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Artist of the week 95: Olga Chernysheva

With a magpie eye for detail, this artist uses photographs, video, paintings, and drawings to capture Moscow street scenes – and a nation still mired in post-Soviet contradictions

By Skye Sherwin



Leading light... Olga Chernysheva's photographic light-box installation *The Cactus Seller* (2009).
Photograph: Stephen White/Calvert22

Olga Chernysheva has a special term for her approach to making art: "avoska". In 1980s Moscow, everyone had an avoska: a shopping bag that you'd permanently carry about just in case something good turned up in the erratically stocked shops. Wandering through the city today, Chernysheva is always on the lookout – though now her "avoska" is a camera rather than a bag. In addition to videos shot on the spur of the moment, she produces photographs, watercolours and drawings which record everything from parades to buskers, bathers, tramps and security guards. What she captures is not simply life at street level but a post-Soviet state of mind.

Born in 1962, Chernysheva came of age after the Soviet Union's demise, a time she recalls as extraordinarily intense. Following a decade when conceptual artists largely made work behind closed doors, Chernysheva was invited to study at Amsterdam's Rijksakademie – the first Russian artist to do so. Moscow was caught up in the beginnings of a capitalist revolution; amid the sweeping change, what Chernysheva has focused on are people apparently cut off from the flow of history.

The recent watercolour series *Blue-Yellow* (2009) depicts typical Moscow market traders flogging

pickles, vegetables and ladies' clothes from little blue and yellow tents. They look more like medieval travelling players than people at the cutting edge of modern commerce. It's a sense of isolation reflected in *On Duty* (2007), which comprises photographic portraits of guards on the Moscow metro. Sealed up alone in glass booths, with their eyes raised as if in religious contemplation, they might as well be invisible to the passengers filing by. Chernysheva's photographic light-box series, *The Cactus Seller* (2009), presents another kind of inner withdrawal: a bespectacled man tending plants among the dimly lit displays of a natural history museum.

One to watch: Included in this year's Artes Mundi prize exhibition, her 2003 video, *The Train*, follows a man Chernysheva found reciting poetry on the railway system out of Moscow. Walking back and forth through the carriages, he intones an obscure early work by Pushkin, while the train speeds on. Old and new worlds collide.

Looney tunes: Rather than study art – which in the Soviet era meant painting and sculpture more often than not – Chernysheva initially trained in animation at Moscow's film academy. Here she discovered the work of the 19th-century Russian realist Pavel Fedotov, whose final painting is the basis for her recent video, *Intermissions of the Heart*, in which a dog performs a trick over and over, caught in an endless loop.

Where can I see her? A survey of Chernysheva's work is at Calvert 22, London, until 29 August 2010.