Ilya & Emilia Kabakov

Looking into the Past

Opening Thursday 26 November 2026, 5 - 8 pm
Galleria Lia Rumma | Via Vannella Gaetani 12 | NAPOLI

Lia Rumma Gallery is opening in Naples an exhibition by Ilya & Emilia Kabakov entitled *Looking into the Past* on Thursday 26 November 2026. The artist couple's first solo exhibition with the gallery was held in Naples in 2000, followed by two further major exhibitions at the gallery's Milan venue in 2005 and 2012.

Ilya Kabakov (Dnipropetrovsk, 1933 – New York, 2023) and Emilia Kabakov (Dnipropetrovsk, 1945; lives and works on Long Island, USA) were a renowned couple of conceptual artists who worked together for more than thirty years, until Ilya's death, describing themselves as "a family business". Both Soviet-born and naturalised American citizens, they distinguished themselves through 'total installations' of strong conceptual significance, through which they conveyed messages of tolerance, peace and equality. Today, Emilia Kabakov continues to carry on their artistic and intellectual partnership, preserving and promoting their legacy through major international exhibitions and projects.

The title *Looking into the Past* encapsulates the essence of the Kabakovs' theoretical and poetic exploration. Far from being a mere exercise in nostalgia, the project takes the form of a profound investigation into collective memory and the great historical utopias of the twentieth century.

On display in the gallery spaces are two major installations and a series of paintings created between 2001 and 2020, one of which is attributed to Charles Rosenthal, a fictional painter born of Ilya's imagination and his famous alter ego.

The main room houses *The Empty Museum* (1993), a 'total' installation that reconstructs a room from a hypothetical 19th-century museum. In this space, with its dark red walls, illuminated by spotlights but completely devoid of artworks, Bach's solemn *Passacaglia* for organ resounds. Within the room, visitors are invited to sit on a bench to listen to the music and contemplate the void, redefining the very concept of artistic appreciation.

In another room of the gallery is *The Eminent Direction of Thoughts* (2017). At the centre of the space, bathed in dim light, stands a wooden chair from which coloured threads of fabric extend towards the ceiling, a metaphor for the 'thoughts' generated by an invisible figure seated within the room. With a bare light bulb hanging from above, the atmosphere evokes the austere solitude of a monastic cell or a prison: an intimate place where the individual spends their time meditating on the ultimate themes of life, death and spirituality.

Through the dialogue between the empty chair in *The Eminent Direction of Thoughts*, the bare walls of *The Empty Museum* and the paintings by Ilya Kabakov and his alter ego Charles Rosenthal, the exhibition invites the public to look back. This journey through time thus becomes a tool for analysing fragments of the past, reflecting on the transience of human ideologies and rediscovering the intellectual legacy of an artistic partnership that has left its mark on the history of conceptual art.

Ilya Kabakov (Dnepropetrovsk, USSR, 1933 – Long Island, USA, 2023) and **Emilia Kabakov** (Dnepropetrovsk, USSR, 1945) began their artistic partnership in the late 1980s, marrying in 1992. Together they redefined the concept of environmental installation through their famous "total installations," immersive works that intertwine personal memory, utopia and failure, dream and irony, reflecting on the universal human condition. Their works are featured in the collections of major international museums, including the Centre Pompidou, Tate Modern, MoMA, MAXXI, the State Hermitage Museum, the Stedelijk Museum, and the Guggenheim Abu Dhabi. *ArtNews* magazine included them among the ten most influential living artists in the world. After Ilya's passing in May 2023, Emilia Kabakov continues to realize and develop the projects they conceived together, keeping alive one of the most significant artistic practices of the second half of the twentieth century.