

Buttocks, Bodies and Borscht: The Raunchy Social Realism of Ukrainian Photographer Boris Mikhailov

Mikhailov's photo series 'Diary' cheekily exposes the undersides of social suppression in the USSR



In the 1960s, Boris Mikhailov lost his job as an engineer in Ukraine when KGB agents found photographs of his wife in the nude. His career as an artist began then in earnest. His photo series 'Diary' (2015) is full of messy, laughing nudes and people cavorting in the public spaces of Kharkiv, Ukraine. Mikhailov dedicates this show of 87 images, spanning six decades, to Ukraine's Blaue Horse group, members of which were jailed on pornography charges for photos of women 'in Western poses' on the beach. But the variety of people in Mikhailov's mostly black and white photography, and his practice of sketching over them in colour, suggests a trickier relationship to history than the East vs. West oppositions of the Cold War.

Many of the nude photographs (all works from the series 'Diary') are in fact public-facing: a woman posing against a window, with her back to what might be a government building in the distance, pointed between her legs. But her body, balancing against a light-bleached window, seems to unfold the space as we move through it, in opposition to the catch-all vista this monumental architecture might demand. Other, clothed photos say more: a shot of jean-clad legs bent on a bed, socks pointing inward near a scrunched newspaper, seems somehow rapturous in its curvature, wholly intimate in its address. This is to Mikhailov's strength: as his dedication to Blaue Horse suggests, pornography is not a peek into an unmitigated private sphere, but a historical marker of censorship. Intimacy here is a function of how we share space.



Boris Mikhailov, 'Diary', 2019, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin

If Mikhailov's bodies suggest resonances beyond the state's spatial divisions, his sketched colouration does the same to the time of the photograph, opening an echo chamber between its generation and its afterlife. His drawing in and over the images flirts with historical recolouration, dabbing in the red of lips or a wine glass. But Mikhailov has an iconoclastic streak – defacing pedestrians and tumbling coital scenes with thick impasto or snot-green saturation.

In a black and white photograph, three women pee in the snow. Their scribbled-red butts instil the tone of white skin exposed to the cold. But Mikhailov applies the red with such colouring-book fury as to foreground the photograph's reworking. Taking off from the subject's gestures or the camera's blur, his colouration suggests an ongoing force of combination in these bodies, dilating the moment of the picture to include its latent reconsiderations. Whether in boudoir pose or public agitation, people greet us in an inexhaustible morphology of gestures.

This serial form allows Mikhailov to enact the divisions of social space without moralizing or euphemism. Next to one of the three large works in the room – a camera-swerved building in black and white – Mikhailov draws a woman seen from the back. She stares past a curtain held open by a hand at the edge of the frame. The curtain's curve plays like an overtone of the building's. One private bend, one public. Mikhailov's camera coaxes them into rhyme.



Boris Mikhailov, 'Diary', 2019, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin

Other photographs find Mikhailov juggling manufactured bodies. He places an undressed Barbie doll – with a bizarre square hole in the middle of its hips – on his face. We instantly perceive it as Mikhailov's left eye by way of his playful placement, the inhuman square hole made natural by our facial recognition. Treating real or artificial bodies, Mikhailov's photography attests not to a documentary of portraits and landmarks, but to an embodied cartilage of space and sensation. His colouration and wild poses hang like an after-image over even the most understated and unaltered of his photographs, begging us to play the images forward: not as static memorials to a time under censorship, but as a living language. We can only understand it by falling into the flow of its inexhaustible syntax.

Boris Mikhailov, 'Diary' was on view at Galerie Barbara Weiss from 20 November until 19 January 2019.

Main image: Boris Mikhailov, 'Diary', 2019, installation view. Courtesy: the artist and Galerie Barbara Weiss, Berlin