

## Fall Symposium Retraces Contours of History

### 'City of Shadows' Exhibition Exposes Surreal Scenes of St. Petersburg's Past

It can hardly be argued that photographic exhibits remain one of the most effective mediums of art when it comes to concocting the perfect mix of reality and aestheticism. Conveniently, this form of visual art would also be the perfect combination for a symposium, which aims to lend an equal hand to history and art.

Well, we're in luck. The annual Clifford Symposium, this year celebrating the tercentenary of St. Petersburg, Russia presents "City of Shadows": photographs of St. Petersburg by Leningrad-born Alexey Titarenko. The exhibit opened this weekend, while Titarenko himself spoke on Saturday about his work and Russian professor Kevin Moss translated.

Titarenko began his work in the late 1970s as an expression of criticism of the Soviet Union. Therefore, it is not surprising that his first photographs depicted the oppression of Soviet life. When the Soviet Union collapsed, Titarenko's subject matter became obsolete and as he puts it, "the only thing that was left was what was always there, and that's people." Hence, this is why the focus of his photography is on the people of the post-Soviet era.

Titarenko found himself among crowds wandering aimlessly around St. Petersburg looking for food and goods. He wanted to capture the mass anxiety felt at the time. "The more I wandered around the city, the city became for me a kind of city of shadows," he explained Saturday. True to the nature of shadows, his images are not necessarily of people, but rather the idea of people blurred in slow motion.

Titarenko describes how he found inspiration for this effect in the work of Russian composer Shostakovich. The composer suffered the hardship of the October Revolution and had seen people lose everything in a matter of a day. Titarenko describes Shostakovich's music as giving the impression that time is standing still, which inspired Titarenko to make time stand still using photographic technique.

It is clear that Titarenko succeeds in telling the story of St. Petersburg, as his photographs, eerie me\_ langes of street scenes, are striking to look at.

Done completely in black-and-white, the photographs show a journalistic realism skewed by obscure images floating across sharp, urban symmetry. The figures of strangers passing become frozen in movement through Titarenko's long exposure techniques, giving them a ghost-like appearance and blurring them into the abstract.

Titarenko's passion in pursuit of this theme is admirable- his technique often required up to three-minute exposures and he frequently took risks, setting up in very busy metro stations with thousands of people passing. This is dangerous and illegal and as one can imagine he was less than popular. "I had to think of something so that I wouldn't be arrested or killed, so I pretended I was doing geodesic measurements of holes," Titarenko laughs now at his success in fooling even the police. The results of his efforts are phenomenal- in one of these photographs you can see only a cloud of bodies and faint yet distinct hands on a railing, overlapping each other in time. The exhibit is three different cycles of Titarenko's work: "City of Shadows" (1992-1994), "Black and White Magic of St. Petersburg" (1995-1997) and "Time Standing Still" (1998-2000). The images are indeed remarkable, making the viewer feel as if in a dream. One of the pieces, "Untitled, City of Shadows," (1993) shows a small boy leaning against a dirty building while a haze of movement sweeps across the photograph and nears his image. Titarenko describes the boy as being "swept away by fate" and explains how many of his people have thanked him for "capturing the spirit of that time" through depicting the utter lack of control amidst the economic hardship.

One of the most striking photos, "Untitled, Sennaya Square Market," depicts a woman in clear focus, while people blur around her in the middle of the market plaza. The woman is sitting with her eyes down in utter loss of hope as she holds a white piece of paper in her hand that creates a remarkable contrast with the darkness of the scene. Titarenko explains that in fact this was a note asking for help and its whiteness stood out in the gray of St. Petersburg, in his words, "a mirror of her soul asking for help."

Another work, "Untitled, Time Standing Still, Sennaya Square Market," shows a sea of people. This photograph is especially significant to Titarenko as it was taken on Aug. 19, 1998, when it was announced that the ruble, the Russian currency, was no longer of value. The chaos is evident, but Titarenko also points out two people kissing in the middle of the crowd. This is symbolic for him, and he jokes, "it was a long exposure, so you can imagine how long they were kissing."

Titarenko's vision of St. Petersburg is a compliment to that of the Russian writer, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, and much of his work illustrates Dostoyevsky's novels, in particular "Crime and Punishment." Throughout the exhibition hang photographs showing the places where Dostoyevsky's characters haunted St. Petersburg.

Titarenko points out that the writer and himself tell the same story of St. Petersburg as a dark, dirty place that swallowed its inhabitants. This quality is evident as many of the faces are lost in Titarenko's photographs, their individuality smeared by time.

Each photograph tells a story and the technique Titarenko employed is truly worth seeing.

Titarenko's work will be in the College's Museum of Art until Dec. 7.

**By Sadie Hoagland**

© Copyright 2009 The Middlebury Campus