

Galina Manikova

“Blue and brown” project 2013, Shanghai

Galina Manikova has worked with art and photography for more than 30 years. She has behind her many exhibitions, a well-known name and an academic teaching carrier within the field of alternative photography. She has made a valuable contribution to the exploration and development of new techniques and new ideas within this one of the youngest forms of art.

Photography has many forms, from documentary to abstract. It has developed chaotically and explosively during its existence period of about 200 years. Manual processes have been forgotten and revived again enriched by the new digital technology. New technologies have brought new concepts and new ideas within the field of photography, which has always had many technical boundaries.

To display the evidence of things unseen requires transgressing the boundaries of photography. Galina remains stubborn and resolute in her quest to explore the boundaries of her chosen medium. She has a desire to bring new expressive, textural dimensions to photographs. She presents us a new way of seeing photography.

By choosing old archive pictures and making new manual prints and interpretations of them she underlines clearly that the subject and the equipment that have been originally used are not what is the most significant part in a photograph. Photography to her is more like music, where interpretation and performance of the original piece is what defines a new creation of art. She takes just a few images made by a local Norwegian studio photographer and she makes them hers creating a visual concert out of these few originals by playing around with sizes, colours and frames.

She uses manual processes, where application of liquid self-composed emulsions and process of exposure and development of each piece is what makes it special and unique, it is what makes it hers. In today's war for the copyrights in photography this is a revolution. In opposition to an art world obsessed with defining authorship Manikova buys the rights for use of the archive photographs and transforms these into new original works of art by declaring that she is neither an image-taker, nor a printer, but a free interpreter, a performer just as legitimate as a concert musician.

This form of photography, old photographic techniques like cyanotype blue and van dyke brown, exploited by Manikova, are the same ones used to make industrial blueprints and reproductions of drawings. Rauschenberg reduced the image of man and woman to blue icons, symbolic shapes, severed from any originating context. The surface material itself became an issue: why a bed

sheet? A domestic metaphor, certainly. A host of experiments by other artists followed, all serving to explore the photograph's polyglot nature, to play with its transparency and opacity. For many artists after Pop, this playing inevitably devolved into a deconstructive game, a political attack on photography's putative objectivity and its cultural uses. The most familiar examples are Andy Warhol's paintings and Richard Hamilton's collage "Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?"

Manikova is most concerned with exploring individual identity, she is an "expressionist," a tendency that Pop artists thought photography would eliminate in favour of facts. Manikova is consequent in her approach. Each of her projects can be looked at as an attempt to create metaphors for experience using photography. In her work, the photographic image becomes the reference point for what is common to us all, the meeting point of artist and audience.

In her ID installation shown in Photographic Gallery in Copenhagen in 1993, Galina printed old black & white photos of her forgotten childhood onto pillows, carpets and wall hangings, put love letters in Chinese and Russian together with photos of herself and her lovers in 3-D frame to repetitiously remind viewer of her existence and to keep her precious old times and memories alive. Photography stands at the centre of a multimedia experience of Manikova's expressive world, one that combined painting, ceramics, and textiles. The walls were painted a la Van Gogh, emphasizing that the exhibition was a trip through an artist's mind, not just another art show.

In her Metal Project in Norway 1997 and shortly after her father's death, Galina made two groups of pictures on metal, one group from her sweet and romantic childhood in USSR and another about her awkward life in Norway. According to the Russian saying "Things engraved in metal cannot be removed even by a hammer", those pictures can only be destroyed by melting the metal at high temperature. By making sand-blasted images in cast metal frames, Galina hopes to remember and to be remembered and understood, forever.

In her exhibition Climax Value in Norway 2000, she used transparent photos of mature and old naked ladies, eggs, mirrors, projected videos, texts, transparent textiles, herbs, fragrances and medieval sacred music to create three rooms that represent different phases in a woman's life. The process of aging was impossible to ignore when an image of an old naked woman was projected right on the visitors who walked around. This was Galina's attempt to face aging and preparing to become old.

Many artists genuinely sought to add to photography's resonance. They recognized that a photograph acquires meaning not just from its subject but from its framing, process, and deployment. They intervened at all four levels.

Galina's mixed media and mixed-technique work transgresses the boundaries of photography. Moments are de-frozen. Photos are liberated from limitations of frames. Two-dimensional photos became three-dimensional. Textures and depth are added. Uncertainty occurs. Mystery looms. It is forever different, just like the cyanotype or van dyke process itself. Blue cyanotypes and brown van dykes on cotton, Chinese rice paper and silk are simultaneously interwoven, preventing any hard-and-fast interpretation.

By bringing old Norwegian archives to China and exhibiting them in her own version in Shanghai Manikova provokes our curiosity and makes us ask a new question: why here? By displacing the reality and making the objects anonymous she further emphasises her focus on form, shape, texture, colour and expression of an image.

She is incapable of doing anything halfway, or of including less than everything, everything that lies outside the frame or outside the standard rules of interpretation.

It is this restlessness, this impatience with the borders around seeing and expressing that makes Galina Manikova an artist whose progress it is necessary to follow. We want to know where she is, and where she is going next. Her pictures move because, artistically, emotionally, and spiritually, she moves. To know what it means to be alive, follow her.

(Lyle Rexer is a U.S.-based critic who writes on art and photography. He is the author of several books, including *Photography's Antiquarian Avant-Garde: The New Wave in Old Processes*. He contributes regularly to many publications including *The New York Times*, *Art in America*, *Graphis* and *Metropolis*. He lives and works in Brooklyn, New York).