

Carl de Keyzer *Zona*

Reviewed at Photofusion, London

Published in *HotShoe* no.137, August/September 2005, pp. 66-67

When I was very young, I was convinced that in the olden days – that is before the 1960s, and before colour photography was widely used – everything must have existed in black and white. I could not imagine the distant past in any other tones, except perhaps a warm sepia tint, although that must have evaporated around the end of Victorian times – the *really* distant past.

This may seem like a frivolous reflection, but it helps to explain the utterly arresting nature of Magnum photographer, Carl de Keyzer's current exhibition *Zona*, a body of colour photographs documenting the prison camps in modern Siberia. Coupled with the mythology of Siberia and so accustomed to documentary photographers treating Eastern Europe, Eurasia and the Balkans with fast monochrome film, being confronted with de Keyzer's vivid depiction of these ex-gulag camps, is like being sat down and explained a truth, or having a great taboo defeated.

De Keyzer compiled the series over two years, visiting 35 of the 135 prison camps in an area the size of Europe. His first impression of the camps was that of a theme-park; a "Disneyland" of bright colours, completely sheltered from the outside world. Many of the pictures shatter our preconceptions of a penal institution, let alone one in a part of the world renowned for injustice and making people disappear. The prisons are decorated with kitsch landscapes and bright paint; perhaps as part of a feeble experiment in psychotherapy, but a world apart from the Socialist-Realist imagery one might expect to be adorning one of Stalin's most notorious legacies. The pictures are full of visual contradictions, such as the butch "ward boss" taken in the sauna room with his back to the camera, covered with a tattoo of a devil and his buttocks covered with a *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* beach towel.

The situation of the prisoners in the camps is very confusing. Although they are penitentiaries for serious criminals (and many petty criminals also) inmates go on an annual holiday, are allowed to marry, and have many of the benefits of

prisoners in Western jails. Or at least they seem to. In the accompanying monograph, de Keyzer writes a sporadic, but invaluable account of the project. Indeed the story of the project – the games he played with his minders, learning what he could and could not get away with photographing – would have made for an interesting project in itself. de Keyzer is under no illusions as to the limitations of what he was allowed to see. He was well aware very early on in the project that it would be impossible to create a truly objective study. Indeed one of the conditions laid out by the authorities was that he must make positive images of the camps. It is because of this that de Keyzer decided to create such an optimistic vision of the camps: to make them look surreal and underscore the fact that these images are not just of another world geographically, but are the idealized vision that the prison and government authorities would like the world to see. However, by doing this de Keyzer has also protected himself against possible criticism for presenting a romanticized version of an environment that is contrary to his own words.

Another reflection of the stage-managed nature of the project is the pictorial balance between direction from the photographer and candid snap-shot. One image in particular highlights this: Two inmates appear to be playing tennis in an outdoor court. The accompanying caption describes how it took a couple of hours to find participants, then look for rackets, and then (unsuccessfully) a ball. At a glance, this picture could serve as an illustration of the camp's sport facilities, but the image of two people simulating a ball game without a ball acts as a metaphor for the series as a whole. It also makes an appropriate reference to the final, ambiguous scene in Antonioni's *Blowup*, a film concerned with the idea of the photograph as a document of fact, and one's perception of reality.

When asked by some inmates what kind of prison he would prefer to be held in – American or Siberian – he replied with honesty, "Siberian". Although he admits; "...it just goes to show that I don't know what the situation there [Siberia] really was, because I was always presented with this kind of theatre." *Zona* is an interesting exploration of the relationship between censor and information-gatherer, and it is a very unusual representation of a remnant of the old Soviet empire. While it may seem like over enthusiastic PR for a supposedly more democratic Russia, Carl de Keyzer has come to an excellent resolution and has

remained in control of the outcome of his studies. Perhaps one day this work may be exhibited alongside a similar inspection of Guantanamo Bay.