

Victor Bakhtin: An Illustration of Nature

By **TIM GEBHART**
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With a Cheshire cat-like grin, Victor walked me through his studio. Suffering from an injury he sustained in his youth from a climbing accident, he cradled his arm. Allergic to pain medication, he would wince a little bit and carry on.

A front was blowing through, perhaps agitating his old injury. In any case, the winds outside his studio in a high building above Madison, Wisconsin, were blowing in spring.

Victor Bakhtin was born and raised in the Siberian city of Krasnoyarsk. He was enthralled with the wild, and his eagerness and love of life led him to live life in full color. Now a world-class nature artist, many of his paintings are hanging in Holland, Sweden, Spain, England, South Africa, Japan, Taiwan, and the United States.

Originally set on being a violinist, a tragic climbing accident in his youth made it impossible for him to pursue music. Before the accident, the highly energetic Victor had a hard time sitting still.

Vladimir Zykov, a former colleague who had worked with Victor at the Krasnoyarsk Publishing House, remarked, "I can't remember a day he would spend at his desk from 9 to 6."

He was always getting into trouble. The publishing-house director often "lost" him and loudly expressed his indignation at the lack of discipline in his young worker. However, when the printers urgently needed a stamp, Victor got to work and astonished the director.

Starting as a technical editor, then an illustrator, Victor made his mark by illustrating some 78 books. He also began publishing his caricatures, or cartoons, in local newspapers in Russia.

'THE RED DATA BOOK'

One of Victor's first wildlife paintings was of a Siberian eagle-owl. Painted with watercolor, morning fog and dew cascade into a remote lake. Victor mused, "There is not a more serious owl than the Siberian eagle-owl. So perfectly its feathers are designed. However, it doesn't help them much to fly away from the endangered-species list."

"The Red Data Book of the Krasnoyarsk" was a massive undertaking with over 200 illustrations of fauna from the central region of Siberia. While working on a film at the time about Black Kites in southwest Tuva, in Russia, Victor also produced thousands of sketches, color and black-and-white pictures examining every detail of an animal for the book.

The book couldn't be found in bookstores; it sold out as soon as it hit the shelves. The book's striking detail and accuracy has made it a guide for scientific research on wildlife and conservation in central Russia.

Igor Gavrilov, Ph.D., docent, proctor of the Krasnoyarsk State Pedagogical University, stated of



'SPRING SHADOWS': 1996, oil, 85X85, private collection of Andy Davis, Wisconsin. VICTOR BAKHTIN

"I want those who look at my paintings to understand my admiration for the beauty of nature, as well as be astonished by nature's incredible persistence and terrifying vulnerability."

—Victor Bakhtin

Victor, "The artist's eye can see the details of morphology and animal's behavior that we, zoologists, often miss or do not attach

significance to."

The book caught the eye of wilderness enthusiasts, including eclectic birder and president of the International Crane Foundation, George Archibald. Mr. Archibald sought out Victor and offered him work in the United States. "You need to do two things," Archibald pressed on Victor through his interpreter. "One, learn English, and two, learn to paint."

PARADISE LOST

Victor said, "Nature, live or inanimate, is subject to the laws of universal harmony, and it's a great pleasure to study it in the detail available to my eye and brain. This is a daily touch of a secret attempt to move closer to the 'code' of the harmony.

"Sometimes I feel [like a] hacker, but with good intentions. I want those who look at my paintings to understand my admiration for

the beauty of nature, as well as be astonished by nature's incredible persistence and terrifying vulnerability."



'THREE GRACES': 1997, acrylic, 80X170, the collection of Alliant Energy Corporation, Illinois. VICTOR BAKHTIN

When summer's dawn covers the sleeping grass
With pearly dew, and the gloomy shadows melt,
There is a moment, meaningful for us,
That makes us equal to the world where we dwell.

Then you hear how the grass grows,
And understand the words of bird-songs.
You penetrate life again and slowly
Accept everything by heart, without thoughts.

Let there be Light, next marvel after the Word.
Bright sign of every day's reincarnation,
In Nature we are gladly dissolved,
In the delighting pure beauty of creation.

Victor Bakhtin, 1980

Penned in one of his books, Victor Bakhtin wrote: "Touching the Mystery, he displays his expansive art career from its beginnings to now."

Victor graciously loaned one of his books to me. As I flipped through the pages, I was immediately hooked. It was one of those rare instances in life when a work is so absorbing you can't take your eyes off of it, not wanting it to end.

There is something more in Victor's paintings. Wildlife art is of course about wildlife, but how do you show the gravity of a deer? How do you catch its movement in a painting—the still quietness after the deer moves its head?

Before drawing an animal, Victor uses any possibility to study its appearance in its natural environment, as well as in zoological gardens. He has worked with collection funds of zoological museums, traveling frequently to far-away regions of Russia.

On the walls of the International Crane Foundation headquarters in Baraboo, Wisconsin, Victor painted an immense mural that stretches across part of the building. The grand mural touches the heart.

Whooping cranes dance in the marshes. Bison graze in an oak savannah ablaze with wildflowers. Sandstone hills and flocks of birds grace the horizon under billow clouds. The scene is like a breath of fresh air.

The mural is aptly named "Paradise Lost." It is a painting of paradise, what the Baraboo region of Wisconsin looked like before



SOARING IMAGINATION: The young Victor Bakhtin has been described as a Russian Renaissance man. Building remote-controlled planes of every design, hang-gliding, his envy of birds and his love of nature has illuminated his art through the experiences of his life. VICTOR BAKHTIN

development. Victor displays the scene in rich, vivid detail. The more the eyes roam around the painting, the more they are set free by the small details that make the larger picture move as one.

The mural is scheduled to be torn down with the expansion of the International Crane Foundation headquarters—paradise lost once again.

Victor Bakhtin's expansive art career has gained him international recognition as a leading wildlife artist. He has published over 50 articles in different Russian newspapers and magazines. Victor currently paints on commission and teaches art in his studio in Madison, Wisconsin.

Celebrating Arts Around the Globe

Restoration of Late Gothic Sculpture

Restorer Christiane Haeseler works on the "Madonna With the Infant Jesus" sculpture of the Schoellenbacher Altar on April 22 at the regional office for the preservation of historical monuments in Wiesbaden, southwestern Germany. After four years of restoration, the late Gothic altar will turn back to the Erbach castle in the Odenwald region.



THOMAS LOHNES/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

Sand Sculptures in Roermond, Netherlands

The United Nations has declared 2010 as the International Year of Biodiversity. The theme of this year's event is "Love for Life" and highlights the need to protect our natural world. Over 50 professional sand carvers will take part in the event. The Dutch sand sculpture festival in Roermond, Netherlands, will take place from April 30 through Sept. 26..



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