

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

ON PHOTOGRAPHY | By William Meyers

Shades of Reality

Eugène Atget:
Documents pour artistes

◆ **Museum of Modern Art**
11 W. 53rd St., (212) 708-9400
Through April 9

Eugène Atget (1857-1927) took photos of Paris that were used as references by artists, architects and historians. Other photographers shot similar pictures of much the same material for the same purpose, but none have the qualities that Mr. Atget's do. His photos of courtyards, storefronts, streetscapes, architectural furniture and parks have a mystique that is as easy to identify as it is difficult to explain.

But I have a theory: As a young man, Mr. Atget spent many years acting with a touring theatrical company. In my youth, I, too, had a brief moment on the boards, and one thing I realized is that not just the actors but everything on stage—the sets, the costumes, the make-up, the lighting—contributes to the performance.

By the time Mr. Atget took up photography, I think he had

internalized the way a set is used not just as backdrop but as an integral part of the fictive world of the production. The points of view he chose make the courtyards, the street corners and the magnificent facades he photographed into plausible stage sets awaiting only the director's cue for the action of the play to begin. Mr. Atget photographed early in the morning, before people were about, but he enhanced his public spaces with a sense of imminent drama.

The exhibition at MoMA is excellent.

Observed:
Milagros de la Torre

◆ **Americas Society**
680 Park Ave., (212) 249-8950
Through April 14

Each of the projects hung on the walls of the three rooms of the Americas Society's gallery is stylistically different from the others, as if this were a group show. But all the works are by Peruvian photographer Milagros de la Torre (born Lima, 1965), and a com-

mon theme connects many of them—danger. She grew up when terrorism and crime were constant threats and, as the daughter of the chief of Lima's antidrug military police force, she was especially aware of them.

Threat is implied in the two black-and-white pictures in "Bulletproof" (2008): "Corduroy" and "Dinner Jacket" are life-size images of what seem to be ordinary jackets, but are really designed for protection against firearms. Criminal evidence from the Palace of Justice in Lima was photographed with 19th-century techniques to give the pictures in "The Lost Steps" (1996) an antique look. The five 4-by-5½-inch pictures in "Armored" (2000) are formal three-quarter views of the armored trucks that were common in Mexico City when Ms. de la Torre lived there.

Ms. de la Torre's conceptual projects benefit from her extensive knowledge of photographic technology—historic and contemporary, high-tech and low. This is especially true of the striking images in "Un-



Eugène Atget's 'Coin de la rue Valette et Pantheon, 5e arrondissement, mars, matin' (1925)

der the Black Sun" (1991-93), based on the technique of the street photographers of Cuzco, Peru: Red Mercurochrome on the negatives renders these portraits spectral.

Underground: Russian
Photography 1970s-1980s

◆ **Nailya Alexander Gallery**
41 E. 57th St., Seventh floor
(212) 315-2211
Through March 24

Mundane reality is the enemy of totalitarian regimes, so they always create an official alternative reality in which everything is hunky-dory.

The most unsettling aspect of most of the pictures at Alexander is that they are images of commonplace occurrences, and yet unacceptable.

To take one example, photographer Yuri Rybchinsky put himself at risk with the Communist authorities by taking "Drunks" (1987), a worm's-eye view of two men falling to the sidewalk. Officially, life was so good in the Soviet Union that no one would ever get drunk, so such a picture, benign as it seems, menaced the regime.

Igor Moukhin's picture of a young rock musician desperately trying to look hip, "Len-



Milagros de la Torre's 'Under the Black Sun' (1991-93)

ingrad" (1986), couldn't be allowed because such music was anathema.

And even as innocent an image as Nikolai Bakharev's "Untitled" (1980s), a photograph of a handsome young family with many children—all of them in swimsuits—would be proscribed because the father is holding up a bottle of beer.

Some photographs do have more of an edge. Gennady Bodrov's "Untitled" (1988) shows heroic bas-relief portraits of Marx and Lenin out behind a building where they have apparently been dis-

carded with other rubble. Alexy Titarenko's photomontages mock Soviet orthodoxy not only in their avant-garde style, but also in referencing food shortages and other unmentioned aspects of daily life.

Likewise Alexander Lapin's "Door" (1985), which is about shortages and the interminable waits in line. The regime is gone; the images perdure.

Mr. Meyers writes on photography for *The Wall Street Journal*. See his work at his website, williammeyersphotography.com.



Gennady Bodrov's 'Untitled' (1988)

Abbott-Lewis Collection, The Museum of Modern Art

Milagros de la Torre/Americas Society