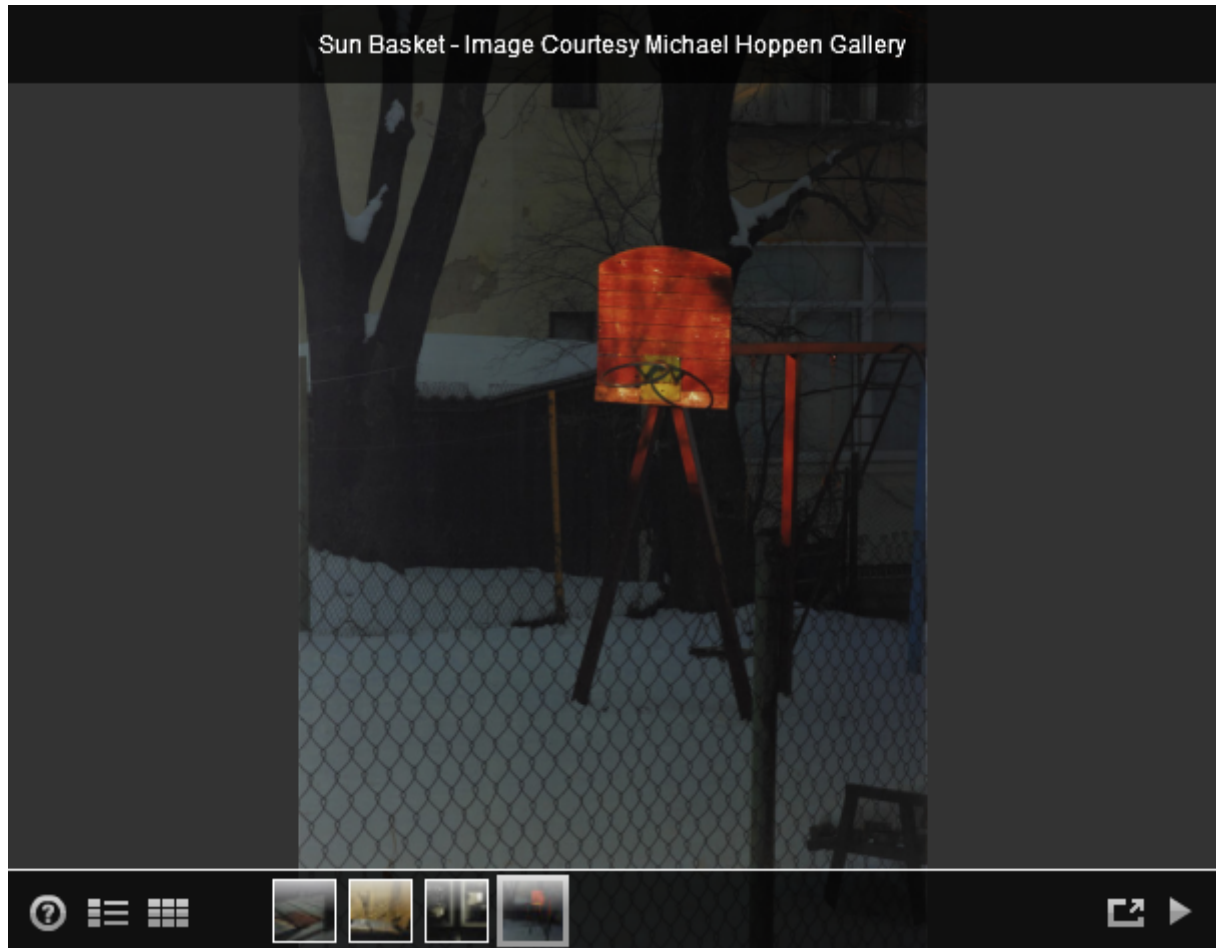


## Boris Savelev: Colour Construction



**John Kavanagh reviews Colour Construction, an exhibition of work by Russian photographer Boris Savelev at Michael Hoppen Gallery.**

*"The camera need not be a cold mechanical device. Like the pen, it is as good as the man who uses it. It can be the extension of mind and heart..."*

*John Steinbeck*

A photograph is a photograph, yes? Photographic images are now so numerous and ubiquitous that we take them for granted. You can take photos with the most basic of mobile phones and view them at your leisure, upload them to Facebook or even print them on a £40 printer from PC World if you absolutely feel the need to. Nowadays, almost everyone seems to be a dedicated chronicler, flâneur and "phoneographer", recording every tedious, mundane visual detail of our times for a dubious posterity. The fact is that technology has de-skilled basic photography to the extent that even the most ham-fisted amateur can produce a decent image. So what is so special about the photographic image nowadays? How does one take a medium which has been democratised to the extent of debasement into the realms of fine art?

Fundamentally, fine art photography is about differentiation from all the other uses to which photography is put – ranging from photo-journalism to advertising and from fashion to pornography. It is the nature of this differentiation, the injection of the aesthetic into the raw image, which is all important. There are those photographers who seem to think that they are the reincarnation of Edward Hopper with a camera yet unfortunately what they intend to be referential and ironic too frequently ends up being formulaic and unoriginal. Others seem more adept with Adobe Photoshop than the camera, believing that the modification of an image is sufficient to raise it to the level of fine art; well, sometimes that happens but I believe it to be a relatively rare occurrence. Although it is often said that the camera never lies, it does not always tell us the most meaningful of truths and the task of the fine art photographer is to endow the raw image with further layers of meaning. And the degree of success achieved is, in my view, entirely commensurate with the integrity and honesty with which that task is carried out.

Savelev's work amply exudes these admirable qualities. His photographs observe their subjects mutely yet intelligently rather than exposing them to glare or seeming to intrude upon them unnecessarily. His photographs are often painterly in composition and in effect. They are printed using a unique proprietary process by the independent contemporary art workshop Factum Arte in Madrid, using a custom-made printer on gesso-coated aluminium panels, which are then hand-finished and waxed. These processes and materials give the finished prints a richness, warmth and depth which can only be appreciated by contemplating them in person. No image on a computer screen or a printed page could possibly do justice to them.

While Savelev's photographs have a cool and confident feeling about them, they are never brash or strident. The overt subject matter of his work varies greatly but throughout there is a consistent preoccupation with painterly techniques of composition. The use of colour in works like *Cakes* and *Red Train* is reminiscent of colour field paintings and lyrical abstraction. There are also nods to Russia's constructivist past in much of his work, and even hints of Neo-Plasticism in works like *Red Light, Rome*. The many photographs of scenes in Chernowitz, where Savelev was born, and Moscow, where he lives, avoid the overt politics and sentimentality that frequently accompany works which attempt to be documentary in nature. In Savelev's work, the purity and beauty of the image, the arrangement of colour, form and light are always paramount in a way that often seems alien to fine art photography today.

**John Kavanagh**  
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