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VILLAGE VOICE

Conceptual Carpet

By Kim Levin

Zofia Kulik
Postmasters
80 Greene Street
Through June 16

From 1970 until a few years ago, Zofia Kulik, along with Przemysław Kwiek, did Conceptual performances in Poland. They called themselves "Kwiekulik." When they were permitted to travel, their work was seen in Sweden, Germany, and in 1987, at Franklin Furnace. In 1978, when they missed a performance festival in Holland because their passports were revoked, they did a piece at home instead called *The Monument Without Passport in Fine Arts Salons*. She sat under a table with her head protruding through a hole in the table. He plastered her feet. In other works, their heads stuck through chair seats or bowls, or were covered by buckets. Or their seated bodies—in a piece that consisted of a series of motionless vignettes—were used as pedestals for a variety of symbolic things: a cow's heart, a white cube, half a pig's head, a two-kilogram weight.

Now Kulik, who lives near Warsaw, is working alone, making mostly black-and-white photo works. Her carpetlike patterns of collaged and montaged repeating images are remarkably similar in their ornamental form to the recent postcard quilts of Gilbert & George, but more subtle and complex. I'm not referring to that duo's current *Sonnabend* show in which Carnaby Street psychedelia meets the morbidity of the AIDS-plagued '80s (Kulik's art can't compete with those garish, disquieting works), but their exhibition just closing at Robert Miller (through June 9). It's a startling coincidence. The largest and most impressive piece in Kulik's show is a photo carpet patterned with the multiplying picture of a naked man striking heroic and martyred poses and contorting his body into

abstract forms. Ornamented with borders of flags, swags, sharp flagpole finials, and Stalinist skyscrapers (it's the Palace of Culture in Warsaw), her elaborate patterning includes insets and medallions that, when you get up close, turn out to be photos of pen nibs or Pope Paul—conducting mass in front of the Palace of Culture where the May Day celebrations used to take place.

Both Kulik and Gilbert & George have hit on the fact that clichéd representational images can be amassed into abstract ornamentation, and that man can be, as a Polish critic has written, "an element of an instrumental whole." By means of repetition and ruglike symmetry, stereo-

typed pictures are transformed into transcendent kaleidoscopic absurdity. These magic carpets are vehicles that mimic a vanishing social order: socialist Britain, totalitarian Poland. The messages are different, though: Gilbert & George's readymade postcard patterns of flaming youths and flaming sunsets give off an aura of benevolent paternalism that skirts the edges of pederasty and comic conformity. But for Kulik, who has refashioned her own amateur repertory of totalitarian poses and attributes, symmetry equals inexorable authoritarian order. Her naked male model, whose body is as scrawny as a medieval Adam's, enacts an awkwardly human collection of autocratic gestures.

Yet her art, for both better and worse, hasn't settled into being a predictable product. One piece features a canopy of arabesques and the politico-narrative implications of the male nude posing nine ways with a piece of rope around his neck, using it as everything from a leash to a noose. Another centers on the discordant inclusion of an actual kitschy "oriental" carpet (her own old rug, it's done duty in her previous shows). And there's a stark cutout of a generic white flag on a black wall. Behind the wall, tucked away where you're likely to miss it, is a commemorative corner: a mock-patriotic display of totalitarian trinkets. Besides the lethal-looking tip of the flagpole she photographed, it contains an arrangement of bullets, medals "for the builders of socialist Poland," zlotys (the engraving on the currency resembles Persian carpet design), and old postcards that point to similarities in Hellenistic,

Gothic, Fascist, and Socialist Realist monuments.

"I am fascinated by Closed Forms," wrote the artist in a statement. And well she might be. She was the East bloc equivalent of an army brat. "My father is an officer and I grew up very strictly prosystem," she told me. She used to earn money decorating halls with red swags for political events. In Poland's past, rampant Catholicism was overlaid with Communism. And in Kulik's work, which she calls *Idioms Soczewicza* (Idioms of the Soc-Ages), the two iconographies meet to serve the same purpose. They proclaim that the individual's actions have been subsumed into a closed, hieratic, inflexible design. Whatever the future holds, Conceptualists from formerly commie countries aren't going to let the bad old days disappear without obsessively appropriating and deconstructing their visual symbolism. ■



Zofia Kulik: *Untitled (Carpet)* (detail, 1990)