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Camera in a city of shadows

Alexey Titarenko's work evocatively captures a tumultuous decade in his native St Petersburg, writes Art Critic, **Aidan Dunne**.

Though he is in his mid-40s - he was born in St Petersburg in 1962 - there is something distinctly boyish about the photographer Alexey Titarenko. It's partly the mop of incredibly thick hair, trimmed in a helmet shape, that crowns his head, and partly his intense, unaffected enthusiasm for his work. He and his equally youthful wife were in Ireland for the opening of his exhibition *City of Shadows* at the Sirius Arts Centre in Cobh.

The show at Sirius is substantial and features photographs from three distinct series of work that, between them, document a tumultuous decade in the recent history of Titarenko's native city, from the collapse of the Soviet Union to the turn of the century. The photographs are black-and-white, though in fact there isn't much black or white in them, but an extensive palette of greys, from radiantly bright to murkily dark.

He has been taking photographs since he was eight years old, and he was something of a prodigy. When he was 15 he was admitted as the youngest ever member to the Mirror Photographic Club in what was then Leningrad.

A photographic club sounds innocuous enough but, as he explains: "The significance of the Mirror is that you were free to show whatever you wanted. It was outside of state control, which was extremely unusual. And most of the members were not photographers, they were engineers, scientists, writers . . . They were free thinkers and discussed all sorts of ideas, and introduced me to underground art and literature. I realised that it was more important for me to listen than to speak. For me it was the foundation of my artistic personality." He read Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn, and listened to the music of Shostakovich.

It was when he began to see the links between Shostakovich's music and the historical fabric of the city, between art and place, that he became convinced that "all music influences perception". Attending the Leningrad Institute of Culture, he studied in the Department of Cinematic and Photographic Art. There, his choice of thesis topic was to have a decisive effect on his own work, though not for some time. "I researched French 19th-century photography, which meant that I was looking a lot of images made with long exposures."

After graduation he was obliged to do 18 months military service. It was, he says, "horrible. Worse than prison. Prisoners have more rights than you do as a conscript. I

think it was even worse then than it is now." Having endured that, he tried to survive as a freelance artist. "That was difficult because there was only one, official culture, and its job was to reflect Soviet ideology." His first concerted attempt to devise a language of self-expression took the form of a series of photo-montages, *The Nomenclature of Signs* in which he subverted the iconography of Soviet posters and statuary.

With perestroika and the collapse of the Soviet Union, he was involved in establishing the first independent photographic gallery in St Petersburg.

A breakthrough came when he was included in a major touring exhibition of new Soviet photography, *Photostroyka*, in the United States in 1990. His work was noticed. The Musée de l'Élysée, the "Museum for, not of Photography" (as he emphasises) in Lausanne decided to award him a generous grant. When he went to receive his grant they told him that he was also getting a Hasselblad medium format camera, probably the best camera of its kind, together with several lenses. He was happy. The grant was enough to keep him going for two years.

"It was essential because the economic system had collapsed in Russia, daily life had become difficult. There were shortages everywhere. People died because they did not have basic medication."

In St Petersburg he tramped the streets with his camera, to the rhythm of Shostakovich's Second Cello Concerto, with its combination of "despair and expectation". At this point he began to use the technique for which he has become best known.

"There was a lot of garbage on the streets, a lot of litter, empty shops, people moving endlessly around in drab, dark clothes, shuffling from one place to another, trying to find essential supplies. They seemed to me to be like shadows. This impression was so strong that I tried to work out how to convey it in photographs and I thought: long exposures." That meant using a tripod and staying in one place for several minutes. "It was the most dangerous experience of my life," he says.

"IT ATTRACTED ATTENTION, especially the attention of bad people." Bad people, he learned, could come in several forms, some in uniform. He had several close shaves. Then, when he started working around and in the central railway station, he had a stroke of good luck. "The station was a dangerous place. But somehow, because I had a tripod and was working, the police who patrolled there thought that I was some sort of surveyor and was working for the authorities. So they did not bother me, and they stopped others from bothering me. I was able to work quietly."

There were still practical difficulties. In one image, a human tide courses up a stairway beyond a rail. The foreground is deserted. Even a single person passing in the foreground, Titarenko explained, would have destroyed the exposure. He was positioned at the bottom of the steps, blocking the way and persuading people to ascend on the far side. "I'd say I had to divert about a thousand people in that time. I was sure it would not work, that someone would push through, but they didn't."

The *Sirius* exhibition takes its title from the resultant, extraordinary body of work. St Petersburg is architecturally beautiful, and Titarenko clearly loves the city - while recognising that things are economically much better now, for example, he is disappointed that commercialisation has obscured and distorted even prominent locations - but he doesn't idealise it in the slightest.

There is a novelistic density to his images, and an abiding sense of melancholy in their

moody tonality. The streets have a worn, lived-in look, and the people who inhabit them are indeed shadows. We see traces of lives rushing by, of time passing. Often a figure materialises out of the flux as if by magic, like an apparition. Of course it might not have worked. The pictures might have turned out as unintelligible blurs. But in the event it is their contradictory mixture of vagueness and precision that makes them exceptional.

Titarenko's subsequent series of photographs features a more positive view of the city. *Black and White Magic of St Petersburg* was inspired by Dostoyevsky's *White Nights* - "his last romantic work" and the city's distinctive, watery light.

Then, on August 17th, 1998, the economy collapsed. "Usually in August the city is empty. Everyone is on holiday. But now everyone panicked and rushed back and flooded to the markets to buy food."

Titarenko fixed his camera on the marketplace and recorded the influx. Looking at one of these photographs, he picks out one young couple rendered in sharp focus in the middle of the market. They are kissing. "The kiss must have lasted at least one minute, because that was the length of the exposure." This series he eventually titled *Time Standing Still*, not so much because of his way of working, but because of his appalled sense of *déjà vu*. "It was as if nothing had changed after all."

Things are better now. He feels however, that genuine change will only happen in the long term. Specifically, "the old mentality" of the Soviet Union still holds sway, and that will only be displaced by coming generations.

"In 1990," Titarenko observes, "I would not have been optimistic about the possibility of real change. Now I think such change is possible."

City of Shadows, photographs by Alexey Titarenko is at the Sirius Arts Centre, Cork, Wed-Fri 11am-5pm, Sat-Sun 2pm-5pm. Until May 27 021-4813790

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