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Jury Rupin

Are you going to Sorochincy Fair?

Photo documentary inevitably produces a narrative, held within the image is a visual dialogue between the concerns of the photographer, their aesthetic decisions and the selected subject. In the case of Jury Rupin, who died in October last year, his archival images betray his circumstances, that of *being* a photographer under Soviet rule in the Ukraine and the difficulties that were a daily fact of life. Unlike Boris Mikhailov, with whom he was both a friend and collaborator (they co-founded the Vremja (Time) Group, he never had the same exposure in Western Europe and it is only now that his work is being seen in Britain.

There is a particularly appealing vibrancy to Rupin's images stemming from his physical engagement with process and developing, his "trial and error" photographic practice in the army and, after qualifying as an engineer, taking a course in art history. What his images offer us, beyond their compositional elegance, is an important historical archive predominantly shot during the 1970s and 1980s in Soviet Ukraine. There are though obvious distinctions between subjects taken as photo reportage or commissions for newspapers and those that were taken for artistic pleasure and a drive to "do something different" the latter including a number of nudes. Trying to get his images seen in the West was problematic; his widow Elena Rupin tells how his photographs were briefly disseminated between 1974–6 when he mailed them to various photo clubs and venues in Europe and America including the Wichita International Exhibition of Photography. Eventually the KGB caught up with him, "dissuading" him from further exposure on the international scene. The "heavy" tactics included "coming to have little chats with him" and returning images that he had posted, defaced and torn. Mikhailov and Rupin exhibited together during these years but the lack of venues and constant surveillance by the authorities necessitated their public exposure being restricted to friends' apartments in Kharkov.

Rupin's images of everyday Soviet life are particularly important as "moments in time" from a country that is undergoing rapid restructuring along Western capitalist lines.

Fair in Sorochincy (7) (1983) shot in black and white epitomizes his keen eye and compositional skill. A peasant woman in a traditional headscarf clutches a tyre under her arm, her other is raised to drink her beer. Framed dramatically against the sky, the image has both hints of the "heroic" workers from Russian Revolutionary cinema and also Rodchenko photographs such as *Pioneer with a Horn* of 1930, stylistically the face and body are pushed up against the picture frame. However, despite the fact that Rupin's cumbersome Russian camera would have been something of a novelty, people just carried on their business as normal or were quite happy to pose for him. In contrast, *Gypsy Nude* (1976) reveals Rupin's artistic sensibility. Shot on colour film, on the surface this is an image of a beautiful, young, nude woman with tousled black hair standing in a deserted field clutching a bunch of freshly picked white stemmed blooms to her chest, and framed against a cloudless blue sky. Yet Rupin's "Eve" is a problematic subject, nudity was frowned upon by the state and finding people to pose was always an issue, the fly that has alighted on her flawless left shoulder, a portentous metaphor. There is purity in this image, a version of an idyllic world that suggests the American flower children of the late sixties and a pre-industrial rural vision. *Round Little Table* (1977), shot in black and white in an apartment in Kharkov, is completely different yet the composition still maintains a formal rigor; a young woman twists her nude body as if caught in the middle of exercising. The tightly framed composition reveals abstract printed wallpaper that echoes the graphic style of El Lissisky. Our eye is led from the back view of the girl on an axis that embraces the round table, the small mirror on the wall and blank television screen in the corner. Both in terms of an art historical engagement with the gaze and as an archival dialogue, the image is laden with political metaphors from freedom of expression to state control. Mikhailov stated in 2002 that there is "no documentary photo-history, no panoramic history of Russia...it exists only in the form of fragmentary pieces". This fractured dialogue becomes pertinent to the Ukraine if we compare a nude by Mikhailov taken for his *Red Series* 1968–75 shot at a time when according to Elena Rupin both men liked to be together "24/7 just walking around with their cameras". Mikhailov's nude is a much more aggressive image. His model pulls up her pink top, her mouth open as if commenting on her act, the defiant pose, bottle of wine on the table and bowl of food, a portent of Mikhailov's later *Case History* series. It is, though, in the nude series that we see Rupin's experimental drive, images such as *Sauna* (1972) not only place him visually in the frame with classical nudes by artists such as Ingres but also link him to the history of photography and pioneers such as Thomas Eakins. The muscled workers in *Sauna* rubbing each other's backs reveal yet again Rupin's ability to transpose an ordinary intimate act of camaraderie to a historic print. Rupin, however, fell foul of the authorities with a naked woman he shot in a square in Kharkov, which he recalls "was sent to an exhibition in Poland, where the director sent it to the Polish KGB who sent it back to Kharkov and the authorities closed down the photography club, not just the group, but the whole club".

Many of Rupin's images capture mood and era in the Ukraine exposing the conflicts between the traditional dress of the working class and the lure of the "seductive West". *Kharkov Girl* 1977 illustrates this. Rupin commented that, "She's a typical Kharkov girl, quite provocative in dress and behaviour... but in those days to wear such a short skirt was shocking and she would have been severely criticized. So she's a symbol of her time." Standing framed against modernist concrete flats behind her is a now obsolete (Stalin Automobile Factory) ZIS lorry. *Yaroslav Bus Stop* (1977), however, provides a different street scene at a time when Rupin self-confessedly admired Cartier Bresson. Four women, three in red coats, provide an undulating rhythm to the composition. The women's faces are turned refusing to face the camera. Rupin suggests that they were fully aware he was taking the shot, as his Salut Camera was obvious. The elegance of the image gives it both a pictorial and historical quality that pleased Rupin who declared that "I like this picture," continuing "the idea was in the air, you know, red everywhere... Boris Mikhailov's work (Red) is very different, he likes photographing rubbish dumps and all sorts of depressing things. I don't...There's nothing in those pictures apart from abominations and upset."

Although Rupin moved with his family to Lithuania, it is his images taken in the Ukraine that seem almost poignant and map the changes and restrictions in the Eastern Bloc. The fresh faced boys in *Pioneers* 1977 on parade and saluting proudly to camera wearing their red scarves and vowing "always to be ready" provide a potent polemic when contrasted with Mikhailov's *Case history* and two homeless young boys saluting in torn and dirty clothes twenty years later.

It is in the ordinary daily lives of the Ukraine citizens and Rupin's photographic intervention that enable us to read the images on a number of levels: aesthetically, socio-politically and personally. Small incidents are recorded — Rupin's car is stopped by the militia, images are shot from a moving tram as he takes a journey with his wife. He documents circus performers. In *Portrait of Majackaja* (1985) his sitter smiles at us with a bright, anxious, brittle expression propelling back into past lives. As Rupin sadly recalled, "Everything was planned so that everyone had more or less what they needed. But it was bad for people like me, for artists, creative people who wanted to achieve something or do something."

JEAN WAINWRIGHT

All images courtesy Ordinary-Light Photographs © Jury Rupin.