

# Face-to-face with female killers

Valeria Zhmak

BBCRussian.com, Khabarovsk

## **A Canadian photographer is confronting Russians with images of women murderers, at an exhibition in the far eastern city of Khabarovsk.**

Olga Shagautdinova, from Montreal, visited a women's prison camp in the village of Zaozyornoye, in the Khabarovsk region, and took about 1,000 pictures. She selected just 17 for her project.

They all show women convicted under Article 105 of the Russian penal code: premeditated murder.

Shagautdinova, whose work was included this year in the "Anthology of Contemporary Canadian Photography", says her visit to the prison camp was "a shock... this was another world, another reality".

"I saw faces which you cannot see anywhere else today.

### **" How sad we look "**

"I thought a lot and concluded that God did not create these women the way they were - it was life and the environment that did it," Shagautdinova recalls.

"Not one of them had had a wholesome family as a child, or normal relationships with men. Before committing the crime, they were themselves subjected to violence from society, from their own husbands."

"I don't want to justify anyone, but I wanted to show the essence of these broken women. Their lives and their crimes reflect to a great extent the state of society."

The exhibition, called "The Zone", is at the Art Museum of the Far East, in Khabarovsk. Apart from the photographs on the walls, the portraits of the women convicts hang from the ceiling.

## **Entering the Zone**

The installation engenders empathy, there is a feeling that the prisoners look you straight in the eyes. Visitors seem to enter the Zone themselves, in this closed space filled with female despair, grief and repentance.

### **" Their lives and crimes reflect to a great extent the state of society "**

Olga Shagautdinova

Photographer

"In Russia, there are 32 female prison camps and 17 juvenile camps for girls," Shagautdinova says. "That is why my main purpose was to show the existence in our orderly world of such anti-worlds - zones of fear, alienation and, possibly, hope for salvation of the soul."

Before and during the shooting the photographer talked for hours to each of her subjects. "One of them - the one on the poster for the exhibition who hides her face in her hands - cried when I told her: 'Marina, no one ever taught you to love yourself.'"