

Boris Mikhailov's surreal photos capture the realities of Soviet life

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Photos: Boris Mikhailov's surreal photography
From "Yesterday's Sandwich" (1966-1968) by Boris Mikhailov – Ukrainian photographer Boris Mikhailov, 78, is regarded as one of the most important artist to emerge from the former USSR.

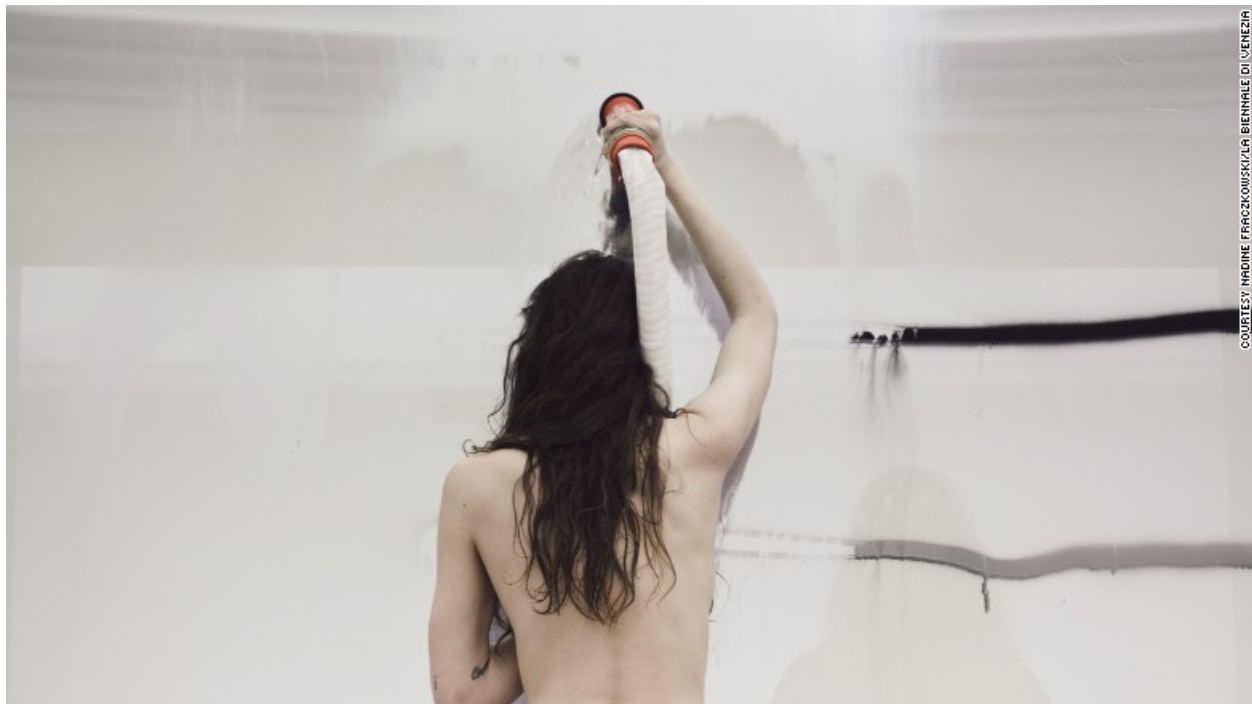
(CNN) At first, photography was just a hobby for Boris Mikhailov. It was only after he was fired from his engineering job following a KGB raid in the 1960s (they discovered nude photos he'd taken of his wife) that he decided to dedicate himself wholly to the craft.

"I became a photographer under conditions of public irresolution, prohibitions and restrictions. In the USSR, official art only reflected a singular opinion, and everything else was considered not only wrong, but also harmful ... I wanted to break through this wild bias and to find ways to circumvent these 'prohibitions,'" Mikhailov said in an email.



"There was no resistance to official ideology, and this encouraged me to search for a new language in art. I was certain that it was impossible to photograph 'the normal' without reflecting on the wicked."

Today, Mikhailov is regarded as one of the most important artists to emerge from the former USSR. While much of his work -- including the "Yesterday's Sandwich" series for which he overlaid color photos taken during the '60s and early '70s -- trades in metaphor (and often eroticism), it was his ability to document the truth that first brought him worldwide acclaim. His most famous series, "Case History," intimately shot photographs of people living in devastated conditions in Ukraine after the fall of communism, has been displayed and celebrated around the world.



Photos: Highlights from the 2017 Venice Biennale

Germany: "Faust" by Anne Imhof – Anne Imhof's Golden Lion-winning "Faust" involves a five-hour performance in which the audience is immersed in a world of music, sadness and sexuality.

"Almost half a century ago, I began to accumulate my photographic material, which, like a mountaineer, I dragged all these years uphill, believing in its value and fighting for it," Mikhailov, now 78, said in an email. "But it wasn't until the beginning of the 1990s, marked by the collapse of the USSR and the formation of Ukraine, that my past proved to be important for many."



This year, the photographer is showing a new series, "Parliament," at Ukraine's pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale.

By capturing glitches in televised broadcasts, Mikhailov distorts the images of politicians like abstract paintings. The distortion seems a reflection of many people's feeling about modern politics.

"These pictures are both of parliament and they are not of parliament, highlighting the uncertainty, we are living under," he explained during the exhibition's opening. "Parliaments are the main reason we have ended up with the state we have in the world, so I felt the need to interpret this common denominator."

Mikhailov is waiting for the inspiration for his next big idea to strike him. Looking at the sociopolitical landscape, he is not enthusiastic for what may come next. However, as he puts it, "the worst has already happened."

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