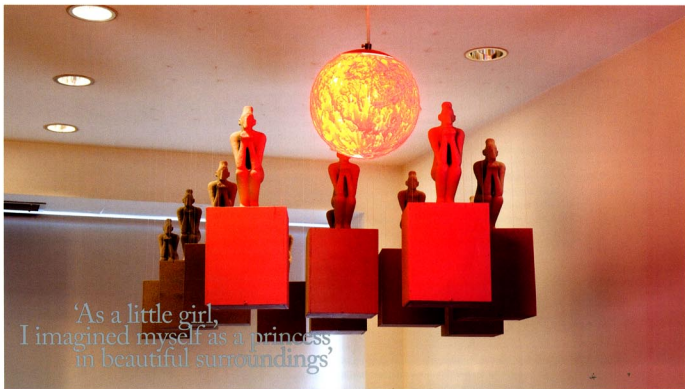


Previous page: Nonna Materkova in her London gallery Calvert 22, in front of Red Square Behind Black Screen (2004) by Vadim Zakharov.

Below: Sunset (2009), a mixed-media installation by Alexander Brodsky



increasingly crowded with female guardian angels flying about, patronising and promoting Russian contemporary art. This has become an important area of oligarchical one-upmanship, played out mainly in Moscow itself by so-called oligarchettes, glossy and expensively dressed wives and girlfriends of powerful businessmen, who operate out of impressive galleries with large contemporary spaces, climate control, security and lighting systems every bit as good as any space in London, Berlin, Paris or New York.

Heading the host is Dasha Zhukova, Moscow-born, Los Angeles-raised girlfriend of Roman Abramovich, who in autumn 2008 opened her Garage Center for Contemporary Culture in a converted bus depot in Moscow; her first show, by Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, expatriate Russian conceptual artists, converted many critics, who had previously scoffed that she was just dabbling. Two other prominent gallerists are Marianna Sardarova and Stella Kesaeva. Sardarova, blonde wife of Rashid Sardarov, who made his billions as chairman of the South Urals Industrial Company, has established her RuArts foundation in a bespoke four-storey 8,600-square-foot HQ in Moscow that has been likened to 'an Apple shop with canvases'. Stella Kesaeva, brunette wife of Igor Kesaev, Russia's tobacco king, who funded her first show when she introduced Basquiat, Wesselman and Warhol to Moscow in 2003, now runs the not-for-profit Stella Art Foundation. She is said to be moving into massive new headquarters in 2010 inside a skyscraper that her husband has built.

Lack of formal training and previous experience of the art world are compensated for with enthusiasm, occasional diva-ish antics, heaps of cash and teams of experts and curators. As Zhukova told me, little knowledge and no experience can be an advantage. 'Had I prior knowledge, I would have

been discouraged... And because I have had very little to do with the art world until now, I am not part of the politics.'

As to why these women find themselves reviving the Russian contemporary art scene, blame the state, which has been of zero assistance, so privateers have stepped in. 'We do not have a Guggenheim in Russia, nor do we have a Tate Gallery,' shrugs Zhukova. 'I enjoy it. Life has a habit of taking sharp turns, but I hope this is something I can do for a long time. I want to make the world smaller, and connect Russians with the rest of the world. Russia is next to Asia. Sometimes it is not good to have everything at your fingertips, but in art that is a strength.'

Materkova's approach is different. She is neither married to an oligarch nor one herself, but self-made. Instead of opening in Moscow, she has opened in London, where two-thirds of all Russian contemporary art is sold. She doesn't appear to be in it for the status or the parties, and she doesn't seem to have Kremlin strings attached to her, although her ex-boss at the city administration of her hometown of St Petersburg, Alexei Leonidovich Kudrin, is now a cabinet minister. However, were she to unmask herself as an 007-style spy assigned to check up on the British, I shouldn't be surprised.

She waltzes me around the interior of Calvert 22. I am struck by the large, open, clean and modern space laid out on two floors. There isn't a hint of glitz or gilt as you might find in a gallery in Moscow. Calvert 22 would sit comfortably in London's West End. At the far end of the main showroom, a large screen shows Alexander Sokurov's *Russian Ark* (2002), a film set in the splendour of the Hermitage Museum. As Materkova's eyes fill with gilt chandeliers, marble columns and sweeping staircases, she says: 'As a little girl, I imagined myself as a princess in such beautiful surroundings. But my