

## ALEXEY TITARENKO: Black and White Magic of St. Petersburg

Alexey Titarenko has a sensitivity for the emotional and spiritual atmosphere of the present dramatic time. He depicts St. Petersburg as a dear friend who is worthy of better things than those given him in life. Titarenko's photographs avoid the aristocratic features of the old imperial capital, features which almost automatically draw the eye of the visitor to this city, and focus instead on signs of unhappiness and decay. Focus with a sympathetic bitterness not on the glaring, attention-grabbing forms of this decay, but on its quieter, less noticeable instances.

In Titarenko's photographs people are downcast, absorbed in themselves. They either wander through the deserted spaces of St. Petersburg's streets and embankments or languish in expectation, almost entirely devoid of any sign of vitality, energy and grace.

What interests Titarenko is not external action or events, but the melody of the internal condition. This melody he has heard in himself on his walks through the part of St. Petersburg called Kolomna, where once lived and suffered characters in the fiction of Fyodor Dostoevsky. Today's passers-by on the banks of the Griboyedov Canal and Fontanka or near the Sennoy Rynok bear a distinct similarity to those met by Dostoevsky on his walks.

Titarenko's camera captures in these people traces of a restless refugelessness. Male and female figures leave a fleeting, vague impression on his film. It is as if they have been rocked by the wind, penetrated by the air, swallowed up in space. They are on the verge of disappearing, are part not so much of reality as of the world of shadows.

The washed-out quality of these images serves as a flexible metaphor of the instability of these people, of the difficulty of their lives. Titarenko uses the art of the hint with great tact. He is interested in the presence on the face of this city of an obscure grief - a grief now overt, now barely detectable. In the breath of the last days of the 20th century he discerns the symptoms of a serious illness. This is a time when old values are subjected to a torturous process of review, whilst new values arouse only doubt or hostility. A time when the life that people led in the past turns out to be illusory or in vain, whilst the *bright future* again retreats into the inaccessible distance. When existence itself becomes profoundly unsteady, inauthentic, shot through and through with an anxious feeling of loss of direction and worries about surviving.

Titarenko has found a persuasive visual equivalent of the city's spectral atmosphere, the crepuscular quality of life here today. Through his lens the contours of the world of objects waver and smudge. Light fades. Shadow gradually penetrates all forms. And those forms reveal their exhaustion with keeping their own shape, reveal a desire to hide themselves, to dissolve in the saving twilight of raw grey air, to slip away from daylight reality and forget themselves in dream. The transparent, tender, greyish-blue darkness, becoming ubiquitous, softens the hard distinctions dividing objects, arousing in them a tendency to draw closer to each other, covers them with itself and gives them temporary repose.

The dim, fading light and creeping shadow half dissolve in one another, drawing into their sluggish interaction buildings, trees and people, and making them part of some sad universal secret. Before us we see a visualization, so to speak, of the music of melancholy in all its diverse notes. It is this music which is the main theme of Alexey Titarenko's series of photographs entitled THE BLACK AND WHITE MAGIC OF ST. PETERSBURG.

Completed in the spring of 1996, Titarenko's series took him two years of hard work.

St. Petersburg's range of grey, delicately-nuanced tones in the narrow *pearl* band of brightnesses is one of the delights of this city at all times of the year. Appreciating the unconscious influence that this colour range has over our moods, Titarenko made it his intention to convey this influence in magnified form. In other words the task he faced was one of activating of the independent emotional function of tone whilst, consequently, reducing its objective descriptive function. These were requirements which are more easily met by painting or graphic art than by photography. To these, though were added other requirements arising out of Titarenko's overall conception - namely, reality, far from appearing as an isolated instant, must have duration so as to preserve the dramatic motif of presence and disappearance.

The solution of this task was suggested by the work of the pioneer of photography Louis Daguerre (1787-1851): prolonged exposure. This technique enables the results of both static and dynamic recording of an object to be combined on film. Whilst the camera shutter remains open a stationary object becomes a moving one. Daguerre's method made accurate prediction of results impossible, which is why a large number of shots had to be thrown away - leaving only those expressing the author's intentions, i.e. those where all objects are enwrapped in an almost tangible time stream; set rocking by the stream of time, these objects gain an air of frailty.

Something similar can be found in the films of Alexander Sokurov. A grey tone, its smooth tints enhanced by the technique of the *wet print*, begins to gently vibrate, to separate from objects, to infiltrate them, slip over and above them, to soften the sharp contours of things like a mist. This smoky-ash ethereal tone, developing the capacity to move around in space, brings objects to life in a magical way. As it thickens or thins, it reminds one now of night, of secrecy and anxiety, now of a faint caress of the sun. It should also be noted that by a partial intensification of tone Titarenko delicately introduces colour into his photographs. The lightest parts of his prints take on a pale-yellow colour, the darkest a greyish/bluish shade. This highlights the collision between major and minor chords in the tonal make-up of the prints. Alexey Titarenko has said that *THE BLACK AND WHITE MAGIC OF ST. PETERSBURG* is largely inspired by the first and second movements of Brahms Violin Concerto. There can be no doubt that Titarenko has succeeded both in drawing out the psychological dimension of the photographic medium by bringing it closer to music and in convincingly portraying the existential and elegiac feelings which have become habitual for residents of St. Petersburg in this age of new social revolution.

***Georgy Golenky, 1997***

*Art critic, member of the Russian Union of Artists, and Head of the Department of New Trends in Contemporary Art at the State Russian Museum*

*Translated by John Nicolson*