

KARLO KACHARAVA

BY HAN MENGYUN

WORKS SELECTED BY SANYA KANTAROVSKY AND SCOTT PORTNOY



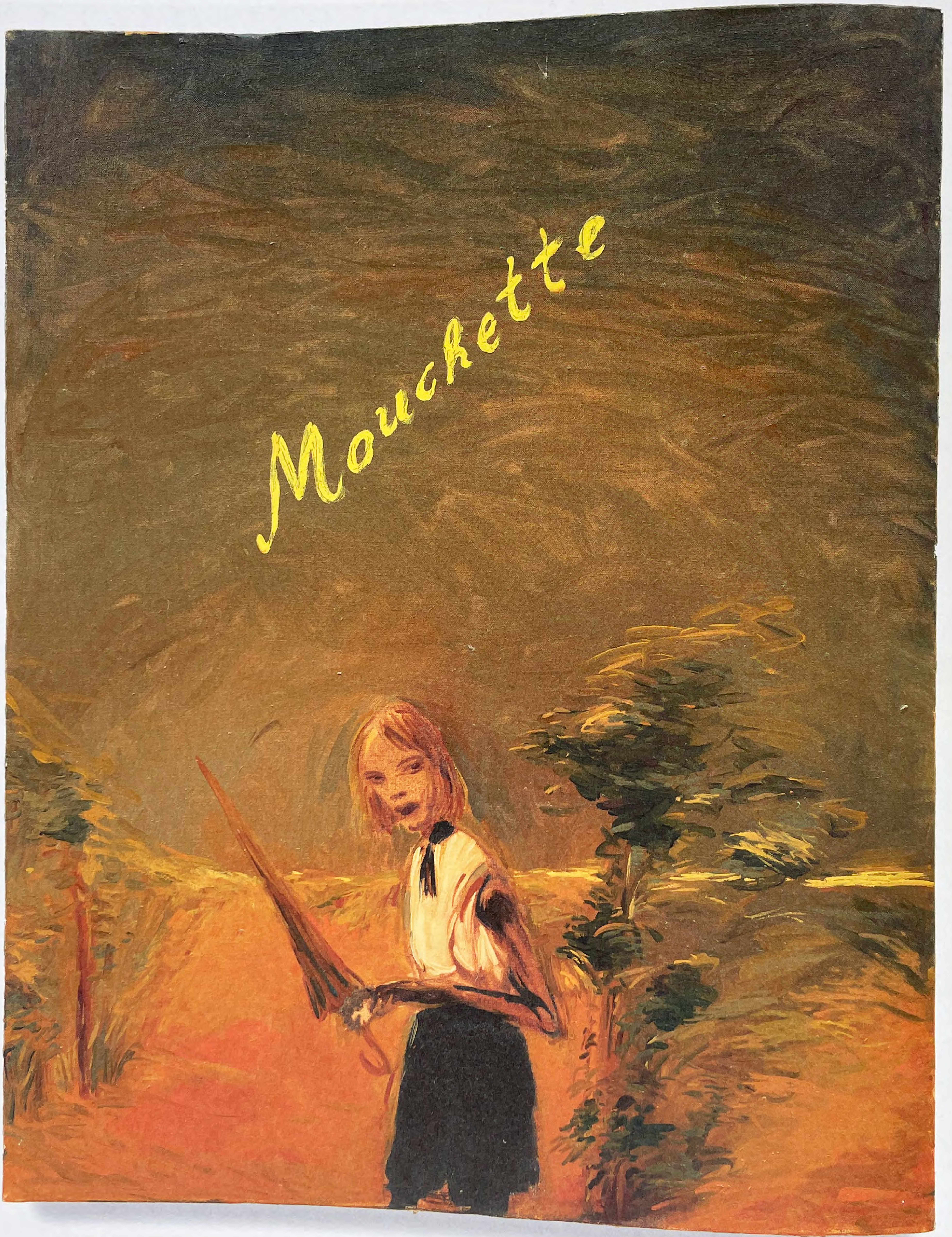
England is Big, Sir, 1992, watercolour on paper, 10 x 12 cm

Artist and writer Han Mengyun writes about the works by Georgian artist Karlo Kacharava (1964–1994), from the exhibition, People and Places curated by Sanya Kantarovsky and Scott Portnoy at Modern Art, London, open until the 17th December 2021.

All works © The Estate of Karlo Kacharava
Courtesy of Modern Art, London and The Estate of Karlo Kacharava, Tbilisi, Georgia



Sentimental Journey, 1993, acrylic on canvas, 124.5 x 104 cm



Mouchette, 1993, oil on canvas, 70 x 55 cm

KARLO KACHARAVA'S WORLD OF THE WORLD

BY

HAN MENGYUN

'In the contemporary art world, Georgia does not exist', wrote the Georgian artist, critic and poet Karlo Kacharava (1964-1994), whose work is brought to an international audience for the first time at Modern Art, London, during Frieze week this year. The exhibition, titled 'People and Places', is curated by Sanya Kantarovsky and Scott Portnoy, whose efforts are a continuation of Kacharava's endeavour to act as a bridge between the Georgian artists of his generation and the Western literary and art worlds.

In order to enrich our understanding of this lesser-known artist, the exhibition provides a comprehensive overview via a selection of works both on canvas and paper, executed using a medley of techniques, as well as the artist's notebooks, photographs and items from his personal archives. Yet Kacharava's work still poses itself as a riddle, not only because of the large body of writings in relation to his visual work that remain unpublished and untranslated, but also because of the extensive and eclectic references to Western culture at large in multiple languages that make it difficult to decipher.

What makes Kacharava immediately unique as a visual artist is his affinity for language, and the text incorporated into the painted image adds a dimension of literary conversation: with his friends to whom the paintings were dedicated; with the literary figures from history or other cultures with whom he attempted to connect. In the painting *Susan Sontag* (1992), the title of her celebrated essay 'Against Interpretation' is written with a twist: 'Gegen Gegen Interpretation Interpretation' (Against Against Interpretation Interpretation). One cannot help but wonder what Kacharava's reading of Sontag's work was. Was he against 'Against Interpretation', or is this simply a repetition of the title as a double affirmative? Given Kacharava's active role as an art critic and as the founder of the Georgian avant-garde group Archivarius, he, a person with vision and criticality, could not have written these words free from intention. A word play it must be, creating a complicated and elusive attitude that eschews interpretation, ultimately speaking to Sontag's ethos as both an embodiment and a commentary. What intrigues me further is the fact that Kacharava signed his name twice in this painting, in Georgian and Latin scripts. Why was he compelled to do so? Maybe it was the polyglot in him, or his awareness of his

role as a bridge between different audiences – the Western world and his Georgian contemporaries. He wanted both to understand and to meet in one picture plane.

American culture served as only one element of Karlo Kacharava's wide-ranging Western influences, the most prominent among them being perhaps German culture, as he lived and worked in Germany; his travel diary written during those times was published by Goethe Institute in 2012. Such ties with Germany can be seen in *Singer in the Wind* (1992), in which his elevated emotions are palpable in the dedication *für "Sternenkind"!* (for 'Starchild') or the word *Traum* (dream), accentuated by a radiating red heart-shape above. *Allain 2* (1990) presents itself as an inner monologue of the artist chanting the mantra of solitude. The German language allowed him to utter certain feelings that other languages, including even his mother tongue, did not. In *Poet who Burned his Poems* (1992), it was in German that the poems were burnt, and likely in German that the poems were born.

One speculation that arose in my mind while perusing the graphic texts scribbled everywhere in relation to the images, however unattested, is not only the influence of popular culture on Kacharava's art but also that of Islamic art, as the pictorial dimension of the text is a prominent trait of Arabic calligraphy and the art of manuscript illustration. Georgian culture is one that is extremely hybrid, the result of an ancient history interacting with Anatolian, European, Persian, Arabian, Ottoman and East Asian cultures. The building of the Tbilisi State Academy of Arts, where Kacharava was educated, is a mix of European and Persian architectural styles, its Mirror Halls executed by Qajar artists from Iran. It seems not unreasonable to deduce Kacharava's knowledge of Islamic culture and his intent to re-enact the traditional model by incorporating an eclectic array of historic and contemporary content.

Kacharava also possessed a talent for travelling from one visual language to another, as may be perceived in his painterly translations of sketches and illustrations drawn from comic books and popular visual culture. Like a film poster done in oil, the painting *Mouchette* (1993) captivates with its vibrant currents of brushstrokes that brew a sense of emotional turbulence, which might belong to the ill-fated character Mouchette herself from

SUSAN SONTAG
GEGEN GEGEN
INTERPRETATI
INTERPRETATI ON



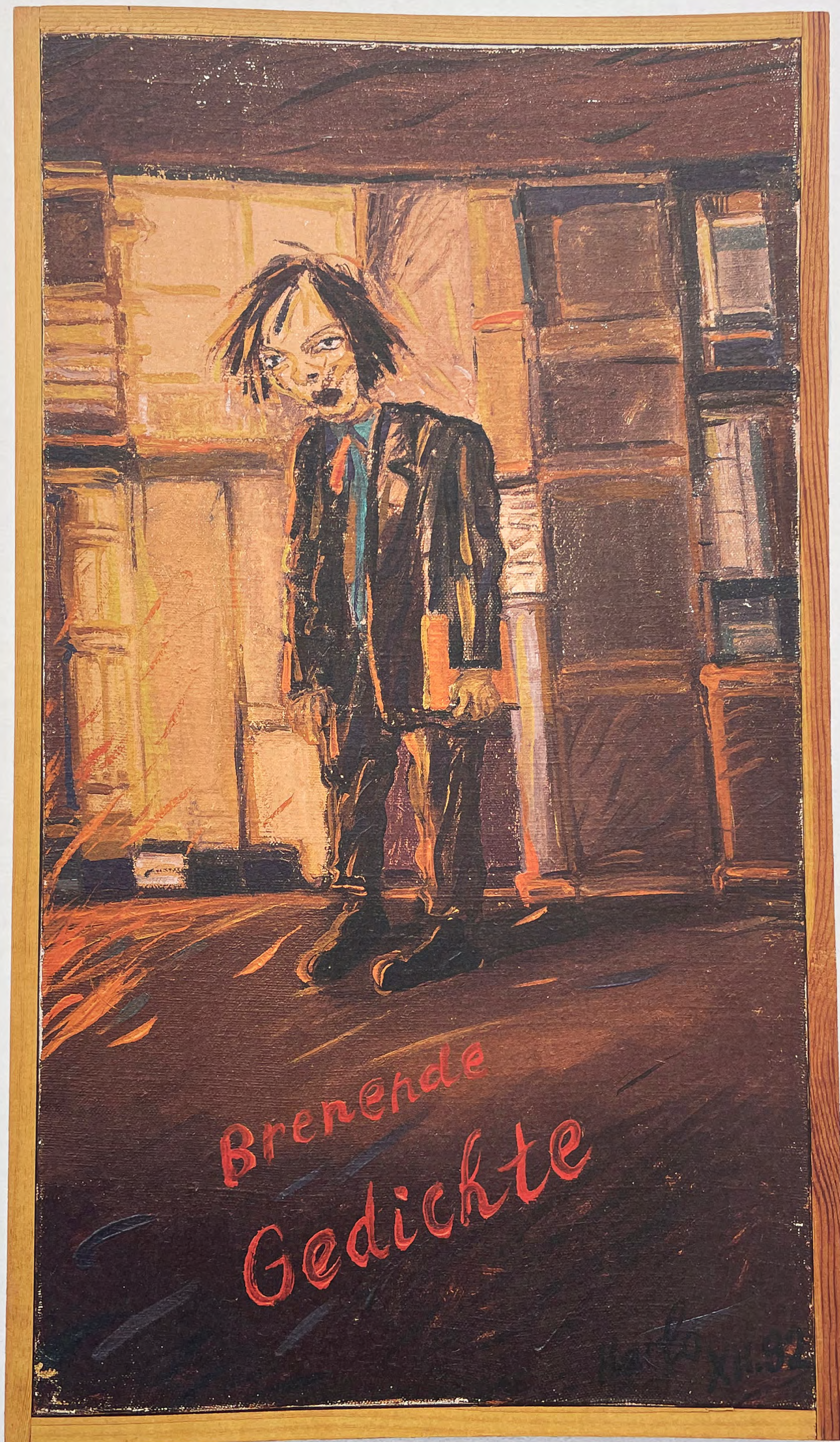
Johnnyn jagshug 1992.



pinxit Karlo Kadscharawa. gubgen



Susan Sontag, 1992, gouache on paper, 46 x 29 cm



Poet who Burned his Poems, 1992, oil on canvas, 52.2 x 30.2 cm



Anarchist's Dream, 1992, tempera on canvas, 103.3 x 103 cm
 OPPOSITE: *Engineer from 1930s*, 1991, watercolour on paper, 32 x 22 cm

Robert Bresson's 1967 film; her sorrowful complexion confronting the audience with a tinge of terror reminds me of Cosette in *Les Misérables*. The incantation of the written name hovering above her in the muddy air reverberates in my imagination, causing me to wonder what the film and its protagonist in misery could have meant to Kacharava and his generation in Georgia, at a time of drastic political turbulence.

The coexistence of multiple languages and compartmentalised images – remaking art histories and literatures, comic books and film scenes – made up Kacharava's life during the era of *glasnost* (openness) in the 1980s, when the Soviet Union was undergoing democratisation reforms implemented by Mikhail Gorbachev. The subsequent reduction of censorship, loosening of cultural boundaries and influx of information led to a flowering of art and letters. As a Chinese artist myself, I cannot help but think of the equivalent of *glasnost* in China – the 'reform and opening up' policy launched in the late 1970s by the Chinese Communist Party, led by Deng Xiaoping, which resulted in the blossoming of Chinese avant-garde art. Just as Chinese artists learned to liberate the artistic potential of quotidian objects after reading about Robert Rauschenberg in the Western art magazines that circulated in China during this period, Kacharava also embraced various artistic influences, most visibly Keith Haring's graffiti-inspired doodles, which occupy areas of the paintings in conjunction with passages of abstraction that evoke Georges Braque's Fauvist schemas.

The release that followed the repression accounts for Kacharava's voracious appetite for information and

fervent desire to fathom his relationship with the world beyond the nationalist paradigm. Kacharava actively built connections between segregated worlds by linking fragmented and disparate entities together. The canvases of certain paintings in the exhibition were literally sewn together from multiple pieces. Images depicted in oil are placed next to modular comic-book cells, creating a spatial fissure, an aesthetic disjunction, and a curious association between text and image, fiction and reality, Georgia and the rest of the world. Such a collage of information resembles our current days of social media, how artists today are exposed to information in vastly different and unpredictable ways compared to our predecessors, whose access to information and material can be more easily traced to understand the ingredients of making.

Kacharava was a portal of information in a broken world, a Nietzschean bridge, a glorification of freedom, a burning desire to embrace the world as a whole and to be embraced by the world. This is why he dreamed of showing his work in London, a city that perhaps meant the world to him at the time. Aligning with Jorge Luis Borges's famous proclamation, 'I am not sure that I exist, actually. I am all the writers that I have read, all the people that I have met, all the women that I have loved; all the cities that I have visited, all my ancestors', Kacharava dissolves in all the people and places he depicted, in the foreign languages he spoke, in the visual culture of the other merged with his own.

But this welcoming of the wealth of information is not without careful selection and critical conception. The New York-based art critic Barry Schwabsky, during our

იხუიხარი 30-
წლებში

იან

ან

იან





Am Abend Brot, 1992, oil on canvas, 48 x 38 cm




Clown/Bergman, 1992, acrylic and ball-point pen on canvas, 40 x 60 cm

conversation about the artist, pointed to 'Kacharava's cultivation of a raw and seemingly amateurish approach, almost reminiscent to me of a teenager filling his notebook with images half derived from everyday life, half from magazines, comics, TV, and movies, but all to dramatize his own inner state'. Kacharava's critical position is reflected in his conscious choice of artistic expressions: his carefree handling of paint with non-naturalistic colours characteristic of German Expressionism, especially in his *English Romanticism* (1992) and *PS to the General* (1990), exudes a sense of levity, vitality and emotional theatricality, which all form a stark contrast to the virtuosity of the mid-20th-century Leningrad School of Painting. Kacharava's cultivated amateurish approach fosters an echo of the dandy image in his oeuvre, most notably in his specific references to musician Nick Cave, who also starred in the movie *Dandy* (1988). Contrary to the image of heroism and patriotism preached by socialist realism, the use of the dandy figure by Kacharava is perhaps an act of revolt. As Albert Camus writes in *The Rebel* (1951):

The dandy creates his own unity by aesthetic means. But it is an aesthetic of negation. 'To live and die before a mirror': that, according to Baudelaire, was the dandy's slogan. It

is indeed a coherent slogan. The dandy is, by occupation, always in opposition. He can only exist by defiance.

At the same time, the anarchic and nihilistic sentiments represented by the dandy complicate what this image really means to Kacharava, just as unclear as his take on Susan Sontag's 'Against Interpretation'. It is precisely this unclarity and confusion that Kacharava ultimately used to dramatise his own inner state, rendered by the profusion of elements in constant dialogue, be it antagonistic, ironic, melancholic, romantic or euphoric.

The rediscovery of Kacharava by another artist is a practice of writing a personal art history. Both Sanya Kantarovsky and Karlo Kacharava present the history of art from their personal perspectives, rather than as a coherent and idealised narrative serving the constructs of national mythologies. That is the unique role of the artist as curator, whose perspectives are of an inner experience and communion with another artist, a conversation via the application of paint and the crooked frame, an acknowledgement of the random, the unfathomable alchemy of the mind and hand. This exhibition provides that sense of communion between the two, as the worlds come into contact on the canvas, in the space. 



Do you think so, 1993, oil on canvas, 52.5 x 42.3 cm



PS to the General, 1990, oil on canvas, 102.4 x 102.4 cm



Dream, 1983, gouache and pen on paper, 25 x 18 cm



English Romanticism, 1992, oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm