area 12 years ago and bought their house about three years ago.

"This area reminds me of Europe," he said. "It's the ocean, it's the small community, you know a lot of people, it's an artist's community...It's summertime, you feel like it's vacation. You have dinner places where you can meet people. You have lunch and you



"Rear View," a 1988 collage on paper.

don't rush."

And there's plenty of time to look at objects. In his studio, Mr. Okshteyn ran his fingers over an old iron can he found on his property, fascinated by its rust-covered surface. Soon he will begin drawing it, and see what it can become.