

New Work: Anna Parkina



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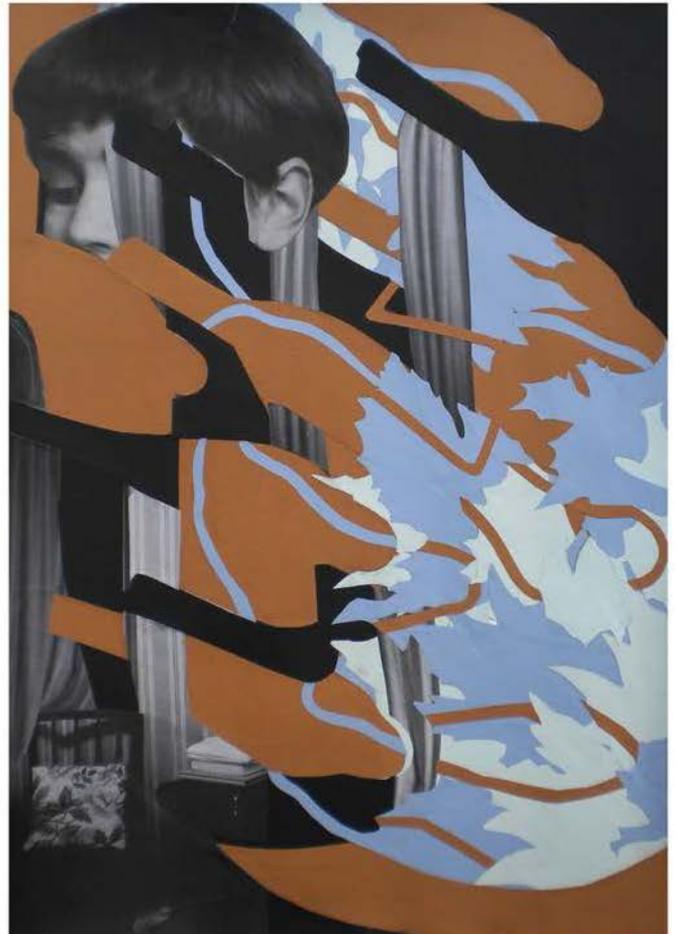
At thirty-one, Anna Parkina is one of a group of younger Russian artists who have made names for themselves in international exhibitions, but who are not well known to viewers in the United States. Her work evokes the forms and imagery of Russian Constructivism, particularly the photo collages of Alexander Rodchenko and the abstract compositions of Lyubov Popova, but her approach to this history is complex. Rather than attempting, as these artists did, to generate forms that would serve to propel society forward, she employs the imagery of mass culture to reflect upon the changes that have occurred in Moscow since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Her work effectively renders a society in flux, in which careers, fortunes, and worlds are made and destroyed every day.

For her first solo museum exhibition, Parkina has developed a new multidisciplinary project entitled *Fallow Land*, which includes both photo-based and tissue-paper collages, as well as drawings and archival materials arranged in cases. On February 24, 2011, the artist also debuts a performance of the same name to inaugurate the exhibition. *Fallow land* is ground that must be cleared in order to be productive again; here, Parkina is using the idea as a metaphor for clearing the space to make a truly contemporary art in Russia. She has noted: "I think that it's important to take a distance before starting to make something new on the same ground; that's what I'm trying to do, to grow up a new culture on the ground of my origin." Ancient nomadic people would burn forests when they moved from a land and return five years later to farm it. For Parkina, the history of Russian modernist art and the radical ideologies espoused by early twentieth-century artists is the ground that needs to lie fallow.

For the past hundred years, Russia has been a crucible of history in ways that are fundamentally social and political, successively marked as it has been by monarchy, revolution, communism, capitalism, and oligarchy. At the same time, some of the most innovative and paradigm-shifting cultural products have emerged from this milieu. Exploring Russian history is not the focus of Parkina's work but neither is it avoided. She continues:

"I like to adopt this metaphor of circulation to my way of life and my natural interest in collage, which may be often considered as a 'non contemporary' medium."<sup>1</sup>

Parkina's visual vocabulary is an eclectic mix of media: photography, drawing, and text. Her work seems to find the latent meaning behind the message, taking found images drastically out of context to produce a vivid visual domain with the qualities of the surreal. The Soviet author Mikhail Bulgakov, following Tolstoy, employed a literary technique called *ostranenie* or "bestrangement," in which one reality suddenly takes the place of another. The term *bestrangement* is itself an odd English



*The Frozen Fingers Were Not Unbend, 2010.*  
Collage of colored paper and photocopy, 20 1/8 x 14 in. (51 x 35.6 cm)

Negative of Assembly Foam, 2010.  
Oil on canvas, 23 5/8 x 27 9/16 in. (60 x 70 cm)

approximation of the Russian word, but it has the advantage of explaining the way an image can actively undermine one's perceptions, to make the world become strange. This form of defamiliarization mirrored the historical transformations of Moscow in the twentieth century; one imagines the Moscow of the twenty-first century, as translated in the work of Parkina, to be equally unsettling.

Bringing worlds together by assembling images, known as montage, was a central technique employed by the modernist avant-garde in the early decades of the twentieth century. Photomontage was inspired by cubist collage, and using this technique, pioneers such as Hannah Höch and El Lissitzky employed found photographic images to overturn preconceptions, questioning both the validity of traditional artistic forms and the apparent stability of contemporary society. In the work of John Heartfield and Gustav Klustis, these assembled pictures took on a political dimension, as they appropriated images from mass culture to make partisan statements through artistic language. It is ironic that a form of image-making derived from Dada's exploration of non-sense would be used in such a didactic manner. In Klustis's work of the 1930s and 1940s, the goals of photomontage were joined with those of Stalin's state socialism, generating a vivid example of avant-garde artistic techniques merging with contemporary political propaganda.

Although Parkina does not practice photomontage per se, since she regularly uses colored paper and draws and paints on her collages, this history of polemical imagery may help to explain why the messages in her works are difficult to determine. On the one hand, Parkina is not prone to promoting any particular agenda; on the other hand, she is putting montage to use for distinct purposes. Montage as a technique employed in film is even more significant for her and may be the best means to explain her approach. In a movie, montage can operate to destabilize the visual field. This was a preoccupation of early Soviet filmmakers. Discussing the theories of Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov, Annette Michelson has described montage as



“the visible suspension of causal relations within the phenomenal world.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, while the individual elements of montage are familiar to us from lived experience, their reconfiguration in film changes the way one is able to perceive them and short-circuits one's normal mental processes, opening the possibility for reinterpretation.

Another way to describe this montage effect is to say that in film, as in life, one shot does not present the whole story—the narrative can only be construed by the viewer over time from multiple angles and views. In Parkina's art, images themselves are objects in the world, yet the way the shapes, contours, and recognizable elements are composed generates a rhythm particular to each work. The tantalizing aspect of her art is the search for a means to assemble the multiple elements into some kind of recognizable form. Just as the imagery is not identical from one collage to the next, the particular rhythm of each work establishes a distinct interval or gap in time between the viewer's seeing the image and her coming to consciousness of its subject. The notion of the interval was an issue central to Russian Constructivist film. As Dziga Vertov described it: “*Intervals* [the transitions from one movement to another] are the material, the elements of the art movement, and by no means the movements themselves. It is they [the intervals] which draw the movement to a kinetic resolution.”<sup>23</sup> In Parkina's

collages, that temporal lag between vision and knowledge is the means by which the works achieve a kind of “kinetic resolution,” to employ Vertov’s terminology. The irony is that, unlike film, Parkina’s images are still, and yet they engage the movement of the eye in time. Where the eye moves, the brain follows, and so a story is written.

But the question remains: what story is written? How does the viewer come to understand the gaps in the work, the interval between seeing and knowing? The artist provides clues through recognizable imagery such as photographs of herself and film noir stills of men in trench coats and fedoras. There is also the relentless geometry of Soviet-era apartment blocks, alongside birds, trees, cars, teapots, and, most recently, scythes. The elements that are assembled are immediate, if fragmentary, and they

occur to the viewer like imagery from a dream. Yet the viewer is awake, and the images are the visual symbols of a society in flux. Parkina’s symbols are universal, if historical, and they remind us that change and repetition are never far apart.

A bird flies, a trees shakes, a man pursues, a woman is surprised. In *The Ticket Is for Today*, a short film Parkina produced in 2010 for an exhibition at Focal Point Gallery in Southend-on-Sea, England, she stitched video clips taken on the Russian subway together with a soundtrack and interspersed frames of texts about a group of invented characters. In the resulting narrative, it does not matter that the footage itself was documentary because the viewer applies the text to the images and vice versa. In Parkina’s pictures the same dynamic occurs. Each element, when placed in the experimental pictorial dynamic that the artist has invented, acquires a new meaning in the context of the work. The goal is not recognition. It is rather the pursuit of meaning through the contingent process of looking. Her images open up an interval between what one sees and what one knows.

The untitled tissue-paper collages on view in this exhibition are a new medium for Parkina, and yet they embody some of the key aspects of her work. She does not employ photographs in these pieces, and so the question of the origin and use of images is subsumed to the development of forms across a surface. In this way, the connection of one image to the next proposes a kind of narrative trajectory. Such a collection of fleeting forms presents the viewer with a conundrum. As other authors have pointed out, to describe Parkina’s body of work presents a fundamental problem: the most essential subject of her art cannot be named.<sup>4</sup> In some sense, it is impossible to say what this work is about. The interplay of line and color is developed through layering, and as one attempts to dig down through the layers to find the base from which the images are constructed, one becomes lost in the play of floating forms. These images that she creates from her imagination are not grounded in any particular foundation; rather, their meaning exists in the way one makes sense of them, in each viewer’s pro-



Untitled, 2011.  
Collage of colored paper, laser prints, and poster

Opposite:  
Untitled, 2011. Vellum



cess of discovering the aspect of the work that is pleasing and real. When a viewer finds herself lost amid the forms is the point at which Parkina's fantastical images come true.

John Zarobell

Assistant Curator, Collections, Exhibitions, and Commissions

#### Notes

1. Unpublished correspondence with the artist, November 18, 2010.
2. Annette Michelson, "The Wings of Hypothesis: On Montage and the Theory of the Interval," in *Montage and Modern Life, 1919–1942*, ed. Christopher Phillips (New York: International Center for Photography, 1992), 65.
3. Dziga Vertov, "We: Variant of a Manifesto," in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, ed. Annette Michelson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 8.
4. See essays by Zdenek Felix and Dmitry Zabavin in the catalogue *Anna Parkina* (Southend-on-Sea, UK: Focal Point Gallery, 2011).

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Printed on recycled paper.

Anna Parkina (b. 1979) is based in Moscow. She grew up first under the Soviet Union, witnessed the end of the Cold War, and experienced the social transformations of post-Soviet Russia. She began to study art at age twelve and later attended university in Paris, at Université de Paris 8 and then at the École des Beaux-Arts. She also spent a year in Pasadena, at the Art Center College of Design. Since the artist's return to Moscow in 2006, her work has been exhibited internationally at galleries in New York, London, and Germany, as well as at the Moscow Biennale (2009) and the most recent Venice Biennale (2009).

#### Works in the Exhibition

<i>Untitled</i> , 2011 Collage of colored paper, laser prints, and poster 27 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>16</sub> x 19 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> in. (68.8 x 49.6 cm)	<i>Untitled</i> , 2011 Collage of colored paper, laser prints, and book pages 27 <sup>9</sup> / <sub>16</sub> x 19 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> in. (70 x 49.5 cm)
<i>Untitled</i> , 2011 Collage of colored paper 19 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>8</sub> x 25 <sup>9</sup> / <sub>16</sub> in. (48.5 x 65 cm)	<i>Untitled</i> , 2011 Collage of colored paper, laser prints, and book pages 19 <sup>11</sup> / <sub>16</sub> x 23 <sup>9</sup> / <sub>16</sub> in. (50 x 59.8 cm)
<i>Untitled</i> , 2011 Collage of colored paper, laser prints, and poster 16 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> x 19 <sup>11</sup> / <sub>16</sub> in. (42.5 x 50 cm)	<i>Untitled</i> , 2011 Collage of colored paper and laser prints 23 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> x 19 <sup>11</sup> / <sub>16</sub> in. (59.7 x 50 cm)
<i>Untitled</i> , 2011 Collage of laser prints 15 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>16</sub> x 11 <sup>7</sup> / <sub>16</sub> in. (38.6 x 29 cm)	<i>Untitled</i> , 2011 Collage of colored paper, laser prints, and poster 19 <sup>7</sup> / <sub>16</sub> x 27 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>8</sub> in. (49.4 x 69.5 cm)
<i>Untitled</i> , 2011 Collage of laser prints 15 <sup>9</sup> / <sub>16</sub> x 11 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> in. (39.5 x 29.2 cm)	<i>Untitled</i> , 2011 Collage of colored paper, laser prints, and poster 27 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>8</sub> x 35 <sup>9</sup> / <sub>16</sub> in. (68.5 x 89.7 cm)
<i>Untitled</i> , 2011 Collage of colored paper and laser prints 14 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>8</sub> x 16 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>8</sub> in. (36.5 x 41.6 cm)	<i>Untitled</i> , 2011 Collage of colored paper and laser prints 27 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>8</sub> x 35 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>4</sub> in. (69.5 x 89.5 cm)
<i>Untitled</i> , 2011 Collage of laser prints 15 <sup>11</sup> / <sub>16</sub> x 14 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>8</sub> in. (39.9 x 35.8 cm)	<i>Untitled</i> , 2011 Collage of colored paper, laser prints, and book pages 29 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>16</sub> x 31 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> in. (74.5 x 80 cm)
<i>Untitled</i> , 2011 Collage of colored paper, laser prints, and book pages 23 <sup>9</sup> / <sub>16</sub> x 19 <sup>11</sup> / <sub>16</sub> in. (59.8 x 50 cm)	<i>Untitled</i> , 2011 Collage of vellum, colored paper, laser prints, and poster 25 <sup>9</sup> / <sub>16</sub> x 25 <sup>9</sup> / <sub>16</sub> in. (65 x 65 cm)
<i>Untitled</i> , 2011 Collage of colored paper, laser prints, and poster 19 <sup>1</sup> / <sub>2</sub> x 27 <sup>5</sup> / <sub>16</sub> in. (49.5 x 69 cm)	Nine collages, <i>Untitled</i> , 2011 Vellum 15 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> x 15 <sup>3</sup> / <sub>4</sub> in. (40 x 40 cm)

The gallery presentation includes a display showcasing a selection of archival source materials belonging to and arranged by the artist.

*The Frozen Fingers Were Not Unbend*, courtesy the artist and The Hort Family Collection. All other artworks and images are courtesy the artist and Wilkinson Gallery, London.

Images on reverse (left to right): *Untitled*, 2011, colored paper. *Untitled*, 2011, vellum. *Untitled*, 2011, colored paper and laser prints.



new work

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