On the brink

Torn between nostalgia and a tentative optimism, Russian art and design may not be renowned for its playfulness, but Yolanda Zappaterra finds some rather witty and whimsical works coming out of Russian design studios at the moment.

LONDON seems to be braced with Russian creativity at the moment, from a celebration of Russian Futurism at the Estorick Collection to a more modern view of the country via Motherland, Simon Roberts’s amazing photographs at Photofusion, and contemporary Central Asian art at Space in Hackney. They all share a curious factor, something that’s hard to define—an almost schizophrenic sense of nostalgia backward-looking while embracing the possibilities that lie ahead.

Roberts, who spent a year traveling the country, describes Motherland as a “layered visual statement about a country that is embracing the capitalist model, but carrying the weight of its Communist past that it’s trying hard to break free from.” The dichotomy such a position creates is evident in his images, but less clearly visible in the contemporary art and design coming out of Russia. What is clear in this work is something that John Miller, Professor Emeritus in Art History at Newcastle University and curator of A Step in the Facil Futurist in Russia, describes as “the very Russian aesthetic of the home-made, peculiarly consistent across a current world view that’s the opposite of it.”

In his seminal book described by Miller, is a playfulness and whimsy that’s often forgotten in Russian creativity. This is exemplified by much of the product design of Artemy Lebedev Studios, a multipurpose Moscow-based consultancy that designs everything from speakers to computer keyboards. Latest in the studio’s output is a plug adapter for sticking your fingers into electrical sockets—the Vizual plug deatleedeapter—a quirky and wittily described on the studio’s website. It is a plug? The date of the design, 1 April, suggests our Western legs are being gently but convincingly pulled, but there is no real way of knowing, particularly as Lebedev is given to comments such as, “Western standards may be artificially applied to Russian design, but they are real work. Russian standards don’t work abroad, which is a good indication that Russian design is crap. But this crap works here.” In Russia, it’s a statement that’s as offensive to the designer and the Terzunus eraser, shaped like the delete computer key and designed by Daniil Rassadin, but it is also distinguishable, for many of Artemy Lebedev’s projects would work well anywhere in the world.

This is also true of another Russian designer’s work, Vladimir Kibardin, who creates tea cups that call to mind earlier Soviet space stations and draws his inspiration from the natural world. A closer examination of the nature can provide solutions to all sorts of aesthetic and engineering design problems, says Kibardin, who strives to “create products that ease man’s interaction with his environment. I work to do away with extraneous detail in the hope that my designs will express their beauty through their simplicity, their utility, and their compatibility with the natural world,” he explains.

Here Kibardin is bringing into play another domain Russian theme identified by Miller and Roberts, that of the real or natural. “The sense of vast spaces, changing seasons and the sheer size of the country” were what Roberts was trying to capture in his images, and this is visible in the country’s art and design too. As Kibardin puts it, “Russian culture is very rich, and encompasses not only classical examples like Russian literature, painting, ballet, music, theatre and cinema, but also deep folk culture, and the designs of designers turn to these traditional images when developing and searching for their own style.”

Kibardin’s studio is based in Prague, a location that literarily and metaphorically enables him to travel the world and the West rather than bring a purely Eastern approach to his work. “Products issued under the mark Kibardin Design are on sale both in Europe and in Russia. My international competitions and my projects are published in many international editions, so the maintenance of my ideas does not carry national attributes,” he says.

In this sense, Kibardin exemplifies the position of modern Russian design as one that’s about looking both backward and forward, inside and outside. It’s a position that’s fraught with provocation, but also with exciting possibilities. As Miller says, “There’s a lot happening in Russian art and design at the moment, but it’s invisible. All the greatest work and influence are Western, all the Russian stuff isn’t. The West is visible in the country’s art and design too. As Kibardin puts it, “Russian culture is very rich, and encompasses not only classical examples like Russian literature, painting, ballet, music, theatre and cinema, but also deep folk culture, and the designs of designers turn to these traditional images when developing and searching for their own style.”

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1. Jupiterbus money box, designed by Artemy Lebedev Studios
2. 2 and 3 images from Simon Roberts’ Motherland series
3. Optimus Maximus computer keyboard, designed by Artemy Lebedev Studios
4. Vizual plug deatleedeapter, designed by Artemy Lebedev Studios
5. Terzunus eraser, designed by Daniil Rassadin for Artemy Lebedev Studio
6. Good morning cup, designed by Valdim Kibardin
7. Tree boxophone, designed by Valdim Kibardin
8. A Step in the Facil Futurist in Russia is on at the Estorick Collection of Modern Italian Art until 10 June