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Boris Mikhailov

by David Ebony

One of 55 sepia-tone gelatin silver prints from Boris Mikhailov's "Crimean Snobbism" series, 1981, 5½ by 7 inches; at Dominique Lévy.



In the foreword to his 1999 photo book, *Case History*, Ukrainian photographer Boris Mikhailov explains his project of taking candid shots of the homeless and destitute citizens of Kharkov, his hometown, as an urgent calling. "I understood that taking pictures of poverty was my personal and civil duty," he writes, citing the relentless ban on photographing anything other than idealized images of communism during the Soviet era. Few pictures exist of the 1930s famine in Ukraine, for example, when several million people died, or of the suffering caused by World War II, as authorities feared such images would negatively impact the nation's morale.

Over the past several decades, Mikhailov, born in 1938, has steadfastly documented the tumultuous changes in Ukraine that accompanied the waning years of the Soviet Union and the disastrous consequences of its dissolution in 1991. Self-taught as a photographer, Mikhailov is widely recognized internationally for his unflinching vision and artful images, but his work is not often seen in the U.S.

This exhibition contained examples of several key series spanning Mikhailov's career. Although lacking the depth and breadth of a full-scale survey, the show served as an encapsulated study of the artist's endeavor, and there were a number of stunning works on view. Among the earliest pieces were 55 photos

from the "Crimean Snobbism" series (1981). These 7-by-5½-inch, sepia-tone pictures, arranged in a salon-style cluster on one wall, were shot in Gursuf, a spa town on the Crimean Sea that was once a gathering place for Russian intellectuals in the 19th century. In this relatively light-hearted series, Mikhailov has his friends pose in swimsuits, sunbathing on rocks or frolicking on the piers. Here, he parodies the activities of the leisure class, a lifestyle far removed from the harsh everyday realities of Ukraine in the 1980s.

His subject matter grows a lot grittier and ominous in later pictures, such as the "At Dusk" series (1993-2000). The 88 black-and-white images on view—68 small (5½ by 11¾ inches) and 20 large (24 by 50¾ inches)—are all hand-tinted deep blue. The striking formal elegance of the photos quickly yields to the dystopian subject matter. Reflecting the country's painful transition toward capitalism, the images explore shadowy, trash-littered Kharkov streets populated with an assortment of abject individuals—prostrate bums, ostensibly abandoned children and impoverished families with their worldly possessions strapped to their backs.

Part of the "Green" series (1991-93), a large untitled triptych (104 by 118 inches overall) is one of the show's most impressive and poignant works. Hand-colored pale green highlights lend the piece a lush, painterly quality. But the hyper-aestheticism of the surface belies the tragic vision of entropy Mikhailov offers. Shot from a skewed angle, the panels depict the grounds of a disused factory, with a heap of dilapidated industrial equipment in the center. The right panel shows a woman apparently trying to push a rusted and mangled tractor in a futile attempt to reactivate the broken machine.

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