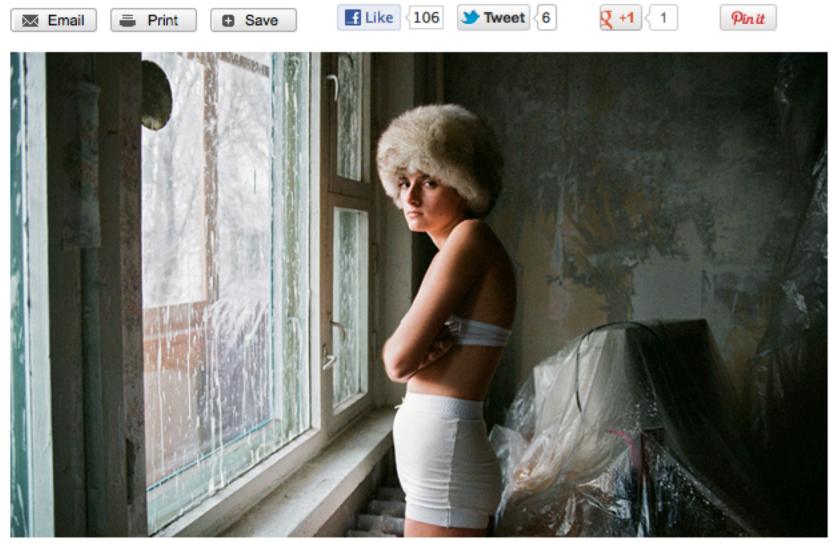


FotoFest Brings Russia's Photographic History to Houston, From Its Socialist Past to Its Vulgar Present



View Slideshow Anastasia Tailakova's "Untitled 9," 2009, from the series In Vain

Courtesy of FotoFest 2012

by Kyle Chayka Published: March 21, 2012

HOUSTON — If you're at all interested in Russian photography (which hasn't exactly caught on with Muscovite audiences quite yet), then the best place to be is half a world away in Houston, Texas. The city's **FotoFest**, a photography-only biennial that has also developed a series of international projects over its three decades of history, has devoted its 2012 outing to an extensive — and impressive — survey of the subject, assembling a series of exhibitions sprinkled around the city's studio warehouses and corporate towers that together give viewers a sense of the medium's arc in Russia from the 1940s to the present. The ongoing story of modern Russia is a dramatic one, and it has left in its wake plenty of dramatic images.



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The show's historical depth couldn't have come together without the help of contemporary Russia's assertive new arts institutions, including **Dasha Zhukova**'s Moscow-based <u>Garage</u> <u>Contemporary Arts Center</u> and its funding wing, the <u>Iris Foundation</u>, as well as the <u>Lumiere Brothers Center for Photography</u>, an organization founded in 2010 with the goal of expanding awareness of and scholarship on Russian photography. The biennial was curated by three Iris-associated Russian curators and editors: **Evgeny Berezner**, cutting the classic image of a Russian intellectual with a halo of frizzed hair, wide eyes, and tweed jackets; **Irina Chmyreva**, a warm woman who expressed a love for Texan barbecue; and **Natalia Tarasova**, a writer and consultant who translated for the group.

"After Stalin and The Thaw," shown in the Brutalist lobby of Houston's Philip Johnson-designed **Williams Tower**, forms the first part of the exhibition, though certainly not the best, and definitely the ugliest. Prints from the late 1940s through the '70s (the majority drawn from the Lumiere Brothers Center's collection) are shown on corporate gray exhibition stands, dwarfed by the enormous space. In the earlier decades of the history charted here, photography was limited to officially sanctioned photojournalism in the service of ideology. Thus, the wide-eyed optimism and graphical clarity of Soviet Realism dominates. Work like **Alexander Ustinov**'s 1960 "Electronics," depicting a factory full of reflective electronics equipment that brings to mind Jetsons-style antennae, is striking but tinged with irony: History shows how that Utopian dream fizzled.

As Khrushchev relaxed limits on artistic expression in the 1960s, photography became a popular hobby for workers, and many urban factories hosted small gallery spaces that showed the work of amateur photography clubs like Moscow's **Novator** (which is still active today). At that time, "independent photography was born," explained Lumiere Brothers Center co-founder **Natalia Grigorieva**, and a newfound freedom shows through in the images. The tone of the later part of "The Thaw" becomes markedly more humanist in its depiction of daily life at ground level, even verging on cynicism. In "The Year 1980" by **German Vorotnikov**, a member of Novator, two busts of Stalin are shown slumping in the bed of a truck, blanketed by a tarp.

FotoFest's heart, however, lays in its central exhibition "Perestroika: Liberalization and Experimentation Mid 1980s-2010," a mammoth show spread throughout two Houston studio buildings. Particularly in "Perestroika," one of the biennial's principal joys is the potential for discovery it holds for non-Russian audiences. Work like **Andrey Chezhin**'s "Drawing Pin and Modernism" series, in which he used photo-collage techniques to turn shots of everyday thumbtacks into replicas of pieces by artists like **Kazimir Malevich** and **Duchamp**, is famed within Russia but little known in the United States. (The thumbtack is such a signature for the artist that Chezhin, who was in attendance in Houston, carried around a wooden toy dog plastered with the pins.)

As this section of the exhibition progresses to the collapse of the USSR and the fall of Communism in 1991, social (as opposed to Socialist) realism becomes the order of the day with gritty work that pulls no punches in documenting the depths of Russian society. **Alik Yakubovich**'s "Patsany (Guys)" series (2002-09) is a portrait of masculinity that runs to the hard-boiled, with scarred toughs sucking down cigarettes. Photographers began to work in color, and then in multimedia, on a large scale. **Alexey Kuzmichev**'s heavily saturated portraits of Russian cultural figures provide a look at the national creative class. **Olga Tobreluts**'s mammoth digitally composed prints show both political acumen and formal experimentation. Her "Modernization" (2002), a mural of muscular men wrestling virtual monsters, is particularly astute in its sarcasm — the title term has become a euphemistic buzzword of **Putin**'s.

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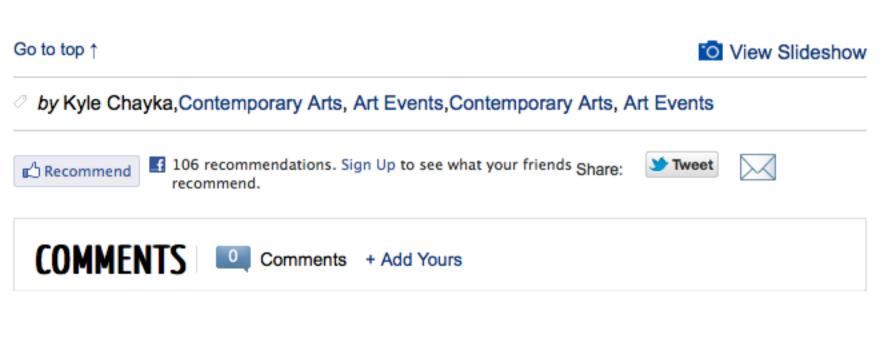
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If the artists in "Perestroika" wrung hard-won inspiration from the changing politics and social structures of the '80s and '90s, the photographers of "The Young Generation," part three of the biennial exhibition laid out in the pleasant interior galleries of FotoFest's open-air office building, have a tendency to come off as less relevant in comparison. The work sacrifices visceral awareness for interior contemplation, and often puts one in mind of the twee escapist fantasies of **Ryan McGinley**. An image like **Margo Ovcharenko**'s odalisque "Rita with a Cigarette" is stunning, but has more style than content. The best among the group is **Ivan Mikhailov**'s gently mocking, bemused "Playground" series (2009-10), which pictures climbing towers and monkey bars designed in the shape of spaceships, showing how the old threat of intergalactic Soviet supremacy has eroded into subconscious dreams.

That the "Young Generation" actually represents the highlights of Russia's new crop of emerging artists is debatable. In a confusing curatorial decision, a number of young photographers have been placed in "Perestroika" instead, and benefit from the more serious context. Photographer **Alexey Kuzmichev** wondered aloud why he had been slotted for the chronologically earlier show when his age might have put him in "Young Generation." He didn't feel left out, though. The work in "Young Generation" was "generic," he said, reflecting not the lights of emerging Russian photography but the fads of the global contemporary art world.

FotoFest 2012 succeeds in telling the story of the transformation of Russian photography from a tightly restricted ideological tool to a weapon of social documentary and satire, and finally into a wide-open medium, free for artistic exploration both successful and not. The trajectory is never overly didactic, and rarely boring, even when the selection falters in coming to terms with the present. In the age of art exhibitions as transient attempts to illustrate the fleeting qualities of the present moment, it's refreshing to see a biennial so oriented toward plumbing an artistic lineage with deep, rarely explored roots.

To see photos from Houston's FotoFest 2012, <u>click on the slide show</u>



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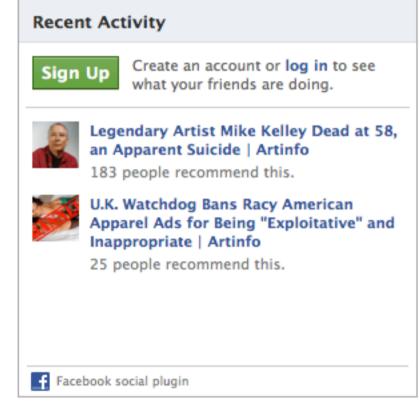
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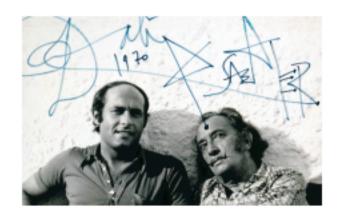


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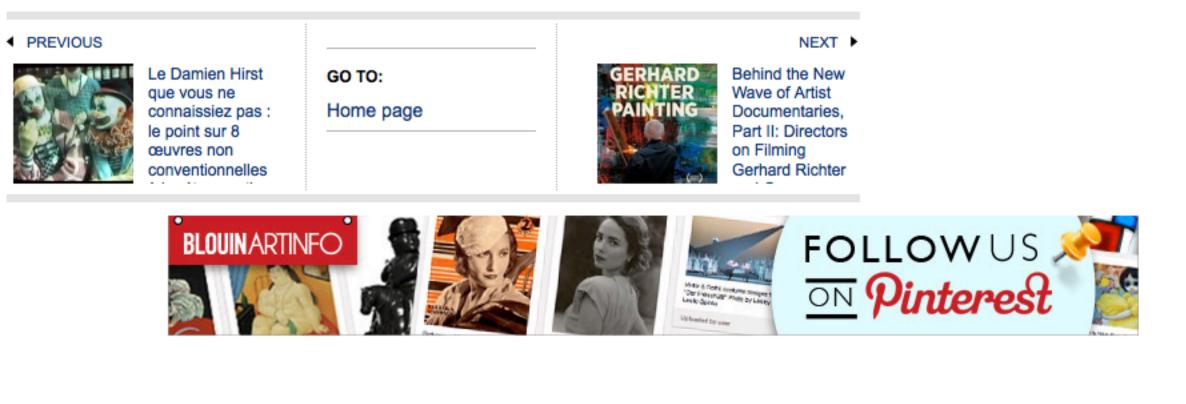


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The Russian artists of "Perestroika" turn the past into something new.

Back to the Classics

"Perestroika: Liberalization and Experimentation — The mid/late 1980s-2010s" Through April 29. Spring Street Studios, 1824 Spring St. and at Winter Street Studios, 2101 Winter St, 713-223-5522.

BY KELLY KLAASMEYER

first met Olga Tobreluts in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1996 when I interviewed her for the St. Petersburg Times. Sixteen years later. I ran into her in Houston. Tobreluts is one of 142 artists who hail from Russia, Belarus and Ukraine included in the epic, ambitious, Russian-themed exhibitions of the "FotoFest 2012 Biennial." Three exhibitions at four venues feature Russian photography from the late 1940s until the present day - from the USSR and Stalin to Russia and Putin. The exhibitions were curated by Evgeny Berezner, head of the "In Support of Photography in Russia" Project of The Iris Foundation, Moscow; Natalia Tarasova, a writer and cultural affairs consultant for the same project and Trina Chmyreva Senior

them dressed in constructivist costumes or showing off designs for the uniforms of the modern factory worker. They were looking to the future and breaking from the old, decadent and corrupt Czarist excess. (Stalin, however, saw to it that their idealism was short-lived.) Meanwhile, when you look at photos of the artists of Neo-Academism, you see them goofing around and dressed up like 19th-century dandies or clad in flowing Greek robes. Embracing history and beauty seems a fitting rejection of the brutal functionality of the Soviet state.

When I spoke with her in 1996, Tobreluts was showing a digital video in which Hercules stands next to a tree of golden apples. The exhibition was at Pushkinskaya 10, an abandoned building in the center of St. Petersburg, just off famed Nevsky Prospect. It had been turned into an artist's squat around 1990 and was headquarters for Neo-Academism and the school they created, The New Academy of Fine Arts. That same video is currently on view at Spring Street Studios in "Perestroika: Liberalization and Expolitical commentary - just because you have the might, you don't necessarily have to use it.

Tobreluts studied architecture and then took a computer graphics course in Berlin in 1989. Creating digital video in 1995, when the work was made, was an involved undertaking that required a lot of expensive hardware and software no matter where you were. In St. Petersburg, a city of 4 million people, circa 1995, there was one publicly available computer that could do the job, a massive Silicon Graphics machine, optimized for 3-D rendering. Tobreluts worked out a deal where she rented it at night, which also benefited the owners, as it protected the computer from theft and from technical issues. According to Tobreluts, if you turned it off, it might not come back on.

Just as technology is very different today than in 1995, so is Russia. Tobreluts no longer lives in that 4,300-square-foot apartment. (I think she used to rent it for like \$500 a month. That kind of thing isn't remotely possible anymore; real estate is astronomical in St. Petersburg, and

color photos from his 1996 series Lives of the Remarkable Monroes are on view, featuring the artist as Marilyn Monroe, Dracula and Peter the Great. For Volga-Volga, Mamyshev-Monroe made himself up to look like the film's heroine and digitally inserted his face over Orlova's, singing along with the hokey soundtrack. It's great even without the back story, but knowing that this "musical comedy" extravaganza was filmed during the horror of the purges makes Mamyshev-Monroe's alteration darky absurd. The fact that a guy in drag has replaced Stalin's favorite actress adds yet another layer - Stalin recriminalized homosexuality in the Soviet Union after the Revolution had decriminalized it. (There is a whole other show to be curated around art and sexual identity in Russia - and given St. Petersburg's now-infamous new ban on "gay propaganda," it would be timely.)

Novikov has work on view as well: tapestry-like wall hangings from plush fabrics ornamented with gold cord, with vintage photographs placed in their centers. An untitled work from the Lost Ideals from the Happy Childhood series (2000) frames a black-and-white photo that looks about five-by-seven inches, in the middle of a deep, rich, reddish-purple velvet panel. The photo is of a white marble statue of a young boy playing a drum; it's the white of Greek statuary, but it looks to be Stalin-era. The boy is wearing the shorts and kerchief of the Young Pioneers, the Communist version of the Boy Scouts, who, in Stalin's day, would be asked, "Are you ready to fight for the cause of Lenin and Stalin?" and would reply "Always ready!" With

Researcher at the Russian Academy of Fine Arts.

FotoFest has always taken a wonderfully global approach to the world of photography, bringing a geographically diverse range of work to Houston viewers as well as to FotoFest's international attendees. Houston doesn't have a huge Russian community. Most of us will probably need some cultural orientation and catch-up to view this work in its larger cultural context, and that's tough when you talk about a country as historically, politically and socially complex as Russia.

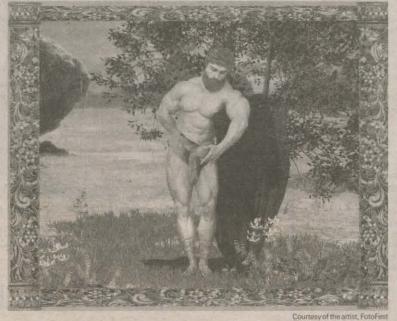
Sixteen years ago, I visited Tobreluts in her sprawling prerevolutionary apartment, an amazing 1910 Egyptian revival (??) structure with 15-foot-high sculptures of pharaohs flanking its door. Like a lot of elegant old Russian apartments that had previously housed the bourgeoisie, under the Soviet Union it was turned into a *kommunalka*, an apartment housing multiple families,

one in each room, its glory decidedly faded. In the chaos after the 1991 fall of the Soviet Union, spaces like this came available and were colonized by artists working with an openness not previously available.

Tobreluts was a member of Neo-Academism, a St. Petersburg movement born in 1991 with the fall of communism and led by the artist Timur Novikov. Neo-Academism looked to classical sources for artistic inspiration, and St. Petersburg, a city of museums and neoclassical architecture, provided plenty. It wasn't about postmodern irony, although irony - and humor - are very much present; instead, it was a way to reach back and reinvigorate history in a time of dramatic cultural change - change taking place against the crumbling grandeur of the city of St. Petersburg.

If you look at early 20th-century photos of the artists of the Russian avant-garde, you might see perimentation — The mid/late 1980s-2010s," the FotoFest exhibition which covers work from the beginnings of Gorbachav's reforms, through the fall of the Soviet Union to today.

In the Greek myth, Hercules (Herakles) had to steal the golden apples of Hesperides for his 11th labor. For her campy-looking video, Tobreluts digitally collaged an image and ever so slightly animated it. She got Russian bodybuilder Alexander Vishnevski to play the mythological hero and strongman and pasted his image against a landscape pulled from a Star Wars storyboard. He stands on digitally drawn grass next to the tree of golden apples, and nothing really happens; the leaves jerkily blow in the "wind" as Hercules just stands there. Then suddenly an apple drops, and the virtually immobile Hercules briefly flexes his pecs. It's wittily anticlimactic; there is no display of strength, no dramatic action. Then and now, it carries with it



A Russian bodybuilder plays Hercules in a video by Olga Tobreluts.

last year CNN ranked Moscow as the fourth most expensive city in the world, while New York came in a paltry 32nd.) Tobreluts is still creating digital images, and changing Russia and evolving technology have made that much more possible. Today Tobreluts shows her work internationally. (She is also at Deborah Colton Gallery showing more of her art-historical and cultural kleptomania, including a pair of digital photographs incorporating Greek statuary and casting Elvis and Madonna as Adam and Eve.)

Tobreluts's witty video Academism Manifesto is also on view at Spring Street. In it, you see the members of the movement in 19th-century costume, with Novikov dressed as Pushkin. The live action is cut with computer-generated scenes comically showing a figure in a boat painted with the word "Neo-Academism" moving through scenes created by digitally collaging historic paintings. Silent film-style text panels

appear offering up statements about beauty and the dawn of Neo-Academism.

Fellow Neo-Academist Vladislav Mamyshev-Monroe offers up more video, a satirical remake of the classic Stalin-era film Volga-Volga. The 1938 musical comedy was made during Stalin's Great Purge, when he was executing around 1,000 people a day. It tells the tale of a plucky provincial postwoman traveling the Volga River to an amateur musical competition. It was Stalin's favorite movie, and he screened it over and over, watching it during his bouts of insomnia. The dictator was an ardent admirer of the film's star, Lyubov Orlova.

Mamyshev-Monroe is known for his portraits of himself in costume, often cross-dressed. His lush very simple elements, Novikov has potently evoked a blend of disillusionment, loss and nostalgia. The works on view were created after Novikov lost his sight in 1997 from an unknown/ unrevealed illness. The artist had amassed a huge collection of fabrics and photographs that he used by memory, instructing his family on their combinations and feeling out their placement.

Novikov died in 2002 at age 43, from the ongoing illness that had taken his sight. He was the founder of the New Academy of Fine Arts and Neo-Academism and is often compared to André Breton or Warhol. Pre- and post-Soviet era, he is considered one of nonconformist art's most influential figures. His loss was a great blow to his friends and fellow artists. I interviewed Novikov in 1996 around the same time I interviewed Tobreluts, and I wish to hell I could find the tape. Novikov had an incredible presence - he was sharply intelligent and media-savvy, which was still relatively rare in the mid-'90s. (Artists had been working under- . ground for so long that the kind of promotion and press information that was the norm in most of the art world was slow to take hold - just finding a show could become an epic quest.)

In our short conversation, Novikov wasn't some messianic character advocating a retrograde agenda. He had developed Pirate Television in 1989 with Mamyshev-Monroe, Russia's "first independent television channel." He had been the artist for the rock group Kino. Warhol had come to meet him in 1992. Novikov was a creative, boundary-pushing figure, and Neo-Academism blended theory, aesthetics, humor and satire in a way that I couldn't and still can't pin down. It wasn't a rigid agenda, it wasn't satire and it wasn't the postmodernism of my grad school. It was intellectual and playful, sincere and insincere, something shaped by a unique cultural, political and historical climate.

Next week I'll cover more of the "Perestroika" show, as well as the other FotoFest exhibitions, "After Stalin, "The Thaw,' The Re-emergence of the Personal Voice" and "The Young Generation."

30 HOUSTON PRESS / APRIL 19-25,2012 / houstonpress.com