



Collection Focus: Sergei Isupov

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Excerpted from the Racine Art Museum Exhibition Study Guide

Sergei Isupov is descended from artists—his father imbues paintings with humor, his mother creates sculptural clay vessels of imaginative subjects, and his brother works in mixed media and video.

Graduating in 1990 from the Art Institute of Tallinn, Estonia, with both his BA and MFA in ceramics, he won early recognition for his ceramic efforts and was offered an invitational scholarship to the Oslo International Ceramics Symposium the same year he obtained his master's degree.

Shortly after arriving in the US, Isupov was quickly recognized as a talented artist and championed by collectors who helped him become an active participant in the contemporary American ceramics community.

Since 2003, he has been living in Massachusetts on the same property as gallery dealer and friend, Leslie Ferrin, in a renovated mill that houses living spaces, studios, a gallery, and gathering sites for artists.

Interested in exploring the dynamics of human relationships, Isupov has found a distinctive artistic voice combining two-dimensional narrative with three-dimensional ceramic form.

Imbuing his work with social, cultural, and personal history, Isupov investigates the dynamics of the human condition through complex and compelling compositions.

While hybrid figures, naked human beings, and animal characters abound, it becomes quickly clear that the ideas that drive Isupov's investigations—and ultimately the works themselves—center on what it means to be human.

Because the artist draws on his own experiences for subject matter and referent, it is hard not to call the work auto-biographical. However, it may actually go deeper than that. Isupov himself stated, "When I think of myself and my works, I'm not sure I create them, but they create me."

It has been remarked that the bold color palette and heavily tattooed faces of his characters reflect his absorption of both traditional Russian art and "contemporary styles of illustration."

There is no doubt that the artist has developed an iconography for his work, with meaning that can be as personal to an individual viewing the piece as it could be

universal to a larger audience. Favored motifs—such as hybrid creatures that are part-animal and part-human—form the basis for numerous sculptures.

Gesture, pose, and facial expressions carry a lot of meaning—individually or in combination with other story snippets. Contorted poses suggest psychological bending and flexing as well as how the manipulation of a human body immediately hints at something more, a larger story or concern. Creatures can be both human and animal or predominately one or the other.

Similar to the work of other Americans who work (or have worked) with clay—such as Robert Arneson (1930 – 1992), Michael Lucero (1953 –), David Regan (1964 –), Jason Walker (1973 –), and Kurt Weiser (1950 –)—Isupov explores subjects such as personal narratives, fantasy, the human condition, the body, sexuality, social, and cultural issues. Comparatively, Isupov’s works are the most focused on the “human condition” and the most surreal.

Isupov’s work also evokes that of historical painters such as Hieronymus Bosch (ca. 1450 – 1516) and John Wilde (1919 – 2006).

Clay has been an effective medium for Isupov, but it is not the only one he chooses. He was trained as a painter in his early career in Russia. He has worked with printmaking and created large graphite drawings. Isupov also explored singular head composition in two-dimensions through large-scale graphite drawings, which represented either iconic individuals or couples in various embraces from the neck or mid-torso up. These pieces operate as character studies as well as explorations of human form and emotion.

The Racine Art Museum has over 20 works by Isupov, including works on paper as well as clay sculpture.

Even at a mid-point in his career development, Isupov has an extensive and impressive resume. His work has been included in numerous group exhibitions, featured in books and articles, and is collected by institutions such as the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Fuller Craft Museum, Brockton, MA; Mint Museum, Charlotte, NC; Museum of Arts and Design, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Australia; and Racine Art Museum. It is noteworthy that many of these public collections have acquired multiple examples of the artist’s work.

Isupov conducts workshops and seminars, participates on panels related to craft, and has been awarded significant residencies, grants, and awards including the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award. Significantly, he is one of the younger artists featured in the seminal craft history book, *Makers: A History of American Studio Craft* (published in 2010).