

Alexey Titarenko

# SO THIS IS 1992

by Matin Momen



"Time Standing Still" - White Dresses, DATE: 1998

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“So this is 1992.”

Aside from exchanging New Year’s greetings, these were the first words the St. Petersburg artist Alexey Titarenko spoke to me one January morning as we stood over a file cabinet covered with his exquisite photographic prints in the Nailya Alexander Gallery on 57th Street and Madison Avenue. Already busy in the gallery when I got there, he turned, dressed in jeans and a sweater with tousled hair that nearly covered his eyeglasses, and we shook hands. And like a professor who loathes to waste time, he commenced in English, his third language.

“So this is 1992. This is the crowd near the subway station. But not where I took it first. So, if you look at it from this time, you see this area that’s very busy. Shops, magazine... now,” he moved the print to the side, “Now, this is the women selling cigarettes. So, they are basically the person who retired. These women were like fifty-five, so they have pensions, but when the Soviet Union collapsed, the pensions evaporated. So, they were going to the factory in the early morning. They were buying directly from the factory. And then they are selling cigarettes in front of the subway station. It’s illegal, but the police didn’t touch them because otherwise they would die. But, of course, it was illegal. Look there,” he pointed to the central figure, the one with the white winter hat. “She’s looking for the police. So, the original idea was to take these women but so that they don’t see me, because if you take the image of these persons and they see you, it changes the situation. It makes you enter their mind. And they change their behavior and this is unpredictable. So what I did, I used people who were passing by as a screen. So they probably did see me but they didn’t pay attention to me because there were people passing so they didn’t have any idea if I could make a photograph as people passed. Also, they might think that I was selling something because there were a lot of people using tripods to try to attach something for sale. So, they didn’t pay attention to me, the only attention was to looking for police. There,” he waved his hand over the print, “are three different type of woman.”

He showed me the next print. “This is the same basically. The idea, just people searching for something in the garbage can. But the garbage can is empty. It’s vacant. I don’t really need to speak for this image.”

And another print, “This is the same kind of principle: there are people passing between me and the person who I would like to take. That’s why this woman, slumped over on the street, begging, despondent, doesn’t see me. The people who are moving by, they walk past the shutter and look at me, and the exposure is long, but the woman you can see her because the people act to shield me.”



“City of Shadows”, DATE: 1993

“People just don’t know history.” This was Titarenko’s response to my surprise that in these otherwise gorgeous, poetic, and lyrical prints resided forensic historical evidence. “That’s why I’m actually walking you through the work now. Why I’m explaining why this idea came out. Because of course people were taking images in the nineteenth century using long exposures and there was a lot of human tragedy in the nineteenth century but nobody ever tried to use this photography to – this long exposure – to metaphorically represent human suffering... this kind of brutal change of life.”

Titarenko took our discussion over to the gallery’s sunny office where he rummaged up a copy his artist’s statement from a Houston Photofest where his lyrical, heartrending series, *City of Shadows*, was exhibited. It provides:

“The idea for *City of Shadows* emerged quite unexpectedly and quite naturally during the collapse of the Soviet Union in the fall of 1991. At that period I continued to work on my earlier series *Nomenklatura of Signs*. I realized that I was struggling with emptiness and that my creative impulses were running the risk of contemplating ideas that were no longer valid. The Soviet people, who had been deprived of their individuality by a criminal regime, had begun transforming themselves from smiling and happy-looking ‘signs’ into wandering shadows... More than anything, I wanted to convey my ‘people-shadows’ metaphor as accurately as possible. This metaphor became the core of both my new vision and new series. I placed my camera near the entrance to the Vasilostrovskaya subway station, where the shopping district was located. A crowd of people flowing near trying to enter in formed a sort of human sea, providing me with a feeling of non-reality, a phantasmagoria; these people were like shadows from the underworld.”

With the copy of his artist’s statement tucked safely away in my copy of his book, we moved back to the filing cabinet, and Titarenko resumed, moving on to another print, “So this is one of the first crowds that I took that I was talking about in the artist statement. This is also one of the first that you probably know, from the cover of my book, *City of Shadows*.” The image depicted a shuffling black mass in a bleached out cityscape, a human sludge, slowly congealing up the extreme right edge of the frame and disappearing into a door apparently held open by the entering mass. There was evidence of some street traffic – we can see the vehicular blur (many

of Titarenko’s images are devoid of traffic, long exposures notwithstanding) – but despite the traffic and the crowd, the image is hushed, the noise level reduced to nocturnal mutterings, if at all, even though it is clearly depicting a relatively busy street on a short St. Petersburg’s winter’s day.

The cinematographer **John Bailey** describes Titarenko’s working method like this: “Alexey Titarenko carries his larger format Hasselblad also at his side. It is mounted on a collapsible tripod. His hand grips the legs, the camera hanging from it, upside down. When something catches his eye he quickly moves to position, sets the tripod in place, looks down into the large ground glass, snaps the shutter, and waits for the time exposure to end. He picks the rig up and moves on; one could think the whole device was a strange kind of time machine fused to the end of a walking stick.” There is a short, well-done documentary on Titarenko made by French and German television in which you get to see the “time machine” in action, as well as a good sense of his St. Petersburg streets (a city I have never visited), his printing methods (he looks like a painter hovering, toning and bleaching with fine soft brushes; no two prints are ever the same), and of the gulf between a negative and a finished print.

“The same effect. Take the image of this boy.” Titarenko pointed to the boy’s eyes. “He doesn’t see me. He looks to you, not to me, beneath the people passing by so they draw attention. That’s why the image is like that. Otherwise, the boy would just walk away. The exposure is quite long and I use a tripod.” A Middlebury College exhibition essay notes that Titarenko felt this “small boy leaning against a dirty building while a haze of movement sweeps across the photograph and nears his image... as being ‘swept away by fate.’”

In discussing the collapse of the Soviet Union and the teetering of the nation into the Yeltsin years, Titarenko showed me how he can mentally date some of his photographs via historical content rather than, say, notations jotted at the time of their taking. He explained, “We didn’t have any idea of the photography market, so I wasn’t doing it for sale. I was doing it as documents for myself, to express myself. I didn’t have any idea that I might sell it. So this didn’t matter for me. So this,” placing another print on the top of the pile, “is one of the first subway images that changed completely my way of looking at photography. When I started taking pictures in the 1970s I used – I barely began to use medium sized film



“City of Shadows” – Variant Crowd 2, DATE: 1993



"St. Petersburg" DATE: 1996

– my parents gave me a camera, like a Soviet copy of Leica, and so I was taking 35 mm images. So the 35 mm Soviet film had near the perforation the year when the film was made so it was easier for me to look at the negative and say, ok, this is '75. (Even though I can't imagine, say, my sister looking like that in '75 the film says so, so this is '75). And the medium format film for some reason didn't have any mention or label of the factory. The fact is the name of the factory was Svema, a Soviet factory maker of films, it's actually now in Ukraine, but at that time it was Soviet Union, so there was no mention of the Svema label nor the date when this film was made. There was just white space around the image. It was very difficult to tell to exactly when as the time was passing quickly and there was not any mention of time on the negative. The only real mention of the time is reality... Let's have a look." He pointed to the name on the awning of the news kiosk in the middle background of the shot, behind the crowd thronging up the subway stairway entrance. "When Yeltsin was in power this newspaper disappeared, and instead of that there was a newspaper of Russia, so this is still Soviet Union time, and that's why I am thinking that this is around 92. Soyuz Pechat." He noted the sign to the left of the kiosk. "It still said Lenspravka. Len means Leningrad, and St Petersburg it became... so you know it is probably '91, '92." He stood looking at the print laid flat on the cabinet top. "Sometimes we don't have snow."

"Oh yeah, so you see this is another direction of the crowd but look what year you do you think you are seeing? Look at the advertisement," he pointed to an iron signpost topped with a modern looking advertisement. "It's 2007. Do you think something has changed? Yeah, the crowd is more organized. There is no shoe," referring to the haunting, stray pair of old shoes on the down-side of the subway entrance stairs in the previous photograph, "but there is a real man. It's an alcoholic."

Having finished walking through his prints, Titarenko suggested we retire to the gallery office to continue to talk, and while he quickly reorganized the prints, I commented, sheepishly, on the humanism inherent in his project (before I was overly focused on their beauty as unique art objects). He stopped, thought for moment, and said, "The people, it's me. There is no difference between me and people of Russia... I am everybody. Still now." And he walked over to the sunlit office.

We sat, and I asked him if relationship as an artist photographing the streets and inhabitants of St. Petersburg changed with stabilization.

"St. Petersburg has been changed as Russia has become a different country. This is normal but the city is not the same because the people are not the same. The city people... the population has changed dramatically. As I told you the story, with the collapse of the Soviet Union a lot of the people died. Other people, who didn't want to die, just moved to Moscow or different countries like Germany, Israel, and the United States, whatever. So, the population who moved out made the place for population for people from other parts of Russia or Soviet countries to come in and take its place so there was a demographic shift in population of St. Petersburg, Leningrad, so the city became different because the people became different."

He went on, sparked, "Well, the people have a short memory usually, so to say what happened in '91 doesn't mean nothing, people don't believe it, but when you have images, you at least may show something and say 'Look this really happened.' You can't deny it. Can't deny that a million people died because of the collapse of the Soviet Union, because of the fact that a lot of completely corrupt people took power and used it for their profit. And the population of a great country became victim of it. It happened several times. It happened when this completely unnecessary war had been started, the First World War, and the revolution arrived, the Bolsheviks took power, revolution so-called – just as a coup d'etat – then in 1918 as you know the elimination of the first democratically elected parliament by the Bolsheviks with the help of the military from Latvia. So it happened several times. It happened again in '91. For me it is most important so that we didn't build a legend as it was built for the Russian Revolution because there are no factual images of people in the street during the Russian Revolution. We see the images that emphasize and completely deviate the history, like the films of (Sergei) Eisenstein having nothing to do with reality. Just like propaganda, even though it's genius, very talented film-making. That's why I started taking these images. Even though I mean I was thinking that it [conditions at the time] somehow probably would stop very quickly but the matter of fact is that nobody would predict it took so long, all 1990s. I felt that this is a mission rather than a kind of, let's say..." He trailed off, his hand falling back into his lap.

“You should find your aesthetics; otherwise, you just make ‘a writing,’ producing images for the newspaper. You can’t translate. You might make the documentary pictures, but to understand it the people have to feel the same about it because there is some horrible thing you take but that books can write about it as positive. For example, when you take some exploding buildings in New York City that may be a positive thing because they are razing old buildings, making room for new buildings, but you take pictures of it and, wow, there is action. What is it? Bombardment? Human tragedy? No. A very positive thing maybe. So the image by itself... the documentary image says nothing.” He let that point sink in a moment. “What is most important is how we feel about it. How we feel about what happened, what is represented in the images. Most of the people just [photograph like] writing down on the paper and publish it as explanation. That’s how work 99% of photographers. But their images are not enough. For me to avoid that, I was trying to find a way so the image speaks by itself.”

“Let me show you *Begging Woman*, for example,” he flipped to the image in the book *City of Shadows*, “It doesn’t need explanation. You grab everything right away. Or the image of the crowd, et cetera. There are a lot of images like that. So, you have to find that, and the only way to do it, not only in photography but also in music, literature, and painting, is to create the metaphor. Because the metaphor, that is the way you create the thing that can show your state of mind. That’s the only thing actually that can show your state of mind. So you have to create the visual metaphor and how do you create that in photography? Photography is based on very strict technical applications. So one of the ways that I used was in *Nomeklatura of Signs* [the project pre-dating *City of Shadows*, *Black and White Magic of St. Petersburg*, *Time Standing Still*...] to use the technique of collages, of photo montages, and create visual metaphors using images and making assemblages or super-impositions of different negatives to create metaphors.”

“In *City of Shadows* I found out that I might... that maybe one of the ways that I could make metaphors and generalize the image somehow was long exposure. So, I was aware of it because all of my life, because I read a lot of books about photography, even when I was kid. As an eleven year-old, I read – I was fluent in French – a famous speech of the French Academy of Science by Francois Arago announcing the discovery of photography in 1839. The main idea that Arago was trying to tell to the members of the Academy was that

the discovery of photography was not the discovery actually of the way to duplicate reality, but now it’s a discovery of the notion of time. Because it was the most important discovery probably ever made in physics... actually this was true because time was relative and probably the physicists and the scientists then knew it even before the discovery of photography, but how the time is relative we didn’t know. So, for the first time we saw it. We physically by our eyes saw that time is relative. The first image, street image, that was taken was the image of very busy boulevard, Boulevard St. Germain. The exposure was... I don’t remember exactly the technical terms. From the crowd, nothing was left in the image, only a leg,” he smacked his thigh, “of the person who put his shoes up to be cleaned, and so this leg wasn’t moving during the time that someone was cleaning the shoes and the rest of the body was moving, more or less, so what we see is the silhouette of the person with a leg. Basically a leg. And nothing else. Now that’s to give you an idea that what we see is very relative... If our glimpse would last, let’s say, a couple of centuries, we would see like in the Bible, mountains moving.”

“So, I knew all of this. And the philosophical aspect and the technical aspect of what a long exposure might do. And I took pictures when I was eight with long exposure when the light wasn’t enough. Especially, I loved the fireworks, so I was taking pictures of the fireworks, long exposures with a lot of people moving on the ground because there’s always a lot of people looking at the fireworks. But I didn’t have a feeling that this something that would help me in my artistic researches, and the first time I felt that long exposure might help me actually was when... I start it with the image I described in my artist statement, the subway station. This was a strong shock, emotional, and spiritual, intellectual also. So, after that I was really convinced that this was the way I have to follow. That’s it.”

In exploring Titarenko’s working methods, I asked if he takes a lot of photographs on his city walks or if he is more selective and shoots rarely. He shoots a lot. “You don’t know what is important or what is not important. You shoot everything. It’s basically like literature, and that means that you have to write every one of your steps, but as you mentioned and pointed out about writers, especially the people like Dickens or Pasternak, they didn’t write about every step. They don’t need to. Or in the movie you don’t shoot every step of the person, you cut it. So, you take a moment from this, take moment from that, and make a montage. You learn how to



“New York Series” – 58th Street, DATE: 2012



"Venice Series" – Canal/Laundry, DATE: 2006

do it – how to choose what is important, what is not important. If you choose it by wanting to choose it, you might be wrong, but when it comes unintentionally there is more... more truth to it... you have to be somehow distracted and then something strikes you at this moment, 'All right this is important. Why? I don't know.' – It doesn't matter that you don't know why this is important. If you feel it is important it's probably important. And if you decide this is important because you read the newspaper before and you later think, 'Oh yeah, this is important,' it's probably not important. It's shit. So, these involuntary decisions that make Pasternak or Dickens choose such and such situation, they have much more truth than some writers these days and certain things they think is important. Yeah, that's how I'm walking around, and sometimes I'm just looking at how the light is going down. That helps."

"It takes too much time to work on every image. So, I take pictures, and then I have to take a break a long time to work on every image. And I have a lot of negatives from like 2003 that I never tried to print. So, I am working on them more than taking pictures. So, it was the same in St. Petersburg. There was a period, seven or eight months, I never even went out with the camera in St. Petersburg. I was busy with printing. For example from, let's say, this period of April '94 through the summer I don't remember taking pictures during that time. That's almost six months. I was working in the darkroom on prints."

"It helps when the negative stays away from you... the time that passes between you and the time the negative has been taken. Then after it helps you to understand the importance of such image instead of such image. To understand more why this is an important image and why this is not an important image. So, I like it when negatives are resting somewhere in the corner, and I take a look at them five years later. It happens. I've discovered images that I didn't consider... for example, *White Dresses*, which has been taken in '95 I guess, and that was printed first in '99, four years later. I printed it in '95 when I took this image, but I never showed it to anybody. But it became one of the most important images... it became more close to me and the other images became more distant. There are a couple of images like that that came later."

Titarenko currently lives near Columbia University and often walks down through Central Park to make it to the gallery. He does not photograph much in the park, and so I surmised that that's because he prefers to photograph cities, urbanity, but that was not accurate. "It's not about cities. I'm interested in the place where I live. So, Venice," one of his later series, "was for me the happiest part of St. Petersburg somehow, that's why I was taking pictures of Venice. Havana is just for me like St. Petersburg because as I told you St. Petersburg became a completely different city, not mine, and Havana is still the same, still Soviet, nineteenth century city, like probably St. Petersburg would be without collapse of the Soviet Union. So, I am finding some atmosphere of my youth in Havana, especially there is nothing that is that different: the style of regime, the same city on the sea, the same kind of beautiful nineteenth century buildings, all dilapidated, and this kind of totalitarian regime and same kind of people that's living in my youth... the Soviet Union collapsed when I was thirty years old already. That's why Havana is basically for me also like a time machine to be back in the St. Petersburg of my 1970s. St. Petersburg has been a built as a Venice, but there was so much suffering linked to St. Petersburg that you just can't feel happy, as people can feel happy in Venice. Also, because of the sun. There is almost no sun in wintertime in St. Petersburg. It's a dark city. Because the marble is white, Venice is always bright."

And New York? The subject of Titarenko's current developing series and his home as of late. "New York, I live here. So for me, it's important to understand who the people are. What is modifying the people? Why the people are different? The atmosphere of the city modifies the people. Even the French arriving or Dutch arriving in New York, they became different. That's how the architecture and the city itself are modifying you. So, that's why it is important to take in this environment so that you understand this kind of modification of human behavior. You can't say you dislike something. Because you live here. Even the most awful part of the city makes you happy if you connect to it somehow. So, if you're passing by the same thing like for ten years, you can't live without it. I hate the ambulances because they are so noisy. But still... you put up with it. It's part of New York."



"St. Petersburg", DATE: 2005



"Black & White Magic" – Window/Snow, DATE: 1996



"Havana Series" – 07-06, DATE: 1996





"City of Shadows" – Three Women Selling Cigarettes, DATE: 1992