

To Find the Key That Fits (2006)

Alexander Borovsky about Anastasia Khoroshilova

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Let me declare at the outset that the photography of Anastasia Khoroshilova at first left me at a loss for words, but not for the usual reason of having to come to terms with a puzzle of conceptualized and peculiarly personal images. Rather, Khoroshilova's images are clear and attractive, their "doors flung wide," in the Russian poet's phrase. The reason for my hesitation lay elsewhere. Indeed, strictly speaking, it lay in me, in the difficulty of finding an adequate language of description. I have long been unhappy with the state of affairs in this area. The descriptive language of modern photography took shape in the 1960s and has hardened in place ever since. Any writer today who ventures out without the shield of a philosophical or semiotic citation from Barthes (or Benjamin or Sontag or one of their ilk) must feel himself to be walking naked among wolves. As for photographers themselves (the advanced ones, of course, those most at home in the context of strategies of significance), it is unthinkable to imagine them even picking up a camera without also carrying along a copy of Barthes' "Camera Lucida." In short, modern photography is now entirely enlisted in the service of semiotics, social criticism and psychoanalysis (a service that has its rewards: the more open the photographer to interdisciplinary commentary, the more likely that he becomes "important").

And so in studying the work of this quite young artist I found myself confronting fundamentals of photographic meaning that I had forgotten how to think about.

...Tones that are natural, organic; a smooth alternation of planes; lighting that is quiet and even; revealing (but unforced or otherwise "stagy") setups. Finally, genuine interest in the people in front of the lens. An interest so sincere as to be virtually indecent—entirely unforced, not spelled out. Well-intentioned... steady... reliable for the long-term... certainly not an interest arising from topicality... How to describe this in the usual terms of photographic discourse? In talking about old photographs, we have no trouble getting at their existential aspect. They often give themselves away with their naive accompanying inscriptions pledging to "long remember."

Khoroshilova takes pictures of modern people in the spirit of the old photographs. The suggestions of human contact and warmth, of mutual understanding between artist and subject that we sense here suit her pictures. Yet the irreducible presence of other dimensions remains... the everyday becomes the existential, the here and now the eternal. And all it has required was to find the key to the person portrayed.

I am seeking the key to Khoroshilova. Viktor Misiano, who wrote the first published essay about Khoroshilova, was quite right in pointing to her as part of the "post-diaspora" phenomenon, a generation educated and professionally formed abroad and thus free of the complexes and other baggage of the emigre/immigrant. Those few of the preceding generation of artists who were able to find their way as culturally Russian members of the international art-scene did so at a great emotional price. For Khoroshilova, the process was natural: She studied for years in Germany and grew up familiar with the rules of the game and familiar with the names of the principal players in European photography and the world of museums and galleries.

All this is a given. But then there are things that seem to me no less important than questions of background and skill in shaping this artist's personal lens, her "optics."

Khoroshilova's first big project, the series called "Islanders," was executed in 2002-2005. The series is aptly named; its subjects are indeed islanders, inhabitants of places isolated and separated from the people-crowded areas of the mainland: the pupils of the State Academy of Choreography in Moscow and the residents of Essen's dormitories. Crucial here to the artist's vision, no less than her subjects' training as professionals, are their life concerns, including the seemingly trivial if inescapable annoyances of the everyday. In terms of the technical, professional aspects of the photographs—format, color, lighting, printing—everything is at the European level. If hitting the bull's-eye of topical, interdiscursive interest is to be taken as part of professionalism, again all is well. Topically oriented photography is today absolutely wedded to anthropological, gender-related and socially critical themes. The depiction here of adolescent ballet dancers, almost children really, rehearsing at the bar or trying out poses in moments of relaxation in the cold, official interiors of a dormitory can be seen as fitting any of these concerns or all of them at once (or one could make central the even more passionate contemporary discourse about juvenile sexuality à la Sally Mann). But an interpretation pitched in that key in the case of Khoroshilova would be all too approximate.

Her concern is for something else and clearly does not lend itself to appropriation by the reigning discourses. One must have had personal experience of the alien spaces of dormitories and rented flats to fashion a poetics of this kind... I think of calling it a poetics of resistance to emptiness. Khoroshilova's material is unique psychologically and socially: In each of these diminutive adolescents, tormented and worn down by the endless teaching and practice, one encounters a will and endurance that is totally unchildlike—and each has his individual story. But what chiefly unites these subjects (significantly more than similarities of age, professional ambition and social background) is the struggle waged by their warmth, their humanness against emptiness. In other words, Khoroshilova has managed to show not merely cold, official, empty spaces, but emptiness itself, a region of emotional absence, un-life. Her subjects are sucked into the whirlpools and eddies of impersonality (their naive attempts "to make a life" are both touching and absurd). But the small, childish bodies gamely resist the threatened emotional-temperamental nullification; the artist accords them, in addition to all else, the function of generating warmth.

Why the generation of warmth and not simply its preservation? It seems to me that Khoroshilova deliberately emphasizes her subjects' immobility, an immobility born out of deep self-absorption, not fear and uncertainty. Her ballet dancers endure all this, the burden of training and rehearsals, of a loneliness entirely alien to childhood, in effect of isolation, not for the sake of preserving their biological warmth, not merely to survive. They have another mission. It is as if these children are listening hard to themselves, listening for the signs of ballet in themselves... It seems to me that in this special separation and self-absorption one catches the dawning of a metaphor of art, even if it is not completely realized...

Khoroshilova's second major series, "Bezhin Lug," was done in 2004-2005. It also is aptly titled, but the multiple allusions to Ivan Turgenev's much anthologized story, to Sergei Eisenstein's film, only fragments of which survive after Stalin ordered it destroyed and to Vladimir Sorokin's "Turgenevesque" novel, "Roman," are incidental, if inescapable, a kind of intriguing semantic background hum. In fact, the references help bring out the photographer's method of a conceptual narrative. Her telling involves a very definite—unhurried, detailed—ceremony-like procession of time passing as well as a journey through the essential, hidden Russian countryside. This is not even to mention the guarded nature of rural socializing and conversation and the mutual testing that went into the photographer's search for keys to unlock these people of the Russian countryside. Here we have the substance of the temporal dimensions of the project—in their aesthetic, topological and behavioral aspects. We are talking here of that very Russian country person who was the subject of longstanding socio-cultural controversy and that became ideological in Turgenev's time only to become especially aggressively ideological in the Soviet era. Khoroshilova, with her personal and cultural background, had no reason to entangle herself in this eternal quarrel (as Osip Mandelstam said, these are "arguments going around in circles"). And so she chose an approach that would allow her to evade all of this: an "optics" of the most clear and transparent kind, without dust or tears affecting the vision, an even illumination, a regular distance between lens and subject and a typical kind of pose or, rather, no pose at all but instead reliance on the fact that photographs are events for country people and that, before the camera, they naturally freeze into positions that are both habitual and slightly demonstrative. These visual tactics are not so much analogous to something culturological as to the ordinary understanding of the concept of tone (to find the right tone, to take the right tone). Why is this "finding" and "taking" important? Because it is a step toward trust. It would seem that Khoroshilova did indeed grope her way toward and discover the right tone for communicating with country people and country life. As has been noted, her tone is devoid of ideology. It is really a matter of meaningful behavior. In fact, however, on this the photographer had few choices. An ethnographic approach to one's own people would be insulting. A fingerpointing, critical approach would be even more insulting. A social-documentary approach would require the kind of artificial collaboration now modish with respect to some localized social groupings. This tactic of collaboration in connection again with one's own people raises ethical questions: Is it not a kind of ingratiating to win trust? The choice had to be something else. Thus, we have Khoroshilova's "right tone"—quiet, steady, courteous. Show respect, and you may be invited in. Show your interest in people and their life, and they may agree to be photographed. One small step at a time—toward a condition of mutual trust. And meanwhile the artist never forgets that she is a guest. A certain distance is preserved (the visual means of doing this were outlined above). Moreover, this is a distance that will never entirely be overcome: there can be no real return to roots, and in any case Khoroshilova is not the sort of person to seek it. This distance also presupposes an absence of special preparations by the subjects: The artist's interest is in these individuals and these lives just as they are. Her serenely steady goodwill is undeflected, whether it is confronting the impressive or the laughable, something fine or kitschy, the earthy or the enlightened. I find particularly noteworthy, incidentally, the absolutely uncondescending respect that Khoroshilova accords kitsch, whether Soviet or contemporary. There is a remarkable accumulation of ideological visual junk to be seen in country homes. Soc-Art artists would be agog. But this young artist has a different response. Understanding. To use her computer to clear away all the junk or, contrariwise, to play it up artificially, to force attention to it would be, in either case, to violate the integrity of others' lives, lives worthy of respect and vulnerable to the aggression of unexpected irony (one thinks of "War and Peace": "It never crossed his mind that anyone might laugh at his life"). As a result of the manipulations or, rather, the ethical choices described earlier, we have here something unique in contemporary photography: a series of pictures of Russian peasants who look into the camera lens—with trust. This is worth a great deal.

In Khoroshilova's "Baltiysk" series the material is again very specific and socially sharp-edged and again with an unspoken theme that is only occasionally linked to the outward shape of the narrative. Baltiysk (Prussian Pillau) is a Russian military seaport on the Baltic. These days, of course, it is an enclave, and thus the theme of "Islanders," isolation and alienation, continues. The texture or surface of Baltiysk, with its mixture of typically Soviet buildings, military monuments and agitprop displays with the solidly bourgeois architecture of the 19th century and the remains of ancient fortifications, is itself quite special. As is the makeup of the population, which after the war became a mix of mostly military personnel and a few civilians attached to the port and hailing from all corners of the USSR. Until recently the population was augmented only with new draftees and remained otherwise closed even for Russians, let alone foreigners. The result was a special kind of population distinctly uncomfortable living in East Prussia. Obviously, in dealing with such inflammable material, Khoroshilova would pay her respects to photo-journalism, registering with her camera the material traces of the clash between the militaristic civilizations of Prussia and the Soviet Union and the variety of human types on the scene. But the best work in the series bursts the bounds of genre. Khoroshilova's dead-on shots of young sailor-recruits have their genre elements—some unrelated movement may be caught in the background or perhaps the figure of an officer looms up without any apparent reason, "strolling along by himself": life taken unawares, as it were.

However, what actually "comes through" is a kind of somnambulistic self-absorption that throws the journalism, the anthropology and even the portraiture into the background. . . . What emerges in the foreground is a kind of undeliberated flight or escape from the imposed and controlling reality. Each of these service-bound individuals, even when caught in the perfect performance of duty, turns out to be a sovereign territory in himself entirely non-coincident

with the territory of the enclave. We get an even stronger sense of uncertainty about rootedness in the “here and now” from the double portraits of naval officers and their wives at home. Everyone has heard, of course, about the difficulties in personal arrangements and the lack of housing that greatly trouble the personnel of the army and navy. This sense of an underlying unsettledness in living arrangements is much intensified in Baltiysk by the feeling of temporariness that has been a condition of life there throughout the postwar period. Khoroshilova has found a way to represent these complex and dramatic social moods. Her subjects hold hands, underscoring their ties to each other as the only connection open to them. Connections to place, to a way of life and to their surroundings are all too shaky and uncertain, and this feeling is conveyed by the tried and true method of positioning of the figures in space.

Khoroshilova seems to be seriously engrossed by the theme of military life. Her just completed series, “9.5%,” seems to me to be perhaps the most powerful narrative we have of women in the armed services. Certainly it is the most believable. Surprisingly, this young, thoroughly civilian girl-photographer was able to establish contact with all her subjects, from contract privates to colonels, and with all their female and service problems, from bonuses to the ban on pregnancy for the length of one’s signup. It would be wrong to retell the narrative here. It needs to be “read.” I will make just one comment: If Anastasia Khoroshilova could convince so many women in uniform to allow themselves to be photographed, she surely has many keys yet to use. Keys to people.