

RUSSIAN ART

# THE MASKS OF STALIN

Stalin's victims live on in Vladimir Sulyagin's work — an art given life by collage and on show for the first time in London. Novelist **Margaret Drabble** met the artist. Photographs by **Graham Turner**

**V**LADIMIR Sulyagin's collages gaze at us from the horrors and repressions of the past with an extraordinary spirit and eloquence. Sulyagin, who is 49, has not suffered the same violent fate or crushing censorship as many of his chosen subjects but nevertheless he appears mildly astonished to find himself in London talking freely about his work to curious strangers.

Small, balding, with a greying beard, a few words of English and a passion for poetry, he is far more interested in talk-

ing about his collages than about himself. He is not used to being interviewed. I am not sure he knows what an interview is. As I am a lousy interviewer, we and our friend and interpreter Vera all got on fine.

He was born in the Urals, the son of an engine driver and a junior school teacher who introduced him to Russian literature. His mother now lives with his sister, who is a philologist. He describes himself as a late developer, who married late (he has two small children) and whose professional interest in art

developed late — though he had early ambitions to be writer, film-maker and artist in one.

He has never been a member of the official Artists' Union and speaks circumspectly about his apprenticeship at art school; he began to study (and first saw Matisse) at the age of 25. He earned his living as an ill-paid mural artist in Moscow and his professional Rubicon seems to have been some ideological battle over 500 square metres of wall painting on a Young Technicians' Club.

Over a period of three years he had to defend his designs against traditional stylistic objections. Russian murals, he says, are painted in poor materials, to disguise poor architecture. Public art clearly did not give him freedom of expression. In the old revolutionary days Mayakovsky had urged the people to make the streets their brushes and the squares their palette. Sulyagin was not encouraged to add his own statement.

The collages, in contrast, are in style and content entirely his own. They are also made out of very poor — that is, inexpensive — materials, of a heroic, almost childlike simplicity. His images are made of cardboard, card, wrapping paper, silver foil. His tools are scissors

and paste. His basic colours are white, grey, cream, black and silver, enlivened with odd slashes and gashes of blood-red or earth-red and in some of the later portraits, there are touches of purple and yellow and gold.

He has no proper studio space, no gallery, no access to public or private showing, although he does seem to have a circle of friends who appreciate and enjoy his work; he does not live totally in isolation. Significantly, he numbers among his close friends several contemporary poets.

His subjects, most of them literary figures, are chosen largely from the ranks of the famous dead, and he says that his portraits are his tribute to the rebirth and glasnost-renewed recognition of the great Russian writers of this century. Once banned and censored, they now rise from the grave.

Many of them met a violent death, the poet Nikolai Gumilev (1886-1921), here a dapper, well-dressed, man-of-the-world, young and dashing, was shot by the Bolsheviks over some mysterious allegation of conspiracy in a pro-monarchist plot — a shot that profoundly and prophetically shocked and alarmed the Russian literary world. Osip Mandel-

stam (1891-1938?), here a grey retreating shadowy profile boxed in by heavy galls-weights, died of a heart attack on his way to the labour camps; Isaac Babel (1894-1941?) (shown with spectacles, pen, and silver-furrowed brow) disappeared into the camps and died who knows when or where; Father Pavel Floryensky (1882-1943) was shot in a labour camp in Solovky. The exemplary fate of Vladimir Mayakovsky (1893-1930), Russian Futurist poet and revolutionary, who shot himself after a life of extraordinary public and private tension, is represented here by three striking emblems — the first a young, cigarette-smoking, vigorous, theatrical, challenging profile, the second a bold, Futurist design composed of the letters of his own name: and the last a tragically complex full head, representing conflict, disintegration, incompatibility, and the whole strange tormented after-life of his disputed, savaged and rehabilitated reputation.

These are but a few examples of the violent ends which awaited the intellectuals of the revolutionary and Stalinist years. Others had to struggle with censorship, with inner doubt, with their own compromises with the system. We see film-maker Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948) both young and old-young; he is confident, romantic, the triumphant maker of Potemkin but old. After years of battle with Stalin and Stalinist aesthetics, he disintegrates into pale cream worried fragments. Literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), the Sixties hero, confronts himself in the same frame — young, energetic and idealistic, and old, frail and faded. Even for those who died in their beds, the price of survival was high.

SULYAGIN does not attempt "realistic" portrayal, and compares his images to icons or masks (appropriately, he has on occasion used images from death masks — there is a strikingly theatrical death-mask profile of Pushkin). He says he seeks by shape and symbol to represent the fate or destiny of his subjects, not their physical likenesses. He pares away inessentials, leaving simple expressive figurative details — the glowing tip of a cigarette, a swollen lip, a pair of bushy eyebrows, a bow tie, a crucifix at the throat. There is something reminiscent of Japanese art in the concentration and spareness of his work, and he recalls attending and being impressed by a large Japanese exhibition in Moscow. He also speaks of "magic realism" and finds something magical in the very act of creating durable art from scraps and leftover bits of paper.

"Magic realism" were the watch-words of one of his personal heroes, the illustrator, sculptor and wood engraver Vladimir Favorsky (1886-1964), who, in Sulyagin's own phrase, tried to "reconcile the twin poles, the realistic and the magical, the concrete and the abstract, the intellect and the emotion". This reconciliation, he believes, is the main-spring of all art.

He explains that his use of colour is

not natural but "semiotic". One feels he may have had to explain this many times before the hostile viewers who like reality to be depicted rather than re-interpreted. He may not be used to being interviewed by the Western media, but he has been through a good deal of cross-questioning about his creed and aesthetic intentions. Socialist realism dies hard, and his Russian critics have accused his adaptations of folk and primitive art of "illiteracy".

**N**EVERTHELESS, despite a certain abstraction of purpose, every representation in his gallery of doomed artists has a lively and immediately recognisable personality. And the strange thing is that although many of them are taken from famous photographic images, there is nothing stale or secondhand about them. In each case he has created something eloquent and new and full of individual expression. He is anxious to stress that he is not trying to use dead, flat, known signs or logos, but to give birth to new ones: to deliver a complex message from a simple newly created form. He tries to give us a sign "in the middle or on the verge of its appearing", not when it has already become known and lifeless.

Some of the most striking examples of his practice and his obsessions are to be found in the portraits of Marina Tsvetayeva (1892-1941) and Anna Akhmatova (1899-1966). These two great women poets, these tragedy queens, each in her different way carrying the burden of their generation and their nation, demonstrate both their own physical being and their own symbolic destiny. Sulyagin's first collage, made in 1986, was of Tsvetayeva when young, and in it he discovered (clearly with

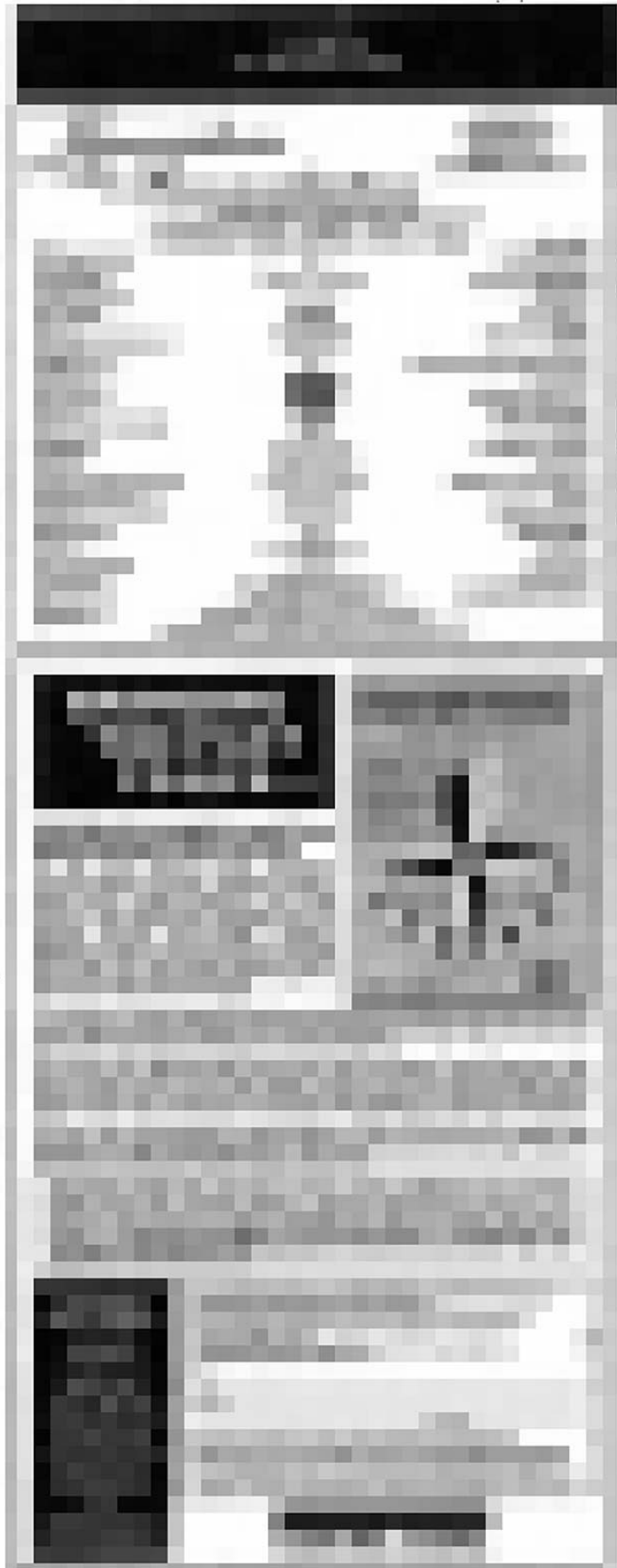
great excitement) his technique for the whole series. She stares forth, plain, bold yet vulnerable, at her own unfolding life, yet around her neck already hangs the noose with which she will kill herself and the cross of her personal calvary. In the second portrait, she is transformed into a glittering silver icon of power and immortality, a silver image for a poet of the great Silver Age. The sensational story of her life (movingly told by her translator Elaine Feinstein, in her biography, *A Captive Lion*, 1987) is charged with a terrible historical and personal pain, and a desperate emotional intensity; Sulyagin catches both.

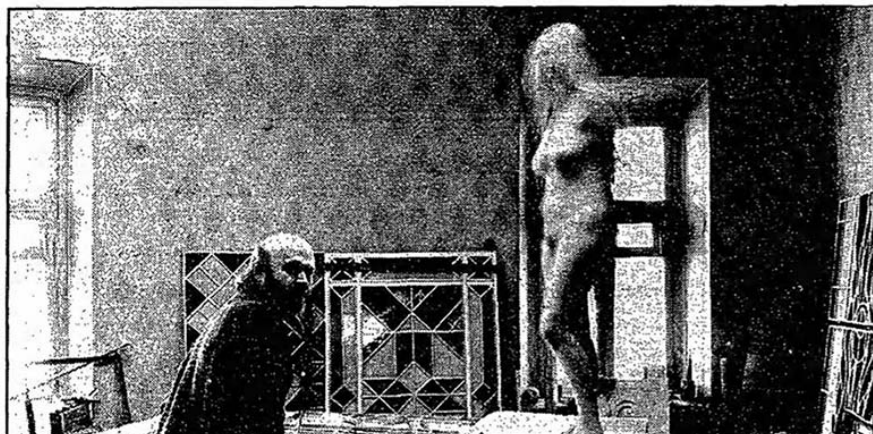
"Why did you choose her first?" I asked. "Because I loved her," he says. "I loved her, as poet, as philosopher, as passionate human being. I wanted to portray those I love." These portraits are his message to the woman who in her time wrote long and impassioned letters to Rilke and Pasternak, both of whom she extravagantly admired. A continuity is maintained: a community of creation, defying death and censorship, is celebrated.

The two portraits of Tsvetayeva present us with the Marina of whom



**CUT AND THRUST:** Sulyagin (left) with collage of the poet Khlebnikov; and (above) 'small, balding, with a greying beard, and a passion for poetry'.





**LIFE SIZE:** Sulyagin and model (left) in Moscow. A late developer, he began to study (and first saw Matisse) at the age of 25 then earned his living as an ill-paid mural artist

► Ahkmatova famously wrote in her lament to Mandelstam, Pasternak and Tsvetayeva, *There Are Four Of Us* (1961)...

*There by the eastern wall,  
where criss-cross shoots of  
bramble trail,  
— O look! — that fresh dark  
elderberry branch  
is like a letter from Marina in  
the mail.*

(trans. S. Kunitz)

Ahkmatova herself was one of the few to fulfil her genius, achieve international and national recognition, and meet a natural death. Yet she too lived through hell and spoke for a generation who knew hell, and her heroic courage and the solidarity of friends sustained her through trials that broke many of her contemporaries. In a sense, her sister the Muse, and her own sense of her high destiny saved her. She took on the role of spokeswoman for the sufferings of her age, for all those who died in the camps or lost there (as she did) friends and family.

Sulyagin represents her as a classic grey high-nosed profile, a noble antique cracked bust: and thus she saw herself, as a female Dante, loving and hating the homeland that had alternately tortured and celebrated her, and which unlike Tsvetayeva she would never abandon. As preface to one of her most famous poems about the years of Stalinist terror, *Requiem 1935-1940*, she tells the story of the 17 months she waited in a queue outside the prison in Leningrad for news of her disappeared son Lev Gumilev and her lover; a woman in the crowd, recognising her, whispered, "Can you describe this?" and she replied, "I can": Then something like a smile passed fleetingly over what had once been her face."

Vladimir Sulyagin was not yet born when Ahkmatova waited at the prison gates, yet his portraits, like her poems, bear witness to the common lot, to the common history of his nation, and his work continues the debate about the role of the artist in society. But it is good to note that, tragic though much of

his material may be, the overall impact of his work is far from depressing. Here is wit, style, energy.

The splendid large grey-green nose and quizzical half-spectacles of Nabokov, the golden eyes of Symbolist Fyodor Sologub, the orange ear of bad-tempered Ivan Bunin and the large pipe and merrily shining silver teeth of Nobel-prize-winning, chess-playing nuclear physicist Piotr Kapitza (1894-1984) add humour and even gaiety to this memorable sequence.

Interesting to note that to Sulyagin, Joyce seems to represent the artist who lived a life of bourgeois comfort. All our perceptions are relative. **G**

Sulyagin's collages are on view at Level 5, Royal Festival Hall, South Bank Centre, until May 21, as part of the South Bank Russian Festival, a programme which includes concerts, exhibitions and talks. Further information: 071 928 3002.

Margaret Drabble's latest novel is *A Natural Curiosity* published by Viking.

