

Shamil Khairov: “I need the signs of the presence of humans...”

From the interview given to Alexei Savkin, the Russian magazine ‘Digital Photography’, September 2006.

A.S.: Tell us about yourself. When did you become interested in photography?

S.K.:

In the normal way. At the age of six I loved to go out with a simple camera, which was in my family, to raise the shutters and push the button, and pretend that it was a photograph. Then, when I was eight, I first saw how my older sister printed photographs at home. It was all there; the night, an unusual environment, the smell of the chemicals, the red light. The magical appearance of pictures was exciting since.

Art photography came to me quite late, when I was already 28. To be exact, after I finished my post-graduate studies at Leningrad University, I arrived in Petrozavodsk to teach Linguistics at the pedagogical university. The nature of Karelia and the reserved character of Petrozavodsk fascinated me instantly. Making the acquaintance of the best Petrozavodsk photographers gave me a start. Every summer, I would go with students to the Russian North, on dialectological expeditions. During this time I felt the magic of the colours of a summer’s ‘white’ nights. It was a real treat for any photographer.

Since then I have had a recurring interest in what I term ‘amateur photography’. This interest has seriously interfered with my work and linguistic interests in the past, but not to such an extent any more. I photographed a lot especially in Slovakia, where I taught Russian language and culture at the end of the 80s. Then it was back to Russia again, followed by a short spell in Sweden, and then universities in Ireland and Scotland. It is true, that my time in Ireland and Scotland coincided with a crisis I had, of photographic blindness; I took very few photos, and those that I did take were not up to standard.

A.S.: How would you explain such a crisis?

S.K.:

There are probably a few reasons. On one hand, something happened inside me, a change of some kind. On the other hand, the different circumstances of my new jobs demanded my full concentration, and I was unable to give photography the same attention. If we’re talking purely about photographic reasons, in the West the people, places, and colours did not move me as much. In both Ireland and Scotland you can see landscapes of unthinkable beauty, in stunning atmospheric conditions. But the beauty of an object alone is not enough for me. I need the ‘signs of the presence of humans’, or what Barthes calls ‘punctum’. I would wander the streets, but only see the external appearance of life... and in such moments, I would also lose the idea of who would be seeing my photos. In the first years of my teaching abroad I photographed for people in Russia, but at the end of the 90s it became clear that my friends and colleagues in Russia were not in the same place as me. That, and a feeling of personal domestic localisation, maybe you could call it ‘Where am I, and what am I doing?’, became different. I greatly admire the Czech photographer Koudelka, who has produced a series of wonderful photographs of Ireland. He succeeded in getting to the heart of the matter.

A.S.: Is it a result of this that your photographs are mainly of Russia?

S.K.:

Yes. You start to see a rhythm, even where there is none, and to resonate with the colours and details that are the signs of life. Russia, in general, is fertile territory for a photographer. I’m not talking about mud and ruins, but something else, other signs of life. I generally take a provincial outlook. I was born and raised in a provincial town, and spent every summer in the Tatar countryside.

A.S.: Tell us about your course, and how it relates to your current photographic interests.

S.K.:

Being a Slavonic linguist by trade, and with my main job being a teacher of Russian, I felt that foreign students were looking for something outside the traditional areas of language, literature and history, for a non-verbal kind of knowledge. In 2003 I taught a course at the University of Dublin called ‘Russian Visual Culture in the 20th Century’. The

format was a combination of lectures about the Russian avant-garde artists, the history of Soviet posters, and visual propaganda. Photography played a significant role in all of these areas. Rodchenko, Lissitzky, the group 'October', the famous photos of the war years, and also contemporary photography. As I was unable to do justice to modern painting, I decided to focus on the photography. The course turned out to be very much in demand. The following two years I taught it in Finland, and now it is included in the Slavonic Studies options programme of Glasgow University. It is in line with my own interests, and also raises new questions. I started to present papers on Russian photography at seminars and conferences. My most recent paper, given at the conference of Irish Slavists, was written to coincide with the 60th anniversary of the victory in World War II, and featured the photographs of Yevgeny Khaldei, 'The Flag over the Reichstag' I then had the idea to write about the situation concerning modern photography in St Petersburg. The first step towards this was the notes I made during conversations with renowned St Petersburg photographers of various genres.

A.S.: Are you continuing your involvement in creative photography just now, and in what form?

S.K.:

Right now, the British poet James Sutherland-Smith and I are working on a project, which we have called '*photopoems*'. I am suggesting photos, and he is writing poems and words that resonate with them. It is interesting, that sometimes his poetry coincides with my impressions, and at other times he sees and feels something completely different in the photos that did not occur to me. It is turning out to be an interesting creative process. A small part of this series was published this spring, in a London literary magazine. In the near future, if all goes according to plan, we will be organising our own exhibition, with James' poetry and my photography. In the exhibition we intend to organise poetry readings, as well as discussions about poetry and photography, and there will be text accompanying the photos.

A.S.: So after a long break you returned to photography, and what's more when you returned it was in the age of digital technology. What are your impressions about this? Has there been a switch from classical, film-based technology to digital?

S.K.:

This has already been spoken about a lot. I will try to expand on my opinions, from the subjective point of view of an amateur. Because of my constant moving around, I found myself cut off from a proper dark room, and the appearance of affordable digital cameras and printers at first seemed like a saviour. A long time ago, as a student, I naively believed, that I would write literary and linguistic masterpieces, on a typewriter. Then there was a similar expectation, when the computer took the place of typewriters and card indexes.

It has turned out, that the ease with which a snapshot (including those which have pretensions towards art) flies out of a printer, or flashes across a computer screen, is a danger as such. Every so often the question arises: why are there so many pictures? The prospect of being invited 'to have look' at a flurry of other people's photos on a computer makes everyone extremely bored. It can be called the pollution of the visual environment. And here you begin to understand Cartier Bresson, who in his last dozen years refused to pick up a camera. Another danger lies in the psychological influence on '*homo photographius*'. This comes from the direction of glamour, glossy publications, advertising, and photographic technicians with their guidance on what is 'good photography'.

For professionals, first of all, the final result is important, and already in a number of areas there is evidence of the technological victory of 'digital'. But for amateurs, and more specifically for me, every stage of the photographic process, from the initial thought or idea (the birth of photography) to the final result, is no less important. If this process is too fast, then you can't have time to get to know your work.

A.S.: You consider yourself an amateur photographer, although in 1988 you joined the Russian Union of Photographic Artists. That, in my opinion, slightly alters this status. How would you define an 'amateur photographer'?

S.K.:

In my view, these two definitions - 'photo artist' and 'amateur photographer', - are not exclusive of each other. Membership of the Photographers Union did not make me any better or worse as a photographer. As regards the status of an amateur; it gives a lot to someone who has this status. First of all, there is the freedom and independence from customers and clients, professional business, and the like. An amateur has no censors, except the censorship which you impose upon yourself.

The main judge of an amateur remains his/her own taste, which can always be improved. Any disappointment caused by mistakes is compensated by the joy of successes. An amateur is not ashamed to experience trepidation before his object or model, nor before the resultant photo. In an amateur, one can find a concentration of all the psychological and social factors of the phenomenon of photography. In this sense, he/she is akin to a poet. A poet has words at his/her disposal, a photographer has vision. The fountain pen is available, just like photographic equipment, but the possession of a fountain pen, or a camera, or even a membership card, does not make a person either a photographer or a poet. Both poetry and photography are special forms of self-expression. The main thing is that through photography, just like through poems, exists the search for yourself, and the attempt to share with others your discoveries, your heartfelt feelings.