

Quiet Resistance: Russian Pictorial Photography, 1900 – 1930s

Reviewed at the Gilbert Collection, Somerset House, London

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Photography has unfortunately always been compared to painting. Since 1839, when Paul Delaroche was asked to present a report on the daguerreotype and declared that “from today, painting is dead”, the photograph has regularly been asked to explain itself in relation to the hand-made image (that is not to say that photographs cannot be hand-made). Of course painting (and related media) and photography actually enjoy a very complex and complimentary relationship; if anything, the invention of photography forced painting to reevaluate itself and played a major role in the development of new genres. However, in the early twentieth century, as a reaction to the ever-growing mass use of the photographic image for purely documentary and illustrative functions, some photographers – led by Alfred Stieglitz and the Photo-succession group – sought to bring photography into the sphere of fine art by imitating the aesthetic of pencil and other materials.

Pictorialist photography is perhaps a genre defined by technique rather than its subjects. Photographers used a variety of different printing processes to achieve the look of a non-photographic picture. Most commonly employed was the bromoil transfer print (which was becoming antiquated), which involves brushing the paper with ink, thus leaving a physical trace of the artist on each print. Also present at this exhibition are examples of the less commonly seen mezzotintograph and photo-etching. The results are very successful, and with some images the viewer has to get extremely close to the image to identify it as a photograph – the exact opposite of viewing a photorealist painting.

Quiet Resistance on show at the Gilbert Collection in Somerset House exhibits some one hundred rarely seen samples of Russian pictorial photography from the early twentieth century. Subjects are typically nudes, actors striking poses or performing specific roles from history and literature, and romanticized landscapes. With the exception of Alexander Grinberg’s portrait of Eisenstein,

images are defined as rough works rather than studies of specific subjects, much like an artist's sketchbook might be and are titled so: For example "portrait of a man" or simply "herd boy". Photographers concentrated upon a celebration of life, form and especially beauty, rather than on individual personalities.

By contemporary standards, pictorial photography is rather tame in content and it is difficult to imagine how such innocent and inoffensive images could become so subversive. Pictorial photography in Russia became unpopular as it was contrary to descriptive documentary shots, but chiefly as it attempted to reflect upon the emotions and represent personal feelings. Actually, some of these images, particularly the rural studies of Leonid Shokin and Sergi Lobovikov make fascinating documents of a world that was so detached from the rest of Europe. But these nostalgic scenes, not dissimilar to those painted on porcelain and advertised in newspaper weekend supplements, were not in keeping with the image of industrial strength that was the Soviet aesthetic and did not conform to the strict language of Socialist Realism. Alexander Grinberg was sent to a labor camp in 1936 for five years after his pictures were deemed pornographic, and the pictorialist movement was forced to work in secret. Within this dimly-lit and intimate space at the Gilbert Collection, a sense of the oppression that surrounded these artists precipitates; the pictures seem contraband, and the viewer, peering at these often tiny prints, might feel that what they are doing is illicit. This is especially the case with the dainty little nudes.

It is easy to criticize the pictorialists for trying to mimic another genres of art rather than allow photography to develop on its own terms and experiment, as did Alexander Rodchenko (whose faux-pictorialist work is displayed) and other photographers of the avant-garde, but this collection must be scrutinized within its historical context. The show will appeal especially to those with a specific interest in the genre and the period, or with a taste for unusual vintage prints. The exhibition is part of the Act 2005 festival which is promoting Russian arts in London, and while it would be wonderful to see more contemporary photography from Russia (or any country for that matter), this is an original exhibition, and not a regurgitation of previously plundered archives and libraries. There is certainly a discussion to be had about the real significance of the pictorialist movement upon

facilitating the acceptance of photography as a fine art medium, and also whether there is a tangible relationship between pictorialism and photorealism.