

LEO KOENIG INC.

545 WEST 23RD STREET
NEW YORK, NY 10011

TEL. 212. 334. 9255
FAX. 212. 334. 9304



Photos by JENNIFER HACK/The Kansas City Star

"The art world needs a little nightmare," says artist Aidas Bareikis. His haunting installation, "The Guard of Sorry Spirit," below, and other works, including a sculpture he cooked on a grill, are now on view at Grand Arts.



GOING FOR BAROQUE

Lithuanian artist emphasizes the glitzy and the grotesque

By ALICE THORSON
The Kansas City Star

What if someone held a multi-ethnic festival in a flea market and a bomb went off?
The aftermath might look very much like "The Guard of Sorry Spirit," a new installation by Brooklyn-based artist Aidas Bareikis, a Lithuanian citizen who has lived in the U.S. for 12 years.

In the main gallery at Grand Arts, a grotesque band of survivors, made from slashed and tattered thrift-store clothing topped with rubber masks and assorted hats, appears amid a post-apocalyptic landscape.

Pigment doused tchotchkes, spurts of insulation foam and objects so distressed that they are unidentifiable clutter the floor at their feet.

One fabric-covered form suggests a human limb. A Homer Simpson mask lies discarded a few feet away.

"I think the art world needs a little night-

mare," Bareikis said during an interview at the gallery.

Fueling the work is the artist's compulsive collecting of thrift store junk.

"The explosion or destruction of such objects is subversive," he has said. "It denies their significance."

And his ethic of reuse challenges society's fixation on "stuff."

"The economic engine is completely mini-malized," he said.

Blending trends

Bareikis was 26 in 1993, when he moved to New York City on a Fulbright scholarship. He arrived with a bachelor of fine arts from the Art Academy, Vilnius, where his education was interrupted by service in the Soviet Army. In 1997 he completed his master's of fine arts at Hunter College in New York City.

Today, Bareikis is one of Lithuania's best-known artists. He has been showing in the

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GUARD: Artist calls work 'schizophrenic'

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U.S. since 1995 and caught the eye of influential New York curator Robert Storr as early as 1996. But it wasn't until 1999 that his career took off. That year he appeared in the "Generation Z" exhibit at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Space and had his first one-person show with the young, German-born New York art dealer Leo Koenig.

Bareikis' "Guard" at Grand Arts embodies several leading trends in American art, including a turn to the grotesque and a manic, labor-intensive approach to making work, seen also in the Kemper's current "Decelerate" exhibit.

"Guard" also reflects an emphasis on theater and spectacle in much new art.

Bareikis relates what he calls his "baroque sensibility" to the city of Vilnius, which is "very baroque," he said. It is also the city where the Lithuanian expressionist Chaim Soutine grew up.

The baroque component of Bareikis' aesthetic reaches a crescendo in the small gallery at Grand Arts, which features a figural grouping weighted down with a glittering web of junk.

On exhibit

■ **THE SHOW:** "Aidas Bareikis: The Guard of Sorry Spirit"

■ **WHERE:** Grand Arts, 1819 Grand Blvd.

■ **WHEN:** 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Thursday and Friday; 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday and by appointment. The exhibit continues through March 4.

■ **HOW MUCH:** Free

Set amid platters of glitzy found-object offerings, they suggest lions on an altar to material wealth and avarice. Many of the components are molten and fused together, a result of Bareikis' cooking them on a grill.

The ferocity of Bareikis' treatment of this "debris of advanced humanity," as he calls it, parallels his description of it as a "vicious vortex."

Western consumerism and materialism have become much-debated issues in Lithuania since it declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. The discussion in-

tensified with the country's admission to the EU and NATO in 2004.

With Lithuania's independence came a need to "rethink the whole dialectic" of how to serve the country's best interests.

"The game was really high stakes that required a correct strategy for the country," Bareikis said. "(Lithuania's) exit strategy from the Soviet Union was probably one of the most successful ones in the last decade and a half."

"In a sense it was an experiment," he added. "Communism is over — the people know about it more than anyone else does. They probably want to live under capitalism. Trying to figure out this perfect strategy, there was speculation about a third way."

But finding this third way is complicated. As historian Tony Judt observes in his new book, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*, communism's failure has bred a deep suspicion of the utopian ideals it was founded on.

"The Guard of Sorry Spirit" is obviously a metaphor for psychic trauma, of which the most obvious causes are war, natural disaster or nuclear apocalypse. But it speaks also to a battered idealism and what the future

may hold if materialist values are allowed to be the driving engine of global society.

Bareikis frequently uses the term "schizophrenic" to describe his art, experiences and state of mind.

Global ironies swirl around this 38-year-old artist. The Soviets sent him to fight in Afghanistan; now U.S. soldiers are there, and now democratic Lithuania has troops in Iraq.

It is perhaps no wonder that Bareikis feels an affinity with the Russian surrealist literary movement of the '20s and '30s, called "Obektivizm," or Society of Real Art. Its members included poets like Alexander Vvedensky, who responded to the Soviet government's violence and authoritarianism with dark humor and absurdist performances.

At Grand Arts, Bareikis sounds a similar note of giddy hilarity.

"Everybody's very fast to commit a crime and very fast to ask for forgiveness about it," he observed. "Others are very fast to judge. The victim and the prosecutor are not far apart. Everybody falls into a sorry spirit."

To reach Alice Thorson, art critic, call (816) 234-4763 or send e-mail to athorson@kstar.com.



JENNIFER HUCK/The Kansas City Star

A detail of Aidas Bareikis' "Daydreaming Dead, Navigator Golden Gate" (2005)