



Close and Far: Russian Photography Now

June 18 – August 17 2014

A new generation of artists is fast emerging inside Russia. *Close and Far* introduces some of the country's most original young voices, alongside the extraordinary work of a pre-revolutionary master whose work has only recently been rediscovered, and will be shown for the first time in the UK.

When Nicholas II, the last tsar, commissioned an early pioneer of colour photography to document his vast empire in the years leading up to the Russian Revolution, he presided over the largest territory in the world: Romanov Russia extended from Finland to Turkestan, and from Poland to Siberia.

That photographer, an aristocrat called **Sergei Prokudin-Gorsky** (1863-1944) was to travel by boat, train and horse-drawn carriage, non-stop for six years, carrying his delicate glass plates and astoundingly complex chemistry with him. From 1909 to 1915, he journeyed down the Volga, across the Urals into Siberia, south to the Caucasus and on to Turkestan and Asian Russia. Prokudin-Gorsky took pictures of places that had never previously been documented, and went to regions that have never been photographed again. All were captured in a burst of luminosity before the world disappeared back into black and white. Prokudin-Gorsky's work has only recently become accessible thanks to the newest techniques of digital composition. This is the first time they will be exhibited in Britain.

The photography of Prokudin-Gorsky reverberates through the exhibition like an echo from the past. A century later, his work is shown alongside some of Russia's finest contemporary artists working in photography and video. Russia is smaller now, yet it is still the largest country in the world, and still a land of dramatic extremes and diversity. Where Prokudin-Gorsky witnessed first-hand the effects of galloping Russian colonisation, as well as the early stirrings of industrialisation, today's young artists are working in the aftermath of that empire's collapse, grappling both with its past and with its future.

A sense of place – the 'landscape' in the widest sense - has played a formative part in the making of Russia's historic and modern cultural identity and has been a rich resource for its artists, from Tolstoy to Tarkovsky. How are Russia's young artists and photographers approaching the subject of identity and place in the early 21st century?

In tsarist times there was little freedom of movement for Russia's people: Prokudin-Gorsky could only travel with the tsar's special permission. During the Soviet regime both travel and photography continued to be heavily policed. Cities like Vladivostok were sealed off and street photography, seen as subversive, was effectively outlawed. Consequently, as **Max Sher** (b. 1975) points out, between 1917 and 1980 in Russia: "there is an almost complete absence of photography focusing on the everyday, the vernacular, the inhabited landscape". Sher's ongoing series *Russian Palimpsest* sets out to restore that lost image of Russia to itself. From 2010, he has aimed to record, in a dispassionate and methodical way, 40 cities across the country. He is drawn to the changing incarnations, the historical layers, of Russia's urban landscape: from the vestiges of pre-Revolutionary architecture, to the gradual eradication of Soviet-designed Russia as it is eclipsed by a new style of post-Soviet building. The characterless banks, shopping centres, and streets of the new Russia are photographed in all their ugliness, with a directness and honesty that stands against the past distortions of socialist realism.

Prokudin-Gorsky's Russia was overwhelmingly rural. Now, the vast majority of the population has migrated to towns and cities. Traditional country life is dying, but is still indelibly associated for many with the essence of being Russian. Kich Gorodok is an ordinary little village in the North, indistinguishable from hundreds like it. **Olya Ivanova** (b. 1981) made it the subject of intense study. Like an ethnographer undertaking field research, she photographed the village's inhabitants and rituals over a period of time. Her exquisite and tender portraits are shot in the style of turn-of-the-century village photography, informed by the shots of weddings, funerals and young love she found in people's houses. Her subjects wear their best dresses, pose resolutely and - following tradition - unsmilingly for Ivanova's camera.

If the Russian city is Max Sher's subject, the Russian village, Olya Ivanonova's, then **ALEXANDER GRONSKY**, has made that peculiarly Russian space, the city's edge, his own. In his series Pastoral, 2008-2012 town and country collapse into one indeterminate zone, permanently poised to become yet another building site as the city pushes inexorably outwards. Amongst the toxic wasteland, the polluted forests, the reservoirs and sand dumps, city dwellers find space for traditional leisure pursuits: sunbathing, swimming, socializing. Gronsky's subjects are ugly but his pictures, often washed in a golden elysian light, are extremely beautiful. The rural idyll of the 17th pastoral – traditionally addressed to the city dweller in virtuous contrast to the evils of urban life - is here masterfully adapted and undone by Gronsky.

One popular leisure pursuit assumes, when set in the Russian landscape, truly epic dimensions. Gronsky's new series Reconstruction follows the activities of groups of amateur war re-enactors, located in Moscow, St Petersburg, Volgograd and Kharkov. Second World War battles are popular. But they also restage scenes from more recent conflicts such as the Soviet –Afghan war. Thus, the unlikely scene of head-scarved men on horseback, amidst blazing fires and bombed out jeeps, set against the snowy ground and soaring towers of Moscow's city edge.

Gronsky's Reconstructions are made up of three separate shots which you nevertheless read as one continuous panorama, occurring in one moment of time. His work asks us to consider what is real, what is fantasy – and what is history.

A lone figure performs a haunting choreography in a mountain-top village in Dagestan. *Gamsutl* (2012) is a stunning and provocative film work by **Taus Makhacheva** (b. 1983). We see a once-thriving Caucasian settlement, now abandoned. Its spectacular masonry slowly crumbling back into the mountain from which it came. Viewed from great distance, the protagonist makes a series of frozen movements, as if performing a modernist dance. In fact they are gestures of combat copied from the 19th century battle paintings that celebrated Russia's conquest of the people of the Caucasus. In evoking the past through a vocabulary of gesture, this lone figure merges into the historical memory of *Gamsutl*, at the same time as his body embraces its ruined bricks.

There's a community of people living by the side of the Moscow Ring Road, the relentless mega-motorway that speeds you into the centre of Moscow. They survive by scavenging roadside trash, and all the detritus that gets thrown out of passing cars. These unlikely objects become the focus of a bizarre set of group rituals and rites. Kandinsky Prize-winner **Dimitry Venkov's** (b. 1980) *Mad Mimes* is a spoof anthropological documentary, which also works as a clever allegory for life and art in post-Soviet times.

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Admission is free to all exhibitions at Calvert 22 Gallery. Opening hours: Wednesday - Sunday: 12pm - 6pm. Open until 9pm on the first Thursday of every month as part of First Thursdays.

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Strategic Partner



Notes to Editor

- **About Calvert 22 Gallery**

Calvert 22 Gallery is the UK's only not-for-profit institution dedicated to the presentation of contemporary art from Russia and Eastern Europe. It presents a dynamic programme of exhibitions, talks and cross-disciplinary events with both emergent and established artists.

Calvert 22 Gallery is an initiative of the **Calvert 22 Foundation**
www.calvert22foundation.org

- **Strategic partner**

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- *Close and Far* is curated by Kate Bush. The exhibition is part of the official programme of the UK-Russia Year of Culture, the largest ever showcase of cultural projects to take place. More than 250 events across culture, science, education and sport are planned for both countries throughout the year.