

TRANSFORMER OF INNOCENCE

EVGENY MOHKOREV AND THE YOUNG IN THE CITY



A common social experience of 'new economies' has been the transformation of settled social frameworks by the sudden irruption of the capitalist system and of market values into daily life. Russia has had more than its fair share of that. This rude economic awakening has parallels with the transformation of innocence wrought by adolescence. Russian photographer Evgeny Mokhorev has an uncanny ability to express this transformation in both the physical and allegorical sense.

Born in the Soviet Union, and an '*enfant terrible*' of the St Petersburg art scene since the late eighties, Mokhorev is a transformer of innocence. He places young figures in literal and metaphoric space to reflect his feelings about the resilience, the ambiguity, the adaptability of youth. Correspondingly, he exposes the stresses to which they themselves are exposed, stresses that bring out these qualities, and that reflect their origin in how Russian society thinks of and treats its young people¹.

Mokhorev's work has been grouped into series: "Dolls. Children's Games"; "Difficult age. Children of St. Petersburg"; "Ballet Royal"; "St. Petersburg. City Life"; "The walks across the city".

¹ For a still more aggressive example see the work of AEF+S, Russian creators of photo-images that set the young to war against each others as proxies in adult battles - see: <http://www.aes-group.org/>

His earlier work provided a broader visual context to the story of people in St Petersburg, his city.



Streets of St. Petersburg, 2001

His recent work has stripped away context and even clothing and succeeded in providing the viewer with a set of cues that invite a wide range of responses and significantly deeper cause for reflection.



Untitled, 2004

Young adulthood encompasses an important and universal experience and provides extensive parallels for the adult world. If art confined itself solely to the exploration of maturity, it would abdicate the opportunity to investigate innocence, change, risk, wonder, power, example, danger, honesty, simplicity, purity, cynicism, growth, and by

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implication responsibility and parenthood, which are all inescapably linked to the nature of adolescence.

In some circles, his focus on youth or sexual ambiguity (e.g. *About Clothes*, 2005 (*Boy in frills*)) will be seen as too



About Clothes, 2005

provocative. In truth, however, it is a provocation (if at all) that compels us more forcefully to confront difficult issues and to investigate thoughts and feelings both human and social. In the Christian West, loss of innocence is metaphorically brought about by the plotting of Satan, and is a consequence of the Fall, of the tasting of the Tree of Knowledge. This deeply colours our way of thinking and feeling about symbols of innocence and threats to them:

*Of Man's first disobedience and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world and all our woe,
With loss of Eden ...²*

² Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 1, 1674

Still, and whatever the artist's intentions, a good or great work of art may answer this perhaps Faustian search for knowledge and help us develop a many-layered understanding of the world. Knowledge hungers to taste the fruit of the Forbidden Tree. Art, to the extent it succeeds in providing us with understanding or enlightenment, is forgiven transgressions against taste or convention. Thus Bacon or Mapplethorpe succeed in ways Bouguereau does not.

Equally, the asexual use of pictures of the young in Arthur Tress' "My Brother Adam in Central Park" or Diane Arbus' "Boy with a Hand Grenade" makes them less visually shocking than the Japanese



Untitled, 2001

photographer Araki's exploration of juvenile sexuality in a consumerist world. Indeed, Mokhorev's response to his young subjects is often deeply classical, as in his pairings of young torsos - more Durer than Dijkstra.

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This does not prevent an understandably defensive caution in the viewer. The internet has highlighted the existence of circles of exploitation. Indeed in a world in which danger never seems far away – at least to Western communities that take TV-delivered images as their reality – the issue of photography and the young is a tender one. The words “artistic expression” can be used as cover for the exploitative and the immoral. Sometimes, especially in the United States, social sensitivity is sufficiently high that unexceptionable art shows are reviewed for pornographic or exploitative content. Photographs of children bathing trigger police reports. The hanging of works is deferred while legal opinions are sought. Mokhorev himself has acknowledged such risks³ but declines to accept inherently negative associations⁴ and defines

³ See <http://carytjerina.com/europe/> last accessed 6/9/08

⁴ “My attitude to pornography and voyeurism is the same as to a shadow that an object casts when

himself in Russian terms as a documentary worker rather than an artist, commenting on the pride of the subjects in, and their parent’s consent to, his work with them.

It is good, given these issues, that when we scrutinise Evgeny Mokhorev’s photographs and compare them to the work of such established photographers as Mann and Dijkstra, we find his images possess a depth that parallels or exceeds the latter and which validates the risks associated with the potential to shock. This is because he offers empathy as well as the capacity to disturb. His images are emphatically on the side of their subjects, not exploitative of them.

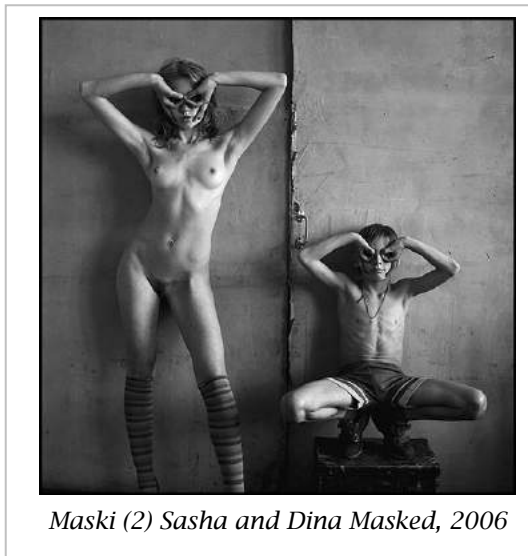
Mokhorev explores not only the literal and physical appearance of his subjects – mostly the socially underprivileged of St Petersburg – but also their perceived social status, their psychological relationships with society and their peers and their experience of growing up.

As a result his work has many layers of tension which create, under optimum conditions, a dipole that holds concept and reality in balance while maintaining an implicit conflict between the subjective and objective relationships portrayed. He expresses this visually in composition and lighting, and in his

blocking direct rays of light.” Courtesy of Russkialbum.ru

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treatment of surfaces, as well as his specific choice of subject and context.



Maski (2) Sasha and Dina Masked, 2006

For example in *Maski (2) 2006, Masked Boy & Girl*, the subject matter provokes and even requires us to think carefully about the boy and girl. Are they empowered, or victims? Are they trapped in a state of subordination, or latent with human potential? How far do they represent the opposite of decadence, perhaps able to find in their deprivation a sense of imagination, ambition and dynamism (all born of the need to struggle) that the privileged of St Petersburg, for all their wealth, will never achieve. At the same time, we are compelled to reflect on our own ways of seeing, about our self-concerned reactions and thoughts. “Why does this nakedness make me uncomfortable?” “Do I condemn or do I empathise with their state?” “Is the photographer a good or a bad person to set up, capture and show these images?” “What were the parents thinking?”

We are also influenced, often seduced, by the formal beauty of the images. Often elegantly and classically presented, they appeal to us at a number of levels. At the visual level, balance, line, contrast, harmony, elegance, geometry make an immediate impact: *Untitled, 2005 (Young couple, Torsos, see above)*. At the emotional level, innocence, childhood, uncertainty, vulnerability engage our sympathies and protective instincts, while incipient adulthood compels our respect for the independence of the figures: *Lyushka (Slim model on a chair)*.



Lyushka (Slim model on a chair), 2004

It is perhaps this sense of respect, and its associate, honesty, that led the parents of the young people appearing in the images to allow them to be portrayed by Mokhorev.

Despite our awareness of parental involvement in their role as subjects, we sense at the social level a distinct element of abandonment in the way

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these young people are handled by society, which in turn implies a broader abandonment of communal bonds of social responsibility.



Nude on Finsky Bay, 2004

We are thus made aware that cruelty and indifference are significant elements in post-Soviet Russian society.

It would be wrong to view this use of cruelty as judgmental. The very ambiguity of images presented by Mokhorev reminds us that reality is more complex than we generally allow. One cannot but marvel at the resilience displayed by Mokhorev's subjects. In images involving couples, young though they are, and disguised by masks or the framing though they may be, we are firmly aware these are or will shortly be independent individuals. This is so even if we are inclined to a negative view of their condition – how have they allowed themselves to be photographed thus? They will need to find their own way, as much by inner growth as by external

instruction. And if society, as it appears from these images, takes no interest, how can it instruct them, still less disapprove or condemn their path? We should take a sympathetic perspective – asking with Coleridge and Benjamin Britten *“Has he no friend, no loving mother near ?”*⁵

The formal beauty, emotional impact and human-social engagement are reinforced by a rich historical-classical component in much of Evgeny Mokhorev's work. Sometimes the form and use of profile remind one of Renaissance masters. Sometimes it is literal, as in his use of interiors



Kuzya and Alena, 2004

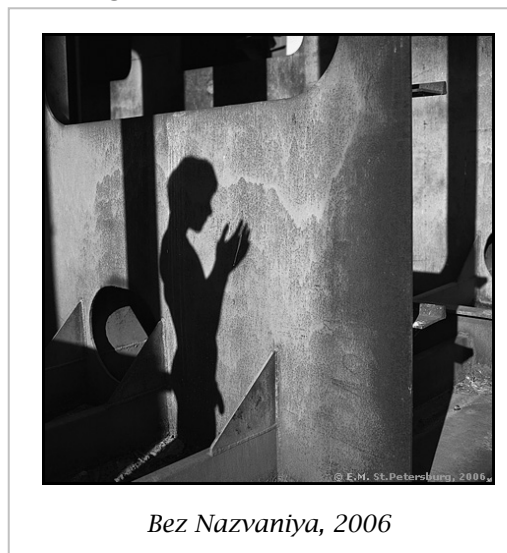
reflecting St Petersburg's rich cultural heritage. In other cases the presentation of bodies, moulded by light, generates a strong sense of the proportions and even materials used in classical sculpture (*Naturshchiki (2), 2006 (Rear Torso)*); as do the cross-references, by

⁵ From Britten's song cycle 'Serenade', here using Coleridge's poem, 'The Wanderings of Cain'

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way of props or framing devices used to achieve the same result (*Sasha and Hannibal, 2005 (Boy and Bust)*).

A respect for order and geometry also characterise much of his work. Even the use of shadow, combining classical geometric elements with hints of Plato's Myth of the Cave (*Bez Nazvaniya 2006, (Shadow)*), provide juicy layers of meaning for the viewer to chew on. Which is reality for us? The shadow, or the drawing on the wall, or the images we see etched or simply placed or standing veiled before us? At one level



Bez Nazvaniya, 2006

we know these are literal aspects of reality. At another we are unsure what they should or might represent. At another again, we recognise the multiple meanings that all situations have for people of different ages, cultures, histories and experience.

We can also note the distinction between the use of light by Mokhorev and the use of shadow and darkness by that other photographic explorer of youth's status

and emotions, the Australian Bill Henson. Where Mokhorev revels in the contrast between light and dark, Henson prefers the ambiguity of shadows⁶. Henson's young people are degraded, often, by the situations they find themselves in, Mokhorev's often ennobled. Henson's figures are lost in an adult world they cannot control, while Mokhorev's refuse to be humbled. The ambiguity of Mokhorev's figures resides within themselves. That of Henson's in their settings and their dependence on them. Henson's youths are passive, Mokhorev's assertive.

This suggests a fundamental optimism on Mokhorev's part, and a respect for and confidence in his young subjects. In contrast, Henson's youths seem captured, portrayed in scenes of great tension. Everything happens at the confluence of a Nietzschean moment, according to some irrevocable destiny that reflects all possible pasts and futures. We may not know what this destiny is, but the fatalism afflicting the young people in Henson's images affirms it exists. So, as Henson puts it: "The object in my photographs is not always the subject"⁷. In other words, those who obsess about the age of Henson's models miss the point of his work. Henson's self-observation also applies to Mokhorev, but - to indulge in over-simplification - the subject of

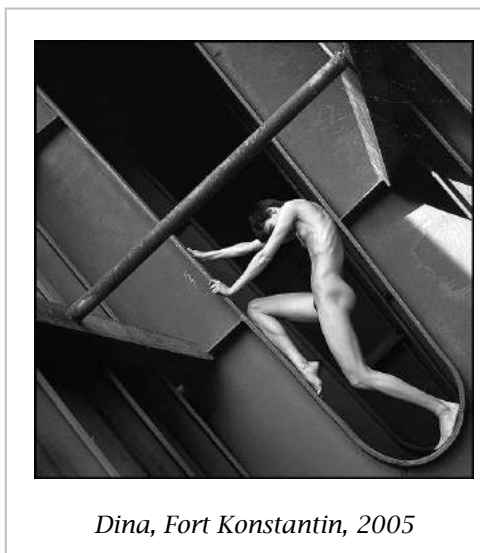
⁶ See at RoslynOxley9, Untitled, 1983 - 84 http://www.roslynoxley9.com.au/artists/18/Bill_Henson/123/

⁷ Lewis and Hall, Venice Biennale, 1995, catalogue

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Mokhorev's work is transformation and empowerment while Henson's subject is the status of innocence at a given moment and its lack of power or even will to change that status.

While preferring to use contrast, Mokhorev does use shadows, often metaphorically as well as literally. Thus Ivan in camouflage trousers is less likely, in Russia, to be a reflection on youth and fashion than one on youth and death, on beauty and the hardness of the world, on childhood and growing up. These, different sides of life, that all of us wrestle with at some time, are also dealt with in *Nastya I Patsanyi 2005 (Roof Group)*, which seems to suggest negative forces can be held at bay, but only if one is young enough to retain the optimism of youth and its indifference to the seductive pleasures of bourgeois comfort.

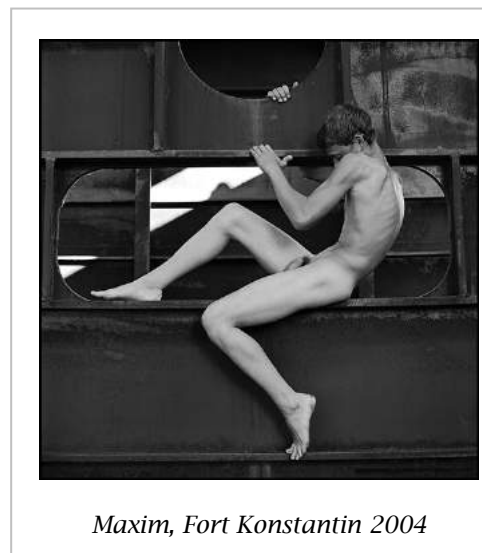


In often selecting individuals of an age and physique that renders gender

ambiguous, Mokhorev also explores our typecasting tendencies in areas such as strength and beauty, independence and vulnerability, youth and age (some of the youngsters look remarkably aged), even the styles of dress we attribute to men and women.

As time has gone on, it seems the style of Mokhorev's images has gently polarised, some acquiring a still-more stripped down quality. The softness of the surroundings has diminished. The isolation of the figures has grown. The contrast between the softness and elegance of the flesh and the unambiguous hardness of the settings is more tangible, unattenuated. And still he is able to conjure up surprising associations.

The late 2004/05 figures of a muscled but slight boy and girl, tensed and



embedded in the metallic surroundings of Fort Konstantin in Kronstadt, illustrate this shift. Captured in space,

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tensed into position, alert but static in their anatomical correctness, ambiguous in their combination of strength and sensuality, they also reinforce the classical qualities of his imagery, bringing to mind the figures flanking the lintel of Michaelangelo's tomb of Giulinto de' Medici.

A similar associative effect, alluding to the 1920s and generating the role and gender ambiguity noted above, is achieved in *Dina with Closed Eyes* (2006). The sharpness of contrast, the bands, triangles, circles and curves of black bring to mind a constructivist painting of the 1920s, while the pose of the model and her necklace contrive simultaneously to bring to mind a



Dina with Closed Eyes, 2006

muscle-builder, the attempted elegance of a 1920s vamp, and the nude celebrity portraits of Helmut Newton, an extraordinary combination of attributes that nonetheless feels quite natural.

At the other end of this polarisation lie

images that soften the flesh and the light, perhaps by employing gauzes or playing with perspectives, looking for the meeting point between people rather than focusing on points of opposition



Ivan and Nastya, 2007

between the subjects and the world outside. *Ivan and Nastya*, (2007), explores such relationships, with the girl looking out, clean and modern, arm wrapped around herself, while he stands gently hidden, like an Orthodox icon, behind the lace-edged gauze of the curtain, which once again reverses and renders ambiguous the socially traditional roles and attitudes of the sexes.

While Mokorev's tougher images generate in the viewer an empathy with the subject's weakness relative to the world, his softer ones generate sympathy with the subjects' ability to shrug weakness off and get on with their lives. There is still an underlying uncertainty and ambiguity of feeling because the subjects never succeed in escaping from let alone dominating their

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environment, but it is an ambiguity that reconciles moods, is a balm not a battle, and reflects acceptance not rejection.

Indeed, the human relationships established amongst the subjects that Mokhorev places in the picture frame are almost always shown as mutually supportive, even if the social context comes across as cruel or harsh. The innocence of the subjects is not subverted. In contrast the highly fashionable *enfants terribles* of the 2007 Venice Biennale, AES+F, use the language of violence and exploitation in their exploration of youth, pitting beautiful idealised youngsters against each other in battle, often using models drawn from ballet or modelling schools, embedded in Wagnerian or war-game-based scenarios.⁸ Mokhorev does the opposite. His youngsters are not idealized but real, the settings he chooses are genuine, not fantastical. Any idealism is internal and implied through character, not expressed through conventional beauty, though often beautiful. There is no cynicism. Most of all, the individual personalities as portrayed share supportive bonds of common humanity. These are communicated by compositional relationships and textures that reinforce the interplay in

his work between the mental and the physical aspects of reality.

In his choice of subject matter, he deals with the psychology of power relations – between rich and poor, child and adult, informed and uninformed, exploring the degrees of control we exercise over our internal and external worlds. A richness of ambiguous interpretation emerges.

Applying his visual toolbox, he deals with the psychology of personality, and through the use of clothes, lighting, textures, postures, masking, balance, order, shadow, line, materials of differing strengths and associations he conjures up the inner states of mind of the transforming child-adult.

Through his devices – mirrors, frames, windows, doorways, clothes again, layering of images and people, he explores the psychology of status and our self-perceptions. This aspect of psychology is associated with issues of power, but reflects formal rather than economic or knowledge-based status – for formal status can be entirely independent of any active power to impose anything on anyone (e.g. aristocratic status, or the status of 'the beautiful').

He chooses specific individuals, whose individuality he respects, and assembles various aspects of the total image to evoke human relationships in their full

⁸ See AES+F at http://www.aes-group.org/last_riot.asp: This paradise also is a mutated world ... where inhabitants lose their sex, and become closer to angels. [In] the last riot, where all are fighting against all and against themselves, where no difference exists ... between victim and aggressor, male and female

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range, while also respecting their humanity in the general sense. As a result, when we view these pictures, we know we see a slice of reality. This slice allows us to witness a single moment in a process of transformation that, caught between a beginning and an end while reflecting both, is necessarily ambiguous. The individual is both child and adult in an ambiguity of identity that is profoundly human.

Nobel prize-winner Amartya Sen, writing about the concept of identity⁹ accepts that it is core to man's humanity, but he also points out that it is our desire to identify and to belong without ambiguity to single categories, that underlies many of the tribal tendencies that divide us and ultimately may drive us to fight each other. Mokhorev's work, by embracing ambiguity as a key element of human nature and demonstrating Sen's proposition that there are many "We"s wrapped up in each "I", produces images that project values of acceptance, toleration, compassion and mutual understanding. Mokhorev through his art brings to life a special blend: the idealism of the young with an adult's awareness of reality - an awareness the young will come to possess as time works its transformation.

Paul Derbyshire, 2008

All photos: *Evgeny Mokhorev*, courtesy of Nailya Alexander Gallery

Front page image: *Sergei and Nastya (Portrait for a newspaper)*, 2005

⁹ Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence*, Norton, 2006