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Exploring Russia's Underbelly with Boris Mikhailov

by [CLARKE RUDICK](#)

Boris Mikhailov made a name for himself by creating art that was hard to look at. Capturing the disenfranchised casualties of the crumbling Soviet Union in the 90s, Mikhailov conceived jarring photographs that included his downtrodden, dirtied, and often unpleasant looking countrymen in various states of undress. Although the photos are at times repulsive, the artist still manages to provoke sympathy from the viewer and endow his subjects with humanity. "In the American Depression, the government sent photographers to take pictures," Boris explained in an interview via his wife, translator, and sometimes collaborator, Vita. "[My work] is the same, but the government didn't send me. I sent myself."

The raw intensity of these photographs, along with their importance as documents of a burgeoning lower class in former Soviet Russia, is what has drawn institutions like the Museum of Modern Art to support Mikhailov's work. In 2011, Mikhailov showed 19 of his "Case Histories" at the museum, further solidifying his importance as an international photographer creating unique works of art documenting economic hardship and social change before the era of camera phones and Vice documentaries.

Now **Dominique Lévy Gallery** has stepped in to champion Mikhailov, displaying nearly 200 photographs from 6 different series by the prolific artist in their show titled, *Boris Mikhailov: Four Decades*. The works range from a massive collection of blue-tinted shots depicting the cold, dark, and sometimes depressing life (or lack thereof) on the streets of Kharkov, to small, staged photographs of him and his friends on vacation at Gurzuf on the Crimean Peninsula meant to depict a luxurious and carefree lifestyle that was essentially fiction to the impoverished Soviet citizens of the time. While all of the pictures certainly differ in both style and subject matter, there's a distinct and undeniable historical and political awareness in all of his creations.

In our interview, Boris spoke about the necessity of communicating truth through photography: "It's important to have some critical position and balanced information between the information you get in magazines and what is not shown... For me, it's important to show the pain and the [different kind of life within my country]." To this day, Mikhailov rarely leaves the house without his camera, describing the necessity of being a "social person" in order to be a successful photographer. When I asked Mikhailov if he means to disturb and provoke controversy with his photographs, the artist knowingly responded, "Photographers don't just show beauty. Photographers tell a story."

Boris Mikhailov: Four Decades is on view at **Dominique Lévy Gallery** now through February 8th.

Dominique Lévy Gallery

909 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10021



Gelatin silver print, sepia toned, from the series *Crimean Snobbism*, 1981





Gelatin silver prints, blue hand toned, from the series *At Dusk*, 1993 - 2000



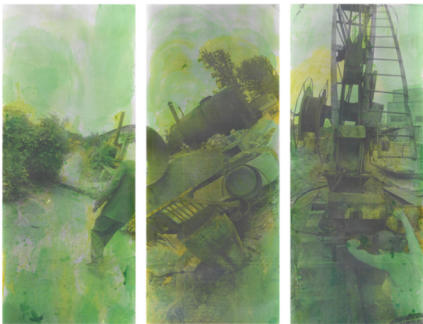
Gelatin silver print, sepia toned, from the series *Crimean Snobbism*, 1981



Gelatin silver print, sepia toned, from the series *Crimean Snobbism*, 1981



Untitled. Chromogenic print from the series *Yesterday's Sandwich*, 1968 - 1975



Untitled. Gelatin silver print, hand colored with aniline. Triptych. From the series *Green*, 1991 - 1993



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