

OLEG SAVUNOV
17 JUNE 2021
24 FEBRUARY 2022

THE JONES INSTITUTE
AT MINNESOTA STREET PROJECT

This exhibition is based on the archive of photographs the artist had taken during his last visit to Russia in the summer of 2021 and is published as the author's version of the propaganda magazine, "USSR in Construction." Published in the USSR from 1930 to 1941, 1949 the magazine was by the famous Soviet writer Maxim Gorky and featured renowned avant-garde artists, including El Lissitzky and Alexander Rodchenko. The striking visual design, an homage to the industrial progress of the Soviet state, incorporates propaganda texts and numerous photographs of Stalin.

In his version of the magazine, Savunov limited himself to work essentially with his own photo archive of 600 images of buildings, individuals, objects, and landscapes, representing his most recent portrayal of his home country. Since all of the photographs were taken in pre-war Russia, this project began with a sense of hope for the future, in spite of the violent repressive regime of the Russian state. This hope was brutally crushed by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the photographs have now taken on a whole new context.

The title "Nostalgia for Ruins" originates from the article by Andreas Huyssen in which he explores the prevalence and significance of nostalgia in contemporary culture. Huyssen gives "ruin" the following definition: "The architectural ruin is an expression of the indissoluble combination of spatial and temporal desires that trigger nostalgia. In the body of the ruin, the past is both present in its residues and yet no longer accessible, making the ruin an especially powerful trigger for nostalgia."

The photographs of constructivist architecture of the 1930s used in the magazine contain traces of communist ideology, and their persistence in a state of gradual

decay or renovation underscores their historical significance. These ruins represent a nostalgic backdrop of Russian reality, invisibly present and subtly influential. Thus, the title of the project appears to reflect the present political situation in Russia, where the pursuit of an objective goal for the country's future development appears absent, and instead, a search for it in a romanticized past is pursued. The current militaristic Russian geopolitics reveal this yearning for a mythical "Golden Age" manifested in nostalgia for the Soviet heritage or even further back, to the times of the Russian Empire.

The photographs in the publication are made intentionally ambiguous by subtle collaging, resulting in fantastical landscapes arranged with a dry sense of humor. The travelogue-like photos of various Russian locales are paired in collage with subjective excerpts from news coverage detailing Russian life, from the extremely mundane to the pressingly geopolitical, supplemented with quotes from the Andres Huyssen's original article. The time period used by Savunov during which the information was collected, begins from the first day of his stay in Russia and ends with the beginning of the war in Ukraine. The photographs work together with the text, unfolding in time and immersing the viewer in a slice of Russian reality.

The only clear position that the artist takes in this project is his unequivocal condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the annexation of Crimea. At the same time, he cannot and does not want to give up his Russian identity, experiencing mixed feelings of guilt, belonging, and empathy for the Russian population living in his home country, while not participating in the war. The author is looking for his place in the frightening new reality of the unwilling expat and the answer to the question, what does it mean to be Russian now?