

DOMINIQUE LÉVY

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In Ukraine, the Chilling Winds of Change

A Boris Mikhailov Survey Looks at Ukraine's
Soviet Era

By KAREN ROSENBERG JAN. 23, 2014



Boris Mikhailov: Four Decades A picture from the photographer's "At Dusk" series, in a show documenting life before, during and just after the Soviet Union's collapse. Courtesy of the artist and Dominique Levy, New York

The photographer Boris Mikhailov, born in Ukraine in 1938, has become widely known in late career for his wry and wrenching pictures of post-Soviet life. His series "Case

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History” (seen at MoMA in 2011) unnerved viewers with large-scale color portraits of homeless people in Ukraine, pictures that seemed to violate the codes of serious documentary photography. The subjects flashed naked flesh to the camera and had been paid and fed by the photographer.

The mini-survey “Boris Mikhailov: Four Decades,” at the Dominique Lévy gallery, explores some of the less confrontational but equally challenging work Mr. Mikhailov made before the collapse of the Soviet Union. While the show is not quite as substantial as advertised (one of the decades is represented by a single image), it’s Mr. Mikhailov’s most comprehensive show yet in New York. And with Ukraine embroiled once again in political turmoil, these photos give us a deeply human perspective on its street culture, offering glimpses of day-to-day life before, during and just after the breakup of the Soviet Republic.

The works here take many liberties with the categories of amateur and street photography, just as “Case History” did with the social documentary label. Those categories, after all, played out differently in a culture where even amateurs were expected to hew to official standards and where the street was, as Mr. Mikhailov has said, a place for “ ‘state education’ or murky space where nothing was allowed to happen.”

Mr. Mikhailov’s 1981 series “Crimean Snobbism,” for

instance, looks much like an ordinary vacation album. Fifty-five 5-by-7 prints, clustered on the wall, show the photographer and his friends frolicking at a beach resort on the Crimean Peninsula. (Ukrainians might recognize it as Gurzuf, a site once associated with literary figures like Chekhov and Mayakovsky).

A man and a woman spout seawater, pretending to be fountains; nude sunbathers loll like sea lions on the rocky shoreline. But something is a little off. The poses are too exaggerated, the expressions strangely self-conscious. It's not entirely surprising to learn that the fun is fictional, staged by Mr. Mikhailov in protest of the fact that the kind of leisure Westerners take for granted was not part of the Soviet lifestyle. In his hands, setup photography is not just theatrical exercise; it's also a kind of wish fulfillment, which makes it exceptionally poignant.

The series "At Dusk" finds Mr. Mikhailov playing street photographer in his hometown, Kharkov, between 1990 and 1993, during the early stages of Ukraine's post-Soviet transition. The hour is twilight, and the mood — exacerbated by the blue hand-toning of the prints — is relentlessly grim. Men in ushanka hats and women in babushkas shuffle along icy streets, lugging heavy carts and, in one case, a hobo bundle on a stick.

The series has a filmic flow, thanks to the panoramic format of the photographs and their end-to-end placement in this installation. But certain photographs convey a

powerful sense of movement interrupted: A man lies facedown on a sidewalk; a little girl stops to vomit on the curb, as her mother or caretaker holds back her hair.

If this is street photography, it's street photography with a powerful, pessimistic filter: the blue tone, applied so as to leave painterly streaks and splotches. Mr. Mikhailov has said that he associates blue with his childhood experience of World War II, calling it "the color of the blockade, of hunger and war." Also in the show is a large-scale triptych from his "Green" series, made around the same time as "At Dusk." It could be a faded Soviet mural, except the images are of a decaying scrapyard.

Mr. Mikhailov's relationship to color is highly emotional and intuitive. But when the hue is red, the official color of the Soviet Union, the reality is a little more complicated. During the late 1960s and early '70s, in his "Red" series, he photographed red objects in everyday life, starting with flags and other patriotic accessories but moving on to flowers and tomatoes and painted toenails, things so unremarkable that they are largely ignored by the people in the photographs. With an air of defiance, these images separate color from ideology. (At the time they were made, Mr. Mikhailov could not show them in public.)

Sadly, none of those photographs are in the show. But one of Mr. Mikhailov's "Superimpositions," which combine selected images from the "Red" series via multiple, overlaid slide projections that are then photographed, is on

view. It shows a little girl standing next to a chair with an upholstered red seat; behind her is a ghostly red balloon.

This image and the others in “Boris Mikhailov: Four Decades” would have benefited from more context: a catalog, for one thing. (The existing literature on Mr. Mikhailov is often badly translated, when it’s available in English at all.) But if you’ve seen only snippets of Mr. Mikhailov’s photography — at MoMA, or in group shows like the New Museum’s “Ostalgia” — you’ll appreciate this immersive, color-coded overview.

“Boris Mikhailov: Four Decades” runs through Feb. 8 at Dominique Lévy, 909 Madison Avenue, at 73rd Street; 212-772-2004, dominique-levy.com.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/24/arts/design/a-boris-mikhailov-survey-looks-at-ukraines-soviet-era.html>