

ER

ENCLAVE REVIEW

Olga Chernysheva
Calvert 22, London
Klara Kemp-Welch

Olga Chernysheva's melancholic videos, dimly-lit photographs and unassuming watercolours do not comfortably fit the sleek contemporary space of Calvert 22. The gallery (dedicated to Russian and Eastern European Contemporary Art) is a tasteful blank canvas. Chernysheva's recent portraits of contemporary subjects, meanwhile, carry the burden of Soviet history, albeit surprisingly lightly. She herself carries her camera like an *Avoska* – a 'just in case' bag that people kept with them in Soviet times in case they stumbled upon a rare delivery of some consumable goods worth having. Chernysheva is 'always on the ready to capture something poignant if it appears' (David Thorp, *Olga Chernysheva*, 2010), and she finds plenty that is poignant in today's Moscow. She finds Metro attendants in glass booths and monumentalizes them in oversized black and white photo-portraits (*On Duty* [2007]). Her lens settles upon their faces, searching for the story each has to tell. The guards gaze upwards with their eyes raised dourly as if to the heavens. They may wear official uniforms, but they are far from impenetrable: their ordinariness inspires our sympathy. If Rodchenko's *Pioneers*, from the famous 1930 series, cast their eyes towards the promise of the future announced by the Communist plan, Chernysheva's mostly ageing pioneers gaze into the distance in anticipation of the malfunctioning of the machine. Paid to stay immobile in their booths, they watch with admirable stoicism the

unforgettably steep escalators, ready to intervene if needs be. It is a life spent wearily waiting for the worst case scenario. Citizens can step in to interrupt the march of technological progress, but they must make a decision about when to do so. Political resonances abound.

On Duty leads to the series *Guard* (2009). This time, security personnel are shown standing. We do not know whether they are in the business of protecting property or safeguarding lives, and it does not matter. This is a reworking of the German photo-documentary tradition of classifying subjects according to their trade. But Chernysheva produces difference rather than similarity, deliberately failing to provide evidence for the physiological characteristics of a type. The guards are a diverse assortment of men, formally unified only by virtue of appearing alone in the work-spaces that frame them. It is a moving study of alienated labour and masculinity, of resilience, resignation, and withdrawal, induced by hours of standing. The men's body language is unnervingly revealing as we scrutinize their shyness or bravado.

Russian Museum (2003) is screened on a loop in the adjacent room, its mesmerising but melancholic 'zen meditation exercises' spilling out of that space. Through Chernysheva's lens we look into people's thoughts as they look, reflected in the glass. We see them gazing into exquisite 19th century genre scenes and landscapes,



Olga Chernysheva: *On Duty* (2007). Gelatin silver fibre print from a series of eleven. 136 x 90cm. Courtesy Galerie Volker Diehl, Berlin and Foxy Production, New York. © Olga Chernysheva

oblivious to a patriotic guide's running commentary, recorded on location. The guide confidently offers a collage of didactic absurdities alternating between the meaningless, the offhand, and the outrageous: 'the psychology of art is inseparable from geography, do you understand?'; 'only the warmth of Greece could produce such an upspring of human creativity'; 'humanity is still chewing over these achievements like a piece of chewing gum'. But this is not what people see in these paintings. They lose themselves. Represented and lived time fuse: an ancient guard taps her feet, an adolescent girl in beige earnestly scans the flesh-coloured brushstrokes of a painted child's cheek. Visual silence successfully exceeds the din of museum traffic. The contemplation of masterpieces is best pursued in isolation, and the museum, such as it is, is clearly poorly suited to providing the conditions for individual communion. The privileged pursuit of the contemplative life necessitates an extensive economy of guards. There are multiple museum attendants, and soldiers laughing and stamping their feet outside in the snow. But if guards and attendants are everywhere, they seem too halfhearted in their presence to proliferate and to become the nightmare they do in Kafka's trilogy. They are just workers wrestling with boredom until they go home at the end of their day.

Installed diagonally in the basement, we find black and white photographs from the Moscow Zoo museum in light boxes, themselves like artefacts. Amongst images of prehistoric skeletons and delicate boxes of dead birds are photographs of a spectacled man busying himself with something from behind a strip-lit tank full of cactuses. The hero of *Cactus Seller* (2009) has set up shop in the museum and tends his treasures against a backdrop of frescoes resembling one of Komar and Melamid's *Most Wanted* series – oversized stags in action, pictured in a forest landscape. The cactus tank is a microcosm in a nest of parallel realities: the world of the tank, then the bizarre world of the museum, then the strangeness of post-Soviet Moscow. Inside, life carries on calmly, at many removes from what others, outside, might think of as reality. Time does not stop in these worlds, it carries on. Nothing much changes here. The metro attendant below the ground, the guard above ground, the cactus seller, the melancholic inhabitant of the one-room apartment in Chernysheva's reworking of Pavel Fedotov's painting of someone lounging in bed holding out a stick for a dog to leap over (*Intermissions of the Heart*, [2009]), the market stallholders in the watercolour series *Blue-Yellow* (2009); each an island in an invisible market that has been edited out of the scene – these characters exist within their own reality. Chernysheva respectfully studies these isolated experiences. Whether society is broken or the individual has been liberated from belonging to a type is left as an open question. To each her own reality, for now.

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