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ALEXEY
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Places, therefore,
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TITARENKO

Hailing from Saint Petersburg, Alexey Titarenko is Russian and it shows; in fact, it can almost be felt. His photography displays a dramatic literary view of the city that made him, and of its inhabitants who dissolve into a spectral black and white. Nailya Alexander Gallery in New York will host an exhibition of his images from April through May, as will Camera Obscura Gallery in Paris next autumn.

PHOTOGRAPHER OF SOULS

At 46, Alexey Titarenko is quite young to be producing such apparently ancient photography. His work possesses this as yet unheard of ageless strength that marks its era with acute precision, both in time and exposure. Titarenko is a Petersburger, this much is essential, for Saint Petersburg is the very soul of his photography and he feels exactly the same about the city, photographing the soul that's endowed to it by its citizens. He was born, grew up, and lives there, and he is imbued with its spirit; steeped in its beauty, its culture, its history, and its strength. He loves it the same way he loves its inhabitants, its heart belongs to him and to them, and vice versa. The same goes for its thoughts and reflections. He has photographed it exhaustively like no one before - except maybe great writers using words for that purpose, like Dostoyevsky - taking into account humanity and the dehumanization imposed upon it by the regime and the economic power. It's that social humiliation haunting Saint

Petersburg that Alexey Titarenko wanted to conjure up, in a kind of unapologetic, even rapturous exorcism full of savage beauty and poetic despair. At the end of the 80s, following his first series entitled *Nomenklatura of Signs* that mocked the stupidity of the Soviet regime, the sudden poverty afflicting his fellow citizens - as he explains below - brought about a change of tact in the face of the human disaster he was observing, which deeply affected him. Three series, *City of Shadows* (1992-1994), *Black and White Magic of Saint Petersburg* (1995-1997), and *Time Standing Still* (1998-1999) depict a town that's far removed from the familiar postcard cliché representing one of the most beautiful cities in the world. Still, through Petersburgers, he summons the whole of Russia; the women, children, and men reputedly so proud and strong of character who were lost, abandoned, weary, wiped out, and degraded, as if erased by poverty. They wander in Titarenko's evanescent black and white like spectres, ghostly apparitions disembodied by multiple nuances of grey, former citizens who become mere shadows of themselves, waiting in lines nearly as long as the exposure, and whom he blesses with the miracle of motion. What better interpretation could one imagine than those imaginary figures that appear almost to lunge towards us? The sensation of his 2002 exhibition - hosted by the Réattu museum during the Rencontres d'Arles international photography festival - remains a vivid memory for all who saw it. Since then, Alexey Titarenko has photographed Venice and Cuba with the same humanity and empathy, the same heart and timeless beauty, searching for hidden souls deep within postcard pictures.

You photographed your city of Saint Petersburg quite a lot and the first thing that shows is the strong presence of the town itself in your work, while its inhabitants seem to be just passing through, like spectres. Is that a way for you to express that we, humans, are merely passing through?

Alexey Titarenko / I didn't think about that when I made those images. At the beginning of the 90s, although Soviet totalitarianism had just disappeared, I was actually working on the photographic project I had begun in the 80s called *Nomenklatura of Signs*. That series was initially conceived as a reaction to the stupidity and absurdity of the Soviet regime; a kind of automatic and personal reflex I had facing the strange - veering on supernatural - manifestations of it. The pictures in this series represented the visual landscape (created with several superposed negatives, or with collages combining photography, red fabric, printed excerpts of Brezhnev's speeches, etc.) that was surrounding me at the time, like something detached from any realistic reference, where people were reduced to mere preconceived representations, such as "*The true worker*" or "*Women, happy builders of communism*." At a certain time, I realized how quixotic it all was, and that my work, although completely sincere, could be subject to speculation... Because it was terribly painful for me to see the Soviet people, all those individuals transformed into mere symbols by the regime, turning their very existence into a substitute for real life... They passed from a state of solid and tangible cheerful symbols into one of wandering shadows... One day, in the autumn of the dreadful year 1992, I was sadly hanging about a downtown street that had once been merry and swarming with people; it was poorly lit, the afternoon was coming to an end, and there was not a car to be seen... In the midst of the strange silence, interrupted only by the slamming of empty shop and bakery doors, I saw distraught people, men and women in simple attire, their eyes full of exhaustion and despair, left breathless by their sad daily quest for a few basic products to feed on... They looked like 'shadow-people'... We hadn't seen this happen in Saint Petersburg since the Second World War when the Nazis had imposed blockade on the city. From this strong and lasting impression, I felt the urge to expose this distress and suffering to others... I wanted to express it through my pictures and give rise to compassion and love towards the inhabi-

tants of my native city that had been extraordinarily massacred with injustice throughout the 20th century. With my photographs, I wanted above all to convey this metaphor of shadow-people upon which my view was based. I did it using a very long exposure...

Do you photograph Saint Petersburg as a character in its own right?

A.T. / It's more like an instrument, a means through which I express my vision, because social problems are more visible in cities.

Do you feel like you have a duty towards Saint Petersburg?

A.T. / It's a duty towards myself, towards what I see, what I think, and what I feel.

They say that places have a soul. Did you ever come close to it?

A.T. / In order for places to have a soul, we have to think about them... Places, therefore, are inhabited by our souls, which brings us back to ourselves, to the very expression of ourselves, and that's the best way to approach the soul of places.

What does Saint Petersburg's soul look like (compared to that of other cities, if it's easier to express by comparison)?

A.T. / Saint Petersburg was built by foreign architects; Italian, French, German, and Dutch. It has more masterpieces of late 18th and early 19th-century Italian architecture than Rome. Saint Petersburg's opera is as famous as Milan's and the most famous classical ballet in the world is here. The Ermitage Museum is as important as the Louvre or the Metropolitan, and its Impressionist collection can easily rival that of the Musée d'Orsay. There are more orchestras and classical music ensembles here than in Vienna, while the parks and fountains outshine those in Versailles. The city once had the reputation of being 'a window on Europe,' a link between Russia, that in the past was considered to be more of an Asian country, and Europe. Native Petersburgers are different from people of other areas, especially Muscovites. They have a more European spirit, and are more attached to democratic ideas and values. Petersburgers' pronunciation has long been considered a standard way of speaking the Russian language by which others are compared. There are 5-million people here, and it's less than a 3-hour flight from Amsterdam, London, or Paris. The distance between Saint Petersburg and Moscow is approximately 650 km, but it's a ten-hour drive for lack of a motorway - not a single decent one in the whole of Russia! - and a 7-hour train ride. The closest capitals are actually European, like Tallinn or Helsinki, a mere 400 km away.

It's maybe because of the dramatic aspect of black and white, added to that of your own compositions, but it seems that you're respecting a certain Russian literary and cinematographic tradition. Is that so?

A.T. / Certain works of classical music and literature have had their influence, but I couldn't say that of cinema. The largest impact actually came from classical music, especially that of Dmitri Chostakovitch, but also from all the greats, from Mozart to Schnittke. And although I do adore certain books by Dostoevsky, I think that the most important work in the history of modern literature is that of Marcel Proust. So there's nothing specifically Russian in what I respect...

Why did you choose black and white? Or is it black and white that chose you?

A.T. / That's not absolutely true, because my pictures are sometimes very colourful. It's just that the intentions of my photographic language can only be translated through visual metaphors requiring very subtle nuances of pure grey added to that of colours, which are also rather fragile and delicate.

Yet, with black and white you enhance grey, even though you exploit all of its nuances. Could that indicate a pessimistic view of the world?

A.T. / The view is not pessimistic per se, nor is it optimistic for that matter; both just coexist, in relation to one another. When you create a series of pictures, the view is not translated by considering every photograph one by one, but through the whole sequence they form. In that respect, I think my series are rather optimistic.

Still, in the series you shot in Venice and Cuba - two sunny locations that have been photographed a thousand times and upon which you cast a new look by instilling what looks like this Russian soul - we feel the same pessimism. Isn't it a kind of fate you can't escape, or at least one that you don't wish to escape ?

A.T. / Venice and Cuba complement my work on Saint Petersburg, for the same reason that one first has to add a fair share of pessimism in order to appreciate true optimism afterwards. A writer uses the same process when, within the plot, he introduces images and episodes of happiness to give the right measure of hardship. Venice is the symbol of happiness, of eternal love, and everything that's good here on earth... And although it's not the same for Havana, you soon discover that tourists in Venice are more often than not young newlywed couples on honeymoon, which is far from being the case in Saint Petersburg.

Characters in your photographs are ghostly; they're either spectres within indistinct crowds, or individuals lost in the city. What are you looking for in people? Are they simply of trivial interest ?

A.T. / There's a large scope to your question, because it's one of principle that brings us way back to the very notion of what's trivial in art. It is true that in some of my pictures, people appear rather like trivial characters compared to the dimension of the city that is generally behind them, but it's particularly true because of their dimension in time. For it is actually a notion of time that's introduced by the presence of those characters; and it's the time that has become visible that's at play when you talk about their spectral state. It's like reminding someone of his age by saying, for example, that we'll no longer be around when such and such an event happens... So what's trivial, in my opinion, is the place that any individual occupies in time, and that's what my pictures refer to... Like the Bible and so many other things for that matter... But that's not all. I think that art sometimes offers - for example some trivial little detail on a painting, or a few sounds or gestures that are not directly linked to the text of a play during the performance (in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* played in Saint Petersburg, for instance, the recorded buzz of mosquitoes in the theatre had the comedians trying to squash them) - a few secondary trite melodies, almost trivial indeed, that occur unexpectedly in a particular Mozart or Schnittke concerto, and which bring us a renewed feeling of beauty and fullness of life. These things fill us with a sort of disinterested pleasure, with everything we look for in art. From this point of view, which is essential in my opinion, couldn't we consider the trivial element as synonymous with genius, unpredictable, and with everything that a true artist brings out that's different from others and that can't be acquired but only created? That's something to ponder...

You enjoy playing with time that passes, and also with the weather, especially when it's bad: even when the sun is up, it shines through the clouds and yet one can feel that you don't do it purposefully for light and shadows. What is the fundamental reason for that ?

A.T. / Weather is an important part of my language that knows no letters, no numbers... It's a bit like major and minor in music.

Filming and editing count for equal parts in the making of a film. Can we say the same about your photographs, that they're created both during shooting and printing ?

A.T. / The process of creating a picture can be compared to that of a piece of classical music played by a pianist or a conductor who has actually written what they're playing, or that of a role created by an actor who is also the playwright. There are also two creative stages for me: the first is the image I capture on the negative, and the second is the print I realize from it. I use every artistic means allowed by both processes to achieve my goals, to express my vision.

Has photography changed the way you see the world ?

A.T. / It actually hasn't. It's rather the pre-existing view I had of the world around me that changed my photography.

Since you purposefully use a long exposure to obtain the effect you wish to create, do you get random results ?

A.T. / I have a pretty good idea of what's going to end up on the film, but that doesn't mean there can't be any surprises. They do happen... Both good and bad ones...

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