

End of innocence

Moscow-based foursome AES+F pose some disturbing questions about youth, beauty, violence and war, writes **Yenni Kwok**



Last Riot (left), Action Half Life, AES+F

With their smooth skin and bright eyes, these boys and girls have a beautiful, innocent look. But surprisingly, they are doing disturbing, wicked things: toying with rocket-propelled grenades, strangling and torturing each other.

Such are the strange but compelling images created by AES+F, a collective of four Moscow-based artists: Tatiana Arzamasova, Lev Evzovich, Evgeny Svyatsky and Vladimir Fridkes. Their works, titled *Action Half Life* and *Last Riot*, explore issues of youth, beauty, heroism, violence and war.

”The artworks speak about our world,” says Evzovich, who was recently in Hong Kong with Svyatsky and Fridkes to attend the opening of their exhibition at the Art Statements Gallery, their first solo show in Asia. “It looks glossy and beautiful on the outside, but it has a bitter, traumatic meaning inside.”

The exhibition features photographic prints, digital prints on canvases and a video animation from the two series, and runs simultaneously with their other shows at two art events. One is at the Istanbul Biennial, which ends

today, the other is at the Venice Biennale until November 21. (It's part of the Russian pavilion, curated by Olga Sviblova, the director of Multimedia Art Centre in Moscow.)

While it's tempting to link the works – *Action Half Life* began in 2003 and *Last Riot* in 2005 – with ongoing events, from the terrorist attacks to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the artistic inspiration comes from elsewhere.

The body language and the facial expression of the models resemble the aesthetic style that has appeared throughout history: from old European master paintings, propaganda art to fashion photography. In addition, there is also a dose of electronic games and Hollywood blockbusters thrown into the mixture. “The virtual world is a reflection of our reality,” Arzamasova says. “Our goal is to show both hopelessness and hope in one moment. And our hope is our sense of humour.”

Action Half Life takes its name from a trigger-happy computer game that was inspired by John Woo's films. The boys and girls, selected from 500 children from modelling agencies, take on the roles of heroes and heroines in a futuristic war. Dressed in white and armed with gleaming hi-tech weapons, they are juxtaposed against the backdrop of the Sinai Desert, which looks like a cross between a scene from George Lucas' sci-fi epic *Star Wars* and the scenery from Renaissance Italian painter Giovanni Bellini's *Sacred Allegory*.

The series is less about condemning the effects of electronic games than scrutinising the idea of heroism through the ages. “Children always play wars. Even before the arrival of computer and video games, boys played with toy guns or swords,” Svyatsky says. “Action Half Life is about the narcissistic qualities of heroes. We decided to have children as models because they are visible and eye-catching. People are simply more sensitive to the image of children.”

Last Riot blends the dramatic tension of baroque paintings, such as those by Caravaggio, and the brutal, violent world of America's Army computer game. The androgynous youths, mostly recruited from the ballet school of Bolshoi Theatre, are engaged in a fight against all and each other.

”We were looking for a certain look, feminine boys and masculine girls, who can also strike a classical pose,” Evzovich says about why they have

chosen ballet students. “*Last Riot* is about the game of violence and the sexuality of violence. The story might be like Abu Ghraib [the Iraqi prison], but the picture is also very baroque in style.”

Napoleon Bonaparte famously once said: “Scratch a Russian, and you will see a Tartar.” That saying is incomplete, according to the artists. “It should go on to say: ‘Scratch a Russian, and you will also see a German or a French.’”

“Russia is in between the east and the west,” Svyatsky explains. “It is both inside and outside the two worlds. In this sense, what we are doing is very Russian. We are adopting different elements, and what we are doing can be understood everywhere.”

The group started as a three-member collective in 1987 – graphic designer Svyatsky, conceptual architects Evzovich and Arzamasova (the only female member) – called AES, after the initials of their last names. Since 1995, they have been collaborating with fashion photographer Fridkes in several projects under the name AES+F.

The foursome, whose ages range between 49 and 52, prefer to collaborate rather than work independently. “We do much better as a group,” says Evzovich. “We can discuss and verify our ideas with each other. It surely helps if we are in doubt.”

“Like Monty Python,” the quiet Fridkes suddenly blurts out. “We work as a collective, but each of us is unique.” He may also mean they work like public jesters, poking fun at people's desires and fears while exposing their absurdity.

AES gained recognition in 2001 with their Islamic Project. The photographic series depicts the great cities and landmarks in Europe under the ‘invasion’ of the Muslim ‘horde’ and its culture. The Statue of Liberty is draped in a burqa, the glass cupola of the Reichstag in Berlin is replaced with an Islamic dome and minarets, while a Muslim bazaar occupies St Peter's Square in Rome.

“The Islamic Project serves as a psycho-social analysis, it expresses and examines our deepest dreams and worries,” Svyatsky says. “We hope we can overcome our fear and heal ourselves. But first, we need to have a sense of

humour to understand things in a right way.”

The artists are no strangers to controversy, yet their works have been prophetic. The Islamic Project, often seen as a probe of the ‘clash of civilisations’, began in 1996. But the artists say they didn't hear about Samuel Huntington and his contentious theories about the world order until much later. “Only after 9/11, we heard about Huntington or Osama bin Laden,” says Evzovich. “Our idea actually came from the Chechen war, which began in 1994.

’What is also strange is the *King of the Forest*,” he says about their series of performance art from 2001-03, inspired by a mythical creature from medieval Europe who kidnaps beautiful children and keeps them in his palace. “Then Beslan happened [in 2004] and people suddenly made a connection between the *King of the Forest* with the school hostages. I guess you can see it that way.”

”What we are doing is a new political art,” Svyatsky says. “It isn't didactic, it doesn't belong to any particular group, and it is not connected with straight political activism. Yet it has aesthetics and entertainment values.”

AES+F, Art Statements Gallery, 5 Mee Lun St, Central, Mon-Fri, 11am-7pm, Sat, 11am-6pm. Ends Nov 30. Inquiries: 2122 9657

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