

Mother Russia's extended family

Visual arts

**MOTHERLAND:
SIMON ROBERTS**

Photofusion

LONDON ★★★★★

In a quest to capture the essence of the Russian concept of *rodina*, or "motherland", the British photographer Simon Roberts spent a year crisscrossing the former Soviet Union.

In July 2004, Roberts and his wife set off from Magadan in the east, and travelled right across the vast continent. They had been to Russia 10 years earlier, and wanted to see what it was like a decade on. Though Roberts had seen a lot of contemporary photography of Russia, he felt that it wasn't telling him anything he didn't already know. He wanted to somehow get under the skin of the continent and its inhabitants. He noticed that when people spoke of Russia, they seemed only to think of St Petersburg or Moscow. But could they pinpoint Kamchatka or the Ulyay Republic on the map?

The photographs in the Motherland exhibition start and end with summer, but there is plenty of snow in between. "You can't not pho-

tograph snow in Russia – when you try to document a place, you can't avoid depicting something because you're afraid it may be a stereotype," says Roberts. Indeed, he doesn't shy away from images that may be regarded as clichés, pointing out that they are the reality: bombed-out buildings in Grozny and displaced families in shacks, for example. But he also shows the other side of life in Chechnya: the glamorous women, the breathtaking landscapes. Life in Russia is full of such polar opposites.

By being flexible and by staying with Russian families who let him into their daily lives, Roberts has come up with images that no guidebook could ever offer. His personal favourite is of the meat market in Pyatigorsk, in the Northern Caucasus. The woman selling the meat smiles benignly at the camera: "There's something other-worldly about her, dignified, beautiful," says Roberts. "She's content with who she is and where she is." It's true that the woman, who remains anonymous, is smiling, but – to my eyes, at least – it is a smile more of resignation than contentment. Such are the contradictions of Russia's realities and how they can be interpreted.



The real Russia: Alexander Zhukov and Pavel Lipatov, Esso, Kamchatka, October 2004

The concept of *rodina* is hard to grasp. Russia is predominantly white, but there are multitudes of ethnic minorities in the republics in the west and the east of the country, and little seems to

unite them apart from their tie to the motherland.

Apart from trying to capture this sense of *rodina*, Roberts documents a land that is alien to many Westerners. In one photograph,

the skeleton of an abandoned warship in Murmansk, twinkling in the twilight, is a piece of history frozen in time. In another, an old lady in a red scarf, who leans on a wooden

shack, has cancer, as does her entire village, from a Chernobyl-like atomic fallout. The colours on these photographs are quite unique, having been filtered through the north-west light of the Urals.

In a third poignant image, limp balloons adorn trees around a lake near Ekaterinburg. Bunches of people stand there to mark Victory Day. Every year, they get together on 9 May to celebrate the anniversary of the victory over Nazi Germany in the Great Patriotic War, during which around 20 million Russians died. There are not many of them beside the lake, and those who cared enough to bother to turn up make for a sad spectacle – the only ones left in the whole motherland.

These intimate portraits of Russia and its people, the result of Roberts' year-long odyssey, show us a world and a way of life that most of us are unlikely to witness for ourselves. They reveal a proud and defiant nation, people who are may be sad and tragic, broken by war and a struggling economy, but who are somehow united by a common identity and a shared feeling of belonging.

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