THE BAREFACED CHEEK OF BORIS MIKHAILOV

His photographs of naked women in the Soviet Union were banned by the KGB, and he was persecuted for his ideals. But, as his secret body of work shows, this audacious artist could not be silenced. Report by Christine Toomey
Photographs of production facilities could be factories then had a darkroom where propaganda electrical components for spacecraft. Most arrested, interrogated and eventually sacked carried no weight with the KGB. He was not pornography, “he says. Such arguments the nude. “I was interested in showing beauty, he took were of his wife and female friends in the reality, not reflecting an officially sanitised view of the world. So some of the earliest photographs that did not have religion as a means of controlling people, fear and guilt were used instead,” he says. “Guilt was linked with the KGB, but Mikhailov, who acted as the factory’s official photographer, had developed and printed his own pictures there as well. Next he found work as an engineer and official photographer in a water-treatment plant. But again he used the darkness there for his own work, and again the KGB seized his pictures. This time, they tried to persuade him to become an informer. “To refuse was dangerous. It was considered unpatriotic. When I stayed silent, they lost interest in me and eventually left me alone,” he says. The censorship and the loss of his job incensed him, fuelling his passion for

The prohibition of nudity had more to do with social control than moral censorship. Mikhailov believes. “For a totalitarian regime that did not have religion as a means of controlling people, fear and guilt were used instead,” he says. “Guilt was linked with nakedness. Since everyone was naked, everyone was guilty. We were made to feel ashamed of our bodies.” But he was interested in recording reality, not reflecting an officially sanitised view of the world. So some of the earliest photographs he took were of his wife and female friends in the nude. “I was interested in showing beauty, not pornography,” he says. Such arguments carried no weight with the KGB. He was arrested, interrogated and eventually sacked from his job as an engineer at a factory making electrical components for spacecraft. Most factories then had a darkness where propaganda photographs of production facilities could be developed. Such labs were regularly inspected by the KGB, but Mikhailov, who acted as the factory’s official photographer, had developed and printed his own pictures there as well. Next he found work as an engineer and official photographer in a water-treatment plant. But again he used the darkness there for his own work, and again the KGB seized his pictures. This time, they tried to persuade him to become an informer. “To refuse was dangerous. It was considered unpatriotic. When I stayed silent, they lost interest in me and eventually left me alone,” he says. The censorship and the loss of his job incensed him, fuelling his passion for
describes as “living out their last moments”, part of a series of more than 400 searing portraits he shot in the late 1990s called Case History. The series, showing people barely existing on the margins of society after the collapse of the Soviet Union, brought him as acclaim but also changes of exploitation. In one, behind a half-baked man with a tattoo of Lenin on his chest, a middle-aged woman with calloused hands stands in a ragged overcoat. Thick snow covers the ground, and they look resigned to their fate, beaten down by a life on the streets. In another, a hand wields a giant salami on top of a military overcoat. The old man, aged woman with calloused hands stands in a bare plate and a spoon superimposed on them, to convey the emptiness and boredom of their lives. In another image, an old man’s piercing eyes are formed by the bottom of a military overcoat. The old man, Mikhailov explains, is his father, a former military officer and engineer in Kharkov’s tank factory. In another, a blind world’s giant salami on top of a crane under a dark cloud. This, he says, conveyed the impotence of the state in meeting the basic food needs of its people. “The Soviet Union always boasted about its ability to construct and produce, yet having salami to eat was rare.”

The dual nature of the images reflects the two aspects of his own identity: Jewish and Ukrainian. They also draw on the language of cinema and the idea of a “disolve” between two doors, he explains. At the factory, he was commissioned to make a short film about its history—which made him certain that it was photography he wanted to pursue. “A film might take a year to make and be seen in a few minutes, while a photograph takes just a second and can have as much impact,” he says with a laugh.

Walking into his apartment, you come face to face with two giant photographs that, for most of us, would be intimidating company to keep. Both are lifesize portraits of homeless people he photographed them or not. It didn’t harm them, and the money at least helped them a little. Spreading across the wooden floor of his airy Berlin apartment are dozens of photographs of Kharkov’s youth culture, from which he is trying to make a selection for a possible exhibition at this year’s Venice Biennale. “It is even more difficult taking photographs of people now than it was in Soviet times,” he claims. Despite the restrictions then, he says, people were less self-conscious, and less litigious. Taking street photographs has become so problematic in Germany that he has a certificate from the police giving him permission to take pictures wherever he wants, on the grounds that they are art.

There can’t be many people who would want to display photographs of the naked and diseased homeless of Kharkov on their walls in the way Mikhailov has done in his flat. But when I talk to him about this, his view is clear: “Before, we would hang historical paintings on our walls. Now I think it is up to photographers to take historical photographs and to give public space to what is happening around us. It is important to make art of this, to make people reflect.”

Yesterday’s Sandwich, by Boris Mikhailov, is published by Phaidon, price £35. It is available at the Sunday Times BooksFirst price of £31.50, including p&p. Tel: 0870 165 8585; www.timesonline.co.uk/booksfirst

on the lookout for any new information and studied images closely in search of their truth and meaning.” So a couple in overcoats staring out over a waterfront have a bare plate and a spoon superimposed on them to convey the emptiness and boredom of their lives. In another image, an old man’s piercing eyes are formed by the bottom of a military overcoat. The old man, Mikhailov explains, is his father, a former military officer and engineer in Kharkov’s tank factory. In another, a blind world’s giant salami on top of a crane under a dark cloud. This, he says, conveyed the impotence of the state in meeting the basic food needs of its people. “The Soviet Union always boasted about its ability to construct and produce, yet having salami to eat was rare.”

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images from the sandwich series, which “concisely captures all the subtle allusions”, says Mikhailov.

Top left: he used this image of a sandwich to symbolise the USSR’s failure to satisfy its people’s basic food needs. Bottom: a bare plate and spoon represent the emptiness and boredom of this couple’s life.