

Boris Mikhailov

GALERIE BARBARA WEISS

For more than four decades, Boris Mikhailov has photographed the shifting visual landscape of his native Ukraine, utilizing a range of formal approaches while never fully abandoning the spontaneous, amateur quality of what initially began as a hobby. (He was fired from an engineering job in the late 1960s, when the KGB discovered nude photographs he'd taken of his wife.) In his recent exhibition at Galerie Barbara Weiss—instituting the gallery's impeccable new venue in Kreuzberg—the artist presented two series of works, "Black Archive," 1968–79, and "Tea Coffee Cappuccino," 2000–10, spanning



Boris Mikhailov, *Tea Coffee Cappuccino*, 2000–10, color photograph, 9¾ x 16¾". From the series "Tea Coffee Cappuccino," 2000–10.

an artistic trajectory devoted to capturing and critiquing a cultural history that might have been otherwise neglected or forgotten.

As in his work from the '90s, especially "Case Study," 1997, a series of portraits showing the diseased and scarred bodies of his hometown Kharkov's homeless population, "Tea Coffee Cappuccino" depicts the continued dissolution of a social body that suffers from the greed and economic disparities of an awkward transition to neoliberalism compounded by the precariousness of a postcrisis global economy. Well over a hundred images were mounted in groups, usually of two, three, or four, to create disjointed, panoramic urban scenes of decrepit kiosks decorated with gaudy advertisements; pedestrians weighed down by large shopping bags and navigating icy, garbage-strewn streets; and poor, elderly residents seemingly stuck in a time warp, waiting for trams that never arrive. And yet, characteristically, Mikhailov's unflinching view of an unpicturesque reality is infused with a fatalistic sense of humor that avoids the easy, exploitative tropes of victimhood often associated with documentary photography. Street dogs and marginalized individuals sleep, loiter, and relieve themselves in public with equal abandon; inebriated teenagers crowd around a scrawny, naked friend, who is splayed out Christlike on a wooden table; a man (the artist himself) hurls his body toward the sidewalk in a staged episode of what looks like projectile vomiting, consistent with the daily spectacle of excess and deprivation. Elsewhere he appears holding a gold reflector, like a halo, above the heads of potbellied men in Spandex swim briefs eager to plunge through a hole in a frozen lake, in observance of a masochistic Day of Epiphany ritual symptomatic of the tremendous resurgence of religion in post-Soviet Ukraine.

In contrast, the black-and-white photographs of "Black Archive" portray a much more somber landscape of near-empty streets, prefabricated housing blocks, and pedestrians photographed at close range, often from awkward angles, as if the images had been made quickly and furtively. Largely devoid of movement, the photographs seem to reflect either a time of relative stability under developed socialism, or a bleak and repressive "era of stagnation," depending on one's perspective. Mikhailov's own narrative is ambiguous, as usual, but what's certain is that in the 1960s and '70s the private sphere—be it in the form of a cramped interior or an intimate encounter on a park bench—offered much more in the way of artistic license and experimentation than the prescribed themes and subject matter of official Soviet art. Interspersed among these banal yet lyrical snapshots are several portraits of naked women posing in an uninhibited and playful manner, literally stripped of the ideological trappings that determined both how they were expected to portray themselves in public and what, in turn, their secret lives might have looked like.

—*Michèle Faguet*