

RUSSIA'S CONTRADICTIONS

Santa Cruz, CA / Rick Deragon

Martha Casanave's recent series of photographs at Tager Gallery provides an unusual glimpse of Russian people and places. Titled *Out in the Cold—An American in the USSR*, the series consists of twenty-two images—landscape, cityscape, interior and portrait—that are color photographs of hand-tinted black and white prints. Casanave's idiosyncratic color and the work's second-generation status impart a strange "off" quality that is as central to its impact as the narrative force of the subject.

Often, with hand-tinted photographs the chromatic presence of the paint is, if not detectable, then at least sensed. Pigment, however subtly applied, comes between the viewer and the photographic image. The pigment has a life of its own, and we respond to both that energy and the black and white image. By photographing the hand-colored black and white image, Casanave has removed the paint, but not the color, from the viewing experience. This produces a belief in the veracity of the color, which we accept even when it is pro-

lief while they stand obviously and utterly fake behind the players. Similarly, Casanave's color is false, fantastic, comical—theatrical. We accept the coloring as a vital part of these unfamiliar scenes, not because the color is correct but because the pictures are staged so that the color seems part of the whole. This is a world unknown to most Americans, and Casanave is telling about it in her own way.

What is Casanave trying to tell us about the Soviet Union, and how does she tell it? The most engaging of these untitled images are of relaxed Russian citizens looking directly at the camera. Portraits, they show these people at table in their flats, smiling and benign. In one, a bohemian-looking couple grins and toasts the camera. The wide-angle lens exaggerates the thrust of the man's raised arm. They seem to say, "Ahh, let us stop talking about perestroika. Here's to your Grateful Dead!" In another, the young wife of a woodcarver looks out drowsily. Her folk dress and a large carved head of a troll behind her suggest some Russian Brothers Grimm. Casanave has colored her blouse turquoise



Martha Casanave, from the series *Out in the Cold—An American in the USSR*, color photograph of hand-tinted black and white photograph, at Tager Gallery, Santa Cruz. © 1988, Martha Casanave.

trophe or doom. Are these foreshadowings or reports? In one, a pastoral river scene at the edge of a village seems charming at first, but the dense orange sky reads as fallout or industrial waste. Still, the foreground figures cavort; the cows graze, and life, at least in this district, goes peacefully on.

In two other photographs, Casanave has employed the nuclear orange sky to help convey a sense of destruction and to serve as a foil to bittersweet humor. In the first one, a wooden building is systematically being torn down in the foreground; traditional wooden steeples and pitched rooftops fill the background. The intense orange sky bursts forth as if consuming all. This commonplace scene is transformed into an allegory—Old Russia is going up in flames.

In the second, the tranquility of a snow-covered cemetery is disturbed by another

fieri sky. A tombstone with a realistically carved—and colored—head of a matron looms in the foreground. Red letters spell "Mama" on the stone. While "Mama" rests in peace and her good life is respectfully acknowledged, the country boils, the sky burns.

In the photographs that show us individuals in their domestic settings, the faces' warm colors and frontal gazes make them seem accessible, friendly. The staged poses and the unreal nature of the colors, however, cast suspicion on all of them. Are they really like this? They have let us into their homes; they have smiled—but have they really communicated? The landscapes forcefully depict a land malignant with contradiction. Even though we can admire a finely carved tombstone with its manicured plot of grass, there where all seems peaceful and right, something is rotting underneath. □



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vocatively bizarre. The choice of hue has been carefully considered; these are narrative and symbolic colors.

Casanave, who has studied Russian literature and speaks Russian, has made seven trips to the Soviet Union during the 1980s. She has led photography groups there in conjunction with University of California Santa Cruz's Extension Division and the Citizen Exchange Council (in New York) since 1984. Her familiarity with the culture, people and countryside and her insights into the Russian *modus operandi* charge these images. Her empathy toward the people is buffeted, however, by cynicism and sly humor. This is borne out by the color: nuclear sunsets drench cityscapes with frightening orange glows; cheeks blush from vodka; hands are chafed red from hard work; a cracked marble statue bleeds; a river runs red; and a stone-faced Lenin becomes a pink-cheeked carrot-head. Regardless of the intellectual implausibility of the unreal color, we believe it because of the emotional contact between sitter and photographer and, paradoxically, because of the artifice.

Theater sets help us suspend our disbe-

and pink; her face is rosy with good health. Other pale colors establish a morning glow that energizes everything, even the troll—he seems more alive than the young woman. It is a dreamy, tender scene that has the feeling of Pinocchio, Hansel and Gretel, a wistful memory. These people are at ease, candid—indeed, human, and not the commie monsters some would have us believe stand around Red Square with itchy trigger fingers.

If the interior, portrait images are flushed with a benevolent glow, then the landscapes/cityscapes are harsh, symbolic, political. One striking image shows the upper portion of a statue of a bare-breasted woman with a park lawn in the background. The woman is stately, with thick neck and prominent brow, a flower in her hair. Like Delacroix's *Liberty*, she seems to embody a metaphorical force, Mother Russia. But the time-worn pits and cracks of her marble have been rendered as wounds by Casanave's coloring. Ravaged, this Mother Russia stares across the land with blood-shot eyes, battered as much by history's wars as by self-flagellation.

Four landscape images suggest catas-