

MEP

MAISON
EUROPÉENNE
DE LA
PHOTOGRAPHIE

Press pack



Boris Mikhailov

Ukrainian Diary

07.09.2022 – 15.01.2023

Studio

Elsa & Johanna

The Timeless Story of Moormerland

07.09.2022 – 06.11.2022

Antony Cairns

PXL CTY

11.11.2022 – 15.01.2023

President: Jean-François Dubos

Director: Simon Baker

Institutional partner



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The MEP would like to thank the Collector's Circle of the MEP and the Friend's Association of the MEP for their continued support.

The next season at MEP is dedicated to the first major retrospective in France, and indeed the most significant internationally for many years, of the Ukrainian artist Boris Mikhailov. Although this project has been scheduled for some time, the delays and closures effected by the Covid-19 pandemic mean that exhibition will take place against the backdrop of a war in Ukraine that few thought possible in the twenty-first century. Given the level of international consensus over the need to support both the Ukrainian people in their homeland, and its threatened cultural sector both at home and abroad, the MEP is proud to exhibit Mikhailov in Paris at this time. It is, however, inevitably with sadness as well that the MEP celebrates his work and his achievements, in the knowledge that Boris and Vita Mikhailov, whose native Kharkiv has been devastated by the conflict, have an emotional and political relationship to their subjects that has, like the country itself, been permanently and irrevocably altered. Mikhailov remains one of the greatest and most celebrated photographic artists of his generation, and the exhibition will bring together works from international collections around the world (including Tate in London, and the Pinault collection here in Paris), signifying his central place in contemporary photographic culture. Working equally between documentary, performative and conceptual practices, Mikhailov's 'diaries' of life in Ukraine both before and after the fall of the Soviet regime remind us of the rich history and endless resilience of the Ukrainian people. The exhibition celebrates the lives of the people who continue to show us the meaning of survival and triumph over adversity through the eyes of one of their most sensitive and original witnesses. To accompany this major event the MEP has invited three emerging artists to exhibit in the Studio, drawing out different themes from Mikhailov's work: Elsa and Johanna work with performance and the logic of family albums, while Antony Cairns reworks and hand-colours images of contemporary cities in photography and film.

Simon Baker
Director of the MEP

Cover image
From the series "Case History", 1997-98

Chromogenic print,
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn
Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris



Galleries +2 +3

Curator:
Laurie Hurwitz

The MEP very warmly thanks Boris et Vita Mikhailov, as well as the Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris, for their invaluable help in realising this exhibition. Our gratitude also goes to the collections, institutional or private, who generously lent works to the exhibition.

From the series "Red", 1968-75

Digital chromogenic print, 45,5 x 30,5cm

© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

Tate: Purchased with assistance from the Art Fund (with a contribution from the Wolfson Foundation) and Konstantin Grigorishin, 2011.

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Boris Mikhailov

Ukrainian Diary

07.09.2022 – 15.01.2023

The exhibition

The MEP is proud to present the most important retrospective to date devoted to the Ukrainian artist Boris Mikhailov (born in 1938 in Kharkiv). Today considered one of the most influential contemporary artists from Eastern Europe, he has been developing a body of experimental photographic work exploring social and political subjects for more than fifty years.

From the series "Yesterday's Sandwich", 1966-68.

Chromogenic print, 30 x 45cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.



Boris Mikhailov's pioneering practice encompasses documentary photography, conceptual work, painting and performance. Since the 1960s, he has been creating a haunting record of the tumultuous changes in Ukraine that accompanied the collapse of the Soviet Union and the disastrous consequences of its dissolution. Conceived in close collaboration with the artist, the exhibition brings together more than 800 images that draw on more than twenty of his most important series, up to his most recent work.

Mikhailov has constructed his own distinct artistic language in series that vary enormously in terms of technique, format and approach. In an extraordinarily rich body of work that defies categorisation, he challenges visual codes, and uses documentary photography to conceptual ends. Combining numerous working methods, he alternately creates a dialogue between photography and text as well as between the images themselves, in superimpositions and diptychs and with blur, cropping or hand-colouring, giving them a feeling of irony, poetry or nostalgia.

The series produced while Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union deconstruct propaganda images and question collective memory, and reflect the societal contradictions that existed at the time. In "Yesterday's Sandwich", starting in 1965, the artist shows a dual reality, ambiguous and poetic, juxtaposing beauty and ugliness. In "Red" (1968-75), he underlines the omnipresence of the colour red, evoking the pervasive presence of the communist regime and the way it introduced itself into individual consciousness and collective memory. The series "Luriki" (1971-1985) and "Sots Art" (1975-1986) are a cynical reflection on the way propaganda images artificially idealise reality. The underside of the proselytised utopia is also revealed in "Salt Lake" (1986), images of bathers taken clandestinely on the shore of a lake in southern Ukraine.

Boris Mikhailov also frequently uses humour as a weapon, a means of resistance to oppression and of potential emancipation. In provocative self-portraits, he uses self-deprecation and irony in series such as "Crimean Snobbism" (1982), "I am not I" (1992), "National Hero" (1992) and "If I were German" (1994), rather than making a more frontal critique of society.

Other series realised during and after the collapse of the USSR bear witness to the failure of both communism and capitalism in Ukraine and shed light on the roots of war, from "By the ground" (1991) and "At Dusk" (1993) to "Case History" (1997-1998), "Tea, Coffee, Cappuccino" (2000-2010) and "The Theater of War, Second Act, Time Out" (2013). The iconic series "Case History" depicts a devastating portrayal of the disenfranchised in Kharkiv, left homeless by the new capitalist society; while "The Theater of War" powerfully documents the occupation of Maidan Nezalezhnosti, the central square in Kyiv, during violent protests that are inextricably linked to the current conflict.

Through his uncompromising treatment of controversial subjects, Boris Mikhailov demonstrates the subversive power of art. For more than half a century, he has been bearing witness to the grip of the Soviet system on his country, constructing a complex and powerful photographic narrative of Ukraine's contemporary history that in the light of current events, is all the more poignant and enlightening.

Exhibition overview

The exhibition gathers more than twenty series, most being shown in France for the first time, in loaned works from major institutions and from the artist's personal collection. From projected images and large-scale installations to small-format vintage prints or artist's books in display cases, the hanging reflects his indefatigable investigations of photographic techniques and styles as well as his frequent oscillation between conceptual and documentary work as he explores the shifting landscape of his native Ukraine.

The exhibition is curated by Laurie Hurwitz in collaboration with Boris and Vita Mikhailov.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue in French and English published by Morel Books, London, with an introduction by Simon Baker, director of the MEP.

In conjunction with the exhibition at the MEP, Boris Mikhailov's video installation "Yesterday's Sandwich" will be shown at the Festival Images Vevey in Switzerland from 3 to 25 September 2022. The Pinault Collection will also present several works from the "At Dusk" series from 14 October 2022 to January 2023 at the Bourse de Commerce in Paris.

From the series "Red", 1968-75

Digital chromogenic print, 45,5 x 30,5cm

© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

Tate: Purchased with assistance from the Art Fund (with a contribution from the Wolfson Foundation) and Konstantin Grigorishin, 2011.



Reality, aesthetic innovations and the dissolution of the USSR

The first half of the exhibition introduces a number of the artist's most important aesthetic innovations from the mid-1960s to the early 1990s – black-and-white documentary, conceptual work, superimpositions of slides, hand-colouring prints, combinations of text and image, "bad" photography – in an experimental visual language that is poetic, playful and uncompromising. At certain moments, the order of the works is non-chronological, in order to highlight connections or contrasts between the series.



Luriki, 1971 - 1985

Starting in the late 1960s, Mikhailov worked as a commercial photographer and earned extra money enlarging, retouching and hand-colouring family snapshots of weddings or newborns, or of someone lost during the war.

In what is considered the first use of found material in contemporary Soviet photography, Mikhailov appropriated the photos in order to conceptualise this technique and create ironic works of art. Often using kitsch colours, he made them more "beautiful" while mocking the way Soviet propaganda glorified mundane events.

From the series "Luriki"
(Coloured Soviet Portrait), 1971-85.

Hand-coloured black and white photography, 81 x 61cm
© Boris Mikhailov. Collection Pinault.
Courtesy Guido Costa Projects, Orlando Photo

Sots Art, 1975-86

The title "Sots Art" refers to a movement created in 1972 by the Moscow-born duo Vitally Komar and Alexander Melamid, who deconstructed Socialist Realism and combined it with elements of Western Pop art. Boris Mikhailov took photographs depicting sanctioned socialist imagery (parades, students in military training, athletic youth...), then subverted them using garish colours that reflect his disillusionment with false Soviet ideals.

Yesterday's Sandwich, late 1960s- late 1970s

While developing colour slide film, the artist nonchalantly threw it on the bed and two slides accidentally stuck together "like a sandwich," he says. "Suddenly, I saw a totally new, metaphoric image". He began randomly exploring combinations in what he called "programmed accidentality" to create surreal, highly poetic images that act as a metaphor for the duality of Soviet life, between the idealised images imposed by those in power and the drab reality.

"Yesterday's Sandwich" fuses opposites or unrelated images as a way of introducing forbidden imagery, conflating beauty and the grotesque, and visualising the world of memory and the collective unconscious in a visual language not unrelated to the cinema of Andrei Tarkovsky. "I made these compositions at a time when, given the scarcity of real news, everyone was on the lookout for the smallest piece of new information, hoping to uncover a secret or read between the lines. Encryption was the only way to explore forbidden subjects such as politics, religion, nudity", Mikhailov explains.

The MEP exhibition presents the work in a large-scale projection set to Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon*, which for the artist explores the "exaggeration of beauty" and "a paradise lost", along with individual prints.

"A photographer's task is to always find this subtle and vague border between the permitted and the prohibited. This border is constantly changing, like life itself."

From the series "Yesterday's Sandwich",
1966-68.

Chromogenic print, 30 x 45cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.



Black Archive, 1968-1979

Small-format black-and-white vintage prints, "Black Archive" documents everyday life in Kharkiv, often revealing the disparity between outside and inside. In the public space, images taken clandestinely (at the time, anyone making photos on the street could be taken for a spy, and Mikhailov's studio was frequently searched by the KGB) capture solitary pedestrians, often from behind and at odd angles, while in contrast, the private sphere is seen as a space of liberty, as in joyful shots of naked woman proudly showing off their curves.

The series introduces another of Boris Mikhailov's concept of "bad" photography: unlike his fellow photographers, who sought technical perfection, his prints were deliberately low-contrast, blurry, full of visible flaws, on poor-quality paper. While it was quite difficult to procure high-quality Soviet-made film, paper or chemicals, these defects more importantly express Mikhailov's very personal idea of beauty. They were also a way of subverting the glorified imagery of social realism; he felt glossy, impeccably crafted photographs could never reflect the hardships of the life he saw around him.



"By adding something previously unacceptable to my photos, I was violating the canons of Soviet photography: I was shooting allegedly wrong things in an allegedly wrong way..."

From the series "Black Archive",
1968-1979

Black-and-white print, 24 x 18cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie
Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.



Dance, 1978

"Dance" captures light-hearted moments of open-air dancing in Kharkiv. These scenes reflecting Mikhailov's interest in photographing very ordinary subjects and anti-heroes, "some sort of general uniqueness, a group of people that could easily be from anywhere". In many images, women dance together as if preparing subconsciously for war, when the men would be sent away again.

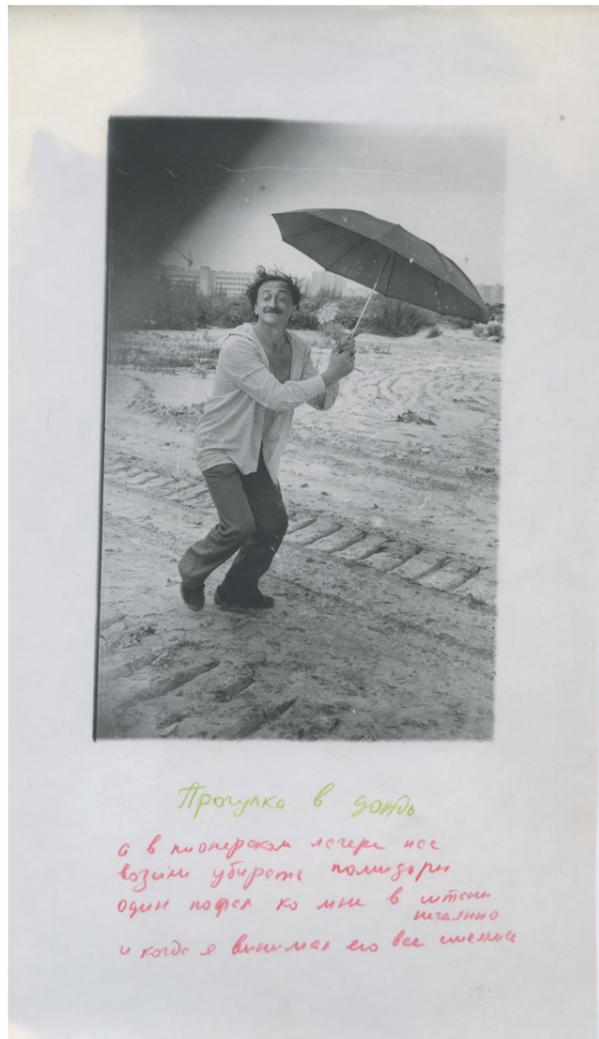
"As an unofficial photographer, I discover, I observe, I clandestinely stalk."

From the series "Dance", 1978

Gelatin silver print, image 16,2 x 24,5 cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie
Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.

Series of Four, early 1980s

In "Series of Four" Boris Mikhailov printed four small-format, black-and-white pictures on the same sheet, as if creating a single image. Once again an accident, here due to a technical constraint – a shortage of photographic paper – is conceptualised. Multiple viewpoints become a metaphor for a complex reality, an ambiguous, fragmented view of a world in constant flux, one that invites viewers to look for connections between them. Taken in the suburbs of Kharkiv, these "bad" images, poorly aligned and full of imperfections, depict a series of non-events.



Прогулка в зонде

а в монументе негде нас
 возили убирати полизаторы
 один пошел ко мне в штыки
 и когда я вынимал его все штыки

Viscosity, 1982

Combining text and image in a conceptual way, Mikhailov created a new kind of artist's book, one that would have an enormous influence on his peers and on generations of younger artists.

Mikhailov carelessly pasted his photographs onto pieces of paper, then scribbled thoughts – banal, poetic or philosophical – in the margins. His fragmentary thoughts were not meant as captions, nor as an interpretation or elucidation of the photos, and did not even necessarily relate to them; they were also meant to be as important as the images and to inspire unexpected associations.

"Viscosity" for Mikhailov talks about a period he calls *viscous*, "at the threshold of something unknown... no catharsis nor nostalgia – only frozen day-to-dayness". In this time of "deep political stagnation", he said "nothing is happening — nothing at all is interesting... There was a kind of certainty that society was at the threshold of something unknown, something everyone was anticipating".

From the series "Viscosity", 1982

Gelatin silver with hand-coloring and handwritten texts
 © Boris Mikhailov. VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Private collection.

Unfinished Dissertation, 1984

On the back of each yellowed page of a tattered university thesis found in the bin, Mikhailov pasted in two messily printed, black-and-white photographs of insignificant moments, often taken just a few moments apart, then jotted down his thoughts on art and life in the margins. Totally subjective (as its subtitle, "discussions with oneself", suggests) and bereft of any scientific value, in this project, in which he says the "text gives new life to boring pictures", Mikhailov puts forth his own "dissertation" about a new aesthetic.

Red, 1965-1978

Bridging documentary and conceptual art, the "Red" series brings together 84 colour photographs taken in Kharkiv between 1968 and 1975. All contain the colour red – a powerful symbol of the revolution and the Soviet empire – either in patriotic objects (a flag, a billboard, a military parade) or mundane details (a tomato, a garage door, painted toenails, a headscarf). For the artist, together they showed the extent to which everyday life was permeated by communist ideology.

Printed in small format and left unframed, the photographs are hung together in a loose, pseudo-organised grid several meters long, in random order. Drawing visitors into a disjointed vision made up of small, disparate moments, this immersive installation invites viewers to become active participants in the work.

"The word 'red' in Russian contains the root of the word for beauty. It also means the Revolution and evokes blood and the red flag. Everyone associates red with Communism. Maybe that's enough. But few people know that red suffused all our lives, at all levels."

From the series "Red", 1968-75

Digital chromogenic print, 30,5 x 45,5 cm
 © Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.
 Tate: Purchased with assistance from the Art Fund (with a contribution from the Wolfson Foundation) and Konstantin Grigorishin 2011.



Performance, social documentary and the roots of war



By the Ground, 1991

In two seminal series created before and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Mikhailov wandered the streets with a Russian-made swing-lens Horizon camera with a rotating lens that took in a 120-degree panoramic view. Holding the camera at hip height, the artist guides the viewer's gaze downward, as if to bring us closer to the experience of destitute figures queuing for food or lying in the street.

In "By the Ground", Mikhailov hand-painted the silver prints with sepia, evoking dirt and dust, while imbuing the pictures with a sense of nostalgia. The bleak street scenes reminded him of Maxim Gorki's play *The Lower Depths* (1901-1902) and the extreme poverty of Russia's lower class it depicts. The artist's protocol for installation accentuates this effect: hung low, in a single row, they force viewers to stoop down, symbolising the new, destabilising social order.

At Dusk, 1993

Taken shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, this series is toned with cobalt blue, the colour of twilight, the transition from day into night, alluding to Ukraine's transition to independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. For the artist, the colour blue is also linked to the artist's traumatic memories from World War II, when at age three he was awakened by the wailing of air-raid sirens in the middle of the night: "Blue for me is the colour of the blockade, hunger and the war... I can still remember the bombings, the howling sirens and the searchlights in the wonderful, dark-blue sky..."

A related work, "Green", a monumental triptych of hand-coloured silver prints, shows a world falling apart: an abandoned factory, surrounded by an overgrown landscape with a figure attempting to reactivate a rusty tractor.

"Everything fell, collapsed, died: both the environment and human beings. Space was destroyed, people fell to the ground... I tried to express this photographically, in sepia-toned, aged panoramic images."

From the series "At Dusk", 1993

Chromogenic print, 66 x 132,9 cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.

The second part of the exhibition introduces Mikhailov's performative work. We see him using irreverence and humour as tools for corrosive social criticism, for revealing our fragility and the lies of Soviet propaganda – *mise en scène* reflects a world in which everyone seems to be playing a role. This part of the exhibition also includes Mikhailov's best known social photography, bridging documentary work and a conceptual approach, and evoking the failures and tensions that have since led to war.

I Am Not I, 1992

In provocative, dramatically-lit black-and-white images, the naked artist plays the role of anti-hero in burlesque, self-deprecating self-portraits that mock the traditional masculine stereotype idealised by the Soviet regime. At times recalling Buster Keaton or pantomime artist Marcel Marceau, he dons a curly black wig, brandishing a sword or artificial phallus or holding an enema bag; exposing his aging, vulnerable body, "trying on the icons of Western mass culture, like Rambo," he assumes pseudo-athletic or contemplative poses that call to mind works by Rodin or Caravaggio.

The images are presented here in a composition imagined by the artist especially for the MEP with vintage prints from his archives.

"In the Soviet Union, heroism had already been destroyed by ideology. So there could only be an anti-hero."

From the series "I am not I", 1992

Sepia silver print, 30 x 20cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.



National Hero, 1992

Dressed in Soviet military garb with Ukrainian insignia, Mikhailov creates a seemingly simple portrait of troubling ambiguity, in which the face's delicate beauty and the pink background challenge classic images of masculinity.

Crimean Snobbism, 1982

Mikhailov turned the camera on himself for the first time in tongue-in-cheek snapshots of his holidays with his wife Vita and their friends in Gursuf, a seaside resort on the Crimean Peninsula and a popular destination for Russian intellectuals in the 19th century. Sepia-toned images, like photos from another era, capture the carefree protagonists swimming, sunbathing on the rocks, spouting seawater, frolicking in the park or on the pier. But their idyllic vacation is also a game, "playing at being bourgeois"; on closer inspection, the poses feel forced, exaggerated, as if mimicking the luxurious and carefree lifestyle of the West that was inaccessible to Ukrainians at the time.



From the series "Crimean Snobbism", 1982.

Silver print, sepia tone, 20 x 15 cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.
Tate: Purchased with funds provided by the Russia and Eastern Europe Acquisitions Committee and the Photography Acquisitions Committee 2016

If I Were German, 1994

In the early 1990s, Mikhailov, his wife Vita founded a group called "Fast Reaction" with their artist friends Sergei Bratkov and Sergei Solonski. In this controversial series, they engaged in darkly provocative, satirical role play, staging scenes inspired by interviews with Ukrainians who had witnessed the country's wartime occupation by the Germans during World War II. At times donning Nazi uniforms, the artists pose in tableaux vivants, some with captions quoting Goethe or Dürer, in scenarios that explore how they might have felt as either victim or oppressor, and probe difficult questions about guilt, accountability and shame: "What if we had been German? How would we have treated others? Who or what is the real enemy?"

Salt Lake, 1986

Mikhailov's large-format sepia prints of bathers were taken on the edge of a lake in Sloviansk, his father's native city, in the Donbass region of southern Ukraine, whose inhabitants, he was told, were convinced the warm, salty water had healing properties. He found a popular bathing spot where little suggested anything salubrious: a murky, heavily polluted industrial site surrounded by factories. Mikhailov's clandestine photographs of these scenes in which families enjoying their "freedom" with total indifference to their surroundings are both compassionate and scathing.

From the series "Salt Lake", 1986

Chromogenic print toned sepia, 75,5 x 104,5cm © Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.



Promzona, 2011

A guest at the first Kyiv Biennale, Mikhailov returned to abandoned industrial sites in Donetsk, in the Donbass region, long famous as a center for mining, steel production and machine manufacturing, largely left behind by socio-economic transformations. The former engineer explores a constructivist aesthetic in compositions that at times echo works by Rodchenko, with their sharp, unusual camera angles and rigid geometry. "For me, these pictures are an anthem to the technologies of a past age", says the artist.

Tea, Coffee, Cappuccino, 2000–2010

In a continuation of "By the Ground", "At Dusk" and "Case History", the artist photographs Kharkiv nearly two decades after the fall of the USSR, in an independent Ukraine that has adopted the Western capitalist model. Colourful advertisements and billboards, McDonald's, an ocean of cheap plastic objects and tote bags, anonymous figures waiting at tram stops, and the cries of street vendors who once sold only tea or coffee, but now propose cappuccino as well – they capture a moment of transition, in between east and west, past and present, and a new era of "doing business" in which "anything can be bought and sold, even children", says Mikhailov.

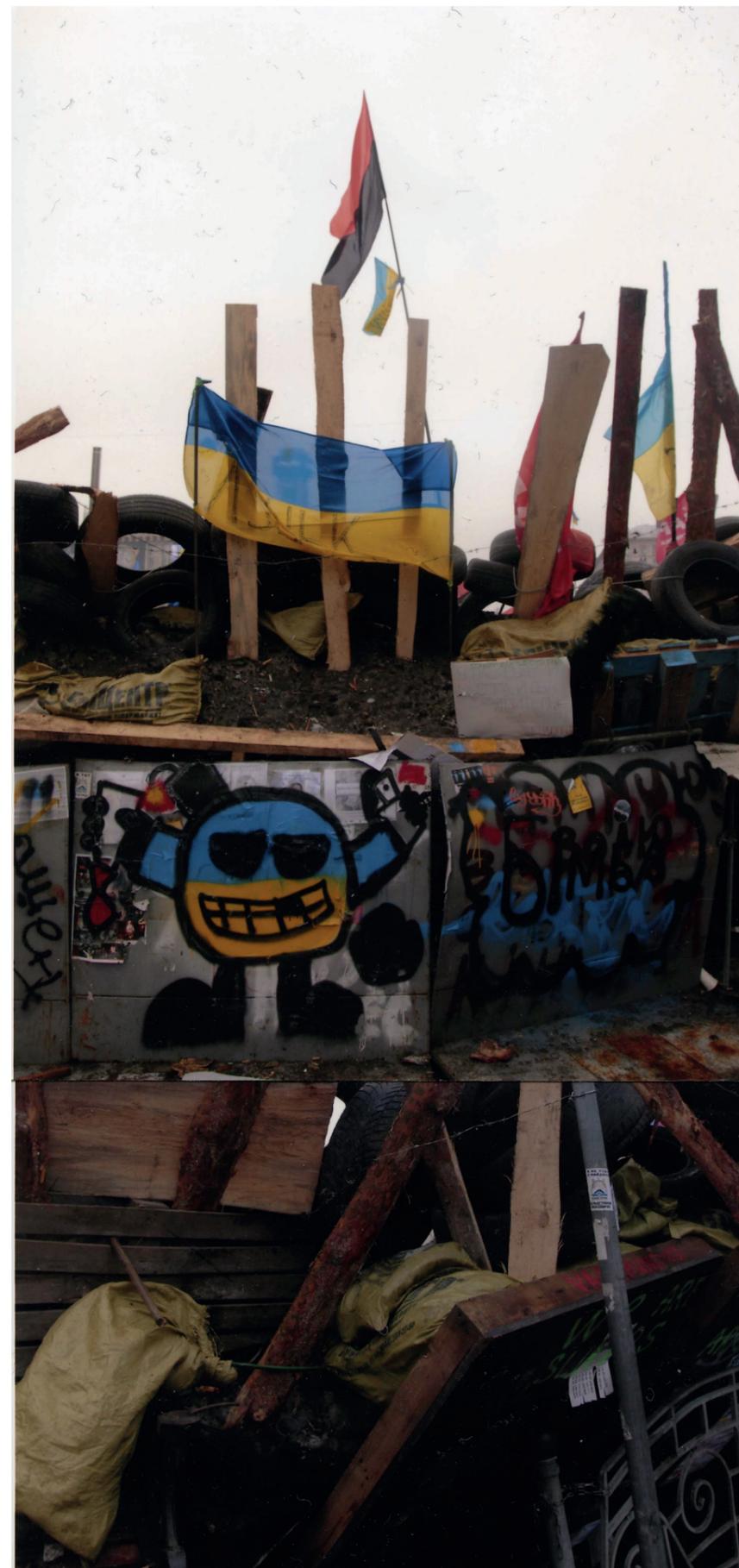
Part of "Tea, Coffee, Cappuccino" was first presented in the Ukrainian Pavilion at the 2007 Venice Biennale.



"Only when one sees misery in a picture, does one begin to notice it in the street."

From the series "Tea, Coffee, Cappuccino", 2000 - 2010

Chromogenic print, 25,5 x 80 cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.



The Theater of War, Second Act, Time Out, 2013

In late December 2013, Boris Mikhailov and his wife Vita documented those who had pitched their tents a few weeks earlier on the central square in Kyiv, Maidan Nezalezhnosti, to protest the Ukrainian government's sudden decision not to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union – a key moment in the ongoing tensions that recently led to war. In photographs of the protestors' everyday life behind the barricades, their faces express a palpable sense of anxiety. Some of the images recall 19th-century Russian realist paintings. "Emotions were so high", the artist explains, "that at first glance, the scenes almost felt as if they had been staged".

From the series "The Theater of War, Second Act, Time Out", 2013

Chromogenic print © Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.

Case History, 1997-1998

After spending a year in Berlin on a stipend from DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service), Mikhailov returned to Kharkiv and saw that the city had changed drastically post-communism. A new ruling elite of millionaires had emerged, but a considerable part of the population had been plunged into poverty, and the number of homeless people, or bomzhes, had swollen dramatically.

A series of some 400 raw, difficult, deeply empathetic portraits, "Case History" is Mikhailov's requiem; it documents the deeply troubling situation of this disenfranchised community. Some embrace in poignant moments of tenderness or gesticulate drunkenly; others pose in compositions that allude to scenes in paintings by Leonardo da Vinci or Rembrandt or evoke actors in a passion play; many openly exhibit their wounded bodies for the camera.



From the series "Case History", 1997-98

Chromogenic print, 172 x 119cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn
Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris

While these photographs may look like traditional photojournalism (the title even evokes the clinical detachment of a medical history), they also distance themselves from this genre – Mikhailov and his wife Vita paid their subjects, often taking them home to feed them and give them baths, in exchange for posing. Mikhailov intentionally subverted the codes of photojournalism, exploring the limits of objective representation. While this approach was controversial and perceived by some as unethical, he argued that his often theatrical shots might help draw attention to the degradation and suffering of his subjects.

For this exhibition, the artist proposed to show a selection of large-format works along with small-scale prints of the series and medium-format works specially created by the artist for the MEP collection.

Temptation of Death, 2017-2019

This elegiac installation, composed of more than 150 diptychs, was awarded Shevchenko National Prize, the first official recognition of Mikhailov's work in Ukraine in 2021.

The project was inspired by an unfinished building for a working crematorium in Kyiv, where construction, begun in 1968, was fraught with conflict. Sensitive to the fact that the subject of cremation could provoke memories of the mass killing of Ukrainian Jews during World War II, the architects proposed a modernist design that also included a park and a huge bas-relief, "The Wall of Remembrance". But after more than ten years of work, the government buried the wall under a layer of concrete, calling it inconsistent with the "principles of socialist realism".

Boris Mikhailov juxtaposed new photographs of the structure with images made throughout his career in a dialogue about past and present, raising questions about transformation, vulnerability and mortality.

Diary, 1973-2016

In 2016, Boris Mikhailov published "Diary", bringing together five decades of his work presented as an intimate scrapbook. "Diary" was not conceived in a retrospective manner; and there is no obvious historical narrative or linear progression. The selection of images, many of which are outtakes from his different series, range from political scenes to staged photos, landscapes, self-portraits and erotic images, often soiled and blemished by scratches, tears, blotches and hand-colouring.

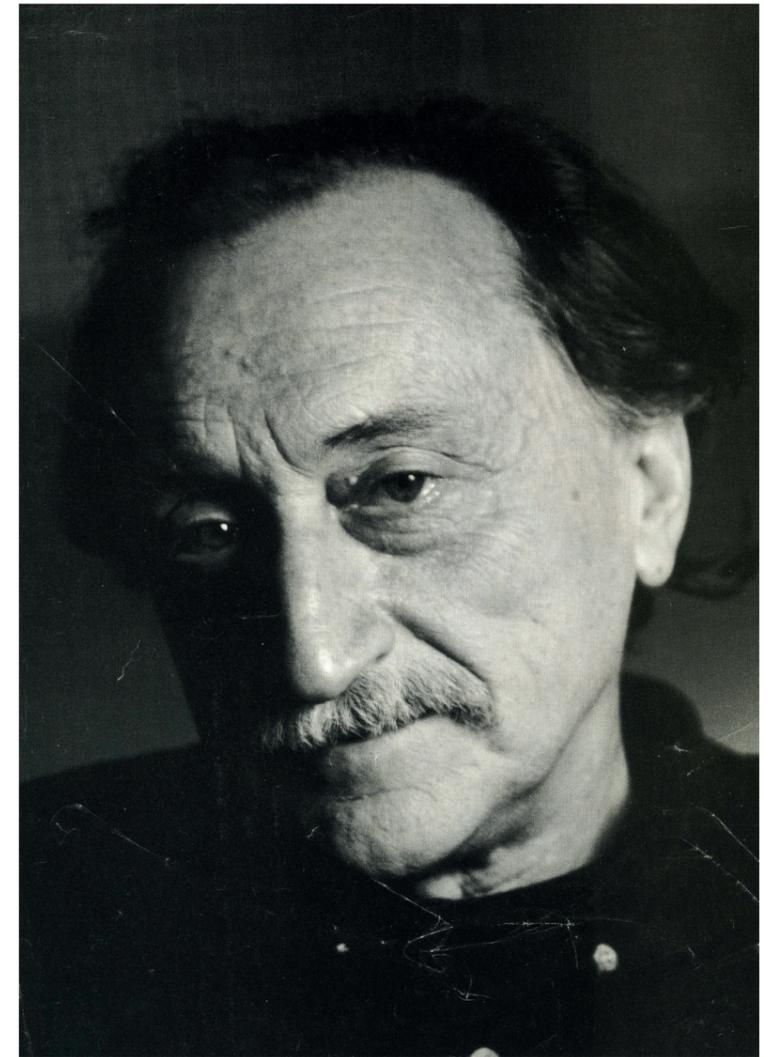


From the series "Diary", 1973-2016

Black-and-white print with hand colouring, 29,7 x 21cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn
Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris

In work often marked by irony and self-mockery, Boris Mikhailov plays with a wide range of everyday and propaganda imagery to bear witness, in uncompromising terms, to both the harsh social realities and absurdities of his time. He combines humour and tragedy, consistently defending a wild and energetic artistic freedom as both a means of resistance to oppression and potential emancipation. For the artist, even the most serious subjects have a deep comedy, and every joke is deadly serious.

The interplay of these haunting images — by turns beautiful and ugly, disturbing and poignant, brutal and tender — gives rise to a compelling and unique view of history that resonates today more than ever before.



Boris Mikhailov

© Nobuyoshi Araki

Boris Mikhailov a dissident artist

A key figure of the Kharkiv School of Photography (KSOP)

In 1971, Boris Mikhailov was one of eight photographers who established the Vremya group in Kharkiv, an experimental non-conformist art collective that is considered the core of the Kharkiv School of Photography. The group's members (Boris Mikhailov, Evgeniy Pavlov, Jury Rupin, Anatoliy Makiyenko, Oleg Malyovany, Oleksandr Sitnichenko, Oleksandr Suprun, and Gennadiy Tubalev), thus formalised an underground movement sparked in an informal photo club in the 1960s, to create a visual tool for cultural resistance. Although the name Vremya (Time) sounds banal, it was a call for revolution – a statement of defiance against a painful system from the past. They called their artistic objective the "blow theory", to produce works whose impact would strike the viewer hard and fast. Boris Mikhailov, who emerged as their informal leader, was the driving force for much of their shared aesthetic.

Vremya developed a diverse but recognizable photographic language that frequently depicted nudes and an unseemly Soviet reality. Persecuted by the party's ideological watchdogs, routinely searched by the KGB, its only public exhibition of their works, held in Kharkiv in 1983, shut down on opening day, the Vremya collective dissolved in the 1980s. The group nevertheless formed the basis for the school established a few years later.

The group's influence was far-reaching and continues to be deeply felt throughout Ukraine; a second and third wave of younger artists are still inspired by their ideas today. Boris Mikhailov continues to be a beloved mentor for many of them. In 2018, the Museum of Kharkiv School of Photography was also founded through the initiative of Sergiy Lebedynskyy, a member of the Shilo Group, in close collaboration with Boris and Vita Mikhailov.

Biography

Born in 1938 in Kharkiv, Ukraine, and trained as an engineer, Boris Mikhailov is a self-taught photographer. Early in his career, he was given a camera in order to document the state-owned factory where he was employed; he used it to take nude photographs of his wife. He developed them in the factory's laboratory, and was fired after they were found by KGB agents.

Determined to take up the camera full-time, he eked out a living making photographs on the black market, in parallel creating a body of experimental personal work in reaction to the idealised images of Soviet life. He showed his work in "dissident kitchens", clandestine exhibitions organised among friends in private flats, and became an active member of a collective of non-conformist photographers that would later become the core of the Kharkiv School of Photography.

At the time, taking images of the naked body or unflattering images of daily life, of people who were poor, ill, or in distress, was utterly taboo. Artists whose work did not conform to the official USSR aesthetic risked arrest, interrogation, even imprisonment. Under constant surveillance, Mikhailov was frequently harassed, his cameras broken and his rolls of film destroyed.

Today seen as one of the most important figures on the international art scene, he has received many prestigious awards, among them the 2015 Goslar Kaiserring Award, the Citibank Private Bank Photography Prize (now the Deutsche Börse Photography Foundation Award) in 2001 and the Hasselblad Award in 2000. He represented Ukraine at the Venice Biennale in 2007 and again in 2017.

His work has been exhibited in major international venues, including the Tate Modern in London, MoMA in New York, and more recently, the Berlinische Galerie and C/O Berlin in Berlin, the Pinchuk Art Center in Kyiv, the Sprengel Museum in Hannover and the Staatliche Kunsthalle in Baden Baden.

Boris Mikhailov is represented in Paris by the Suzanne Tarasiève Gallery. He also shows his work at the Sprovieri Gallery in London, Guido Costa Projects in Turin, Barbara Gross in Munich and Galerie Barbara Weiss in Berlin.

His work is currently on display in the exhibition *This is Ukraine: Defending Freedom* at the Scuola Grande della Misericordia in Venice, as part of the official program accompanying the Venice Biennale.

Press images

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From the series "Luriki" (Coloured Soviet Portrait), 1971-85. Hand-coloured gelatin silver print, 81 x 61cm
© Boris Mikhailov. Collection Pinault.
Courtesy Guido Costa Projects, Orlando Photo

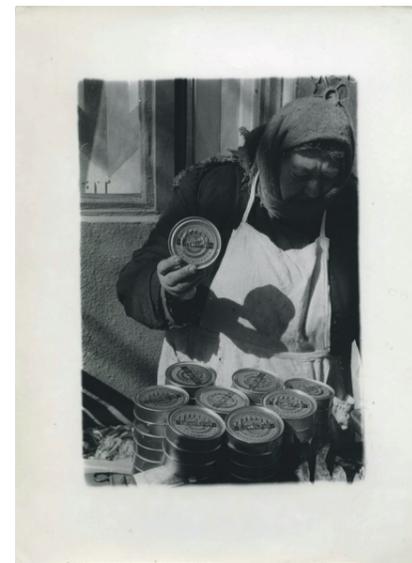
From the series "Luriki" (Coloured Soviet Portrait), 1971-85. Hand-coloured gelatin silver print, 61 x 81 cm
© Boris Mikhailov. Collection Pinault.
Courtesy Guido Costa Projects, Orlando Photo



From the series "Yesterday's Sandwich", 1966-68. Chromogenic print, 30 x 45cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.



From the series "Yesterday's Sandwich", 1966-68. Chromogenic print, 30 x 45cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.



From the series "Black Archive", 1968-79. Black-and-white print, 24 x 18 cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.



From the series "Black Archive", 1968-79. Black-and-white print, 24 x 18 cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.



From the series "Viscosity", 1982. Gelatin silver with hand-coloring and handwritten texts
© Boris Mikhailov. VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Private collection.



From the series "Dance", 1978. Gelatin silver print, image 16,2 x 24,5 cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.



From the series "Dance", 1978. Gelatin silver print, image 16,2 x 24,5 cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.



From the series "Red", 1968-75. Digital chromogenic print, 45,5 x 30,5cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Tate: Purchased with assistance from the Art Fund (with a contribution from the Wolfson Foundation) and Konstantin Grigorishin 2011



From the series "Red", 1968-75. Digital chromogenic print, 45,5 x 30,5cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Tate: Purchased with assistance from the Art Fund (with a contribution from the Wolfson Foundation) and Konstantin Grigorishin 2011



From the series "Red", 1968-75. Digital chromogenic print, 30,5 x 45,5 cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Tate: Purchased with assistance from the Art Fund (with a contribution from the Wolfson Foundation) and Konstantin Grigorishin 2011



From the series "By the Ground", 1991
Gelatin silver print, toned sepia, 11,5 x 29,5 cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.



From the series "National Hero", 1991
Chromogenic print, 120 x 81cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.
Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.



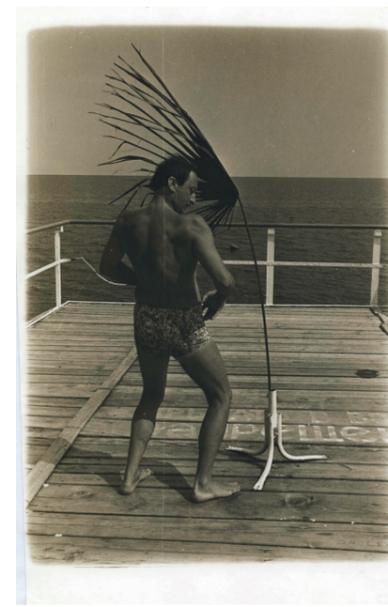
From the series "I am not I", 1992
Sepia silver print, 30 x 20 cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.
Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.



From the series "Crimean Snobbism", 1982. Gelatin silver print, toned sepia, 15 x 20 cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.
Tate: Purchased with funds provided by the Russia and Eastern Europe Acquisitions Committee and the Photography Acquisitions Committee 2016



From the series "At Dusk", 1993. Chromogenic print, 66 x 132,9 cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.



From the series "Crimean Snobbism", 1982. Gelatin silver print, toned sepia, 20 x 15 cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.
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From the series "At Dusk", 1993. Chromogenic print, 66 x 132,9 cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.



From the series "Salt Lake", 1986
Chromogenic print toned sepia, 75,5 x 104,5cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.



From the series "Salt Lake", 1986
Chromogenic print toned sepia, 75,5 x 104,5cm
© Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.



From the series "Tea, Coffee, Cappuccino", 2000–2010
 Chromogenic print, 25,5 x 80 cm © Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.



From the series "The Theater of War, Second Act, Time Out", 2013
 Chromogenic print, 130 x 180cm
 © Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.



From the series "The Theater of War, Second Act, Time Out", 2013
 Chromogenic print
 © Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.



From the series "Tea, Coffee, Cappuccino", 2000–2010
 Chromogenic print, 25,5 x 80 cm © Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.



From the series "The Theater of War, Second Act, Time Out", 2013
 Chromogenic print © Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris.



From the series "Case History", 1997-98
 Chromogenic print, 172 x 119cm
 © Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris



From the series "Case History", 1997-98
 Chromogenic print
 © Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris



From the series "Diary", 1973-2016
 Black-and-white print with hand
 colouring, 29,5 x 21cm
 © Boris Mikhailov, VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn. Courtesy Galerie Suzanne Tarasiève, Paris

The MEP supports young artists

In parallel with the four-month-long programme in the Galleries (on floors +2 and +3) presenting major exhibitions and work by established artists, the Studio (on level +1) is organized according to a shorter timetable, offering emerging artists the opportunity to exhibit their work for the first time in an institutional setting in France.

Curator:

Victoria Aresheva
On a proposition by Manon Demurger

The exhibition is organized with the support of Christian Dior Parfums.

#Elsa&Johanna
#StudioMEP



Elsa & Johanna

The Timeless Story of Moormerland

07.09.2022 – 06.11.2022

Exhibition

Elsa & Johanna, a duo of French photographers, open the autumn Season in the MEP Studio with a presentation of their most recent project "The Timeless Story of Moormerland."

The series will be installed in a specially conceived installation, both as a projection of 160 analogue slides, and as traditional photographic prints. Over a period of four weeks in May 2021, Elsa and Johanna were based temporarily in Northern Germany in several villages in and around Moormerland in Lower Saxony. The artists chose with care houses with a kind of 'outmoded charm' in which they stayed long enough to imagine and bring to life various characters; including sad young adolescents, fathers and housewives... The resulting photographs suggest the imaginary lives of the neighbourhood inhabitants through the strange, almost cinematic aesthetic that characterises the work of the duo. The recourse to auto-fiction, at the heart Elsa & Johanna's practice permits them to stage scenarios with characters freed from their own identities, and thereby to interrogate contemporary questions of individuality, as well as notions of self-representation and anonymity. These images, organised as though taken from family albums, mix posed portraits, spontaneous and accidental photographs, and fragments of interiors, proposing multiple and interrelated narratives of imaginary daily lives.

Elsa Parra (born in 1990) and Johanna Benainous (born in 1991) have worked together as Elsa & Johanna since 2014. Working between photography, video and performance, they both conceive of, and realise, stories in which they are the principal actors. Their work has been exhibited at the Salon de Montrouge (2016) at MAC VAL, Paris Photo, and at the Hyeres Festival (2019). In 2020 they were finalists in the Louis Roederer discovery prize at the Rencontres d'Arles. Their work is in the collections of the CNAP, The Acquisition Fund of Contemporary Art of the City of Paris, and the collection of the Societe Generale. In 2021 Elsa & Johanna held their first retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Karlsruhe, Germany. They live and work in Paris.

Press images

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The Black Eagle, from the series "The Timeless Story of Moormerland", 2008 © Elsa & Joanna



The Sound of the Bell Tower, from the series "The Timeless Story of Moormerland", 2008 © Elsa & Joanna



William, from the series "The Timeless Story of Moormerland", 2008 © Elsa & Joanna



A Girl's night Out, from the series "The Timeless Story of Moormerland", 2008 © Elsa & Joanna

The MEP supports young artists

In parallel with the four-month-long programme in the Galleries (on floors +2 and +3) presenting major exhibitions and work by established artists, the Studio (on level +1) is organized according to a shorter timetable, offering emerging artists the opportunity to exhibit their work for the first time in an institutional setting in France.

Curator:

Clothilde Morette

The exhibition is organized with the support of Christian Dior Parfums.

#AntonyCairns

#StudioMEP



Antony Cairns

PXL CTY

11.11.2022 – 15.01.2023

Exhibition

In the Studio, British artist Antony Cairns presents a new series of works taken from his larger project entitled "CTY". Fascinated by the idea of the metropolis, Cairns records major cities like London, Tokyo, Osaka and Las Vegas, both photographically and with video.

In his work the artist reflects on the urban landscape by using techniques and technologies usually considered obsolete such as PXL2000 video cameras, computer punch-cards, and COBOL codes. This recourse to processes and supports which date from many decades ago – which could be considered a long time given the relatively short history of the photographic medium – permit Cairns to rethink and rework individual images. In his practice, buildings, their facades and commercial centers seem to be surrounded or distorted by haloes of light that make them hard to 'read' as structures. To produce these images Cairns first takes a photograph or film, and then intervenes directly on the resulting images, as in the case of the hand-coloured prints included in the exhibition. The aesthetic of his work evokes the visual codes of science-fiction and futuristic writing. And if the human figure is often totally absent from his cityscapes, it is perhaps here that Cairns questions our relationship to the urban environment and the ways in which technology shaped our perceptions of it.

Antony Cairns (born in 1981) lives and works in London. His work has been presented at the Rencontres d'Arles in 2013, at the George Eastman House, New York in 2016 and at both Tate Modern and Festival Images Vevey in 2018. Cairns has published a number of artists books including LDN (2010), LPT (2012) and OCS (2016) as well as publishing CTY (2017) with Morel Books.

Press images

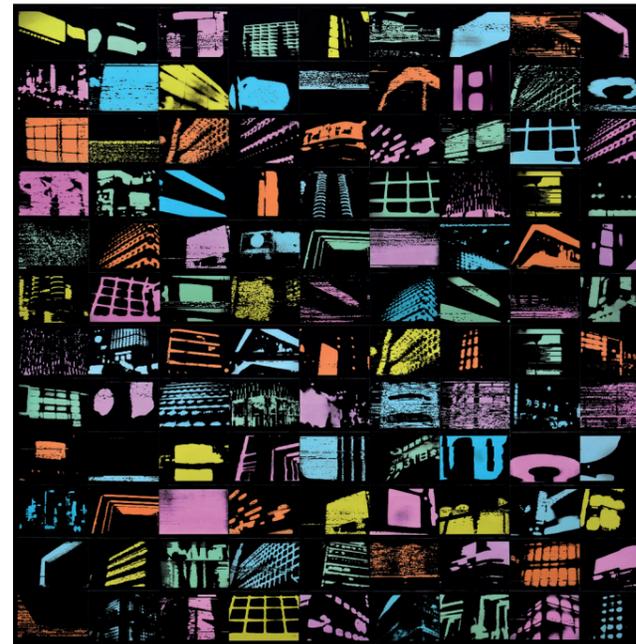
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CTY, 2017
© Antony Cairns



CTY, 2017
© Antony Cairns



CTY, 2017
© Antony Cairns



CTY, 2017
© Antony Cairns

Coming soon

The MEP will present the first retrospective in France devoted to Zanele Muholi, the internationally known South African photographer and activist whose work documents and celebrates the LGBTQIA+ community. This major event, which brings together more than 200 works and archival materials, covers the full breadth of Muholi's career to date and honours one of the most acclaimed photographers working today.

Born in 1972, Zanele Muholi describes themselves* as a "visual activist". Since the early 2000s, Muholi has documented and celebrated the lives of Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and intersex people in post-apartheid South Africa. While the country's 1996 constitution was the first in the world to outlaw discrimination based on sexual orientation, its LGBTQIA+ community remains a target for violence and prejudice to this day. Challenging dominant ideologies and representations related to the notion of gender, Muholi's photographs present them as fellow human beings bravely existing in the face of prejudice, intolerance and often violence. The exhibition retraces the steps of Muholi's artistic journey, bringing together several key series that tell collective as well as individual stories.

Challenging preconceived notions of deviance and victimhood, these powerful series explore themes of labour, racism, Eurocentrism and sexual politics. Zanele Muholi presents the participants in these photographs with compassion, dignity and courage in the face of ongoing discrimination, encouraging viewers to address their own misconceptions and to create a shared sense of understanding and solidarity.

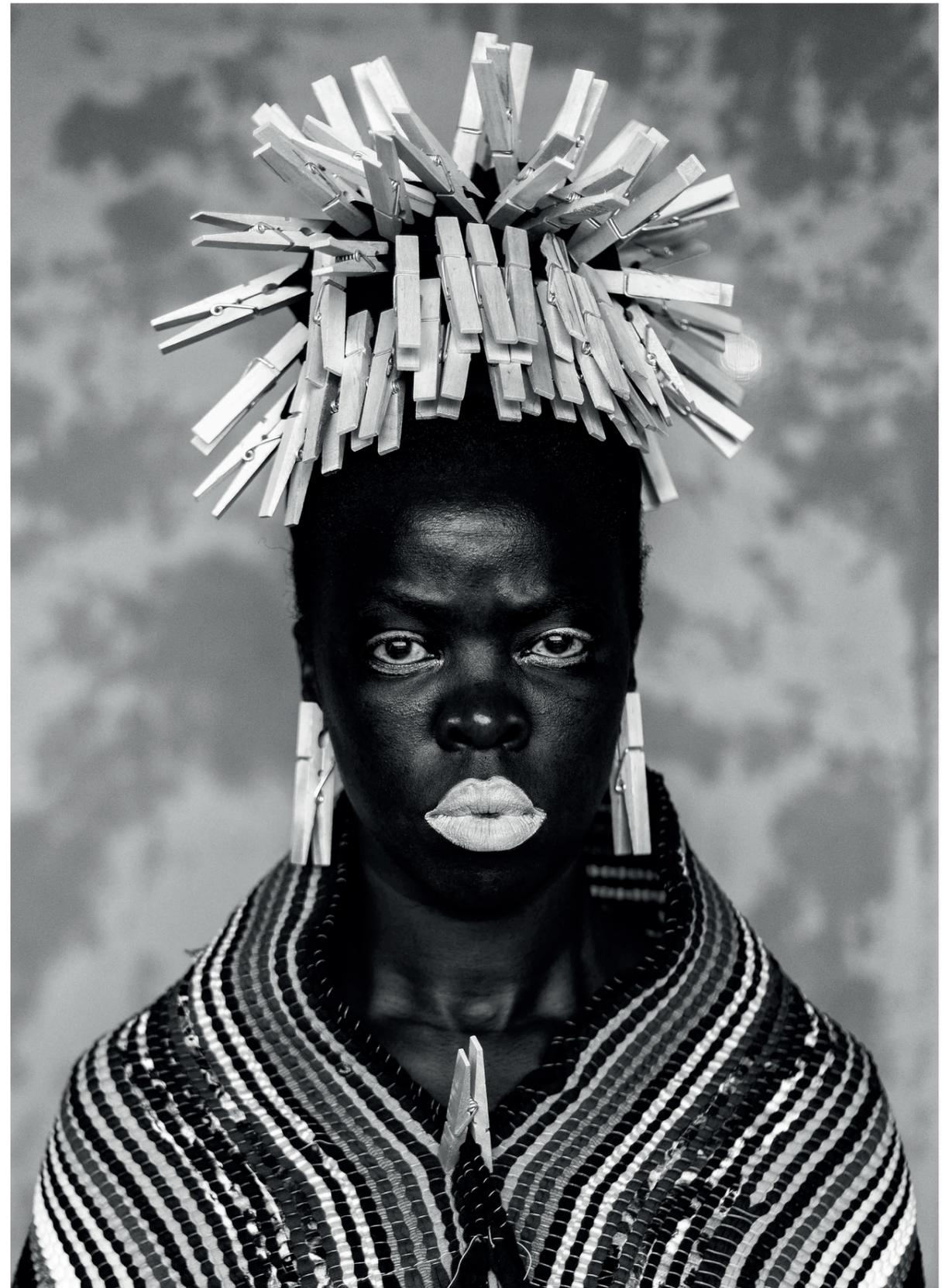
* Zanele Muholi identifies as non-binary and uses the pronouns they/them/their.

An exhibition organised by Tate Modern in collaboration with the MEP, Gropius Bau in Berlin, the Bildmuseet at the University of Umea and the IVAM in Valencia. It will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue and a programme of talks and events organised at the MEP.

Curators: Laurie Hurwitz for the MEP, Paris; Yasufumi Nakamori, Senior Curator, International Art, and Sarah Allen, Assistant Curator for Tate Modern, London.

Zanele Muholi
Bester I, Mayotte, 2015

Courtesy of the Artist and Stevenson, Cape Town/
Johannesburg and Yancey Richardson, New York
© Zanele Muholi



Useful information

☐ MEP

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+33 (0)1 44 78 75 00 – mep-fr.org
Metro: Saint-Paul (line 1) or Pont Marie (line 7)

Opening hours

Wednesday and Friday from 11 am to 8 pm
Thursday from 11 am to 10 pm
Saturday and Sunday from 10 am to 8 pm*
Ticket office open till 7:30 pm
Closed on Monday and Tuesday
* Only for MEP members on Sunday 10 am to 11 am

Admission fee

Full price: €10
Reduced price: €6
Pass MEP*: €40
Pass MEP* 18-30: €25
Pass MEP* Donor: €120
*Pass for two people for an entire year

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