

Portfolio Review Russia

International portfolio reviews have been part of photography's infrastructure since the 1970s, when collectors, curators, editors, and other photographers would sit in the plazas and cafés of Arles during the annual Rencontres looking at young photographers' prints. From these sessions, first shows, publications, and purchases were often negotiated. Now portfolio reviews are regular features of many international photography festivals. Moscow presented the first International Portfolio Review for Russian Photographers last fall with forty-seven reviewers from nineteen countries seeing work by 185 photographers from thirty-nine cities across Russia as well as the Ukraine and Belarus. The photographers reviewed were selected from 2,400 who submitted work.

After the first day, the reviewers expressed among themselves their surprise that, while a few of the photographers showing work were internationally trained (and exhibited), the majority were self-taught and didn't seem familiar with the review process. There are only a few Russian universities that offer courses in photography, and only a handful of private classes available. Typically, photographers show their work to friends or like-minded individuals who will support and encourage them. As Irina Chmyreva, co-curator of Portfolio Review Russia, explained: "For a long time, Russian artists have communicated in silence. They were attracted to people whom they sensed would accept their work. In that kind of culture, there is no analysis and no serious challenge to the work." Thus, the reviewees were baffled when asked: "Why are you making pictures?" "What do you want to convey?" "Why did you choose this technique to convey it?" All are standard classroom questions. What took many of the photographers aback was that behind the reviewers' questions were interest and encouragement for some dialogue about the work. One reviewed photographer explained it concisely: "It's a new idea for Russia. In the past, to be criticized was to be controlled."

Nothing like the scale of these review sessions has been attempted before in Russia. The reviewers were all prominent museum curators, magazine- and book-publishers, festival directors, and gallery owners, selected because they could potentially show or publish some of the photographs outside Russia. The event was conceived and organized by curator Evgeny Berezner, along with Wendy Watriss and Fred Baldwin, artistic director and chairman, respectively, of FotoFest, the photography biennial in Houston. (The Russian event adopted

FotoFest's successful structure for portfolio sessions.) Another partner was Daria Zukova, founder of the Iris Foundation, which was a substantial contributor. The reviews were held at the Garage Center for Contemporary Culture, an exhibition space and bookstore/café in Moscow that is also funded by the Iris Foundation to show work by contemporary Russian and international artists.

Among the many aspects of FotoFest's portfolio reviews that drew Berezner to the collaboration was its computer-lottery program for assigning photographers to reviewers. Even the photographers commented on their surprise that "the people you knew" played no role in the people you met with here. Berezner also wanted the Russia public and arts world to understand photography's broad acceptance as an art form in the West as reflected in the diversity of the reviewers' professions and their integration into the arts community.

But the most ardent hope of the organizers was more recognition in the West for the unseen strengths that exist in photography in Russia, the Ukraine, and Belarus. FotoFest will feature Russian photography during its 2012 biennial. While the names of the photographers to be featured has not been released, given the patterns seen at the portfolio review, the odds are that the works will include documents of Russian life both in rural areas where changes are slow and poverty is high, and in urban centers where change is rapid and brings all the advantages and regrets of modern life elsewhere. Photographing traditional life is a strong custom in Russia. The best work I saw was by Sergey Chilikov, whose color essay on his town, Yoshkar-Ola, conveyed complex community dynamics. Two photographers—neither of them absolute newcomers in the field—stood out for me in looking at the impact of Russian's new billionaire class: Anna Skladmann has photographed the young children of this sudden new demographic and their extraordinarily lavish lives, while Valeri Nistratov has focused on the rapid conversion from public to private land and the resulting fences that now make off-limits land that was once available to all for agriculture and recreation. Given how many of the photographers are self-taught, books, the Internet, and, for a few, the opportunity to travel to see photography outside of Russia have been beneficial. Nistratov has obviously looked closely at the work of Robert Adams, but his series of black-and-white photographs are his own. (Joel Sternfeld is another photographer whose work has influenced those who seek to portray the rapid physical and cultural changes.)

Along with Skladmann, another fine portraitist is Oleg Videnin, whose work was featured in a FotoFest “discoveries” show in late 2011. Among the older photographers, the new Kazimir Malevich–inspired series of black-on-black still lifes by Vadim Gushchin were also strong. Gushchin was for a while one of the photographers giving private instruction in Russia and is a thoughtful observer of photography in his country relative to that in the West. While videos were scarce, Olga Chagaoutdinova’s two black-and-white performance pieces were visually and emotionally engaging. The Group of 4, who work anonymously and collaboratively, were charmingly witty if in need of some greater exposure to the world of conceptual and performance art. Finally, because of my own current engagement with war photography, I saw numerous portfolios of both veterans of the Great Patriotic War (as World War II is known in Russia) and of current armed conflicts involving Russia. Karen Mirzoyan, winner of Magnum’s Photographer in the Caucasus Award for 2010, has extensively photographed postconflict situations in Armenia, South Ossetia, Karabakm, Abkhazia, and Azerbaijan. Dmitry Beliakov, who has made more than forty trips into Chechnya, probably has the most thorough coverage of that conflict. He has also made a strong portrait series on men in the Russian Special Forces (Spetsnaz).

These are a few highlights of works seen. As a veteran of portfolio reviews, I’d say that the percentage of great to good to weak work was proportionally about the same as at other reviews. And one can’t help but wonder about the work in those two thousand rejected portfolios. Like many other Russian resources, photography is yet to be fully explored.

—Anne Wilkes Tucker

The International Portfolio Review for Russian Photographers took place at the Garage Center for Contemporary Culture in Moscow, August 28–September 2, 2011.

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