

## EXHIBITION REVIEW

“Vintage and Contemporary Czech Photography”

SK Josefsberg Studio Portland, Oregon March 1 - April 7, 2001

“Contemporary Photography in the Czech Republic”

Benham Studio Gallery Seattle Washington March 19 - April 28, 2001

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Czechoslovakia stands out among the modernist countries of Europe; it was occupied by the Germans (1939-1945), by the Soviets after World War II, and then taken over by Communism (1948-1989). Throughout this series of oppressions, its modernist tradition, even its avant-garde, survived. This was partly because, prior to these decades of vicissitudes, the early modern traditions were well established. Even in the era of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, Bohemia was a highly industrialized area and a hotbed of political activity. Already in the late nineteenth century art photography was ensconced and by 1918, when Czechoslovakia was established as an independent country, it had an active photography scene. Thus the photographer Jaromir Funke (1896 -1945) was a part of the international avant-garde of the 1920s with his camera less images and abstract compositions right along with artists like El Lissitzky, Man Ray and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy and his wife, Lucia Moholy, who was also Czech.

Funke's work, "Children Ascending a Stairway," c. 1922 marks the oldest photograph in the two tandem exhibitions in Portland and Seattle. Together these shows make a selected overview of twentieth century Czech photography. The exhibition in Portland was curated by Pavel Banka, the one in Seattle by Eva Králová, director of the Prague House of Photography. The contemporary artists were shown at both exhibitions. The plan is to have an exhibition in Prague next year with Northwestern photographers.

In Portland, the exhibition featured familiar vintage photographs such as nudes by Frantisek Drtikol(1883-1961) from the late 1920s. Drtikol posed nude women near geometric shapes, as in the offbeat constructivist Composition (Nude with Crossed Poles), 1929. Influenced by the modernism of Funke, Drtikol was also known for his portraits of writers and artists. He had a short career though, he gave up photography for painting in 1935.

The outstanding photographer of the next generation, Josef Sudek ( 1896 -1976) was represented by a few of his characteristic works of the 1950s and 1960s, as well as a portfolio of photographs of Saint Guy cathedral commissioned in 1928 on the tenth anniversary of the Republic of Czechoslovakia. This album of pictorialist works emphasizes the grandeur and romanticism of the cathedral.

Sudek was not expecting to be a photographer, he was trained as a bookbinder, but he lost an arm in World War I, so was unable to pursue his original profession . Jaromir Funke became a close friend in the 1920s, even as Sudek began to experiment with the pictorialist manipulations popular with the New York Stieglitz circle. pictorialism was popular in Czechoslovakia, and his Saint Guy cathedral photographs demonstrate his expertise with these techniques. By the early thirties though, Sudek joined modernism

and specifically what was called "New Wave" photography. But he continued to use large plate cameras in spite of his disability and in 1958 he used an 1894 panoramic camera to make a series of images of Prague that emphasized a poetic almost dreamy view of the city; he was completely at odds with the Socialist Realism of those years, but his continued production of poetic modern works such as the works in the SKJosefburg Studio exhibition, demonstrates that Socialist Realism was not the only possibility in Czechoslovakia during the Communist era. After the death of Stalin in 1953 and the Communist president of Czechoslovakia, Klement Gottwald, there was a significant relaxation of the cultural atmosphere, although Surrealists still had to work in secret.

Another photographer of this same generation, with a very different biography is Vilem Kriz (1921-1994). Kriz, who studied with Funke, was a surrealist photography in Czechoslovakia until 1946 when he went to Paris and achieved recognition for his works of the dreary post-occupation city. Notre Dame Gargoyles (1948) is a moody, atmospheric image that suggests that these beasts of Notre Dame were dreamy monsters, rather than threatening guards. Kriz went to Berkeley in 1952, quit photography until the late sixties, and then turned to intriguing Surrealist compositions in his back yard.

Photographers born during and just after World War II in the two exhibitions include Miroslav Machotka ( b. 1946) Jaroslav Benes, ( b. 1946), Viktor Kolár ( b. 1941), Pavel Banka ( b. 1941), Stepan Grygar ( b. 1955), Joseph Moucha ( b. 1956). Of this group Viktor Kolár's work in the Seattle exhibition belongs to a genre that could be called humanitarian documentary, a powerful tradition in the country with its roots in the 1930s. Kolár's long series of works devoted to the town of Ostrava, spans from the mid sixties to the present. He was born in Ostrava, an industrial city six hours east of Prague and grew up in the midst of its coalmines with a family of six children. In 1973, after returning from five years of exile in Canada, he returned to Ostrava and worked in the coal mines at the same that he photographed them. In the Ostrava Series stark white sheets hang on a clothesline in the foreground, while a slagheap glows in the background. A man reaches out to feed a swan by a dreary pond, childish trick riders stand three high on a horse. Life, half-life and near death seem very close, but life survives. Kolár won the Mother Jones International Photography Award in 1991 for this series, which funded him to continue work on the project.

Closely related to Kolár, but more toward the communicative side of image making is Ibra Ibrahimovic who is documenting towns in Northern Bohemia, which are now a vast wasteland. In the city of Most, for example, 60,000 people were displaced to high rises, the 800-year-old town was torn down in the 1960s, in order to enable the mining of coal. Today it is abandoned, polluted and full of toxic wastes. The series of photographs called Libkovic, The Conscience of the North, 1992 - 1993 is represented in the Benham Studio exhibition by Karl Krejci in his House and Karl Krejci Going for Coal. Krejci sits in his impoverished home, with his few pieces of clothing, clearly in despair. He expresses the sad mood of this village ruined by industrial development. Landscape behind chemical factory, fish kill, Zaluzi, 1993 is set up like a traditional, picturesque landscape, with framing trees and a foreground, middle ground and background, the

foreground is dead fish, the middle ground is dead trees, and the back ground is a chemical plant.

Another aspect of recent Czech photography is staged photographs, many of them affiliated with Surrealism, others with Symbolism and Romanticism. Pavel Banka does drawings with light in his well-known earlier portraits of women with geometric forms that seem directly in the line of descent from Drtikol. But the highlight of the Benham Gallery exhibition was a recent series of landscapes completed by Banka on the coast of Oregon during an extended stay in 1997. Banka set up his camera and left it for two hours at night. The result was a series of eerie, blurry images of forests and sea that suggest ghostly presences and a mysterious, although not terrifying enveloping nature. We cannot quite penetrate these forests, but we feel that they are occupied. Sometimes the work becomes entirely abstract, at other times more readable as a straightforward seascape, but the best of these works suggested a non-rational reality. They were very dark though, and in our rushed American society, the temptation was to walk by them too quickly, rather than let their eeriness sink into our consciousness. These landscapes were combined with one example of Banka's 1998 series Terezin, the 200-year-old fort near Prague that the Nazis converted to a concentration camp. The empty chamber of the scenes of terrible human suffering resonates with those who died there, but we know that those spirits are now wandering free, perhaps in some Oregon forest.

Other photographers in these two exhibitions who work with staged effects, but in very different ways include Václav Jirásek (b. 1965), Ivan Pinkava (b. 1961) and Michaela Brachtlová (b. 1970). Jirásek is part of the so-called "Brotherhood," a group of photographers who have been prominent since 1989. They work with "old master" techniques, but his work is formal and decorative.. Most characteristic of his style is Untitled, no. 3, 1999, a dense shrubbery with a foreground of falling petals printed on lush, selenium toned reddish paper. The artist is obviously taking advantage of the high silver content of Czech photography paper (its richer tones are impossible from printing papers in the United States, but, ironically, the price is the pollution that production of such a paper creates.)

Ivan Pinkava works with traditional studio lighting and subjects, but these figures seem to be the derelicts of the mythological traditions and classical paintings to which they refer. In Salome, 1996, the seductive temptress is now a thin and somber young woman wrapped in a heavy coat. She cradles the skull against her as though it is a dead lover. The work is part of a long series of pieces that has been called The Theater of Lost Souls. Incest Twins, 1999 recalls Robert Mapplethorpe's posed figures without the sensuality, and His First Wine, 1995 invokes Caravaggio without the eroticism. The alienation and even static desolation of Pinkava's cast of characters descends directly from Dostoevsky and Artaud.

Michaela Brachtlova's isolated studio compositions go one step further from reality with their odd organic appendages, possibly made of wax. They are disturbingly phallic, erotic, and incomprehensible. We can gradually accept these fragments of the figure as abstractions, once we move past the eeriness. Alena Katzmonnovà used liquid light on

canvas in her Station to Station series ( n.d.) that also suggests displaced scenes and people. Marketa Bankova digitally manipulated prints like TV Evening, 1998 a parking garage with trapped faces looking out between the floors, are dark and displaced.

Regardless of whether their affiliations were modernist, surrealist, pictorialist, symbolist, or documentary, these photographers had clear spiritual affinities. They all spoke of the fragility of life, and of the individuals, whether artists or average citizens, who are caught up in systems and powers beyond their control. Such seriousness is a natural result of the complex history of oppressions in twentieth century Czechoslovakia, as well as the difficult economic transitions it has been experiencing since the Velvet Revolution of 1989 and the division of the country into the Czech and Slovak Republics. There was one exception to the pervasive somberness that was not really part of either of the exhibitions, but it could be called an appendage and, hopefully, the spirit of the future. That is Marketa Bankova's quirky, humorous multimedia website called New York Map.([www.bankova.cz](http://www.bankova.cz)).