

Karlo Kacharava comes out from the shadows

28/12/23 6 min read Words: [Laurie Barron](#)

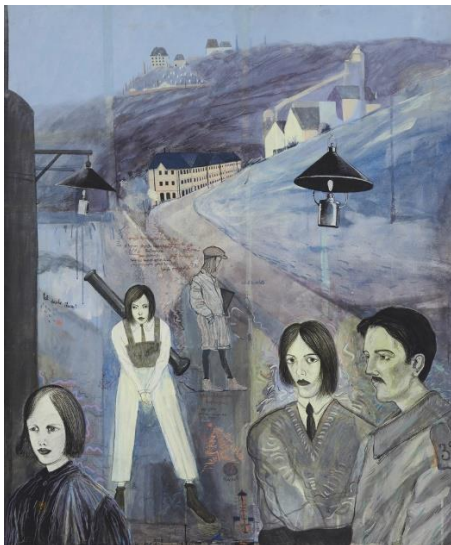
The late Georgian artist and poet is finally getting his dues in a major institutional show at S.M.A.K., Ghent

(afbeelding niet downloadbaar)

Karlo Kacharava, Der Tod des Lichtes, 1993, Courtesy of Karlo Kacharava Estate

While travelling in Moscow in 1993, Georgian artist Karlo Kacharava was violently struck over the head by a robber. The resulting complications led to his tragic death from a brain aneurysm the following year in Tbilisi – he was aged just 30. Kacharava left an unfinished painting, *The Art of Darkness* (1994), which is now on view, almost three decades later, at S.M.A.K. in Ghent, which is presenting the artist's first-ever institutional solo exhibition outside Georgia.

Curated by Liesje Vandenbroeck and Karima Boudou, the exhibition includes archival video, sketchbooks, diaries, paintings and even a selection of vinyl records (ranging from Stevie Wonder and Bob Dylan to Brahms and Mozart) that visitors can listen to. The *New York Times* previously described Kacharava's style as 'Eastern European Noir', and, fittingly, darkness pervades in some of the works on view, such as the aptly named *The Art of Darkness* (1994). A cinematic tension envelops the painting of four figures, including a woman wrapped in a body-length plastic bag. The exhibition is bountiful in similarly masterful drawings and paintings that induce senses of ennui and unease.



Sentimental Traveler, 1993, Courtesy the Estate of Karlo Kacharava, Tbilisi, and Modern Art, London

As Boudou explains, the show is titled 'Sentimental Traveller' after a painting included in the exhibition from 1993. "Kacharava was constantly travelling through many references he was encountering, which he then analysed, incorporated and synthesised in the work."

Kacharava travelled constantly, promoting the work of Georgian artists across central Europe. "He had this productive curiosity. He inserted himself in a singular way through euro-American art history," Boudou continues. "References could be literary or musical; Nick Cave, Susan Sontag, French painter Robert Combas, French novelist Patrick Modiano, and Jean Michel Basquiat. It was not about copying and pasting them, it was about including them in his inventive visual world. The work is very cosmopolitan and international." The exhibition is a clear commitment to placing Kacharava as a key member of the 20th-century avant-garde that has been overlooked.

Many paintings have a storyboard-like framework as if they could have been plucked from a graphic novel. There's a synthesis of the cartoonish and realistic. Kacharava was also a critic and writer. Georgian script appears alongside fragments of French and German in works including Nick Cave (1992) and Without a Saint (1987). Often these seem to start as Dada-esque, Basquiat-like streams of consciousness in notebooks and diaries, before ending on canvas.



Nick Cave, 1992, Courtesy the Estate of Karlo Kacharava, Tbilisi, and Modern Art, London

(afbeelding niet downloadbaar)

Crucifixion, 1989, Courtesy of Karlo Kacharava Estate

The drawings and paintings are the strength of the exhibition. They hold a distinctively recognisable visual sensibility characterised by particular attention paid to the expression and appearance of depicted figures. Female characters often have sharp features, wistful gazes, and rouged lips. Appearing intensely focused, lost in thought, they're expression recalls a feeling of malaise in the works of Otto Dix and Georg Grosz. Many works are monochromatic, evocative of German expressionist cinema – a key influence, according to Boudou.

Numerous works, like *General, Für Helena* (1988) are dedicated to Helena, a Swedish intellectual and Kacharava's long-term lover. Others, like *My Daughter is a Prison Ballerina* (1992), allude to a mysterious younger daughter figure (Kacharava never had any children). In the late '80s and early '90s, life in Tbilisi was characterised by a backdrop of civil unrest, the waning Soviet empire, massive power shortages and economic downfall. The sociopolitical situation is tackled in works like *Socialist's Dream* (1993) and *Anarchist's Dream* (1992). The artist was also a member of radical creative artist groups 'Archivarius' and 'X Floor' that promoted experimentation and creative thinking as tools to rebel against the status quo.



General, Für Helena, 1988, Courtesy of Karlo Kacharava Estate



My Daughter is a Prison Ballerina, 1992, Courtesy the Estate of Karlo Kacharava, Tbilisi, and Modern Art, London

Kacharava's work has only recently found critical and public recognition outside of his home country. His paintings were shown by Stuart Shave at his London gallery in 2021 and in New York at Frieze 2022. I asked Vandembroek about the influence and legacy of Kacharava's work in Tbilisi. He is a hero to many in the city and is considered a martyr for freedom of expression. She says that fragments from his poems and paintings can be found across the city, in graffiti and tattoos. In a globalised world where it can sometimes feel that everyone has a chance to receive their due five minutes of fame, the show makes a burgeoning case to keep pushing to find those radical figures hiding in obscurity.



Socialist's Dream, 1993, Courtesy the Estate of Karlo Kacharava, Tbilisi, and Modern Art, London



Anarchist's Dream, 1992, Courtesy the Estate of Karlo Kacharava, Tbilisi, and Modern Art, London

Information

'Karlo Kacharava: Sentimental Traveller' continues at S.M.A.K., Ghent until 14th April, 2024. smak.be

Credits

Words: [Laurie Barron](#)