

# Bringing Shadows to Life

Alexey Titarenko prints dark, exquisite street photos of Soviet-era Saint Petersburg and modern-day New York, interpreting old and new negatives like musical scores

BY REBECCA ROBERTSON



**ABOVE** Alexey Titarenko's toned gelatin silver print *Saint Petersburg, 1995*, from the series "Black and White Magic of Saint Petersburg."

**LEFT** Titarenko adds hints of color to emphasize the emotion of his scenes. "What's important is how we feel," he says.

On an early evening in November of 1991, when the Soviet Union was coming apart, Alexey Titarenko was out in his native Saint Petersburg, trying to make sense of what he saw—a surge of people outside a steep entrance to the subway. "I was walking on the street, absorbing what's happening. And passing by a subway station I see this sea—this ocean of desperate people trying to get inside," he recalls in his strong accent, carefully enunciating his words. Although street photography was not his usual approach, Titarenko had had a long-standing interest in making art with his camera. In his head, he heard the somber music of Dmitri Shostakovich, a favorite composer. "The beginning of the Second Cello Concerto is like a long-exposure image by itself," he says, "and the melody of the cello is so long and so tired." Together the sight and sound suggested a way to make a photograph that reflected the slow-moving gravitas of the scene. He decided to take photos of it using a shutter speed several minutes long.

In the resulting images, the crowd blurs into a ghostly mass, but certain forms remain visible.

Rebecca Robertson is photo editor of ARTnews.



The lower portion of  
Saint Petersburg

**Saint Petersburg,  
1992, a gelatin  
silver print from  
"City of Shadows,"  
was inspired by  
the music of  
Shostakovich.**

A sense of weight and darkness emerges, and the world is transformed into something metaphoric. A hand appears at intervals along the metal subway railing, hinting at the plodding rhythm of the crowd, while behind it, the city is gray and leafless. A pair of shoes sits forlornly at the bottom of the frame, as if their owner had dematerialized.

Those photographs, which initiated Titarenko's "St. Petersburg" series in 1991, marked the beginning of his interest in the

What is high-contrast? The high-contrast is a key

expressive potential of photography and grew into "City of Shadows," a suite of haunting images of Saint Petersburg crowds that occupied him until 1994. The series won him acclaim in his hometown and convinced him that this kind of photography was worth exploring. "I began to take images because I felt that it was my mission," he remembers. As the economy collapsed, "the changes happened so quickly and so dramatically, and it was so huge a shock, that it changed me internally. It made





me a different person. I said to myself, I can't stay inside of my room when disaster is happening. I have a good camera, a lot of film."

But Titarenko was not interested in making images that recorded only the surface of what he saw. "What is important is how we feel," he says. Since "City of Shadows," he has produced a series of emotionally intense, painstakingly printed black-and-white photographs of several cities. His work has been shown in festivals and museums around the world, including the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles and the State Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg. Most recently he had a solo exhibition at C. Grimaldis Gallery in Baltimore. In New York he is represented by Nailiya Alexander Gallery (run by his wife), where his work sells for between \$2,500 and \$6,000.

Above the sound of water running in washing trays in his Harlem basement darkroom, Titarenko, 51 years old but boyish, with a shaggy, gray-tinged bowl cut, explains that

**New York, Fifth Avenue, 2010, a toned gelatin silver print of the city where Titarenko has lived since 2007.**

city photography did not always appeal to him. Growing up in the Soviet Union, he says, "I hated street photography because for me it was always a tool of propaganda," which depicted only sanitized, government-approved scenes. But an interest in photomontage, Dadaism, and Constructivism drew him as a teenager to the underground photo clubs of the 1970s. There he began to see that this method could have an honest critical voice. "People in these clubs were taking pictures that were not allowed to be published," he recalls.

Collage offered Titarenko a way to make art that might be obliquely critical but still approved by censors. He began incorporating tissue paper and images torn from magazines and newspapers into his photographs, and photographing the results. In the mid-'80s, after studying photography in school and fulfilling his military service, he was still interested in the idea of collage, and he began sandwiching



**Venice, 2001,  
a toned gelatin  
silver print.  
Titarenko was  
attracted to the  
architectural  
similarities  
between the  
Italian city and  
his hometown of  
Saint Petersburg.**

together his negatives so that photographs of public statues often ended up superimposed onto the text printed on street signs. "I loved this project. But at my happiest time at work on the series, the Soviet Union collapsed," he says ruefully. "It's like for people who worked all their life to fight the Franco regime in Spain, and then Franco just died. All these artists became obsolete. Nothing to fight."

Not all of Titarenko's images are as bleak as his earliest. In the series that followed "City of Shadows," the artist explored a more light-filled cosmopolitan vision titled "Black and White Magic of St. Petersburg," inspired by a short story by Dostoyevsky. He has also photographed the intensely romantic cities of Venice and Havana, both of which relate to Saint Petersburg, in his view, since the former was an architectural model for the Russian city and the latter was frozen in the 1950s by economic sanctions, like the Soviet Union. In 2007 Titarenko moved to New York, and he

has spent the years since coming to terms with the logistics of making photographs here. "The difference is that there is more density in New York, so I try to create different colors," he says. Using multiple chemical processes that add warm and cool tones to his gelatin silver prints, he creates an illusion of color. In a shot of Fifth Avenue, American flags stand out at every corner, whispering red, white, and blue.

Whatever his subject, Titarenko seems to deeply enjoy printing his work, spending hours in his red-lit darkroom listening to classical music. By burning, dodging, solarizing, bleaching, and toning sections of each print, he highlights different details and produces versions of the same negative with slightly varying resonances. Reprinting older negatives, he says, "I'm actually apprehending the image more and more. I see more there, because the negative has thousands of details. It pushes me to emphasize something I just didn't see in the first place." ■