International Herald Tribune

Behold the Anonymous Downtrodden

By KEN JOHNSON
Published: June 2, 2011

Boris Mikhailov's photographs of homeless people in Ukraine are not for the squeamish. They are hard to look at, hard to look away from and hard to forget. The 19 examples in "Case History" at the Museum of Modern Art portray people who are far from conventionally attractive in grungy rooms or in wintry outdoor sites, naked or pulling aside their clothes to expose parts of their bodies ordinarily hidden from view. An older woman bends over to reveal buttocks ravaged by a pimply red rash. A young nude woman with arms tightly wrapped around herself stands in an evidently freezing bathroom next to a filthy toilet.

At almost eight feet tall and over four feet wide, the grainy, oversized, unframed prints enhance the feeling of a hellish underworld and thrust its grossness at viewers, as if to rebuke casual art consumers for their complacency. If they picture people in unflattering light — making them objects of revulsion, even — it is not a reflection on them but on an inhumane society that allows people to fall into such substandard states and conditions. Mr. Mikhailov often paid his subjects and gave them warm meals in exchange for their services, which accounts for the feeling that they are consciously performing, not just for the camera but for a public audience, as players in an Artaud-like theater of cruelty.

To feel ambivalent about all this is part of the deal. There is a troubling asymmetry between the photographer and his subjects and between the abjection the photographs reveal and the comfortable situation in which we view them as works of art. Mr. Mikhailov is not your usual hit-and-run photojournalist out for the hot image, but his photographs nevertheless objectify their subjects and make them seem, if not less than human, then at least not like us. Yet he restores to them a certain vital agency that life has denied them.

Mr. Mikhailov began making photographs in the 1960s, and he was arrested and interrogated twice by the K.G.B. for processing his own supposedly subversive prints in the darkrooms of two factories for which he served as official photographer. In 1996, five years after the collapse

of the Soviet Union, he began making portraits of people disenfranchised and left homeless by the rise of a new capitalist oligarchy in his hometown, Kharkov, Ukraine, where he was born in 1938. He published 400 of them in his book “Case History,” from which the pieces here were selected.

Some have a mood of black comedy. A corpulent woman in a bedroom faces forward, hiking up her dress to display her sagging breasts. She has a glint in her eye and half a smile, as if she and the photographer were together in on a joke. A man has his shirt raised up to show a tattoo of Lenin on his upper chest; someone’s hands reach around to pinch his hairy nipples. A woman, fully dressed in grimy winter clothes, leans back in a chair outdoors in a snowy, woodsy setting. Her head is bandaged, and she has a black eye, but she wields a cigarette and looks back with cocky nonchalance.

Desperate loneliness is leavened by a certain companionability in pictures of couples. Two women on the younger side of middle age, one stripped down to her bra, look into each other’s eyes like lovers. Standing in snow, a middle-aged man has his arms around his female companion, his hand reaching down to palpate the flab near her exposed pubic area. The gesture suggests he is demonstrating an untreated physical ailment, a hernia perhaps. A long vertical scar runs down her distended abdomen. Both stare grimly back at the camera as if to say, “See what we have suffered.”

What does it mean to present images like these as art in a museum? In one respect, they carry on a tradition of picturing the downtrodden exemplified in photographs by countless artists from Walker Evans to Andres Serrano, who has made studio images of homeless people resembling the heroic portraits of American Indians by the 19th century photographer Edward S. Curtis. Works like those tell us that, whatever their outward appearances and circumstances, the poor have souls that are worthy of respect.

Mr. Mikhailov’s photographs are not so ennobling. They render their subjects as exotic and even demonic. Specimens in a Boschian freak show, they elicit sympathy, revulsion or amazement but not admiration or empathy. Because there are no titles or captions, you don’t know who the people are or anything about their lives. Maybe some were research scientists or university professors fired for not toeing party lines or for crossing paths with a ruthless plutocrat at the wrong place and time; maybe they were all rounded up from an insane asylum or an alcoholic detox center. The bear of a man holding up an axe in one hand — his blue uniform open to reveal his hirsute chest, his eyes glowing weirdly from photographic red eye — might be completely crazy.

All seem to belong to a tribe or extended family of outcasts. But “the homeless,” you might want to object, is not a homogeneous population. It includes alcoholics, drug addicts, criminals, prostitutes, con artists, people with mental illnesses and hard-working citizens going through rough patches. Mr. Mikhailov is not concerned with personal particulars. Under his direction the subjects are, above all, actors who function mainly as allegorical symbols. They are metonyms for the underbelly of society, and their challenging revelations of their own usually hidden body parts is a metaphor for the whole project of exposing what polite society would prefer to keep under wraps. To the extent that they appear everywhere around the world, including in New York City, they are universal signs of capitalism’s failure to care for the less fortunate.

In some ways Mr. Mikhailov thinks more like a painter than a photojournalist. His project compares to those of photographers like Jeff Wall and Philip-Lorca diCorcia, artists whose staged, socially provocative stories blur the line between documentary photography and painting.

In this show a set of four prints like a medieval church polyptych suggests an older religious context. In one of the middle images a young shirtless man leans far over with outstretched arms; he is held up at an angle by a woman bending over like a mother, wife or lover mourning his demise. Alluding to antique paintings representing Jesus' deposition from the cross, it resonates with the often brutal, grotesque and nearly hallucinogenic realism of artists like Hugo van der Goes and Matthias Grünewald.

Jesus preferred the company of outcasts. He said those with the weakest grip on social security had the best chance of enjoying ultimate spiritual rewards. He rebuked the rich and the self-satisfied pharisees for their investments in worldly gratifications. By invoking this background, Mr. Mikhailov implicitly, perhaps unconsciously, makes himself into a kind of modern Christ figure, wielding photography as a scourge for the powerful and a tool of salvation of the powerless. That is one reason why part of me wants to reject his work. It makes me feel manipulated, pushed into a moral corner and harassed. I dislike how he impresses people with few choices into his grotesque, allegorical puppet theater while maintaining his own godlike invisibility. Yet I can't deny the dramatic ferocity of the images, the aliveness of the people in them and the righteous indignation of the artist. I am reminded of Lars von Trier's cinematic outrages. I am torn by ambivalence, and that, I think, is a good thing.

A version of this review appeared in print on June 3, 2011, on page C21 of the New York edition with the headline: Behold the Anonymous Downtrodden.