

THE UN-RUSSIANNES OF BORIS MIKHAILOV AT DOMINIQUE LEVY NYC

Posted on 2014/01/10

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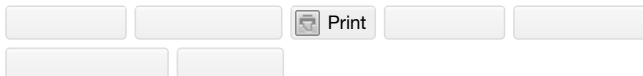
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OUR COLUMNIST AVILA REFLECTS ON THE ONE-SIDED VERSION OFFERED BY BORIS MICHAILOV'S PHOTOGRAPHS AT DOMINIQUE LEVY NYC. IF YOU HAVEN'T READ MY REVIEW ON THAT SHOW [CLICK HERE](#)

'Well... well... I guess that Mikhaelov and Co. prefer to show us a limited and selective archetypical and brutal view of Russia for commercial reasons, disregarding the existent surrealism and dadaism in that society, which often follows Tolstoy's ideals extrapolated to our days based on founding beauty as the salvation of the world; like Guerman Sterligov, the oligarch that founded the Moscow stock exchange and now lives in the country by his own will, bearded as a XIX century peasant from a Dostoyesvsky's novel... Or the exquisite beauty of the Russian women and their insistence with the untamable matriarchal control... Or the aesthetics of the serious Russian people mixed with vodka... Or their crazy obsessive enthusiasm for life in general pointing towards an absurd and ironic Russian reality where Putin can't touch Rasputin's embalmed penis...'



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BORIS MIKHAILOV IS STILL TELLING US HOW AWFUL THE SOVIET UNION USED TO BE BUT I AM STARTING TO MISS IT

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Boris Mikhailov was born in the former Soviet Union and lived and worked for several decades in his hometown Kharkiv, Ukraine. He received an education as an engineer and started to teach himself the practice of photography. His work very much is influenced in the means of Concept-Art and social documentary photography, in other words, it aims at shocking with images that convey the abuses of the former Soviet Union, Chernobyl, etc. His most famous work during this period (1968-1975) was the "Red Series". In these photographs he mainly used the colour red, to picture people, groups and city-life. Red is the color standing for October Revolution, political party and the social system of soviet society.

In his work *Klebrigkeit* (1982) he added explaining notes, or he is using diary-like writings. In "Case History", he examines the consequences of the breakdown of the Soviet Union for the people living there. Therefore he systematically took pictures of the homeless, who soon started trusting him. More than 500 photographs show the situation of people, who after the breakdown of the Soviet Union were not able to catch hold in a secured social system. Although this project could be injected by a lot of 'social justice', it could also be seen from the other point of view and be considered exploitative in the sense of 'first as tragedy, then as farse'. I saw those images for the first time at the Saatchi Gallery in London amidst other 'shocking' staff and they looked gruesome to the point of comedic.



The show a Dominique Levy spans four decades of work although, according to the gallery, it cannot be considered a retrospective. A total of 146 photographic works, variously framed and matted, and hung against white walls in two separate rooms. The works have been executed in a variety of photographic processes, and were made between 1968 and 2000.

The earliest works on view were made during the Soviet era and push up against the constraints of the regime. His sandwich prints combine multiple negatives into one collage-like image, collapsing a morose nude child in a drearily empty room with the impossibly jaunty colors of large balloons, putting private and public into contradiction. In the early 1980s, Mikhailov used a vacation snapshot aesthetic to highlight just how unlikely (no ridiculous) it might be for a group of artists to be vacationing at the fancy spas of the Crimean coast. Friends pose in bikinis, spitting water each other, dancing with palm leaves, and horsing around in lovely gardens and on rocky beaches, the images executed to look like family fun, but with a tongue in cheek wink at just how implausible such a trip was for everyone except the chosen few.



With the fall of the Soviet regime in the early 1990s and the subsequent decline into economic malaise, Mikhailov's work takes on an even darker, more documentary tone. The *Green* series is a like a bleak parody of triumphant Soviet mural art, with large panels of rusting equipment (classic Modernist silhouettes of ladders and girders), abandoned industry, and the futile struggle of workers overwhelmed with an acidic, almost toxic mix of green, yellow, and ochre; the wall filling triptych is wholly depressing and anti-heroic, but has a compelling sense of competing ugliness and beauty. The *At Dusk* series evolves these ideas further toward capturing the decaying social order found in the streets. Using a panoramic camera which seems to make the sky push down with even more unbearable weight, he inventories the poverty and misery which prevails: fallen ice, dirty clothes, long lines, people scavenging cardboard and sleeping in the gutter, hollowed out by hunger and emptiness, all drowning in a murky blue tint. They are pictures of instability, hardship, and unrelenting grimness, almost timeless in their muted, uneven palette.

The variety of cameras, processes and genres makes the experience slightly schizoid for the viewer and

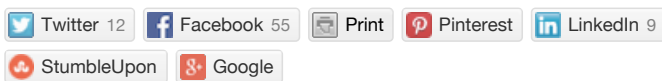
the way the images are curated adds to the confusion. They are either gathered as if the different frames form a cloud or they are aligned at eye level forming a continued line all along the gallery. The problem with those images is that they are supposed to be held in the viewers hand and possibly belong to a book and not an art exhibition and this has been the problem that photography has had since it started competing with painting in the white cubes all around the world. One wonders whether the 'cloud like' gathering of different images was original considered as a work and why because it does not make any sense to look at them like that.

In the publication 'Collector's Daily', Lorin Knoblauch says that 'from our perch in the West, it is hard to truly grasp the darkness of his vision, but what I like best is Mikhailov's tenacious unwillingness to look away. Even as the world around him has become more complex, challenging, and despairing, he has consistently delivered nuanced jolts of provocative intelligence, forcing us to see what he sees'. I find Knoblauch's, how to call it, 'orientalism' a little exaggerated and the assumption that the Western aspects of the viewer makes it 'impossible' to capture the 'tragedy' conveyed in a rather naturalistic way by Mikhailov is too much of a presumption. I believe that Mikhailov's project is to 'épater les bourgeois' and the political meaning relies too much in the shock factor of Soviet industrialist (both material and human debris). I would say that part of his political project was to convince the west of the 'obviousness' of that dialectical opposition between a terrible totalitarian past and a better capitalist world but, at this point in time, that set of oppositions is just not true. Just a thought.

at Dominique Levy NYC

Until February 24th

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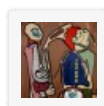
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AVILA (Fernando Gomez)

2014/01/10 at 18:10



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