

Black, white, gray

Titarenko's photos of St. Petersburg in new exhibit are eerily timeless and bleak

By **TIM SMITH**

The Baltimore Sun

Alexey Titarenko's black-and-white photographs conjure up gray areas between motion and inertia, living and getting by, past and present. The images haunt, and are haunted.

For the third time since 2003, Baltimore's C. Grimaldis Gallery is presenting a Titarenko exhibit. This one focuses on the place where the 50-year-old Russian photographer was born — known then as Leningrad and, since the fall of the Soviet government, as St. Petersburg.

The photographer, whose works have been exhibited widely and are in museums in Europe and the U.S., started taking pictures in the 1970s, but was largely underground until Perestroika freed up artistic expression. He has done a lot of work in and about his hometown.

The current Grimaldis show contains 43 works from the first decade or so of life in the new Russia, though there is little difference in mood between the 1990s photos of St. Petersburg and those from more recent years. Titarenko's lens conjures a world of uncertainty and disparate fates, a place where the individual still can be swallowed up, ignored, isolated.

It's easy to see why reviews of the photographer's work often mention Dostoevsky. There is something of the writer's bleakness in many of the shots, especially those that capture human figures in snow-draped scenes.

Other associations from distant Russian times can come to mind. "Untitled (Woman in the Yard)" or "Untitled (Old Woman in Front of Snow Pile)," for example, may have been in shot in 1996, but they're like eerie flashbacks to the bleakness of World War II and the siege of Leningrad.

Titarenko's pictures derive their power from this timeless factor. A man fishing on the ice, a pensioner walking home from a market — such sights have not changed over the decades. Here, they seem to bear witness to what has changed, what has been lost, what has yet to be realized.

Using long exposures, Titarenko can transform people into ghostly shapes, emphasizing their fragility and ephemerality. In some arresting photographs of crowds heading to subways, Titarenko's



ALEXEY TITARENKO PHOTO

Alexey Titarenko's St. Petersburg is a place of uncertainty and disparate fates.

If you go

Alexey Titarenko's photographs of St. Petersburg are on exhibit through June 23 at C. Grimaldis Gallery, 523 N. Charles St. Call 410-539-1080 or go to cgrimaldisgallery.com.

exposure technique is most provocative, turning the rush of people into what looks like a thick cloud of black smoke — with hands — swirling up steps.

A shot of folks enjoying wintry revels in the distance gets a whimsical slap from an outstretched glove stuck to the end of a leafless tree branch. In an alley where two black cats huddle against the cold, a snow-covered car seems to be keeping

watch, its grill like a toothy frown.

The photographer's painterly eye creates many an exceptional shot — a canal where rays of sunlight suggest a strange, rising fog; a tree, its trunk lightly layered with snow, its spidery limbs etched against the backdrop of gray buildings.

Although winter, and all the metaphorical coldness and loneliness it implies, is a major theme, Titarenko does find some warmth. In one particularly eloquent photograph, a man and woman, arms linked, make their way down a snowy, slushy street.

They seem so small, the man a little frail, on the sidewalk alongside imposing walls. But there's something tender about this couple, something sure and comfortable and confident. They will make it, as so many others have before them.

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