

Fresh Perspectives on Contemporary Photography Feb/Mar 2007/£4.50

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From Russia with Love

Simon Roberts

Simon Roberts's passion for photography is like a seam running through his life; a constant presence, which has resurfaced, time and time again, via magical moments and turning points. Now, with the forthcoming launch of his first book, *Motherland*, a visual statement about contemporary Russia shot from 2004-5, Roberts continues his journey through the medium, the origin of which can be traced back to the time he saw an exhibition of images by Ansel Adams of Yosemite, USA, where he was on holiday with his parents. He was 14. "It seemed that photography was able to capture the spirit of the place more than I was seeing, I remember it being quite a powerful experience," he recalls. "What really amazed me were the clouds – I'd never really noticed clouds before. Then suddenly, in these photographs, the sky was brought to life."

Motherland is the culmination of a year-long trip he undertook with his wife Sarah, who had studied Russian at university ten years earlier and whose contribution to the project was vital. "I'd want to credit her, wherever possible. She was the translator – I could bounce ideas off her, she was supportive, helped edit, and was an integral part of the experience." Together they discussed the trip and at least half of the journey was pre-determined. However, the other half was instigated by the people that they met, "so it was spontaneous which I think was very important", he explains. Using a website to engage with communities and find places to stay, the couple entered Russia's multi-faceted worlds. "I wanted the approach to be very structured and blend landscapes and portraits with more architectural and still life images using different methods," he continues. "The landscapes are very much a wide perspective which put the portraits in context. It's all about the enormity of Russia and the vastness and how people are dwarfed by space; I wanted the landscapes to mirror that and for them to hold a lot of information, so they are almost maps which you need to read."

Throughout his teens, photography enthralled Roberts and he studied it at both GCSE and A-level. He wanted to continue to degree level but he was "encouraged not to" by his parents. Coming from quite a conventional background, he took a "more academic path" and went to Sheffield to study Human Geography. "In retrospect, I'm very glad I didn't do a photography degree," Roberts adds. "Geography has played a very important part in where I have come to as a photographer now... studying social science was quite enlightening and opened up a number of avenues to explore with my photography later on in life."

Another key moment occurred when he moved to London and spoke to a close friend, who was a reportage photographer and had just returned from Chechnya. Here was someone brimming with passion combined with a belief in what they

Zhenya and Mia, Yakutsk, Sakha Republic. Zhenya is serving his two-year compulsory national service, stationed in Vladivostok. He and his pregnant fiancée Mia are about to fly to her parents village in the far north of the Sakha Republic, where Zhenya is to meet Mia's family for the first time.





Sasha and Galina Namakonova, Alexandrovsk-Sakhalinsky, Sakhalin Island. After an industrial accident, for which he received no compensation, Sasha Namakonova is cared for 24 hours a day by his wife Galina in their small apartment in Alexandrovsk-Sakhalinsky.

were doing. It was a winning combination and “something I felt I had to explore”, he says. “It sparked me to go for it, so I moved back to Sheffield to do the National Council for the Training of Journalists course – a very vocational press photography course.”

For a photographer in his early thirties, Roberts has a wealth of experience behind him. He won the prestigious Ian Parry Award in 1998 with a photo-essay shot in black and white, which was, he says, “an extremely important turning point in my career” and gave him inroads into the highly competitive world of magazine photography where his work has been published widely. This led to a story the “Snow Birds” for *The Sunday Times Magazine* on the temporary migration of elderly Americans, “who break every convention and were living life to the full. It was a way of flipping the story and our stereotype of retirement”. It also signalled the “optimistic slant” he would lend to his work as he attempted to redress the emphasis on negative representations. “My work is shifting outside the magazine world and developing as I get older and get a better sense of who I am and what I want to do,” he says. “I’ve never conformed to the hard-core photojournalist.”

With *Motherland*, Roberts is also forging a path towards wider public appeal and recognition. “Motherland is a definite departure in terms of my style, it was the first time I shot 6x7,” he says. “I wanted to shoot larger format but it was just totally impractical carrying a 5x4 around Russia for a year. I wanted to slow the whole process down and be more considered. I can still be close to somebody and take an



intimate picture but I can do it in a different way from shooting 36 frames, where I jump around and take a picture from every angle and try and cover every aspect of the portrait. I can take one frame and it can be as powerful, if not more powerful.”

Using a medium format Mamiya 7 with 65mm and 80mm lens, Kodak 400 colour film and available light, Roberts has interlaced landscapes with environmental portraits, which are, for the most part, of people photographed as he met them in the street. “I wanted the portraits to be quite deadpan, I didn’t want too much expression. It was kind of an anthropological approach, in the sense that I was almost cataloguing the Russian people, so I wanted them to be very similar. I knew that for this to work, you have to be quite structured. Everyone is always photographed front on; either three-quarters length or full, and usually looking at the camera. It’s like the method you use in experiments at school where you always keep something consistent so that the changes you make can be identified. Here the change is the place and what they are wearing, the details,” he explains.

Roberts is questioning of representation and how images are appropriated. It’s no easy feat to avoid the “rehashing of stereotypes” – a phrase he uses more than once – on both a personal and collective level but in his latest project, he has attempted to “step out of (his) own preconceptions and ideas and to be very open-minded”, at the same time as recognising that no photograph is objective. “My overall message is trying to show a different view of Russia – not to show a place that is disintegrating or falling apart but to look at identity and where it’s come

Meat market, Pyatigorsk.









from and what it means to be Russian. I'm not interested in looking at specifics – the nouveau riche or certain people in society – but in a more general, optimistic view of Russia. However, I don't think I've produced a chocolate-box, propaganda of the country."

It was the geographical aspect that also fascinated Roberts. Russia is the largest country in the world and he wanted to make a visual statement about contemporary Russia. Traversing the country from the Far East through Siberia, up the Kola Peninsula to Kaliningrad, before heading down to the Northern Caucasus, the Altai Mountains and along the Volga River, the couple covered 75,000 kilometres and crossed eleven time zones.

As the journey progressed, the central theme of the book emerged. The concept of 'rodina', which is translated as motherland and refers to the place where one is born and feels a sense of belonging. Motherland is also identified with the nation's soul and became the title of the book. He says that it is probably the most important word in Russia in terms of identity and an introductory essay written by the academic Rosamund Bartlett explains the word rodina, through Russian history, and provides a context for the photographs.

But the year was also an odyssey. "It was a spiritual journey and there was this idea of discovery; it was a journey for us to a place metaphorically, not just physically. Our child was conceived while we were travelling and Sarah became a mother," he reveals. Their daughter was born four months after they returned. "She's not called rodina, is she?" I ask. "No, Jemima, but she does have a Russian middle name – Lara from *Dr Zhivago*."

One of the challenges for Roberts, as a photographer, is to get the book "outside of the photography art market", and he hopes that it will have wider appeal for those interested in Russian culture and society. To this end, a map with reference points indicates where the photos were taken and quotes from Russian literature, political figures, and proverbs, which are based on the idea of motherland and identity throughout history, are scattered randomly throughout the book. There seems to be a Zeitgeist effect inhabiting the world of contemporary documentary photography, especially in terms of recent book releases. The representation of communist, and former communist, countries has been getting a bit of a makeover with colour at the helm as the 21st century generation of photographers foreground beauty and new futures – and Simon Roberts is understandably optimistic. The work for *Motherland* has already been exhibited in China, Toronto and Paris Photo; there's an exhibition in the Print Sales Room at The Photographers' Gallery this month and the book launch in early March. "It's a pivotal moment for me," he says with a smile. "It feels like the beginning of something." — MIRANDA GAVIN

Simon Roberts is represented by The Photographers' Gallery, London.
www.simoncroberts.com

Motherland will be published in March by Chris Boot Ltd. www.chrisboot.com
 An exhibition of the work will be shown at Photofusion, London
 from 13 April until 26 May.