

ART

Russia on the Walls

BY GINANNE BROWNELL

WHEN DASHA ZHUKOVA, THE GLAMOROUS girlfriend of Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich, opened her Garage Center for Contemporary Culture in a converted bus depot in Moscow last autumn, art connoisseurs scoffed. What did a 27-year-old socialite, born in Russia but raised mostly in Los Angeles, know about the international contemporary-art scene? As it turns out, quite a bit; Zhukova quickly won over critics with the quality of her exhibitions. The opening show featured the rarely displayed works of expat Russian conceptual artists Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, including the large-scale installation *The Red Wagon* (1992), which is made up of a series of platforms and ladders decorated with various socialist-realist murals and ramps that lead to nowhere. Next month, Zhukova will exhibit the English artist Antony Gormley's striking *Domain Field*, an installation of 287 sculptures made from body molds. Zhukova, who is also the editor of the British fashion magazine *Pop*, and her boyfriend are clearly determined to bring international contemporary art to Russian audiences; last year Abramovich spent more than £60 million on paintings by Lucien Freud and Francis Bacon. But the purpose of Garage is also to



expose the world to Russian contemporary art. "I think there is a perception in Russia that if something is Russian it is generally not as good as something that is from America or Europe," says Zhukova. "That is a complete misconception."

Zhukova is at the forefront of a group of Russian-born women fighting hard to change that perception. These women, mostly wealthy, well-educated art lovers who are as interested in promoting their homeland as in exploiting economic opportunity, have opened a rash of new Russian-art galleries—many in London, where two thirds of all Russian contemporary art is sold. Last month, St. Petersburg-born financier Nonna Materkova opened Calvert 22, a nonprofit gallery dedicated to Russian and Eastern European art, in London's Shoreditch neighborhood. The first show, entitled *PastFuturePerfect*, exhibited pieces by five up-and-coming Russian artists, including Pavel Pepperstein. One piece from his *Swastika and Pentagon* ink series (2006) shows a Nazi soldier in a compromising position with an elderly, austere Orthodox priest; another features a grotesque elderly woman—her face half skeleton, half human—dangling a swastika

pendant in front of a seated elderly man.

Iлона Orel, who since 2001 has run a successful gallery in Paris selling Russian contemporary works, inaugurated her London branch in April with a show featuring Andrei Molodkin, a former soldier whose intricate ink drawings have turned him into one of the country's most sought-after stars. Orel, 38, says that women have seized on the art-market opportunities partly out of traditional attitudes at home. "Maybe it's a part of Russian culture that men [are seen] to do the hard work and women do more cultural things," she says. "Art is not seen as a business but as pleasure."

There are signs that their efforts are paying off. At its second annual sale of the genre last year in London, Sotheby's saw profits rise to £4.1 million from £2.6 million in 2007. Among the works on sale: Alexander Kosolapov's takeoff on the red Marlboro box, *Malevich-Black Square*, and Ivan Cguikov's *Self-Portrait With Sokov*, which sold for £49,250. The auction house estimates that 30 percent of last year's buyers were non-Russian. "Looking back even three or four years ago, there was little interest in Russian contemporary art," says Jo Vickery, who heads Sotheby's