

mercury

change your temperature

on the cover

'Self-portrait,' 2002, by
Newport's Alexandrev 'Sasha'
Kouznetsov, 36" by 48"

inside



'Pushkin,' left, and 'Father' by Sasha

off the lip

Sasha says 12

MARIA MULDAUR

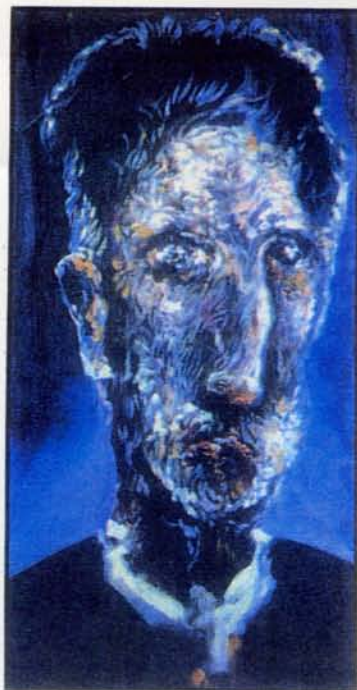
'70s pop star
turned venerable
blueswoman

DORIS DAY SAT. HERE

Where to get hip
vintage modern
furniture

SASHA

The artist in America



'Van Gogh'
oil on wood, 8" by 24"



'Russian Boy with Statuette
of Napoleon'
oil on canvas, 24" by 36"



'Grandfather'
oil on wood, 14" by 14"

off the lip

An artist's many faces

ALEXANDREV KOUZNETSOV, 40, painter, filmmaker/mockumentarist

In 1990, Alexandrev Kouznetsov, a.k.a. Sasha, Ukrainian fashion designer and underground TV and radio show host, became part of a cultural exchange initiated by members of the old Communist Party who wanted to go on a Western shopping spree. Soon he decided not to go back home and to try his luck as an artist in the New World. See his work hanging at Empire Tea & Coffee, 22 Broadway, and Area Venue, 3 River Lane, and at SeaFare's American Cafe, 151 Swinburne Row, all in Newport. You also can peruse his portfolio at www.sashasdreamworld.com. **BY MARTINA HESSER**

Were you in the Ukraine when Chernobyl happened?

Yes. They were lying right from the start. Like always. When Chernobyl happened, my friend Andrey called me at 2 a.m. He lived in Chernobyl at the time. He wanted to talk to my father because my dad was an engineer. He said to me, "Sasha, something happened here. There is a big fire. There is a rumor that one of the reactors blew up." Finally I heard my father say to him, "Get out of there as soon as possible." There was silence for five days. No government official said anything until the cloud was blown over to Europe and Finland. The minister of Health in the Ukraine made a statement that radiation is actually good for you and they use it in medicine. Then people started drinking iodine and got poisoned by that. Gorbachev made an official statement two weeks later: They didn't want to invite anybody from foreign countries to help. It was just like the submarine accident when all the sailors died. People stayed in the area for about three months after the accident.

What were your first experiences like in this country?

Four other young artists and I were invited by the Americans to come here. We brought about 500 paintings, everything we had. There was a private company involved in the whole venture. They made a couple of exhibitions with us in Boston and Cape Cod. People stood in line to see our shows. They brought flowers and gifts. People were so cute. I made very good friends then. But then things started to turn sour. One of the company executives told us to put our paintings in a container, which was supposed to go to Florida. He told us to put the prices of the paintings on each one, but in rubles.

The company wanted to buy all our paintings. My English was very weak at the time, like everybody else's. So everybody got about \$1,000 to \$1,200 for everything. Months later the FBI showed up at our house and asked a lot of questions about this company. Evidently, there had been a large-scale insurance fraud. They told me that somebody showed up at the Boston gallery and wrote a check for \$25,000 for one of my paintings. The check bounced. After that an insurance claim had been filed. In the meantime, the container with all our paintings burned.

If you look at my portfolio of the last 20 years, you'd probably think 20 different people have made it. I can't do the same thing over and over again. My style changes, otherwise I get bored.

What happened then?

The others went back to Kiev but I decided to stay. I stayed with American artists, got a working visa. In the daytime I worked for a telephone company and at night I painted. I gave my landlords two paintings a month instead of rent. During this year I created an enormous body of work and the work was much better. First of all, I had new materials because in Russia, if you are not a member of the official Communist

party you don't have access to good artists' materials. These things I had to buy at the black market and they were very expensive. I still remember when I went to an art store in Boston with my friends Kostya and Natasha. At that time I was 25. Kostya almost fainted and Natasha started crying. I was holding my tears. I still get goose bumps talking about it. I never saw such an amount of material in my life. Unbelievable!

Did you go to art school in Kiev?

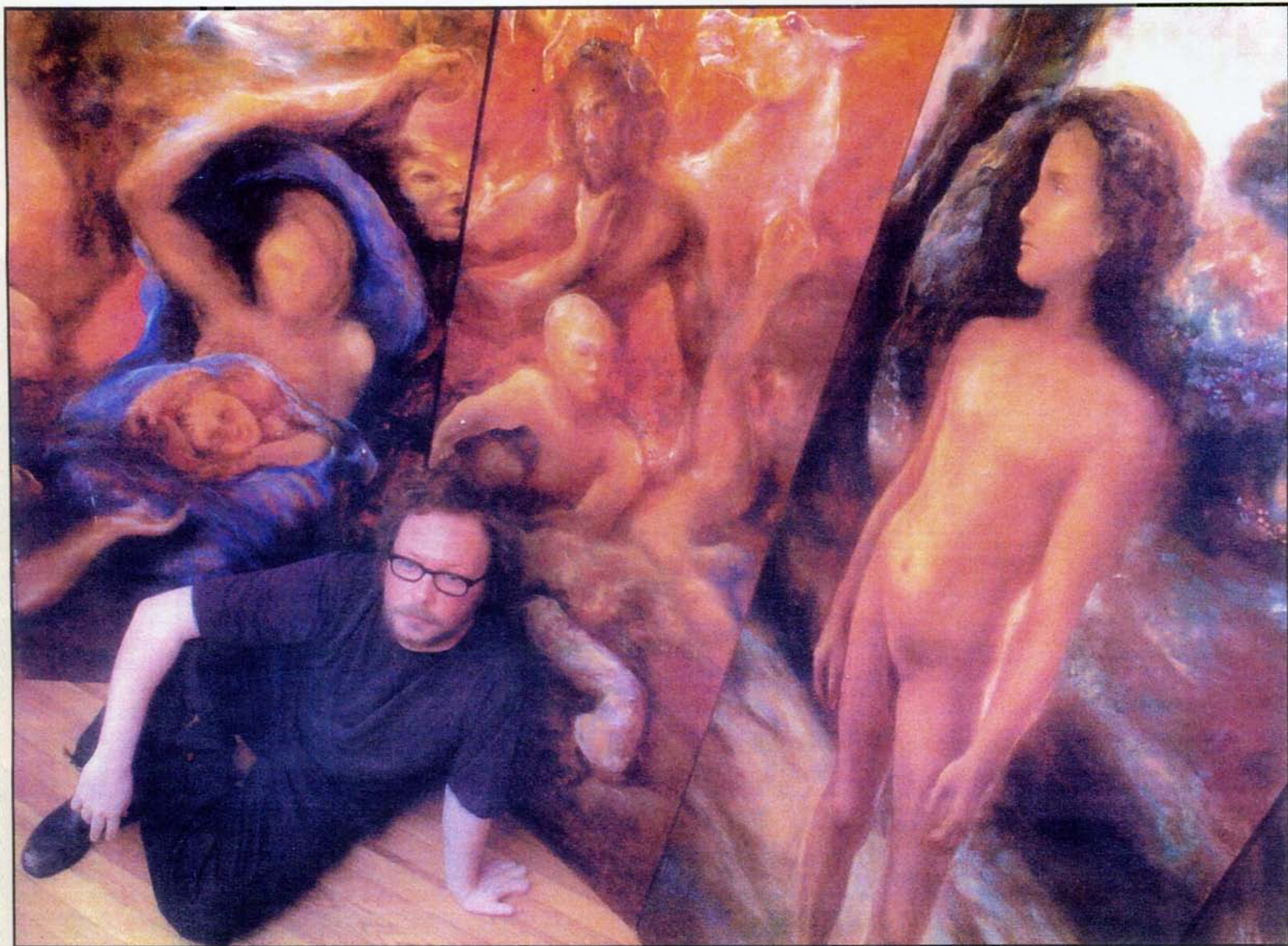
Yes. I finished industrial design and fashion design school in Kiev, but I have been trained by masters since I was a child. I had my first exhibition when I was 10. It was my destiny. Even though I was a fashion designer, I had to study physics and theoretical mechanics, because everybody had to be of potential military use in a time of war. After school, I went to the army for three years; that's mandatory.

What did you do for the military in Russia?

I was a radio operator in a submarine. It was boring but much better than killing people.

What are you working on now?

I paint everything. If you look at my portfolio of the last 20 years, you'd probably think 20 different people have made it. I can't do the same thing over and over again. My style changes, otherwise I get bored. For example Tchaikovsky, Leonardo, Mozart, these guys they did a lot of different things, piano concertos, operas; they were prolific in so many different genres. I also read a lot and I like to pretend. When I read a book about somebody like Pushkin, Dali or Leonardo, I go inside and learn everything about them. Sometimes I come out with lyrics and tales.



Alexandre Kouznetsov, a.k.a. 'Sasha,' with a giant oil painting on large wood panels in his home. He says the piece was inspired by the war in Iraq. PHOTO BY JACQUELINE MARQUE

Do you write in Russian?

Yes. I always had the dream to become a writer, but nobody in my family would support me. My father is a scientist and my mother lives in a world populated with Ovid and Dante. And here I come, writing stuff that is very creepy, about politics, the underground movement. One day my mother said, "Sasha, this is a waste of time."

What kind of literature do you like?

I read a lot of Russian authors. I like Dostoyevsky. He creates his own language. It really is untranslatable. I also read a lot of Nabokov. He is brilliant and even if you read one of

his books in English, I still feel that he is Russian. What I'm trying to say is that if you translate great literature, you inevitably lose a lot of the magic. The same thing is true, for example, of Arthur Rimbaud. If you read his poetry that he wrote when he was 14, it is incredible. At the time I was reading it, I didn't understand the meaning of freedom. I was still living in Russia and over there it is social realism but not freedom. Coming here really changed me in that respect.

Did you ever go back?

I don't want to. It is painful. I am open-minded, but at the same time I

am very sentimental. There is too much corruption.

What are your plans for the future?

I'm planning to go to school on the computer so I can do some animation on it. I am also working on a series of sketches on Gogol. Toward the end of his life he became a hermit and got into Christianity. In his private life, he realized that he was homosexual. He had been carrying this around all his life and it had been torturing him. He asked God to help him, went to doctors, priests and crazy, fanatic shamans who were tortur-

ing him. After he came home from abroad he refused to eat and starved himself to death within three weeks. In my sketches I want to capture his moment of realization when he is finished with life.

You made a movie. What was it about?

I made a short movie called "Painting with Sasha." It had the premiere here in Newport last year during the Newport International Film Festival. It's a parody, a mockumentary. I am playing a guy, who hates everything ingenious, new and innovative and who praises everything mediocre. The painter

Thomas Kinkade was a great inspiration for this.

Whom do you work for?

I work on private commission basis. The people I work for don't tell me what they want. I come up with my own things. There is a lot of trust involved in this. And since I only work for people I know, I know what they are looking for. I would never do anything for people I don't like.

How do you like living in America?

I realized that it doesn't matter where you live, it matters who you are surrounded by. If I have my friends and soulmates close by, I am happy.