

## ART

## Staring into the abyss

Andrew Graham-Dixon

ARTFROMRUSSIA | ★★★★★  
*Saatchi, to May 5 | saatchi-gallery.co.uk; 020 7811 3070*

"Gaiety is the outstanding feature of the Soviet Union," Stalin once said, in a chillingly empty pronouncement that has been borrowed as the subtitle of a new exhibition of contemporary Russian art. The irony could not

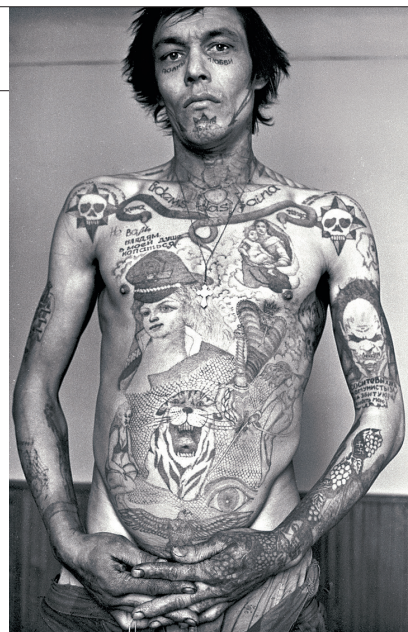
be heavier, the underlying message of the show more dark. Has Russia become a better place in which to live since the days of perestroika and glasnost? Not a bit of it, to judge by this grim collective portrait of the nation, assembled from an intriguing collection of recent painting, sculpture and photography. 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 canvases, raggedly inked with home-made designs expressing rage, disgust, despair. The imagery is coded – staring eyes above the navel indicating homosexuality, skulls at the shoulder signifying a lifelong commitment to crime – so Vassiliev's pictures double as a catalogue of the hieroglyphics of an underclass. The KGB is said 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 destitute, wandering the barren precincts of a city abandoned to terminal decay. They cannot be described as straight photojournalism, because the sitters were paid and fed in exchange for posing.

In many of the images, they bare their bodies with gestures of horrid theatricality, revealing putrid rashes, bloody sores, cancerous cysts and lumps. Often they leer and cavort, as if reenacting for the camera the carnivalesque antics of Goya's darker souls. Yet for all the artifice, these pictures ring shockingly true. Venture into the urban hinterlands of the post-Soviet world and you



## BLEAK

Sergei Vasiliev's remarkable series of photographs show the tattooed bodies of the inmates of Russian jails

really will find a society as dysfunctional, as broken as this. Mikhailov is revealing a bitter reality: a place without shops, without even pavements, where a car capable of movement is a rarity – an asset-stripped world, from which those who stripped the assets have long fled, in their superyachts and private planes, for pastures (or football fields) new.

The triumvirate of photographers is completed by Vikenti Nilin, whose *Neighbours* series pushes reportage towards Surrealism. In each of his black-and-white pictures, a man or woman sits balanced precariously on the window ledge of a ramshackle apartment in some blighted Soviet block, several storeys up. The weirdness of their predicament is presumably meant to be symptomatic of deeper truths. Russia stares into an abyss. Once there were safety nets, at least of a kind, for the hopelessly poor, but now there are none.

The rest of the work in the show ranges narrowly between the sinister, the cynical and the plain abject. The paintings of Janis Avotins are monochrome voids peopled by ghostly figures who may or may not be up to no good. Daniel Bragin's *Lady* is an

inert sack of sand-filled PVC, vaguely woman-shaped, lying poleaxed on the floor: a sculpture resembling a person in a body bag.

Dasha Fursey contributes a column of glass storage jars filled with slowly rotting pickled fruit and vegetables: might this be a modern Russian, pauperist satire on Damien Hirst's luxury, formaldehyde-filled vitrines? Elsewhere, Irina Korina weighs in with a mute 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 column capped not by the elegant shapes of Doric or the ornate rhythms of Corinthian, but by a shapeless mess of rankly corrupt rubbish.

All in all, this is the bleakest of exhibitions for the bleak midwinter.

## ON NOW

**1 Death** Wellcome, to Feb 27; wellcomecollection.org 020 7611 2222/*Its effect on artists throughout history*  
**2 Francesco Clemente** Blain Southern, Fri to Jan 26; blainsouthern.com 020 7493 4492/*Neapolitan painting heavyweight*  
**3 Bloomberg New Contemporaries** ICA, Tues to Jan 13; ica.org.uk 020 7930 3647/*Pick of UK art schools' new talent*

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## DECEMBER

**1 Ilfracombe**  
**The Landmark**  
 01271 324232

**6 Truro**  
**Hall for Cornwall**  
**EXTRA DATE ADDED**

**7 Truro**  
**Hall for Cornwall**  
 01872 262466

## FEBRUARY

**3 LONDON**  
**Royal Festival Hall**  
**with Show of Hands**  
**featuring Miranda Sykes**  
 www.southbankcentre.co.uk

**7 Cheltenham**  
**Town Hall**  
 www.cheltenhamtownhall.org.uk

**8 St Albans**  
**The Alban Arena**  
 www.alban-arena.co.uk

www.portisaacsfishermansfriends.com  
 www.ticketline.co.uk | www.gigantic.com | www.seetickets.com

**9 Guildford**  
**G Live**  
 www.glive.co.uk

## MARCH

**6 Salisbury City Hall**  
 www.cityhallsalisbury.org.uk

**9 Birmingham**  
**Town Hall**  
 www.thsh.co.uk

**10 Cardiff**  
**St Davids Hall**  
 www.stdavidshallcardiff.co.uk

## APRIL

**5 Poole**  
**Lighthouse**  
 www.poolelighthouse.co.uk

**6 Bridport**  
**The Electric Palace**  
 www.electricpalace.org.uk

**7 Plymouth**  
**Theatre Royal**  
 www.theatreroyal.com