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Olga Chernysheva

BAIBAKOV ART PROJECTS, MOSCOW, RUSSIA



Olga Chernysheva, *Guard* (2009)

At the bottom of the endlessly long metro escalators in Moscow you'll find a uniformed guard in a glass box watching a monitor with CCTV footage of the very same escalator. This projection of half-hearted vigilance is ubiquitous at every tourist attraction and museum in Moscow. The guards at Lenin's tomb direct you with a solemn but forceful hand gesture, ensuring that you don't linger too long in front of his body. A security guard in the State Tretyakov Gallery stopped me from exiting through the door I'd just entered, even though it appeared to be the only way in or out of the museum. When I asked why, his philosophical reply was, 'Would you climb out the window of your house?'



Guard (2009)

These weary security guards, whose pseudo-authoritative functions illustrate the hangover of a former era, are the subjects of Olga Chernysheva's series 'Guards' (2009), which formed part of her exhibition at BAIBAKOV art projects, entitled 'Present Past', curated by Boris Groys. In these matt black and white prints Chernysheva portrays the guards in their workplaces, though they could be anywhere at any time, night or day, present or past. Their uniforms and badges suggest authority but their demeanour speaks differently: they confront the camera with blank stares and resigned stances. One wears sandals that expose his bare toes, another stands limply in front of a map of the city. Chernysheva's images show these men as if under the dank lighting of Moscow's underground tunnels or seen through the city's polluted haze. Such an unadulterated, deadpan presentation borrows something from Boris Mikhailov's unforgiving views of his fellow Soviets in the 1970s and '80s. This is not a flattering presentation of Russian 'security'.



Cactus Seller (2009)

Chernysheva's series of small light boxes of black and white photographs, 'The Cactus Seller' (2009), delves deeper into the inner life of one such state employee. These muted, impressionistic snapshots focus intermittently on a man working in what appears to be a natural history museum – the kind which are rarely visited except by school groups and in which displays collect dust. The aging cactus seller with his thick glasses, bent over a small glass enclosure, tends to a group of miniature, potted cactuses. We see him in periodic glimpses between images of stuffed birds with their wings spread, live snakes and skeletons in cases, arranged in an almost cinematic sequence. The glances Chernysheva provides us of his environment are akin to passing by a window and glimpsing an elderly person's apartment through lace curtains, where ceramic figurines, nativity scenes, and modest house plants grace the windowsill. In this case, the cactuses in their greenhouse and the animals in their displays are perfect metaphors for the attempts to care for and preserve something that is aging and nearing obsolescence. A poignant metaphor for the pervasive feeling of post-Soviet life in the city.



Untitled, Dedicated to Sengai (2008)

The exhibition also includes Chernysheva's homage to the Zen monk and painter, Sengai, her video *Untitled, Dedicated to Sengai* (2008). Here, a woman stands in an expansive, crowded plaza beside vendors dressed in sandwich boards, trying to sell a miniature Etch A Sketch. As people walk by her, she demonstrates drawing three shapes, but her work attracts little interest, perhaps suggesting that the artist's occupation is as redundant and anonymous as the guards'. The video effectively captures the distances that Moscow engenders – heads bent downwards as one walks through the underground tunnels of the Metro, or the emptiness of the near-abandoned museums full of relics.



Cactus Seller (2009)

Chernysheva's works contradict the picture of oligarchs and opulence that the contemporary Russian art world often projects. Here instead is the other side of Russia's transformation, the lingering hangover from a previous era. Despite the appearance of her subjects, there is still room for other interpretations of their obsolescence – there might even be some residual pride. Though the

exhibition's wall text describes the subjects of Chernysheva's work as 'people whose jobs consist of doing nothing', the artist herself has said that when she asked one of the escalator monitors if she liked her job, she replied, 'I feel very important because so many people pass me. I feel like the general at a parade.'

Christy Lange