



Russian Photos Trace Images of Mortality and Memory

Art Reviews

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Alexey Titarenko's intriguing photographs at Apex Fine Art are stills that have the presence of short films. Instead of seizing an instant and preserving it intact, they embrace a span of time, allowing it to pass and leave just a trace.

Photographic film has a different sort of memory from the human mind, heart or eye. The mechanics of the lens and light-sensitive chemicals are well understood, but images such as Titarenko's remind us that photographs can still be elusive. Just like images stored in the mind, those captured on film are at once true and reliable, false and selective.

In his "City of Shadows" series on view here (in an Absolut L.A. International Biennial show), Titarenko explores his native St. Petersburg (Leningrad). It is the feel of the city he is after, more than its outward appearance. Familiar monuments are nowhere to be seen, and the buildings on city streets, however grand, function here like the sturdy banks of a river. Life teems by, with a force and personality of its own. All of the photographs are exterior shots made in public places, but Titarenko wrests from the white noise of urbanity a sense of the quiet, private space of the individual.

In one especially poignant example from 1999, an older Russian woman in archetypal heavy coat, scarf and boots sits on pavement that seems to erode beneath her. With a look of resigned exhaustion

on her face, she holds an envelope in her gloved hands, and her shopping bag rests beside her. Her stillness and interiority contrast with the blurred crowds that move like wisps of gray through the square behind her. The picture brings to mind Dorothea Lange's "White Angel Bread Line" of 1932 in its stunning portrait of the singularity of suffering.

In a lighter, more playful vein, Titarenko frames a rain-soaked, leaf-scattered street devoid of life but for the faint echo of a woman's leg, repeated in three whispered beats. In another photograph, he shows the railing of a stairway with a foggy blur of hands and bodies brushing against it, gripping it, sliding along it.

St. Petersburg, in Titarenko's photographs, is a bleak, wintry place, forever wet and cold. Figures huddle in their heavy coats, well-wrapped souls trying to find safe passage through the stony city. In the end, Titarenko's stirring images are portraits of mortality as much as they are evocations of memory. In them, we see that the traces we leave in space and time are faint, yet nonetheless indelible.



Alexey Titarenko's 1999 photograph of a woman in St. Petersburg