**ART**

**Staring into the abyss**

*Andrew Graham-Dixon*

**ART FROM RUSSIA**

Saatchi, to May 5

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Andrew Graham-Dixon

G

stalin

 sits said, in a chillingly

empty pronouncement

Saatchi, to May 5

new exhibition of

art. The irony could not

become a better place in

which to live since the
days of perestroika and
glasnost? Not a bit of it, to
judge by this grim

collective portrait of the

nation, assembled from

an intriguing collection of

recent painting, sculpture

and photography. Walking

through its galleries is like

wandering into a blasted,
desolate landscape – a

place without hope, let
alone gaiety.

The show opens with

a remarkable series of

photographs taken in

the Nineties by Sergei

Vasiliev, a former prison

warden, showing the

tattooed bodies of the

inmates of Russian jails.

The men have turned

their skins into lopsided

canvas, raggedly inked

with home-made designs

expressing rage, disgust,
dispair. The imagery is coded – staring eyes above the navel

indicating homosexuality,

skulls at the shoulder

signifying a lifelong

commitment to crime – so Vasiliev’s pictures

double as a catalogue of the

hieroglyphics of an underclass. The KGB is

deemed to have studied them carefully. Darker than all

the inked symbols are the

expressions in the convicts’ eyes.

Even more blatantly

dismal are the photographs of Boris

Mikhailov, whose *Case History*

occupies two large
galleries at the centre of

the show. The pictures are
drawn from 400 he took in

his hometown of Kharkov,
in

Ukraine: images of
distressed youth, of the

mentally and physically
ill, the desperate and the

distressed. They cannot be

described as straight

photography, but as

reportage: each of them

probes a different aspect of

a place without shops,

a place without hope, let

alone gaiety.

The series pushes reportage

to the limit.

It seems to be the sum

of its parts, but

at the same time it

is the parts. Each of the

pictures is a painting, a

sculpture, a poem, a

parable, a crime report.

And yet, as Mikhailov

himself says, this is, in its

way, a place with hope.

The pictures speak of

terror, of death, of

distress, of despair.

But they also speak of

hope, of freedom, of

liberation.

The pictures are

monochrome voids

inert sack of sand-filled

PVC, vaguely woman-

shaped, lying poleaxed on

the floor; a sculpture

resembling a person in a

body bag.

Dasha Pursey contributes a column of glass storage jars filled

with slowly rotting pickled

fruit and vegetables:

might this be a modern

Russian, paupers satire

on Damien Hurst’s luxury,

formaldehyde-filled

vitrioles? Elsewhere, Irina

Korina weighs in with a

mule column of steel

piercing a ragged cluster of refuse-filled

plastic bags. Capital, she

calls it, a play on words

suggesting that she sees

Russia itself, under its

own new capitalism, as a

corrupt rubbish. All in all, this is the

bleakest of exhibitions for the

bleak midwinter.