

The Sun

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Soviet Fairy Tales Dreary and True
Photography

By WILLIAM MEYERS
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The first exhibition one encounters at the Leica Gallery is "Postcards From Paris," a group show with pictures of the City of Light by such all-star photographers as Brassai, Robert Capa, Chim, Bruce Davidson, Elliott Erwitt, André Kertész, William Klein, Inge Morath, and Gordon Parks. There is Marc Riboud's wonderful 1953 picture of a painter gracefully balanced on a high girder as he slaps paint on the Eiffel Tower, and the marvelous warm colors in a 1959 picture taken by Saul Leiter of a woman reading her newspaper in a café. To go from "Postcards From Paris" to "Wonderland: A Fairytale of the Soviet Monolith," a solo exhibition of 40 black-and-white photographs by Jason Eskenazi, is to go from the effervescence of champagne to the cold reality of borscht.

Jason Eskenazi spent much of the 1990s photographing the former Soviet Union. The book he produced has the same title as the exhibition, and takes as its epigraph a quote from Stalin: "We were born to make fairy tales come true." Of course, in Stalin's fairy tales, the ogres win, the magic wand is a lash, and only the Party gets to live happily ever after. But it is interesting how many of the hinterland settings in Mr. Eskenazi's pictures seem unchanged, as if they had somehow managed to avoid the 20th century and remain their immemorial selves — stasis as a prophylactic against history.

Mr. Eskenazi is capable of his own dark magic. "Shutilova, N. Novogord Region" (2000) is a singular image set in an open area with nondescript one-story wooden buildings in the background. The open area is unkempt grass, with a broken concrete sidewalk and puddles. Two middle-aged women appear in the foreground, each with a heavy-boned, old-world face. One wears a skirt, a jacket, and a babushka, and strides resolutely toward the left side of the picture. The woman on the right wears what might be a housedress; she holds an open umbrella in her right hand and stands awkwardly balanced on her left leg. She has rubber swim fins on her feet. Who are these women? What is their relationship?

The picture was taken on an overcast day that adds to the ambient dreariness. The print has stark tonal contrasts that emphasize the modeling on the women's faces and bodies, making them solid and real. But it is hard to interpret the expression on the face of the woman on the left, not because the image is unclear, but because it is

puzzling. And if the heavy woman on the right needs an umbrella because of rain, why is she wearing swim fins? She would be funny if her expression was not so genuinely distressed. Although the particulars of the picture are uncertain, the overall impression is one of gloom in a world gone awry.

Mr. Eskenazi has a talent for dramatic complexity. "Jewish New Year, Uman, Ukraine" (1997) is unlike any other photograph I have seen of the Breslover Chasidim praying near the tomb of their spiritual guide, Rebbe Nachman, who died and was buried in Uman in 1810. There is a cinder block building. In the middle of the building is a window opening without a window. Two Jews in prayer shawls stand inside the opening facing out. Piled up high against the side of the building are scraps of lumber and other construction debris. There are three Jews outside the building, two men in prayer shawls and phylacteries — one to the right facing the building, and one in the right foreground with his back to us — and in the middle, at the very bottom of the frame, is the head of a young boy with a skull cap and earlocks, facing us. A length of pipe rises from the debris at an angle and disappears out of the top of the frame.

But there are also two uniformed men in the picture in the left foreground; presumably they are Ukrainian soldiers or police. Theirs are the faces — gentile faces — we see most clearly, one sunlit in right profile, the other in silhouette in left profile. They wear peaked military caps and have epaulettes on the shoulders of their jackets. What a jumble: the praying Chasidim, the pile of rubbish, the seemingly benign representatives of state authority, all in the bright sunlight of an autumn morning. There is a lot going on here, but Mr. Eskenazi's composition keeps it balanced. As in so many of his pictures, though, the full meaning is elusive; it is certainly more than the sum of its parts.

"Hotel Moskva, Moscow" (1998) is visually much simpler, but no less psychologically charged. The hotel, a major expression of Stalinist kitsch, was located near the center of Moscow. (It was torn down in 2003.) The picture looks down through a window from a hotel room on about the fifth or sixth floor. In the left half of the picture, we see little figures in an open area in front of older buildings, maybe theaters, built in traditional Russian architectural styles. In the right half of the picture is the window's lace curtain and the bare back of a young woman looking out the window. Although we only see part of the woman's face over her shoulder, we sense she is beautiful and intelligent. She does not seem to be taking in the sights as a tourist might, but rather meditating on the history that took place in the neighborhood outside the hotel. Her nakedness is not erotic, but lets her image function like that of a classical nude goddess, emblematic of something eternal and true.

"Wonderland" is a considerable accomplishment. Jason Eskenazi is a major photographer.

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