

Press release

# Ilya & Emilia Kabakov

## *Kammermusik*

7 June—19 July 2025

Opening Saturday 7 June 2025, 11am—1pm

Thaddaeus Ropac  
Salzburg Villa Kast  
Mirabellplatz 2, 5020 Salzburg

### Artist Talk

Saturday 7 June 2025, 10.30am

Emilia Kabakov in conversation with Séamus Kealy, Executive Director of Oakville Galleries



Ilya Kabakov, *The Six Paintings about the Temporary Loss of Eyesight (At the Outskirts of the Forest)*, 2015.  
Oil on canvas. 112 × 196 cm (44.09 × 77.17 in)

Thaddaeus Ropac Salzburg presents a selection of historic works by pioneering conceptual artists Ilya and Emilia Kabakov. The exhibition covers paintings by Ilya Kabakov, dating from 2005 to 2015, and installations from the Kabakovs' collaborative practice, which spanned 1989 to Ilya's passing in 2023. Every installation presented is a meticulously arranged composition of

objects, artworks, texts, lighting, and sound, designed to fully envelop the viewer in the experience, echoing the idea of the 'total installation' that has been central to their practice. The artists' works allow for multiple interpretations, spanning political innuendos, personal fears and desires, as well as a longing to escape the harsh, at times unbearable, realities of daily life.

*Concert for a Fly (Chamber Music)* is a historic installation, first exhibited in 1986 in Switzerland at the Neue Galerie, Dierikon, then in 1992 at the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art, the Kölischer Kunstverein, Cologne, and most recently, in 2024, at the Fondazione Querini Stampalia in Venice. A paper fly hangs from the ceiling at the centre of the room, encircled by twelve empty chairs and music stands. Each stand holds a white sheet with colourful drawings and Russian texts, translated into English. Some also include musical scores. Everything seems to point towards the immobile fly, which acts as a focal point, directing our gaze upwards and orchestrating our movements.

A fascination with the parasitic nature of the fly and its corresponding anthropomorphic qualities has long gripped the artists; the fly is a recurring concept throughout their oeuvre. In *Concert for a Fly* (1993), a toilet is installed in a small, separate room with a single lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. Crumbling walls and chipped paint give the room an air of decay, much like an antique object. The central focus, however, is on the axis between the window in the back and the multitude of flies swarming around the music stand, contributing to the general sensation of melancholic neglect. In the Kabakovs' characteristic manner, the work is conceived so that the beholder gradually approaches the piece, while the meaning remains ambiguous. In its installation at Villa Kast, the situation arises unexpectedly as the visitor explores the gallery: before him is a toilet, but it is impossible to enter it since the door is blocked by a barrier. This railing creates a boundary that separates the viewer from the scene, like in a theatre. A continuous sound of classical music surfaces from an undefined source. It contains abstract notes, conjuring the viewer into a state of anticipation, as if waiting for a concert to begin.



Ilya Kabakov, *The Four Paintings about Sun #1*, 2013.  
Oil on canvas. 168 × 262 cm (66.14 × 103.15 in)



Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, *The Fallen Chandelier*, 1997.  
Large 12 Light Cage Frame Chandelier, French, c. 1930.  
Chandelier 136 × 131 cm (53.54 × 51.57 in)

The installation *The Fallen Chandelier* (1997) is two-fold, appearing both as the physical presentation of an ornate chandelier on the floor, and as an ephemeral soundscape that introduces itself, step by step, as the quiet clinking of glass. The chandelier has visibly snapped from the electrical wire and crashed to the floor. The paradoxical nature of the work is exemplary of the Kabakovs' approach to stimulate the senses of the beholder and evoke unconscious memories. In this sense, the work depends on its placement, which was crucial to its original conception in 1997. Now set in the historic Villa Kast, previously a residential building, the work evokes a forever lost monument and an atmosphere of tranquillity that belongs to another era. It speaks of the transitory nature of functionality and the culture manifested through objects like the chandelier. 'The chandelier is crying for the past, for the people who used to live here, for the human world,' states Emilia Kabakov. The work is re-positioned to create new aspects of an unexpected catastrophe, something out of the ordinary, that uses the sudden inertia of the visitor to jolt them out of the everyday and into a state of thought and intrigue. In the artists' catalogue raisonné, art historian Oskar Bätschmann describes the 'total installation' as encyclopaedic constructions that can be entered, inviting and tempting the spectator to become an active participant. Even if the space is entirely occupied by the installation, the viewer is left with a sense of illusion and a lingering feeling of void. This hovering state is a recurring theme throughout their practice.





Ilya Kabakov, *Under The Snow #18*, 2005.  
Oil on canvas. 173 × 407 cm (68.1 × 160.2 in)

*I have long been interested by the old theme of the relationship of ‘real’ reality and its depiction on the 2-dimensional canvas. In ‘classic’ painting, the creator does everything possible to convince the viewer that they are seeing the reality and its 3-dimensional ‘realness’. Conversely, I am attracted by the ephemerality in the painting, its naivety in trying to depict the ‘truth of life.’*

— Ilya Kabakov

The paintings on view explore the nature of memories of life under the Soviet regime, influenced by both nostalgia and propaganda. Painting has played a key role in Ilya Kabakov’s oeuvre since the beginning of his career; it was the unofficial counterpart to the artist’s early official work as an illustrator of children’s books, and would later feature prominently in his installations. He developed a very personal painting style, through which he reinterpreted images of the past as well as the visual language of Soviet socialism. Drawing from representational movements as well as early modernist abstract art, images of a fictive reality are superimposed with geometric shapes, such as a luminous white circle in the centre of the image, or depictions of a snowscape, obscuring the colourful pictorial worlds that lie beneath. Ilya Kabakov subverts the idealised representations of landscapes and propaganda, highlighting their illusory quality. He has described the white paint as a ‘down blanket lying over the past.’

The depicted motifs of bright landscapes overlap with images of everyday socialist life. The scenes echo memories rooted in his own experiences or those of the collective experience of life under

totalitarian rule. In this sense, the white snow in *Under the Snow #18* (2005) equally alludes to Malevich’s *White on White* (1918), as refers to the metaphorical snow which began to melt during the ‘Thaw,’ a period of political and cultural liberalization in the Soviet Union, revealing what lay beneath it. ‘The ambivalence of whiteness, so well described in many works and by many artists and scholars, should be present not in some sort of single meaning, it should not get fixed, but rather it should remain diffuse and multi-layered,’ the artist explains. Using humour and irony and oscillating between banality and pathos, the theatrical scenes pose fundamental questions about the capacity and impact of artistic values in shaping both individual lives and society. Surpassing the realm of art, the works on view address universal themes such as personal and collective memory, fantasy, and illusion, speaking to the universal human condition.

In collaboration with the National Gallery of Canada, the Oakville Galleries will present the exhibition *Between Heaven and Earth* and the project *The Ship of Tolerance*, by Ilya & Emilia Kabakov, from 31 May until 20 September 2025.



Ilya and Emilia Kabakov, portrait of the artists  
Photo: Luis Sevillano

### About the artists

Ilya and Emilia Kabakov were both born in Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine, in the former USSR and later settled in the United States. Ilya studied at the V.I. Surikov Art Institute in Moscow and began his career as a children's book illustrator during the 1950s. He soon emerged as the central figure among the Conceptual artists working outside the official Soviet art system. He was offered a fellowship at the Graz Kunstverein, Austria in 1987, afterwards settling in New York, where he reconnected with Emilia Lekach. She had trained as a classical pianist and studied Spanish literature before emigrating to Israel in 1973 and then, in 1975, to New York, where she worked as a curator and art dealer. They worked collaboratively from 1989 until Ilya's passing in 2023. Emilia continues to live and work on Long Island, NY.

The Kabakovs' early work was shown at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (1990); The Museum of Modern Art, New York (1991); Los Angeles County Museum of Art (1992); Museum für Moderne Kunst, Frankfurt (1995); and Centre Pompidou, Paris (1996), among others. They represented Russia at the Venice Biennale in 1993 with their installation *The Red Pavilion* and were included in the 1997 Whitney Biennial. Other important installations include: *We Are Leaving Here Forever*,

Carnegie International 1991, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh (1991); *The Big Archive*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (1993); *We Are Living Here*, Centre Pompidou, Paris (1995); and *The Strange City*, Monumenta 2014, Grand Palais, Paris (2014). A retrospective of their work was the inaugural exhibition at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, Moscow, when it opened in 2008. A major retrospective of their work, *Not Everyone Will Be Taken Into the Future*, opened at Tate Modern, London in 2017, travelling to the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow and the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg in 2018. Solo exhibitions of their work have been held at international institutions, including Centre Pompidou, Paris (2024); Querini Stampalia Foundation, Venice (2024); Dallas Contemporary (2021); Kunsthalle Rostock (2018); Kistefos Museum Sculpture Park, Oslo (2017); Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C. (2017); Power Station of Art, Shanghai (2015); and Sprengel Museum, Hanover (2014). They have received numerous honours and awards, including both the Chevalier and the Commandeur des Arts et des Lettres from France (1995 and 2014), the Oskar Kokoschka Prize from Austria (2002) and the Praemium Imperiale, Japan (2008). They have also received honorary degrees from the Moscow Art Academy, the Sorbonne, Paris and the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna.

For press enquiries:

Dr. Patricia Neusser  
Thaddaeus Ropac Salzburg  
[patricia.neusser@ropac.net](mailto:patricia.neusser@ropac.net)  
Telefon: +43 662 881393 0



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