

Humble man, 1974 – 1979

What are these photographs about? Why were they taken? Who are they for?

I started “taking” photographs as a schoolboy in 1963 and ended my youthful experiments in 1966, when I entered the Aeronautic institute, never thinking I would return to this way of seeing the world.

The next bit seems like a cliché! When my son Vadim was born, I tried taking some photos with the old Voigtländer 6x9cm, which had a hole in the mechanism that I covered up with some black paper tape. I developed the film, and oddly enough, everything worked out well. From that moment on I developed a serious addiction to photography - I simply become obsessed with the way the world looked through a lens and flattened as a photographic print.

All around me there suddenly seemed to be photoclubs and camera shops which carried the bigger, flashier “Salyut” camera. I walked past these shops and looked at the cameras drooling with envy... And so, I joined the “Novator photo club” and met serious guys with their Hasselblads and Nikons, but my heart was set on the brilliance of the “Salyut”. My mind did not rest. Years later I can understand that the Salyut was not suited to my photographic style (my interest has always been in the moment rather than in staged studio portraits) but the dream that one day I would shoot with this miracle object totally absorbed my imagination. I finally bought a “Salyut” and two lenses, one wide-angle and one for portraits, at a consignment shop on Sadovaya (a big street in Moscow).

There was no money left over to buy other cameras and I started actively photographing on the streets of Moscow and other cities with this wide-angle camera. I also shot sports events, developing the skill to photograph in difficult conditions with an unsuitable camera.

Somewhat unexpectedly, the photographs worked, their quality improved, and I started bringing the pictures to the editorial offices of Moscow newspapers and taking part in photography competitions. The papers began printing my photographs, even awarding me a few prizes - that’s how I justified spending money on film and photo paper. There was a camaraderie at the newspaper offices where strong drinks played a part. They gave me the right little bits of paper with the correct stamps stating I was a freelance photojournalist for “Gudok” and “Komsomolskaia Pravda”.

At that time, those bits of paper opened all the doors, and I could shoot anywhere without problems, during the Soviet years officials really didn’t like photography. They didn’t trust it... or photographers.

In response I decided I would shoot a series of portraits of normal people in provincial towns; not for the papers or for publication, but simply for myself. I confess that I did think about an exhibition at the “Novator photo club”, of which I was still an active member. I shot this series between 1974 and 1980. I took many photographs, actively printing, looking, thinking, drinking, reprinting, talking. My goal was to make an exhibition, to share the things I saw. The exhibition never happened. I have exhibited some of the images in Bochum, Chicago, Madrid, London and elsewhere.

From 1980 on I started using different cameras, taking different types of images, and I forgot about this series for 40 years. Now, these images have been polished by history, they have new meanings, and they look different since the fall of the Soviets. They show a different world, a world that has long gone and been replaced with a global digital connectivity. But it seems to me that they haven’t lost anything photographically. Perhaps, with the experience I now have in developing and printing, they have even acquired new visual possibilities, new potential. Hopefully, they will talk directly to a new audience.

Boris Savelev, 2021

Red Arrow, 1980 - 1986

When I printed the portfolio *Humble Man* in 2021, I realised I would soon be 74. Such albums are milestones in a photographic biography since every photographer describes their life in pictures rather than words.

That's how we came to the idea of eight portfolios, in chronological order.

In this portfolio, I present a black-and-white series shot from 1980 to 1986 in Moscow and Leningrad. The title comes from the name of the train that ran between Moscow and Leningrad. In 1980 I'd finally exchanged my heavy Salyut camera for the more compact Iskra 6 x 6 and a Leica 3F. I decided to shoot a series about the two capitals in order to highlight their similarities and differences by way of black and white photographs.

In 1980, I was literally infected with the photography bug, enthusiastically studying the history of world photography from William Henry Fox Talbot to Henri Cartier-Bresson. But I was especially struck with the 'straight photographs of the American Group f/64, with their total materiality, their corporality and normal angle lenses, which were the exact opposite of Soviet photography, where broken and wide angles reigned supreme. I used 'normal' lenses between 40-50mm (corresponding to the angle of human vision), I clamped the aperture to the maximum, and then I only had to build the composition and press the button. I didn't need to focus and so I could take pictures in the moment, which looked very much 'alive'.

By the way, at that time I was of the opinion that rangefinder cameras, Leicas in particular, contributed much more to photographic vision than DSLRs.

Here I have to clarify what is meant by the term 'photographic vision'... it is the result of shooting with the aperture closed to the max and sharpness across the entire image, which gives the least accentuated results. This is where the term 'direct' photography arose. It's not a criterion for the quality of a shot, rather a criterion for the transmission of the image with total veracity.

DSLRs on the other hand give you a 'slice' of reality in the viewfinder because they show the subject when the aperture is open, and so the photographer intuitively moves from a photographic vision to a local one. Meanwhile, I darted between the two cities, developed, printed and piled a mountain of photos on my table. There was no politics in these pictures, but there was a subconscious protest against the official narrative.

I never thought I would see them properly printed, much less bought by galleries and museums. Forty years have passed but these pictures are still relevant, not simply as photographic creations located in a specific time. With the passage of time, I find that they've acquired a certain 'photographicism' – truths, details of a bygone era come through in these pictures, and their significance in my eyes grows every year.

The series has been successful, hundreds of prints are in archives and collections. The train called the 'Red Arrow' still runs. At least I believe it does...

Boris Savelev, 2021

Secret City, 1981 - 1985

I was so carried away by photography that in 1983 I quit my job, left my wife, and struck out on my own... a free entity. I worked under contract for various Soviet publishing houses (wherever I could really) so that I would not starve and could pay to support my sons. The only thing I didn't change was my camera; I still had the 'Iskra'. I knew that you couldn't earn a living doing black-and-white photography. I had to get into 'colour'. I shot on the only colour film available in Soviet stores, 'Orwachrome 32'. It seemed to me then that this was a terrible film, I even had to develop it myself. The process was tedious – it involved intermediate drying and required constant temperature to half a degree. The grain was ham-fisted, the colours only indicative... Now that time has passed, though, I look at it with different eyes. I can see that the colour rendition recalls that of the early twentieth century 'Autochrome', and it looks great now, especially when compared to the 'soapy' films of today.

My dream was to shoot on Kodachrome, but they didn't sell it in the shops, and I looked at the beautiful boxes of film used by journalists I knew with envy. Nevertheless, when I saw the results of their work, I was sad that I would never be able to use this film myself. And so, it was back to Orwachrome 32 and black-and-white photography. At the same time I continued to experiment with colour film, the use of colour negatives, cross-processes: under-development, over-development and other tricks of analogue photography. Then, finally, I had some luck – I started working in publishing houses where they handed out colour Kodak Ektachrome film for shoots. I used to use half of any roll for personal purposes. I also processed the Ektachrome myself because I'd already gained the necessary experience for creative developing. These pictures also piled up, and at the same time I got a thrill out of the results.

In 1985, Perestroika suddenly materialised. My friend Volodia Yankilevsky told me to take my slides to the VAAP agency, where buyers from Europe and America had appeared and were looking for materials to print in publications about Perestroika, Gorbachev and the USSR. I took my pictures there without any hope of success, but they soon called me and told me that the London publishing house Thames and Hudson wanted to print a monograph, and that I had to bring them more material. I took it there, and the publisher said that they were planning on publishing a book by a young American photographer and one by a Soviet photographer. I was the Soviet one, and the American was Alex Webb, at that time an unknown amateur like me.

We signed a contract; they took the materials and in 1988 the monograph came out. It was called 'Secret City: Photographs from the USSR by Boris Savelev'. They sent it to me, I opened it and almost died. The print quality was so bad! They'd prepared it for printing in Hong Kong, scanned everything in the same way without thought. The density of Orwachrome differed from other films, but the Chinese technicians did not know this. They did everything with a single profile.

But even worse, the censors at the Moscow agency had rejected the best pictures as they were not considered Soviet enough... I was so annoyed I decided to print all the originals myself so I wouldn't be embarrassed to show them. I printed on Cibachrome, got satisfaction, but the book still exists! The monograph sold around the world, the first product from beyond the 'iron curtain', I still feel embarrassed every time I see it. Even now, after 40 years, photography buffs still buy it on Amazon not actually knowing what the real prints should look like.

This was as good a lesson for me as it should be for photographers working today. Rule One: for serious work always hand over real original prints, and never slides, negatives or digital files.

The album more or less played its part; the photography world found out about me, I dramatically improved the quality of my images, travelling a long road from "crazy boy" to mature photographer, who now presents this portfolio 'Secret City' as it should look.

Bolshoy, 1985 - 1986

How did I get into the project?

In 1985, I regularly took pictures for the Soviet publishing house Khudoznik carrying out different assignments: painting reproductions, reports from artists' studios, portraits of masters of Soviet art, etc...

I was a long way from the ballet world but growing close to editors, artists and other creative people. One day, I went to see my friend, the artist Vladimir Yankilevsky, to drink a bottle of wine and show him my pictures. While we were looking, he said, "I'll put you forward as the photographer for a new publication. They want pictures of ten different ballets directed by Grigorovich. It was to be designed by Arkady Troianker, Moscow's most famous graphic designer. Vladimir told me it didn't matter how I took the photographs. "Alright", I replied. "I'll go and see what's going on there". I went to meet Troianker. The book sounded great. "I've already got photographs of the ballets," he says, "I need the life of the theatre; backstage, rehearsals, sets and the like. We'll get you a theatre pass and plenty of film. You go in search of masterpieces!"

In the theatre, like in a munitions plant, armed guards ask for your pass at every turn. I thought it was going to be a nightmare. But after checking me out they gave me a pass, I met Grigorovich and got permission to shoot wherever I wanted within the theatre.

I studied the conditions – backstage was dark as the night. You couldn't use lighting during a performance, the shutter sound disturbed the dancers, and the film sensitivity was only 200 ASA.

What to do? The camera had to be changed. I bought a Soviet camera, the Zorkii 4k, to shoot backstage. It was the only camera around with a front curtain shutter, similar to the Leica M. It was quiet and balanced, allowing me to shoot $\frac{3}{4}$ second exposures without camera shake. I also used a tripod and an ISKRA 6x6 for still lives. When the job was 50% complete, the American publisher arrived in Moscow, saw what I'd already done, signed a contract, gave me some money, and got me some high-sensitivity film. I shot the rest of the images on this film. Then the publishing house Planeta reduced the size of the book and dropped my pictures. The American publisher reneged on his contract, and I was left with my pictures, but without a publication. A year later I showed the pictures to my close friends from the magazine Sovetskoe Foto, Mikhail Leontiev and Nikolai Parlashkevich. They were shocked I kept them on my desktop doing nothing. They persuaded me to send the series to a competition in Berlin. I won the Grand Prize, a Pentacon Six camera. I sold that camera, and put the pictures back in my desk where they stayed for 35 years...

But now the time has come to bring them into the light. So here before you is a portfolio about the Bolshoy Ballet, but without ballet.

Boris Savelev, 2021

Kodachrome, 1987 - 2009.

Why Kodachrome? It's only the name of a colour film that is now part of photographic history. For me, though, as a Soviet photographer, it was an impossible dream to shoot with Kodachrome at the time. You could only get the film developed at Kodak labs in Europe and the USA. You couldn't do it yourself and sending the film to a lab was unheard of in the Soviet. You could only get Kodak Ektachrome and Kodacolor in the USSR. In both films you could develop yourself. But the quality didn't do it for me. The colours weren't accurate, and the sharpness was bad.

In 1985 my friend Sasha Lapin brought me a roll of Kodachrome-64 with pre-paid processing. We posted it to Germany. When I saw the results, I was stunned. I'd never seen such sharpness and colour rendering in my life and could hardly believe it existed. The visual impact meant I couldn't, didn't want to, shoot on anything else after that. But where could I get Kodachrome? Nowhere in Moscow sold it...

I was helped by chance. I found out that colleagues from APN and TASS were shooting for a project – 'A Day in the Life of the Soviet Union'. The Americans had given them Kodachrome and they had no idea what to do with it for the same reason as everyone else: it was impossible to get it developed. They either had to hand over the negatives or shoot on a different film. Naturally, they decided to use a different film and the Kodachrome was abandoned. Not only were they not going to use it because you couldn't get it developed in Moscow, but they also couldn't sell it because nobody knew about it.

But I knew about it and I bought up all the film they had for cheap – about a hundred rolls. Sometime later, I was working for a French newspaper and instead of a fee, I received two hundred more rolls, processing pre-paid. A friend of mine, the photographer Garik Pinkhasov left for Paris. He worked at Magnum and was shooting in Moscow – he helped me develop this wonderful film. I used it for ten years. I had it developed everywhere – in Germany, France, England, the USA – until the processing lab closed forever. My last roll was developed in 2005. And then Kodachrome died... There's a movie in which the main characters, a father and son, travel across the US to develop some of the father's old film at a Kansas lab after finding out that it was closing down.

Now it's digital everywhere. I try to take pictures that look like Kodachrome. I think I am succeeding.

In 1992 I put forward some original slides to the Leopold Godowsky Award – he was a musician with a scientific education and the inventor of Kodachrome. The Americans said my colours weren't bright enough; they didn't give me the prize. Recently I learned the prize had kicked the bucket – it was last awarded in 2009. The slides I send are the images presented in this portfolio.

By way of conclusion, a few important technical details:

I had to overcome two hurdles in the printing of Kodachrome slides. The problem was that the contrast of direct prints from the slides produced on Cibachrome paper was too strong. It resulted in high-contrast images that lost too much detail in the shadows. Using Kodak Internegative Film with re-exposure, underdevelopment, and subsequent printing on Cibachrome solved the problem.

In 1995 Gallery mBochum decided to print a portfolio of Kodachrome pictures using the pigment transfer process. Alexander von Berdswoldt, Susanne Breidenbach and I selected 15 images with subjects but they were difficult to print with this technique.

At that time there were only two studios in the world – one in Toronto and one in London – that worked on this superb manual additive colour technique from the mid-19th century. We chose the small London studio Decalcomania run by the artists Adam Lowe and Mike Ward. They were working with a great technician, Adrian Lack... I think at that time the deciding factor was that London was closer than Toronto, but it was the start of a great relationship.

The digital era had not yet begun, the scanners were drum scanners, Adobe Photoshop was in its embryonic stages, stochastic printing of contact negatives was a curiosity and printing original 40x60cm carbon prints with colour negatives in four layers on an inert plastic surface entailed extraordinary labour. All of this had to be done in a very short period of time during a very hot summer in London. We needed 200 prints for the opening of the exhibition at mBochum. The experts rose to the challenge and the portfolio was shown at the exhibition. The quality was outstanding although unusual for photography. I think that we were ahead of our time – people didn't understand the colour, the light and the material quality of this distinctive series of images.

I 'failed' with great success. The exhibition was the only time I showed with mBochum, but I found friends and colleagues in Adam Lowe and Mike Ward with whom I have travelled the long road towards a unique original method of printing dense colour images, with great shadow detail, and complex colour onto gesso-coated aluminium plates using a specially designed flatbed printer and digital files I prepare with Rafa Rachewsky.

But I will talk about this in the next Portfolio...

Boris Savelev, 2021

My Czernowitz, 1987 - 2021

This is the second portfolio of mine dedicated to Czernowitz.

Why should I devote so much attention to this provincial backwater? It was once part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, later Romania, then the USSR, and now part of Ukraine. Every house in this 'little Vienna' is familiar from my childhood, the town's layout was the same as it had been in Austrian and Romanian times. It didn't change much in Soviet hands but had fallen into a state of disrepair.

I was born in Czernowitz on Ukrainskaia Street. I grew up and lived on this street. I have taken many pictures there. My first exhibition in Czernowitz was on this street. I also played basketball on Ukrainskaia Street, my best friend was from Ukrainskaia Street, and I fell in love for the first time on Ukrainskaia Street.

But happily, there were other streets and alleyways in Czernowitz that I photographed with equal tenacity. I became obsessed with photography in my school years but at 17 I left Czernowitz for half a century. I lived in Moscow, but I returned to Ukrainskaia Street at the age of 65. Nothing had changed, except now there is no basketball, my first passion.

But I still have a camera, all the knowledge I've acquired, files that are invaluable to me, and the fervent desire to assemble and publish a portfolio about the city of my youth, the city of my photographic dreams, the city that haunts me wherever I am in the world.

Wherever I go, my eyes search for my provincial Ukrainian backwater...

Boris Savelev, 2021

Digital World, 2000 – 2021

It all began in 1993 on board of a Moscow-Kaliningrad train on the way to the opening of my exhibition at a regional museum. I was travelling with friends and assistants, and we were drinking...

My friend, the photographer Valya Pichugin, suddenly asked: "Wouldn't you like to switch to digital, Boria?" Well, I thought, what a dreamer, because the Kodak Digital 1 Mpx cost 15 thousand dollars, the quality was good only for the papers, and I had a wonderful Leica M3 and Summicron-M 50mm, my favourite Kodachrome film, and a perfected printing process. Not in our lifetime, I said to him, and forgot about the whole thing.

The second time digital drew my attention was in 1998, somewhere between Oxford and Birmingham, where my friend Adam Lowe and I were scanning prints for enlargement.

Adrian Lack, technical wizard and dealer of the then unequalled Mimaki printers, had in his possession a Sinar camera with a 4x5 digital back connected to a computer. He produced a file with dimensions of 3x5m at 300 DPI without interpolation. I stood quietly to one side and marvelled. I thought then that I would make the move over to a camera like that if it were smaller, faster, and not too expensive.

In Moscow, a couple of years later, I came across a miracle – the Sony P1 3mpx.

I tried it out and bought it there and then. I was as happy as a kid with a new toy, taking pictures of everything. That same year I was invited to shoot a digital portfolio about Madrid by Calcografía Nacional, the national museum of graphic art. Two weeks of shooting and the portfolio Madrid, *En torno a Sol (La Estampa Digital)* was ready. I didn't prepare the files, the printing wasn't mine, and the quality left something to be desired, but nevertheless it was a small fragment of 'art'. Then I remembered I was an engineer. I assembled a computer, installed Photoshop on it, and started 'tormenting' the programme, quickly learning how to apply my skills in analogue printing to a digital image.

I avidly followed developments in camera technology. Next thing you know, in 2002, the Leica Digilux 1 arrived with as much as 4mpx – a breakthrough in quality. But you couldn't get it in Moscow.

The director of Dom Fotografii, Olia Sviblova – huge thanks to her – brought one over from Paris and gave it to me as a present. Another commission, this time to produce the portfolio *Stationen des Augenblicks 2003* in Wuppertal, Germany, was shot on this unique camera. I prepared the files and printed them with Factum Arte. The results were amazing!

In 2004 I bought the Leica Digilux 25mpx; in 2005 the Sigma SD9 with the 10mpx Foveon matrix; and an array of Nikon, Canon and Fuji DSLRs.

Finally, in 2007 I purchased a Leica M8, in 2010 a Sigma SD1, in 2013 a Sony A7R and in 2016 the Sigma QH – my main tools to this day. At the same time, I honed my Photoshop skills with the multi-layered prints on gesso-coated aluminium I make together with Factum Arte, and it seems I've reached the limits... but I always want to 'increase the situation' (make things better).

My hands are shaking, and the years take their toll. But I have just bought a new camera, and the results will appear in the next portfolio...

Boris Savelev, 2021

Depot, 2019 - 2020

And so, we've come to the eighth Portfolio in this selection of my photographic experiments of a pre-Covid life in pictures.

My gaze is sharper, I have a keener understanding of photography, but my hands can no longer 'snap' without a tripod at $\frac{1}{4}$ second speeds. I've had to adapt to a new camera with a matrix stabiliser – the Olympus PEN-F. The choice of subject was dictated by my interest in trolleybuses, whose constructivist interiors were always 'in tune' with my artistic sensibilities. All those poles and crossbars, handles and seats transported me into photographic ecstasy. Their endless combinations with the play of light and shadows made by drivers and passengers, the innumerable reflections, gave rise to extraordinary creative results.

And all this richness flowed within the environment of the trolleybus depot, where it was amplified many times over in the noise, smoke and working atmosphere of the place...

My colleague and wife Natalia Bogomas and I wrote a letter to the mayor with the request to photograph in this 'purgatory'. They didn't dare say no to us, and we spent many days in this atmosphere of bustle and work, surrounded by hoses, rails, and cables, and among workers who didn't understand anything about why we were there. We had plans to shoot elsewhere too, but then Covid turned up and everything stayed as it was.

Boris Savelev, 2021