

Ilya and Emilia Kabakov

**The Unfinished Paintings Of Charles Rosenthal**

Kanaal, Patio Gallery

16 March – 31 August, 2019



Installation view, Room No. 5, left wall, Art Tower Mito Museum, Mito, Japan, 1999

Photo by Shigeo Muto courtesy the artists

Axel Vervoordt Gallery is pleased to present an iconic installation by Ilya and Emilia Kabakov. *The Unfinished Paintings Of Charles Rosenthal* is the complete cycle of white paintings created in 1999 conceived as the last proposed unfinished exhibition by Kabakov's avatar and invented character Charles Rosenthal. The exhibition is curated by Jill Silverman van Coenegrachts and is for the first time on display in Europe as a complete installation. In an adjacent room of the main exhibition space 5 drawings from the series *Under the Snow* (2005) will be exhibited.

Being part of the large body of works within the oeuvre, *The Alternative History Of Art* can be read as the Kabakovs' complex imagination that rewrote art history from the end of the last century through to the end of Stalin, as a parable. Kabakov invented the artist Charles Rosenthal as his alter ego, ten years after he was exiled from Russia. The artist Charles Rosenthal died in 1933, the same year that Ilya Kabakov was born, so the beginning of this imaginary narrative presents something hovering between an idea of cultural reincarnation, a spiritual transfer of the ideas — and the embodied soul of Rosenthal streaming into Kabakov. The real artist also invented a clone of himself as the protégé of this beloved teacher Charles Rosenthal — a revered teacher he never *actually* had.

These works are dated 1933, the moment when Charles Rosenthal's career is at a close. In fact, the real Ilya Kabakov decides that Charles Rosenthal would have to be killed prematurely in a car accident before finishing these works. This installation becomes the last work of his life. It consists of frames for canvasses waiting to be painted, as well as canvasses filled with the thin pencil drawings of scenes from Soviet life that filled earlier Rosenthal works with a kind of folkloric kindness and pride. But it is Ilya and Emilia Kabakov –the real artists –who decide to present them. For this reason, they become a clue to the big questions Ilya and Emilia were pondering at that time, via the fictional character of Rosenthal.

Like Malevich puts his famous Black Square in the corner high in the drawing room wall where everyone at the time expected to see the icon painting of Christ, here too, Kabakov offers the white canvas like a monochrome daring us to look differently at something we think we know.

The reductive, minimalist structures fill the space like works of sculpture, and whether the history of their creation is known, the impact, the pale calmness of their order offers the viewer the opportunity to contemplate time, emptiness, presence, and absence in a way that the Kabakovs singularly understand.

The experience of these works is fresher today than when they were made two decades ago:

*"I decided to make a large group of paintings and arrange them together as a unified whole... I don't know whether I'll manage to find an appropriate dwelling for such an arrangement that I have conceived. The materials that I gathered for such an integrated exhibit, the first of its kind, are ready, and I think everything will be finished by the spring of next year."*

*(except from the diary of Charles Rosenthal, March 18, 1933)*

This powerful body of complete work has only been shown three times: first, in 1999, at the Mito Museum in Mito, Japan; secondly, in 2004, in Cleveland, USA when *The Alternative History of Art* took over the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland. There this composition was known as 'Room no. 6.' In 2008, the *Alternative History of Art* was shown in its entirety at The Garage, Moscow. The installation has been shown partially at the Städel Museum Frankfurt am Main, and at Kunstmuseum Bern, both in 2000.

It's a great honour for the Axel Vervoordt Gallery to be the first European venue to show the complete iconic installation of works, a series of triptychs and individual paintings.

**Contact Press:**

Anne-Sophie Dusselier

[asd@axel-vervoordt.com](mailto:asd@axel-vervoordt.com)

phone +32 3 680 14 89

mobile +32 476 230989

high res images can be downloaded from:

<https://www.axel-vervoordt.com/press>

login: [press@axel-vervoordt.com](mailto:press@axel-vervoordt.com)

password: press