

PRIDE AND BELONGING

Simon Roberts goes to Russia

by Jean Dykstra

One of the photographs in “Motherland,” Simon Roberts’ expansive photo essay on contemporary Russia, is a portrait of Dmitry Fesenko. A top professional snowboarder, Fesenko stands on the snow-covered banks of Mount Elbrus, with the Caucasus mountains behind him, wearing a Burton sweatshirt and camouflage pants

and holding a board emblazoned with logos from Nokia and Red Bull. He’s the very image of free-spirited youth, one commodified and promoted by global corporations, and so would seem an unlikely representative of the Russia that has been narrowly depicted in the West—the sleeping bear with the stagnant economy and crumbling infrastructure.

Roberts spent a year traveling across Russia, starting in July 2004 in the far eastern regions of the country and winding up in Moscow. In between, he logged more than 46,600 miles and took an estimated 5,000 photographs in more than 200 locations, including Siberia and Vladivostok,



Simon Roberts, *Outdoor Market. Grozny, Chechnya*, from “Motherland,” digital C-type (dimensions variable), 2004. Courtesy the artist and Klompching Gallery, Brooklyn, New York. © Simon Roberts

less than 100 kilometers east of the Chinese border. It was a journey taken in the spirit of the American road trips of Stephen Shore and Joel Meyerowitz in the 1970s. Wide-ranging in subject and humanistic in spirit, Roberts’ photographs reveal a country with an unorthodox and often unexpected beauty. History may weigh heavily on the country, but, in his photographs, it doesn’t define it.

Roberts became interested in Russia while studying for a degree in human geography at the University of Sheffield in central England. Roberts went on to study photography at the National Council for the Training of Journalists, and after becoming a professional photographer, he began to pay closer attention to the images he was seeing in the mass media. He noticed that the pictures coming out of Russia after the collapse of the Soviet Union didn’t reflect the social and political changes that were taking place there.

“While there had been several important photo documentaries produced, and while all of them conveyed their own truths about Russia,” he says, “I felt that many insisted on collapse and deterioration—on the consequences of the past—as opposed to the possibilities of the future.”

Roberts had been to Russia only once before, for a few days in 1994, to visit his wife who was studying there. Ten years later, they wanted to see for themselves how things had changed. Roberts funded the endeavor himself, saving for more than a year so that he did not have to rely on editorial assignments to make the trip. This meant that he could make his own way through the country without being driven by deadlines, and he could choose his subjects without concern for how they illustrated a news angle. He photographed Evgenia Kuzmina, a pretty blond dentistry student and part-time waitress in the declining city of Magadan, for instance, then turned his attention to the play of patterns in a room at the city’s Ocean Hotel—leopard-print bedspread, floral headboard, vine-covered wallpaper—an



Simon Roberts, *Camping with Sasha and Pavel, Kamchatka Peninsula, Far East Russia*, from “Motherland,” digital C-type (dimensions variable), 2004. Courtesy the artist and Klompching Gallery, Brooklyn, New York. © Simon Roberts

interior as wry and dispassionate as any by Stephen Shore. He documented members of the Yakut tribe, which arrived in Russia in the sixteenth century from Turkey, and made a remarkable portrait of a red-headed butcher at the market in Pyatigorsk, in which the red of the meat, of her hair, and of the pipes overhead draws the eye through the image. “The photograph speaks of the spiritual idea of the *rodina*,” says Roberts. “Here is a woman who seems completely at ease with who she is, while at the same time there’s something otherworldly about her, something dignified and beautiful.”

Rodina is a term that, simply put, refers to the notion of the motherland, but Roberts describes it as “almost a painful yearning of the heart.” He points to one photograph in particular, of Alexander Zhukov and Pavel Lipatov camping on the Kamchatka peninsula, one of Russia’s most isolated regions: Zhukov cooks over an open

fire; Lipatov lies on the bare ground, under a gray sky. Lipatov runs treks for tourists through the region, and Roberts recalls, “He spoke passionately about what it meant to be Russian, the sense of belonging to the land, being part of Russia’s black earth.”

For Roberts, Lipatov embodies the idea that “Russia has experienced a turbulent history but deep in the Russian consciousness lies the conviction that suffering is in fact the wellspring of the resilience and pride of the Russian people.” Though his photographs don’t shy away from depicting economic troubles, homelessness, political strife, and violence (several images touch on the conflict in Chechnya), Roberts’ viewpoint is profoundly more optimistic than, say, Boris Mikhailov’s photographs of Ukraine. Roberts’ photographs give expression to a sense of pride and belonging. The thread that links his pictures in this sweeping project is his genuine curiosity and warm regard for his subject.