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MOSCOW-BASED ART COLLECTIVE AES+F BRING THEIR BITING SOCIAL CRITICISM TO THE BIENNALE OF SYDNEY.

THEY'VE superimposed haute couture onto dead bodies and digitally transformed the Statue of Liberty into a burqa-wearing, Koran-clutching beacon of Islam. You can't say art collective AES+F is afraid of a little controversy. Made up of conceptual architects Tatiana Arzamasova and Lev Evzovitch, graphic designer Evgeny Svyatsky and fashion photographer Vladimir Fridkes, the group takes its name from the initials of each member, but all resemblances to ABBA end there.

The prescient *Islamic Project*, begun in 1996, is a series of photos featuring landmarks such as Sydney's Opera House given Muslim makeovers. In one, a caravan of camels meanders through Central Park. In another, London's Big Ben and Houses of Parliament have been capped with shiny green cupolas and surrounded with throngs of men in white robes. The collective is quick to deflect accusations of xenophobia. "The *Islamic Project* is not anti-Islamic, nor anti-Western, but is a kind of psychoanalysis of both sides of phobia," says Evzovitch. "Even in 1996, we knew it was more than just a grotesque take on mass media paranoia."

Grotesque is perhaps a better description of *Defile* (2000), in which anonymous corpses model couture fashion. "These days death is a kind of necrophilia fashion, as with Lady Di," offers Arzamasova. "People are shocked to see this kind of thing in art, but quite indifferent to the same thing in real life." Two other hot media topics – youth and violence – feature in their *Action Half Life* series

(2003), showing this month at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art as part of the Biennale.

"Society is obsessed with a class of 'professional children' who serve the mass media as models, actors, or dancers, for money and glory," Evzovitch ventures. "We have worked with these well-paid young professionals and the problem seems ambiguous – are these children really the victims of society's obsession or are they not so innocent?" In *Action Half Life*, scantily clad pre-teens roam a surreal Sinai Desert landscape, posing, pouting and toting missile launchers. Of course, the setting is no accident. "We share the Western obsession with the Middle East, from Rubens, Delacroix and Matisse to *Lawrence of Arabia* and *Star Wars*," says Evzovitch. "At the same time, we don't try to say something about the real Middle East. Our works are more about the West's own outlook and illusions."

AES+F have themselves had to overcome Western preconception and stereotype. "Contemporary Russian art has, step by step, become part of the international art scene, losing its Soviet exoticism," she says. So keep your eyes peeled: the AES+F global revolution has just begun. ★



ENFANTS TERRIBLES FROM THE ACTION HALF LIFE SERIES BY AES+F: (ABOVE), EPISODE 2 #14, 2003. INKJET ON CANVAS, 150X120CM. (BELOW) EPISODE 3 #8, 2003. INKJET ON CANVAS, 150X450CM. IMAGES COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS.

ACTION HALF LIFE IS SHOWING AT THE MCA AS PART OF THE 14TH BIENNALE OF SYDNEY, JUNE 4-AUGUST 15. www.aes-group.org www.biennaleofsydney.com.au

