ELEPHANT

Ryan Gander

Chris Burden

Viktor Timofeev

Chen Nong

Art & Craft

Zürich

Viktor Timofeev

WORLD MAKING

Text by Natasha Hoare
Photography by Anja Schaffner
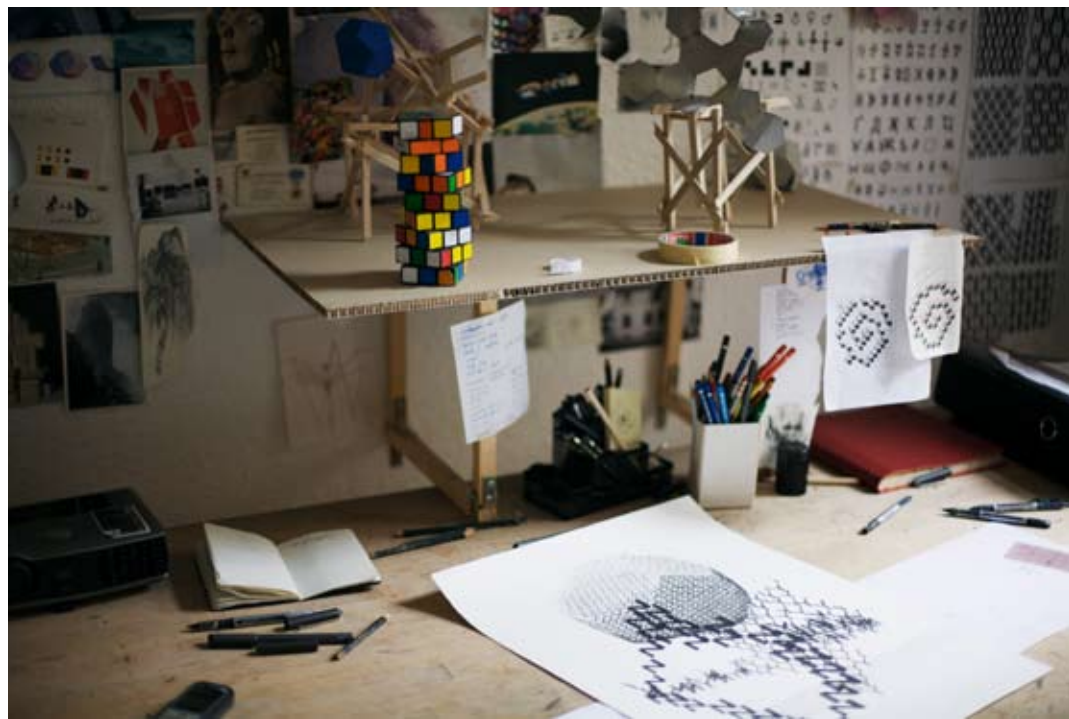
Viktor Timofeev is an artist whose paintings are gaining him considerable international attention. Championed by gallerist wunderkind Hannah Barry, and exhibiting internationally in Germany, Austria and the US, Timofeev's is a star on the rise. Latvian born, he moved to the US as a youngster to live in the architectural splendour of New York. Splitting his time between skating, playing in bands and video games, he was later diagnosed with a chronic foot problem, leaving him unable to skateboard; something on which he had based his whole life. Wanting to keep travelling to Manhattan's skate spots with his crew, he began to sit and draw the buildings that dwarfed them. What started with doodles soon grew into a passion for art, prompting him to switch from his computer science course in college to art history and practice.

Prolific and intense, Timofeev works across many different media in order to arrive at his paintings. His studio walls are covered with drawings, a process central to the formation of his compositions on canvas, and shelves hold ranks of strange geometric constructions or maquettes, through which he explores the forms that populate his paintings. The room has a strange effect, like introducing one to the inside of his mind, and feels like an attempt to keep those thoughts, which whirl around his skull at a hundred mph, in check. The nearby skate park provides an essential exorcism for the energy that accrues during his time in the studio.

He has a magpie mind, picking up thousands of references and ideas, which relate to manufactured spaces and the utopian artistic impulses behind them. His knowledge of these is truly diverse, drawing inspiration from everything: from Renaissance architecture to Buckminster Fuller, the PC game Doom to Surrealist painters. His love of architecture is illuminating; in his paintings one has a profound sense that he is above all acting as an architect of pictorial space.

His vertiginous canvases are large in scale and plunge the viewer into a pixelated world of hulking mechanical creatures moving through latticed spaces of repeated mathematical forms, animated by a restricted palette of colours. These worlds recede infinitesimally into the distance, creating dizzying perspectival vortexes some would find terrifying, but which he finds alluringly comforting and tragically out of reach.

The digital process of optimisation is a fitting concern for Timofeev, whose own work is developing in style and technique around issues of control and expression. Through his early work he has been building up a tight conceptual structure and technical ability, evidenced by a year long drawing project in 2007, which he undertook in order to understand the difference between looking and seeing. He now breaks these systems down to serve more expressive purposes, and as such, has reached an exciting moment in the development of his art.

The more our lives get transferred into bits and bytes, the more we will come to re-appreciate the analogue

— Could you tell us a bit about how your background and how it relates to you what you are doing now?
I got a box of crayons as a gift in kindergarten, but they were all various shades of grey. The obsession with drawing probably started then. My parents were supportive early on – my dad showed me how to make isometric drawings of cars back in Riga. He also showed me a pencil portrait he did of my mom. It's still etched in my memory. I used to draw a comic strip about the adventures of Patat, a wedge-shaped handful of fried potatoes.

— You were born in Latvia and studied in New York before moving to Berlin, what brought you to Germany?
I moved to Berlin three years ago, via London. I was due to study at the RCA [Royal College of Art] in London, but we had a dispute over tuition fees that we couldn't resolve in time. I just needed to keep working, especially as I had just reached a pivotal moment with my last painting completed in New York (*Rubik's Houses*, 2008). Berlin allowed me the time and space to do just that, and I'm still stuck here.

— How was this painting a huge turning point for you?
Everything that I was interested in combined together. It just felt like it was this really big moment. Chromatic codes, the twisted archetype, the cold landscape, rendered space - it was all there. I was still painting in a flat, precise way, but it was still all there.

— Have you always skated?
I've been skating for more than half of my life at this point. In college I was diagnosed with a condition in my feet that was supposed to be chronic. It was a real identity shock, as skating was woven into every part of my being. So, at first, I still used to go to skate spots with my friends, and I started to draw there. I just drew buildings in Manhattan and even some skate obstacles, just normal late-teen doodles. Then I switched my course of study, from computer science to art history and art. The withdrawal from the skate world was heavy, but it also gave me space to absorb other things, like art. I'm lucky to be able to push around and skate now, though I'm careful not to bring it too close to my heart...
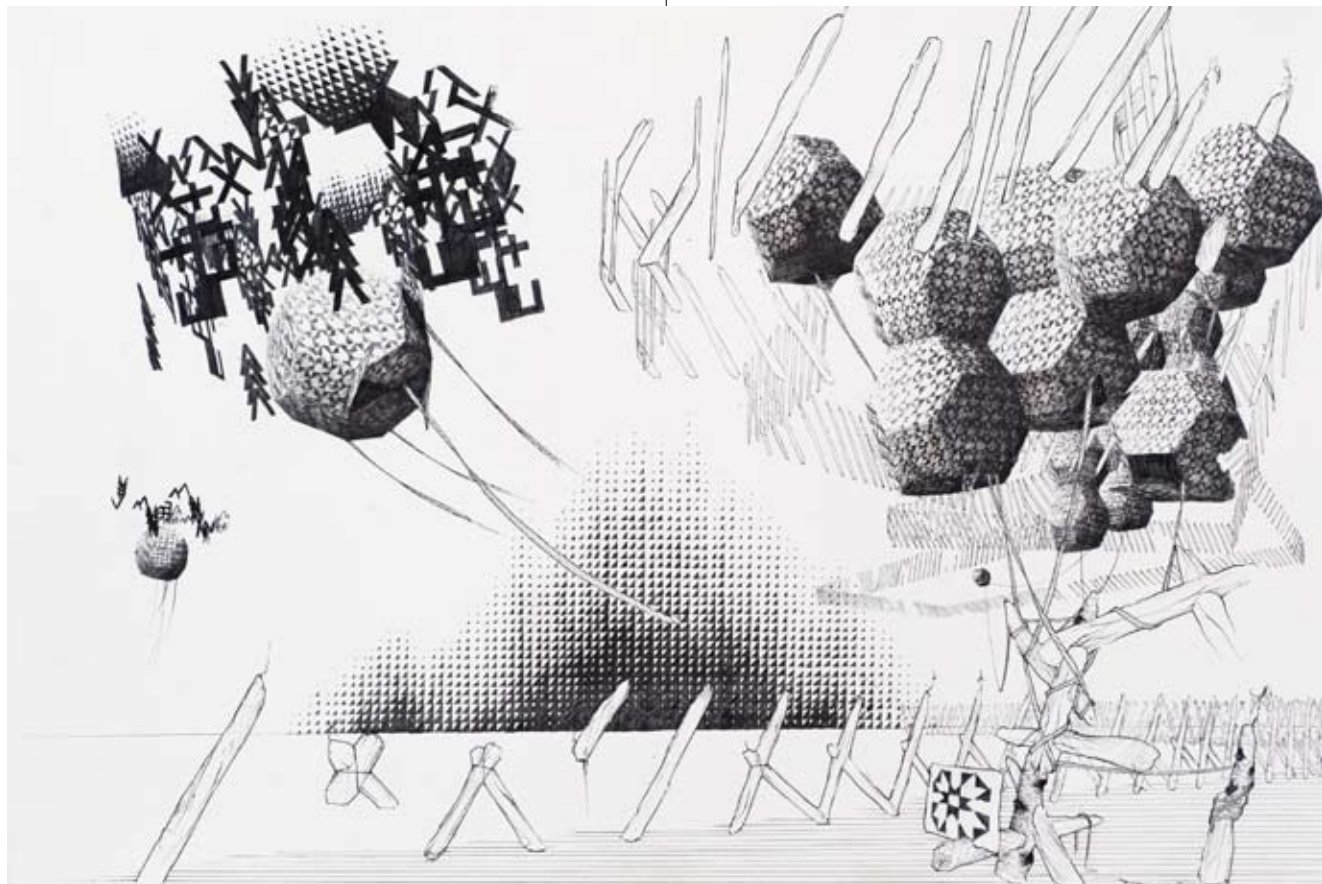
192.128.13.15 [RESIDUAL DIVIDUAL], 2011, ink on paper, 37.5cm x 55cm

LPZG_84 enamel (detail), 2009, acrylic on canvas, 150cm x 195cm

— You work on large-scale canvases, which are often highly detailed in their geometric composition and intricate colour schemes. How long do you spend in front of each?
I try not to spend more than a week on a single work. Because I can spend way too much time on it and end up suffocating it. The work can become too precious, and you worry if your next layer will kill the whole thing. You should always just try it.

— On your blog you have images by Rene Magritte and Yves Tanguy; is surrealist work an influence on you?
With Magritte particularly, it's his peculiar juxtapositions of carefully selected objects and the atmospheric dead stillness, like a video grab of a data mash-up video re-translated into really lucid pictorial logic. I like Tanguy's invention of systems, of logic and hierarchy. It's like he is making a picture of things he found on Mars, and that, even there, he has declared that inequalities exist – parasites and hosts. I've been more influenced by this kind of work – setting up an autonomous system and then either upsetting it, or reinforcing it, over and over.

— The surrealists had a profound relationship with the unconscious and dreams. Does your work touch on these also?
I think of dreams as mediated by our relationships and experiences with recognizable objects and forms from the environment, as opposed to the invisible abstract language that is defining our lives more and more. With things like geofencing and 'gamification', we are transferring every part of our lives into an augmented reality with metaphysical parameters. Since this tertiary reality is more real to us than our primary physical reality, our dreams are probably also now mediated by it. We dream in Facebook. I kind of see my work starting there.

— Your work is informed by computer game graphics and animations, and I have read your essay on Doom and the archaeology of computer games. As a child, did you play many of them? How do they inform your work?
PC games like Wolfenstein 3D and Doom form some of my earliest memories of digital space, which is interesting since they are already evolved from the early console two-dimensional platforms, such as Mario Bros. They take me back to a specific time and place, when I was on different terms with my environment, still adjusting to both physical and digital reality. I played Wolfenstein with my dad, back in Riga from an early age: it was like our bonding thing. I've really only started to think about the relationship between game-worlds and my work in the past few years, as I got more and more attracted to fantasy utopias and perfect cities where the air tastes like sugar. These virtual utopias are expressions of what we collectively desire. Revisiting a lot of these game-spaces, I go through them much slower than initially, savouring the digital déja-vu and just spending time there, remembering my first encounters. This kind of archaeology is probably more of a personal journey than anything, but it makes me think about the future of optimization and where we're headed.

REDROM, 2011, enamel acrylic on canvas, 192cm x 148cm

A line that wavers can communicate something very different. Morandi's still lives are so visceral, so alive because of his immense attention to line

— *What attracts you to these fabricated worlds?*
I was really easily seduced by the vocabulary of the Constructivists in Russia, circa 1918. But that led me into other things like Buckminster Fuller and then backwards to William Morris. History is so fluid and non-linear now that time doesn't exist thanks to the Internet! Anyway, I'm really drawn to working within parameters and using generators. In school I fell in love with Renaissance architecture, which I saw as a perpetual quest for a perfected vocabulary of fabrication. There was a strong belief that by utilizing the correct proportions, architecture will click with the universal order and change society. But what happened when it was perfected? Well, it sort of eliminated the individual's imagination and became only a three dimensional manifestation of order. All of a sudden unresolved, goofy-looking façade problems became much more interesting. So the Mannerists took these canonical systems and skewed and exaggerated them, played games with the vocabulary. I do the same thing with my generators and parameters – set them up and then push them further, creating ambiguities, contradictions and redundancies; what I see as the real content.

— *Is your work inspired by the communist utopias?*
I have definitely spent a fair amount of time studying the architectural drawings of the Socialist Revolution. It is such an amazing pocket of history. I wouldn't say that it particularly influences my work more than any other communal utopias though. So much of the communist vocabulary is problematic in retrospect – we have learned that glass and steel can satisfy a capitalist society as well as a communist one, if not better.

— *Despite quoting the online world, you work in the traditional media of painting, drawing and sculpture. Do you ever program your own games and spaces?*
At this point, I'm only interested in the logic underneath code. I don't want to spend any more time in front of a computer than I have to, because the more our lives get transferred into bits and bytes, the more we will come to re-appreciate the analogue – asking what it means to draw or paint in 2011 is more relevant than ever. There is this meta-narrative that I always think about framing my work – remembering a world that was built only on memories of its digital mimesis, machine hyper-rationality as only a starting point; I guess it's what happens when you grow up with id software as your babysitter.

— *When did you actually start drawing?*
I switched my major six times while in school. I started in computer science and ended up in art. I was really into life drawing classes. I was obsessed with Ingres, roman statues, cross-hatching, Fabriano paper... After drawing nudes I would go outside and draw buildings the rest of the day. I started to treat buildings like characters, and the streets like pedestals.

— *Do you carry a sketchbook or a camera?*
These days I carry a camera and two pocket-sized books, which I use just for ideas and doodles. Once I get back to studio, I copy the doodles to a larger doodle book that stays in the studio. I take photos of interesting things I see on the street, print them out and put them on my wall in order to slowly absorb them.

— *Do you draw from life, or from photographs?*
I never work from photographs. With the way my work has developed it simply doesn't make sense. What I am involved with is invention, not replication. I make a lot of three-dimensional models if I want to wrap my mind around a complex form and then do some life drawings from that just to study it. Working directly from photographs can result in some seriously boring work and it is a slippery slope to complete reliance on the medium. It doesn't train your eyes to see – only to look.

— *Do you see drawing as a tool and a means to an end, or as an end in itself?*
Drawing is both an end in itself and integral to everything I do. I would not be able to make the paintings that I make had I not been seriously involved with purely drawing for a number of years beforehand. I think every medium has its own language and methods; they can inform each other and help push each other's limits, but ultimately work on different levels. Compare the line quality of Morandi's etchings to his paintings.

— *Do you work from a studio?*
When I first started drawing seriously, I worked outside, drawing buildings and streets. Now I only work in the studio, with my maquettes, sketches, books of patterns all around. I need a certain amount of clarity, peace and order when working, so a studio is simply necessary. I can also listen to talk radio all day while working, though I do have to switch off the Internet to really focus.

I like to think of it as world making. My world isn't necessarily parallel, as that implies they never meet. I would say my world meanders around our reality

— *Do you do something to warm up?*
I usually make several preparatory, compositional studies for anything I make, from a small ink drawing to a huge painting. But generally the best thing to do is just dive in; the quicker you make mistakes the quicker you can attempt to resolve them.

— *The title of your show at the Hannah Barry Gallery in London is* MONSTROcity*; is this a mythical city of your creation?*
The first show at Hannah Barry Gallery surrounded a local area network – a generic community of nodes, just like any office. Now I am starting to break it down into hierarchies. Imagine a map of the network – the relative East and West will generate their own behaviour because this human condition feeds into everything. This desire to create, to be different, is embedded in all of us. *MONSTROcity* is the first chapter, and is a place full of optimism. The constant skewing, stacking and rebuilding of parameters suggests that we are never really happy with what we have, and we keep going, which I see as beautiful. It's tragic as well, as this utopian destination can never physically exist.

— *You have a very art historical approach to the construction of space, using the rules of perspective to create sublime volumes and spaces within the flat pane of the canvas. Your recent paintings for* MONSTROcity *break down the accuracy of your line and the geometry of your subjects. Why has this started to happen?*
From control comes freedom – before I couldn't allow myself to be so indulgent. I wanted to build a foundation out of stones, and so they needed to be solid. That's why I did this yearlong drawing project in 2007; to understand the difference between looking and seeing. I made lines straight by default in order to limit the variables involved. Slowly, I became more comfortable with exposing my meandering marks, and accepted my history with cartoons and doodles. A line that wavers can communicate something very different. Morandi's still lifes are so visceral, so alive because of his immense attention to line!

— *Your palette has changes also.*
Yeah, it's the same though. I still organize everything around the primary colours, black and white. The tight parameters have started to expand a bit – modulating saturation, for example.

— *Your Soundcloud account is an amazing sonic landscape that seems to directly correlate to the unfolding spaces of your paintings. What role does music play in your practice?*
Only recently have I been comfortable sharing my music alongside my artwork. My first LP, *GIVE HEALTH999*, comes from a similar place and deals with similar issues – the sublime nature of digital space, being aware that something is a simulation but falling in love with it anyway. It's all constructed from analogue instruments, generated through digital filters. Striving to be a machine, but failing and finding solace in that melancholy.

— *What are you working on next?*
I'm working on a show for the Kunsthalle Exnergasse in Vienna called *You Are Free*, with a group of friends from Berlin and New York. The show is about the link between the utopian impulse of music making and art making, so I will be playing some music there as well.
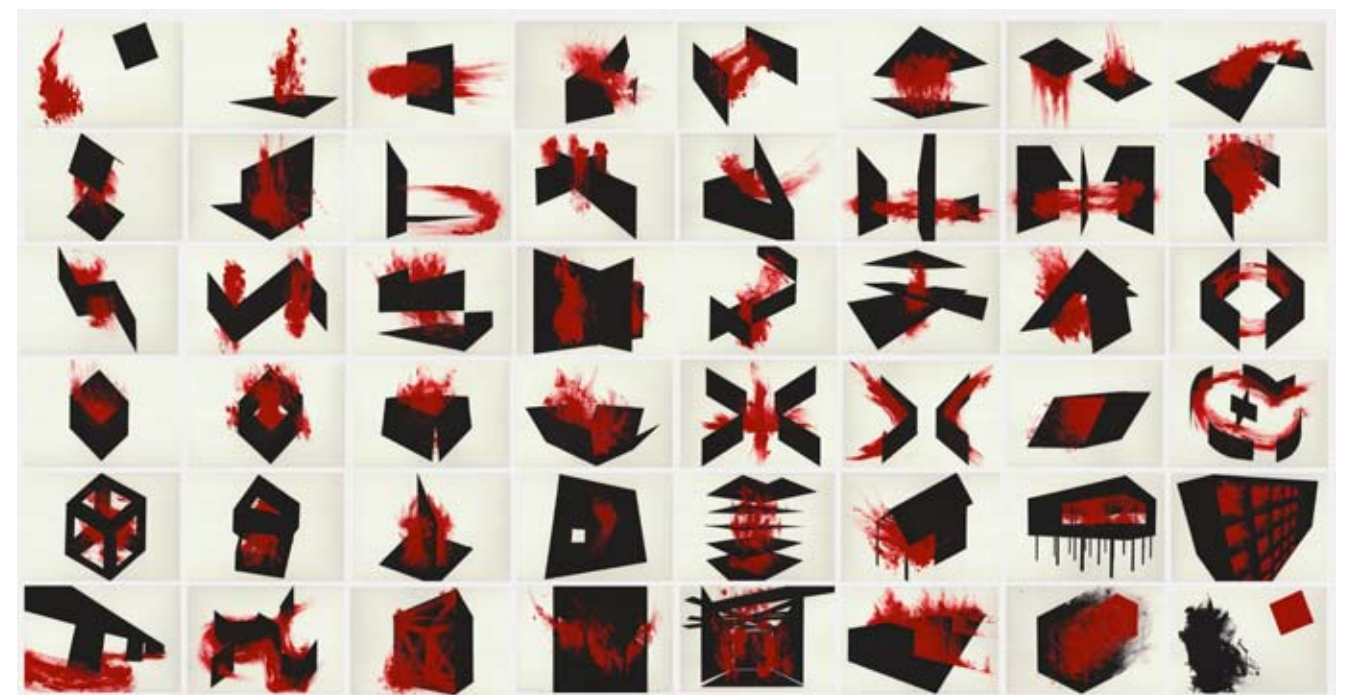
— *How would you define what it is that you do?*
I like to think of it as world making. My world isn't necessarily parallel, as that implies they never meet. I would say my world meanders around our reality, appropriating a certain vocabulary while completely inventing another. I suppose it can be seen as a hybrid in that sense. The constructions and characters that inhabit this world are the content of my work, and it is through them that I program meaning and narrative.

www.victortimofeev.com
www.hannahbarry.com

REDBLACK / Cyclical Nature, 2007-2011, gouache, watercolor on paper, 24.1 x 33 cm, in 48 parts

REDBLACK / Cyclical Nature, 2007-2011, gouache, watercolor on paper, 24.1 x 33 cm, in 48 parts