

Alexey Titarenko's Venetian Style

By [WILLIAM MEYERS](#) | April 24, 2008

IN HER ESSAY ON [JOSEF KOUDELKA](#) IN "LIGHT MATTERS," [VICKI GOLDBERG](#) HAS A CRYSTALLINE PARAGRAPH IN WHICH SHE DISTINGUISHES BETWEEN STYLE AND vision. Any clever photographer willing to make the effort, she says, can develop a style. "Style depends largely on surface components such as composition and contrast, on aesthetics, on a consistent eye, sometimes on gimmicks. Vision probably draws as much from life as from the eye, from the heart as well as the brain, from the complexities of personality more than from ingenuity or mastery of craft." Style, in other words, is only a tool that a photographer uses with greater or lesser competence to achieve his vision. "[Alexey Titarenko: Venice](#)," currently at the Nailya Alexander Gallery, presents a photographer with a highly stylized technique that he puts deftly in the service of a strongly determined vision.



Nailya Alexander Gallery

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Alexey Titarenko, 'Untitled (San Marco)' (2001).

daguerreotype, and luxurious grays that intimate the antiquity of the city. The camera is pointed directly at the hazy sun that is centered between the two columns, and the photographer through his darkroom technique has brought out the dim sun's pearly reflection in the foreground puddles. The romantic atmosphere is further enhanced by vignetting, having the borders of the print fade to black. The encroaching darkness at the edges of the image emphasizes the precariousness of the weather, the huddled crowd, the city, and possibly something larger.

The 19 pictures in "Venice" are all easily identified as Mr. Titarenko's work because of his unique style, but in different pictures he uses different elements of his style to achieve different effects. In "Untitled (San Marco/Couple Kissing)" (2003), St. Mark's Basilica and the Campanile are in the background, and the arcaded buildings appear on either side. The print has been blanched, which gives the familiar site a timeless, dreamy quality. The slow shutter speed blurred most of the tourists and pigeons, so that they have become ghostlike wraiths of all the tourists ever to stare in wonder at their surroundings. But in the middle of the square, a man in black and a woman in white are fixed in an embrace, and because they are still, their image is sharp in spite of the slow shutter speed; love abides.

"Untitled (Canal/Laundry)" (2006) is a different Venice, a narrow canal that is the equivalent of a backstreet. The rears of ancient but ordinary buildings line both sides of the canal, and a low, arched bridge carries one blurred pedestrian across. A spare shaft of light plays on some laundry hanging from a line in the upper left. Except for the motorized boats moored to the right of the canal, it could be a scene from [William Dean Howells's](#) 1866 memoir, "Venetian Life." Mr. Titarenko's printing emphasizes the patches of light, the texture of the bricks and stones and plaster, and the quiet stillness of the water. Since so much of his style comes from darkroom techniques that are applied manually one at a time, no two prints of an individual negative are quite the same.

Mr. Titarenko was born in 1962, in the city that was then [Leningrad](#) and is once again St. Petersburg; like Venice, it is built on canals. He was taking photographs when he was 8, and at 15 became the youngest member of Mirror, an underground photography club. He graduated in 1983 from the [Department of Cinematic and Photographic Art](#) at the [Leningrad Academy of Culture](#), but stuck with photography because it allowed him greater freedom than the more corporate film work. "City of Shadows," his record of St. Petersburg, uses many of the same stylistic devices as those in "Venice," but to different ends. The slow shutter speed, for instance, turns Soviet crowds waiting in their inevitable lines into anonymous herds of sheep. Mr. Titarenko's evocative style is a supple tool used to realize a complex vision.

Until May 10 (24 W. 57th St., Suite 503, between Fifth and Sixth avenues, 212-315-2211).

Venice has been painted, photographed, and written about so often that even people who have never been there feel familiar with it. "Untitled (Columns)" (2006) is therefore immediately recognizable as a picture taken from the Plaza San Marco looking toward the Grand Canal, with the tall column on the left supporting a statue of the lion that is the emblem of St. Mark, and the one on the right a statue of St. Theodore. It is an overcast day with the sun shrouded in haze, the people crowded near the canal are carrying umbrellas, and the pigeons in the foreground are wading in shallow puddles. But the image has a feel of indeterminacy about it; when, for instance, was it taken? Mr. Titarenko's style has elements that resemble pictorialist photographs from the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The components Mr. Titarenko uses to achieve his personal style begin with his choice of a medium-format camera, a Hasselblad, and fine-grained Ilford film, which capture the details and subtle gradations of light that are important in his finished prints. All photographers compose their images and set their exposures, but his are distinguished by their formal balance and very slow shutter speeds; the long exposures affect the tonal rendition and, more important, present moving objects, including people, as blurred. In "Columns," it is the blurred umbrellas and pigeons that give us a sense of the photographer's unhurried approach. But much of the feel of this print was achieved in the darkroom.

Mr. Titarenko exposes his paper to a flash of light before turning on the enlarger to begin the printing process. He uses a cocktail of chemicals of his own devising. He brushes on faint traces of sepia to achieve delicate suggestions of tone, and very selective applications of bleach to create accentual highlights. As a result, "Columns" has a feeling of great depth, something like a