

# In Transit through Europe.

## The Tradition of Street Art in the Paintings by Sergey Akramov

*by Maria Gordusenko*

Looking back at his background as a street artist, Sergey Akramov uses the techniques and media inherent to street art and graffiti in his easel paintings. The early period of his work is strongly related to the trend in contemporary art, which is enriched by urban context. Sergey Akramov had created his very first works on the city streets. Not only had he painted graffiti in his hometown Yekaterinburg, but he also created street art during his trips to participate in art festivals in Europe. However, since 2014, the artist has begun devoting more time to working on canvas. Initially, these were individual pieces, but later the series of paintings dedicated to specific themes have formed. The change of media has opened Sergey Akramov the new perspective of expressing himself in art and it also gave him the possibilities to participate in exhibitions and collaborate with art galleries. Nevertheless, the transition to the new sphere of creativity and his debut in the field of easel painting did not mean that Sergey Akramov would stop producing street art. He still travels to participate in street art festivals, decorates city sites with colourful murals and, most importantly, continues finding inspiration in the endless energy of the streets when creating gallery-sized works.

The artist states that the process of painting itself is very inspiring, and he also enjoys working with bright colours, which helps to overcome the grey reality. Sergey Akramov considers himself a self-taught painter, since he has graduated as an architect from the Academy of Architecture. Also, he notes that his background as a street artist has determined the peculiarity of his style in easel painting, as well as in his perception of the environment, the streets, people and events.

The systematic approach to art projects, which is essential to any well-organised street artist, is also manifested in Sergey Akramov's paintings and graphic art. The artist has created several series of pieces, among which 'The Textures of the Streets,' 'The City Size,' and 'The Transit Route' are inspired by his travels to a number of European cities. In these series, he poeticises the aesthetics of everyday life in various cities of the world. The artist emphasises the views, which many of us may not notice during these hectic and sometimes even chaotic days. The idea of the artist consists in looking at city streets through the eyes of a person who is not just rushing about his business and dissolving in the routine. Sergey Akramov invites viewers for a relaxing stroll in a city, during which the artists suggests to admire the flickering neon signs and the bustling life of the citycentre filled with endless traffic, advertisements and posters. His paintings are dedicated to different European cities, and each of these places is presented to the viewer as a "habitat". At the same time, some of Sergey Akramov's artworks convey deep social implications. Sometimes the artist expresses his opinion and views through the messages encrypted in the neon street signs. Generally, Sergey Akramov rarely depicts pedestrians, but he does include them in some of his paintings, because a city without

inhabitants would cease to be a living organism, lose its face and stop its development. In the pieces with social context, the images of the pedestrians resemble faceless mannequins, devoid of individuality, because the artist aims attracting viewer's attention to the matters of de-personalisation of people in the context of large cities. In fact, human presence is felt even in the pieces where the artist does not depict people, because, after all, cities are 'the worlds' created by people and for people. Although sometimes these 'worlds' are not one hundred percent ideal and comfortable and display a somewhat conventional portrait of society. Sergey Akramov claims that he finds inspiration while visiting different cities and countries, and his main objective is to capture various aspects of city life and human history in the urban context. The artist is particularly interested in developing this topic because he is a city dweller himself and he has a background in architecture.

The rapid pace of life in large cities, where everything changes so quickly, appears before the viewer in its colourful diversity. Glowing neon signs are reflected in puddles and on the surfaces of the cars passing by. The bright colours, according to the artist, are capable of transforming even the most ordinary streets and filling them with beauty and magic.

The connection between Sergey Akramov's series 'The Textures of the Streets,' 'The City Size,' and 'The Transit Route' is manifested in common ideas and in the similarity of artistic techniques. For instance, in the paintings from the series 'The Textures of the Streets' Sergey Akramov applies the technique, which is reminiscent of texture overlay: realistic street views are layered on top of each other, which symbolises the passage of time. Initially, the artist has introduced a similar stylistic effect in his earlier series 'The Layers of Time,' which occupies a special place in his artistic practice. In fact, 'The Textures of the Streets' series has subsequently developed from 'The Layers of Time.' The essence of the artist's method in these series is based on his interest in the aesthetics of old street posters and paper advertisements, which were glued on top of each other and, subsequently, partially torn off. The artist perceives this layering of street posters and advertisements as a kind of informal urban language. The posters change, which also symbolises the passage of time, which, in turn, refers to the transience of life. The events announced in the posters are changing constantly, one becomes layered on top of another, old posters are carelessly torn down, and past events are erased from the citizens' memories. Then, again, new posters appear on top of the old ones - and so the process repeats in a circle. The artist is inspired by this visual component. Looking at scraps of old posters with dates and fragments of phrases, he constructs the concepts for his paintings. Echoes of past events on old half-torn posters thus become visualisations of the fragments of memory.

In the series 'The City Size,' Sergey Akramov depicts the cities as a human habitat and builds his concept on the opposition "man - nature - city". Sergey Akramov seeks to define our place in the ecosystem and to answer the question if we have remained a part of nature or whether this harmonious connection has been lost forever with the development of cities. These reflections build the foundation of the series, whereas the indoor plants become the main characters of the paintings. In this context, the plants symbolise the connection between people and nature. At the same time, the sizes of the ordinary indoor plants, which the viewer is accustomed to seeing on window sills in apartments, are exaggerated; flowers grow through the "concrete jungle", playing an important role in the "domestication" of unfavourable urban environments. The subjects of paintings from the "City Size" series have served as the basis for

a number of thematically related murals by Sergey Akramov, which have become colourful accents on the faceless facades of houses in residential neighbourhoods. Unusually large indoor plants in the streets of German cities dominate the urban environment. In this context, the plants symbolise our connection to nature. While working on canvas, the artist continues exploring this topic on a deeper and almost surrealistic level. He exaggerates the sizes of plants and includes them in cityscapes. These two paintings from the 'City Size' series are based on the locations from the artist's family trip to Europe, specifically to Germany. Sergey Akramov was inspired by the cities of Leipzig, Dresden and Munich. He has spent hours walking and making photographs there. However, the artist felt that something was clearly missing on those streets of German cities and placed flowers in a vase next to the building or other plants in a narrow courtyard between the two houses, as 'neighbours,' thus, domesticating the urban environment.

The paintings from the series 'The Transit Route' are based on the photographs and sketches taken during the artist's trips to France, Italy and Portugal. In this series, Sergey Akramov expresses his artistic insights of travelling to several European countries and shares this experience with the viewer. His cityscapes are filled with lightness and that joyful feeling of discovering something new. Among the striking images of the series is the Gothic cathedral of 'Jardin Truillot'. The artist has found this place by chance, when following his tourist route around Paris. He took a number of photos of the scene and the cathedral and moved on, but sometime after the trip, he decided to make a painting. The artist was stunned by the combination of the present-day life and the past (the history symbolised by the cathedral), and hence the composition is divided in two parts with the upper part dedicated to the majestic cathedral, the sky overcast, clouds, and the foreground – the park, which is full of life, people and bright colours. The local residents, tourists, students – everyone just relax and enjoy the moment sitting on the green grass.

Another painting from 'The Transit Route' shows a terrace in the suburbs of Lisbon ('Loures'). In 2017, Sergey Akramov went to Portugal to participate in an art festival. He was supposed to make a street art painting on the wall of a primary school building. The artist has spent about ten days in Loures. The format of the festival was similar to an international camp. One of the greatest memories Sergey Akramov has from that period is that there were artists from all over the world, and they all lived together in a historical building with its own territory. The landscape depicted is the view from a terrace in the city centre, where the artists were always having their lunch – Sergey Akramov wanted to perpetuate this moment.

Every cityscape and every view depicted by the artist is an attempt to capture the moment and the location, but not all of these views are popular and touristic. For example, 'Porto di Napoli' with the view of Vesuvius speaks for itself, whereas the 'Untitled' painting from Budapest shows a simple, unremarkable place in a central park, however, the composition with the metal structures, the white van, and the graffiti have attracted the artist's attention.

No matter what country Sergey Akramov visits, he is driven by the desire to capture the beauty of the moment. But all the paths invariably lead home, to Russia, which, in this context, is shown as a part of Europe. 'Streets Tonight' (2017) is the earliest artwork from the series 'The Textures of the Streets,' but it already demonstrates the characteristic stylistic features and details such as posters, neon inscriptions and the elements of graffiti. This painting contains a collective image of various cities, among which are Saint Petersburg and some other places in

Europe. Returning to his native city of Yekaterinburg, Sergey Akramov conveys the textures of familiar autumn streets and courtyards, they appear through the layers of time with bright warm colours.

The style of paintings from the 'Transit Route' series is also based on the previous experiences from earlier artworks. However, this time the artist introduces a new stylistic feature, which makes the image look as if it was split into pixels. The artist experiments with reproducing in painting the effects of frame deformation and the glitch effect or digital noise, which is rather inherent in the editing process of photographs. The idea of mimicking the features and tools of photo-editing in paintings was also introduced by the artist in the painting 'Overlay' from the series 'The City Size.' In fact, this artwork is named after an editing technique, which is used for photographs. The location of this painting is in Prague, the Czech Republic, which the artist has visited during one of his trips to Europe. The plant in the painting has overgrown the houses, it brings beauty and positivity to a courtyard behind the fence. The textures of torn advertisements overlay the image referring viewers to the fact that this scene is surreal.

The artist believes that the best way to convey his vision and understanding of cityscapes is to train his own eye. During his trips to Europe, Sergey Akramov often takes pictures of urban environments, and he says that every photograph taken is potentially a narrative. Thus, a series of pictures may develop in a series of paintings.

Artworks from the series 'The Textures of the Streets,' 'City Size,' and 'The Transit Route' have been created over a number of years. Notably, Sergey Akramov's paintings from any of these series may combine figurative images and abstract motifs. These pieces demonstrate the evolution of his artistic method and tell the story of the development of a street artist in easel painting. Most importantly, the strong aesthetic component in the artworks is reinforced by the artist's reflections on various social, philosophical and environmental issues. Each painting reveals the artist's ideas and worldview. Some well-developed concepts nourish the new ideas, which, in turn, materialise into images and contribute to the formation of new series of paintings.

The aesthetics of everyday life in the paintings of Sergey Akramov bears no features of oppressive routine. Bright, life-affirming colours set a joyful tone for the narrative and create an atmosphere of colourful emotions, which the viewers wish to experience again and again.