John Peter Askew

Photographs from Russia, 1996-2017

© Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, UK, 2019, Installation of *We*

John Peter Askew is an artist living and working in London who has worked with photography as his principal medium since 1994. Askew thinks of photography as moments out of time in which we have an opportunity to reimagine our relationship to the world.

He has exhibited as part of major international exhibitions, including Rencontres de la Photographie d'Arles and the Prague Biennale, and at venues including The Photographers' Gallery, London; Icon, Birmingham; the National Museum of Photography, UK; Dilston Grove, London.

In 2019, his work was the subject of a major solo exhibition at the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art, UK. To accompany the exhibition, a 386-page book, *We*, was launched at the Photographer's Gallery, London. In the introductory essay, Alistair Robinson writes 'Here, art returns to its true role as a space of the intellectual and affective 'commons' in which ideas and experiences can be shared'.

Askew was first trained as an economist at Manchester University. He then studied sculpture (BA First Class) at Sunderland University before completing an MA in Fine Art at Goldsmiths College, London.

All images © John Peter Askew, from the series *We*, Photographs from Russia, 1996-2017

Right page: Window and Leaves, 2008
Following spread: Carousel in Snow, 2007

As a young man reading Economics at Manchester University, I was drawn to studying the Soviet Union. What absorbed me more than the workings of a command economy were my daydreams about the enchantment of snow. My first memory of Russia is sleeping in a compartment on a train slowly moving east from Moscow towards the Urals. I dreamt snow was falling upon me through the darkness. When I awoke it was to an endless white landscape sparkling in the morning sun.

It was 1996 and I was travelling to Perm where I had been invited to exhibit my photographs. Sharing the compartment with me were Natasha Dubrovina and her husband the poet Robert Belov who had come to Moscow to meet me. The train was overflowing with disorderly soldiers returning from the war in Chechnya and Natasha, a cautious person, was wary for my wellbeing. Robert had other plans and on the ruse that he needed to escort me to the toilet we escaped to the restaurant car. Here we were served boiled potatoes and pickled herring washed down with vodka which Robert liberally spiked with pepper to soothe his stomach ulcer. Unscrewing the top from the pepper pot he poured all of its contents into his glass. The snow falling outside the train window was now real and as magical as any dream. I saw how the snow makes everything anew, uniting disparate things, creating harmony. A man that I had never met by the name of Giorgi Chulakov, a partner in an electronics repair firm, had sponsored the exhibition. He paid for my train ticket to and from Moscow, printed the advertising posters for the show, and for much of my month in Perm invited me to stay with his family to learn about the city. There wasn't a lot of money around then, as it was only five years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, so I knew this was a significant gesture. It was a gesture of faith – faith in the importance of art and friendship and in what photography can promise.

I often know what I feel about the world but not what to think. Looking, for me, is intuitive, grounded in feeling- whereas words, a greater construction, can obscure. I found early on my inability to speak Russian, not having to think about the world in words, opened up a space for me; a freedom which I filled with looking. It allowed me to feast my eyes on the world.

Right page, top: Football Game, Reindeer Jumper, 1998
Right page, bottom: Woman Carrying Water Buckets in Snow, 1998

Returning a year later to undertake a residency at Perm State Puppet Theatre I was met at Moscow Sheremetyevo Airport by Giorgi with a van overloaded with electronic equipment. It was deep winter. Outside Moscow, under brilliant blue skies, the roads dissolved into frozen streams of snow and ice for the long drive to Perm. Russia makes every other European country feel small by comparison. Perm is nearly 1500 km east of Moscow. For comparison it is 1500 km from London to Warsaw deep into Eastern Europe. Even though this was a journey they had undertaken many times in the past we regularly got lost. Signposts disappeared and the road got narrower and narrower until it petered out altogether at a farmhouse or a wood and we had to retrace our tracks. Twice, Igor, the driver lost control of the van at speed on the roads of compacted snow and both times we were saved catastrophe by soft drifts of snow lining the road. Once we were able to dig ourselves out but the second time we had to rely on the help of a farmer to pull us out with his tractor and the services of a local mechanic to repair the damage. What I remember most vividly of that journey is stopping on the outskirts of a village where women had gathered by the main road selling food. Served from gigantic thermos flasks we feasted on hot, home baked, pastry pies filled with mashed potato. I can picture the pies steaming in the cold air, the simple, perfectly seasoned delicacy warming hands before filling our eager mouths.

Giorgi and his eldest daughter Lyuba visited me in England the following summer. We spent a week together on Colonsay, an enchanted island off the West coast of Scotland. The clear sea to them was an unimagined, magical world, as their winter had been to me. Not long after, Giorgi sadly died of cancer. Over the subsequent twenty years whilst photographing his family and friends I have tried to infuse my photographs with the clarity of the light and the radiant, jewel-like colours that we witnessed together during that week.

“To change the world we need to change the stories we tell about it.”

Left page, top: Cork and Bark Boat, 2017
Left page, bottom: Child Sleeping in Flowers, 2010

My visits to Perm continued regularly and for 12 years I gave little attention to the photographs I was making of my friends and their lives, except to compile handmade photo-books and playful collages and post them as mementoes back to the Chulakovs. Perhaps this accounts for the unselfconscious nature of many of the images. It was this aspect that initially drew my attention back to them in 2008 after returning from spending a memorable summer in Russia. That summer I had joined Giorgi's wife Valya, Ann their youngest daughter and their son Deema, for a month long 6,000 kilometre round road trip to Altai in south western Siberia. We were accompanied by two other families, the Ketov's and the Bolshakov's, close friends of the Chulakovs who had over the years also welcomed me into their lives. The trip was an adventure not just for me, it was an exciting and ambitious undertaking for everybody. The purpose of the journey was to watch a solar eclipse and to undertake a week long walking and camping expedition into the base of Mount Belukha, Siberia's highest peak. A snowy pinnacle pointing to the sky which has been for millennia, a focus of Buddhist, Hindu and Shamanist spirituality. In Altai folklore, the mountain is believed to be the gateway to Shambhala (Shangri-la), a place of peace, tranquility and happiness; a "pure land" where all citizens are enlightened.

On the first day of the trek we encountered torrential rain and my camera became waterlogged after I had walked for hours with it stored neglectfully in an unfastened, external pocket of my waterproof jacket. Alexi Ketov had come equipped with two cameras and he generously lent me one. The next day I lost my footing whilst crossing a deep, fast flowing mountain stream and this camera became waterlogged too. More in desperation than hope I took my camera apart, leaving the components to dry on a flat rock by our camp. In the process I lost the small metal battery compartment cover and became further distraught. Undeterred my friends fashioned another one from the metal of a tin can without any implements other than an axe and a multi-tooled pocket knife. Miraculously once dry and reassembled the camera functioned again.

I was at a loss that I couldn't photograph much of our expedition into one of the most remote, beautiful and unspoilt regions of the world but over time I have come to realize that the photographs that ring true for me are those that elevate the everyday, rather than those describing the dramatic, grandiose or spectacular. Returning that summer to London I realized that I had accumulated an archive of over ten thousand images, and that this was a single body of work that stretched back fourteen years at that point, and now over twentyfive years and amounting to nearly twenty thousand images. The archive encompasses four generations of the Chulakov family. In this it resembles those nineteenth-century novels that can map time in a way we cannot be aware of outside of art, by showing change and continuity, one generation after another, across relations and friendships.

Right page, top: Removing Splinter from Finger, 2017
Right page, bottom: Candles, 2008

As an outsider in Perm, that is as someone who can't speak Russian sufficiently fluently to participate in every aspect of life, I can only ever create my own story, my own play of the Chulakovs' lives. The Chulakovs are a family of three sisters and a brother, just as in Chekhov's play Three Sisters. I discovered too, that Chekhov had written to Maxim Gorky, saying that when he set his play in an imaginary provincial town, he was thinking of a place exactly like Perm. Lying at the heart of Chekhov's play is arguably the sense of difficulty that human beings have in living in the present. In the play, the three sisters all long to return to Moscow, where they imagine their 'real' lives to be, from the provincial town much like Perm where they are stationed; and yet what I immediately saw in the Chulakov family and their friends was the joy they took in being in the present moment. I understood that my photographs similarly had to speak about what it means to be rather than do.

To change the world we need to change the stories we tell about it. To shape these new stories, we need to change the way we look at the world. Currently there is a dissonance between the dominant ideas that shape our societies and [people] being. I first became aware of this disjunction as a student studying economics, I was struck how economic theory built from modelling, graphs, statistics and numbers is far removed from how lives are lived. Our neglect of the peculiarities of everyday lived experience, and our failure to pay them attention or give them merit is one thing that leads to an immoral society, that neither cares for its fellow man and woman, nor for the wellbeing of the wider world.

So at the centre of my work is the desire to pay respect to the things in the world that I photograph, whether that is a person, an artifact, a plant, or an animal. The photographs should show them in their best light, in every sense: they assert their place in the world and their value to the community around them. This action of paying respect to people and indeed to things, gives a reason for and a meaning to living in the present. I see it as a necessary stepping-stone towards lasting political change. Until we can appreciate the materiality of the world as well as the relationships between people, (and between people and things), we cannot hope to question our wastefulness or frivolous attitude to fundamental things like friendship, sharing food, raising families and becoming aware of what lies outside of ourselves.

Left page: Man in Swimming Trunks, 2008
Following spread: Women and Children Outdoors, 2009