

August Sander/Boris Mikhailov: German Portraits @Pace MacGill

By Loring Knoblauch / In Galleries / April 9, 2012



JTF (just the facts): A total of 23 black and white and color photographs, hung against grey walls in the main rooms of the gallery. All of the works by August Sander (11 prints in total) are gelatin silver prints hinged to board, framed in blond wood, and taken between 1924 and 1943. Each image is sized roughly 10×7, in an edition of 12. All of the works by Boris Mikhailov (12 prints in total) are archival pigment prints mounted to Sintra, framed in white, and taken in 2008. Each image is sized 29×20, in an edition of 5. A monograph of Mikhailov's body of work, *Maquette Braunschweig*, was published by Steidl in 2009 (here). There is no photography allowed in the gallery, so the installation shots at right are via the Pace/MacGill website.

Comments/Context: The pairing of contemporary portrait photography with the work of August Sander has now become a kind of subculture of exhibition all its own. Given Sander's wide ranging influence in

the genre, showing paired juxtapositions of old and new offers an opportunity to set a baseline and provide aesthetic comparisons. Using Sander's formal portraits as a kind of gold standard, these exhibits both reinforce Sander's importance, and provide visual connections across photographic history.

Sander's foil in this show is Ukrainian photographer Boris Mikhailov, and the pairing is particularly apt since Mikhailov just did a recent series of portraits of German citizens from the town of Braunschweig. So not only are their stylistic parallels to discover, but there are also social and cultural angles to be explored, separated by 70 years. The selection of Sander images has been meticulously edited and hung, placing like poses and profiles in small groups, rigidly reinforcing commonality and repetition in the gestures and looks.

Mikhailov's newer portraits are even more strict in their composition: crisp head shot profiles against deep black backgrounds. This approach accents the line of the profile, and the details of chins, noses and foreheads become more prominent, like a figure and ground illusion. Mikhailov's portraits take Sander's idea of the subject who is both an individual and a type to its logical extreme, where images of the men and women show quirks of hair style, skin, personality and genetics, while seeming anthropologically scientific at the same time. The portraits are simultaneously wholly contemporary and unabashedly classic, connecting to Ruff's deadpan frontal portraits from the late 1980s and Old Masters paintings with equal power.

In general, this is a thoughtful, subdued pairing, which to some degree mutes in the freshness of Mikhailov's works. This duet highlights ties to the past, reinforcing historical links and echoes, where a more contemporary pairing might have given the Mikhailov portraits a more radical frame. Regardless, it's a refreshingly solid one two punch of German portraiture.

Collector's POV: The photographs in this show are priced at as follows. The Sander prints are \$4500 each. Sander's photographs are widely available in the secondary markets, including portraits, landscapes, and later prints/portfolios made by both Gunther and Gerd Sander. As a result, prices vary widely, from as little as \$1000 for lesser known images to more than \$100000 for iconic vintage portraits. The Mikhailov prints are \$7500 each. Mikhailov's work has only been sparsely available at auction; prices have ranged between roughly \$3000 and \$30000, but the number of lots up for sale has been small. As a result, gallery retail may still be the best option for those collectors interested in his work.