

Touched by an Angel

Karlo Kacharava: Sentimental Traveller
2 December–14 April
SMAK, 1 Jan Hoetplein, 9000 Ghent

One of the first things that draws your attention to Karlo Kacharava's arresting paintings and drawings is the look of his figures. While some are recognisably human, many appear alien, their expressions haunted and self-absorbed.

The way he expressed his own mind through his many creative endeavours makes his visual work all the more intriguing. Before his death in 1994, aged 30, the artist had also carved out a reputation as a poet, commentator and art critic. And in this, the first solo exhibition of his work by a museum outside his native Georgia, you see all these strands come together.

It is a reflection not just of a rich soul linking different forms of expression, but of someone living on a geographical and historical crossroads. Sited at the fringes of both Europe and Asia, Georgia clings to its identity and language in the face of far bigger powers. Kacharava grew up in the twilight years of Soviet occupation, which was followed, after independence, by a pendulum swing to hyper-nationalism,

chaos and civil war. And in his response, he pioneered a new wave of avant-garde expression in his country, one whose influence is still spreading.

Themes of anarchy, alienation and collapse compete in his visual art with youth, work, identity and love, and what Kacharava regarded as the duty to protect those closest to you. He expresses that latter theme most strongly in *Die General, Für Helena*, a monumental painting of a Prussian officer. 'Helena', surname Lundberg, is a Swedish-born academic he met in Russia, who became his muse and lover. Many other works are dedicated to her.

She appears in *Für Helena, Moskau* embracing a figure who resembles the artist himself. The painting demands close examination with its intricate montage of buildings, objects and introspective figures. Some of Kacharava's works are in the style of film storyboards, while others conjure the feel of a graphic novel or urban mural, with graffiti-style inscriptions and verses in multiple languages. Another exhibition highlight is a 200-page visual diary of a journey through Germany.

Kacharava never drew or painted from observation, only from what was in his

head, paying homage to what he said was the primacy of 'the internal spiritual universe of man'. From that belief flowed another motif common to his work – angels. The result is 'art that breaks the categories of the Western canon', says SMAK's curator Karima Boudou. And with this exhibition, she hopes to raise his profile further.

Recent events have heightened interest in Kacharava and other artists from the region, given the parallels between Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 and its later assault on nearby Ukraine. 'The current political situation and the new forms of colonisation manifested by certain political regimes in the world only reinforce the strength and convictions of artists and curators,' says Boudou.

The exhibition also includes Kacharava's last-known painting, *Untitled*, in which a scowling angel is bearing down on the artist himself, as if he knew his time was coming. Yet by then, he had already left a legacy of some 300 major paintings and thousands of drawings and writings that even artists who lived three times as long might struggle to match. *Andrew North is a writer, artist and graphic reporter based in Georgia*



'Für Jorg Immendorf', 1985, oil on canvas, 52.6 × 73cm