

Olga Chernysheva BY YAELE AMIR

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"Isle of Sparks" is established Russian artist Olga Chernysheva's New York solo debut, representing photographs and videos from the last seven years. Although the works vary in style and subject matter, their overall theme is contemporary Russian experience in the post-communist era. Documenting the stark loneliness and drudgery entailed in living in the former U.S.S.R. today, Chernysheva conjures a very different reality from the collectivist system that previously animated it.

Taking a rather voyeuristic slant, Chernysheva zooms in on everyday quirks and anomalies, exposing their innate whimsy and humor. The two-channel video

Anonymous (2004) shows an oblivious middle-aged woman and man going about their private business in public places. In the first part, the woman changes into a bathing suit surrounded by passersby, all the while accompanied by a voiceover instructing women in onanistic pleasure. Part two reveals the pathetic attempts of a drunk sitting on the curb of a busy street to open a bottle of vodka. These two vignettes dramatize the inescapable sense of miniaturization and implosion prevalent in Russia today, here made all the more palpable by their concluding extreme zoom-out.

In one luminous slice of life (recalling Vertov's early realist cinema), *The Train* (2003), Chernysheva walks along the cars of an intercity train holding a video camera, advancing through a throng of mostly unmindful stock characters—a poet, accordion player, small children, railroad staff, elderly men and women. Muting the varying notes of stoicism and brief intensity struck by these passengers are the blanketing strains of Mozart's 21st Piano Concerto. This soundtrack enables the viewer to keep in measured step with the artist, heightening the illusion of ebbing and flowing waves of isolated humanity.

The two large black-and-white portraits from Chernysheva's *On Duty* (2007) series capture the boredom or possible futility of two uniformed functionaries who seem to do nothing but watch people—in this instance, a middle-aged woman and young man sitting idly at their station and staring blankly ahead. Despite the difference in age, gender, and location, they both share the anesthetized glaze of wary ambivalence. Unlike obvious precedents from the history of documentary photography, Chernysheva does not offer expressive and emotionally charged exposures, but rather reflects subjects "without qualities," disinvested of common affection.

In the multi-channel, anti-Hitchcockian *Windows* (2007), Chernysheva videotapes ordinary unsuspecting people as seen through their apartment windows—a woman ironing, another watching TV, two men practicing the guitar, etc. But rather than unveiling an underlying clue or reason for it all, absolutely nothing of note seems to be occurring on or off camera. In the last analysis, these candid and at times unyielding glimpses of Russian everyday life point to the prevailing mood of total abandonment following the loss of state patronage.

