

City of Shadows. The Black and White Magic of Saint Petersburg. Time Standing Still

Titarenko, the Magician of St. Petersburg

Alexei Titarenko's first major work. *Nomenclature of Signs* series 1987-1991, is representative of the expression of a generation of Russian artists whose inspiration was ignited by Perestroika. By manipulating relics of the Communist regime, he creates a metaphorical inventory of urban landscape, populated by once-familiar signs and symbols. But in the wake of the old regime the multiple bust sculptures of Lenin and other once-potent symbols of the old cult, such as hammer and sickle, seem to have lost their essence. So heavy is the burden of daily life in Russia today that no one even thinks to restore or destroy these objects and spaces; they remain exhausted by time, abandoned to deterioration—and fertile ground for the photographer's imagination.

Titarenko takes a different approach in his later works ones less related to recent history and to the landscapes, both urban and emotional, of his generation. This new approach highlights his extreme originality, a quality that becomes especially obvious when his work is compared to currently developing aesthetics, particularly the ones emerging from Moscow (one must not forget that the photographer lives and works in St. Petersburg). His subjects range between the present and a faraway past, eras that met in the first photographs. Not only are the more recent images difficult to date, their style defies categorization. Nevertheless, the viewer senses that something purely Russian is developing in these pictures, however inexpressibly.

The urban landscape always constitutes Titarenko's milieu, his domain of observation and reflection. Landscapes take on foggy, hazy forms, as if transferred from Turner's paintings. They are more or less recognizable as scenes of St. Petersburg, but sometimes the imagery is so mysterious that one cannot be completely certain. Every now and then a silhouette emerges, whose allure and raiment could belong to the 1990s or to the beginning of the nineteenth century. One can imagine a group of people in a hurry, passing in front of the lens and then slipping away from the photographer's view. The city itself is infiltrated with tremors and rustle, inhabited by shadows and mysteries.

Titarenko uses all methods to create these mysterious, evocative spectacles, both during shooting and printing. His visual language reveals continuous movement and mobility, refusing to freeze reality by means of the banal or stereotypical. Magic indeed is in his pictures - to borrow a word from the title of one of his series - yet his lens is also tinted with a certain classic romanticism.

By Gabriel Bauret.