Art and documentary photography

Home to Telephoto, a launchpad curated by the Telegraph alongside a collective of independent publications who share an expertise in photography.

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By Lucy Davies
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Polyarnye Nochi
Simon Roberts' photographs of the Polar North surprise with raw grandeur.

Britain may have sulked through freak temperatures of -21 degrees celsius last night, but close your eyes for a minute, fold your arms about you and try to imagine this being your average thermometer reading for whole weeks of the year. For the third of Russia's population who live and work in its northern territories this is not unusual. Throughout December and January the region is shrouded in perpetual dusk, a phenomenon known as Polyarnye Nochi or Polar Nights. The sun remains below the horizon, leaving just the faintest glow of light visible around midday and a raw, dry, gripping the landscape.

Simon Roberts' Polyarnye Nochi series, currently showing at Crane Kalman in Brighton, is actually a tiny, tiny part of a huge journey. In July 2004, he began a year's journey across Russia with his wife. Starting in the Russian Far East they travelled through the Siberian provinces, up the Kola peninsula and across to Kalingrad, before heading down to the Northern Caucasus, the Altai Mountains and along the Volga River. In the course of their travels they covered over 75,000 kilometres and crossed eleven time zones. The pictures he took were gathered together and published in Motherland in 2007.

"I wanted to counter some of the photographic representations of Russia that focus on collapse and deterioration -- with their emphasis on the consequences of Russia's turbulent past as opposed to the possibilities of its future -- without sidestepping the realities of Russian daily life" he says.

"As my year there progressed, I came to understand that Russians see beauty where an outsider might only see decaying apartment blocks or featureless landscapes...They see Russia as home, their ronia, and they see its landscapes and people as being unique -- set apart, spiritual, resilient, even holy".

The human figures that populate Roberts' blue Polar landscapes seem dwarfed by an epic landscape in danger of enveloping them. Factories, railways, apartment blocks, airstrips and shoutlamps loom resolutely from the raw, melancholy gloom. In Murmansk, more than a hundred nuclear-powered submarines, some equipped with warheads and loaded with radioactive materials, languish in the harbour. The soft yellow lights in one apartment block speak of warmth and comfort, yet the Soviet mural on the walls of another tell of the brute force and fierce regime that went into building them.

It is the hushed beauty of these images that lingers though: the fuddled light; the limited palette; the open sky sometimes grey sometimes navy. Combined, they surprise the viewer with their vastness and grandeur.

Simon Roberts - Polyarnye Nochi will run from 4th January to 7th February 2010.

Read a Q&A with Simon.
Polyarnye Nochi

Picture: SIMON ROBERTS

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