

**"By night the table conversation grew into an argument with a hint of fistfight.
A shaven-headed man in a sailor shirt, screamed at the top of his voice:
– I repeat once again, color is an ideological phenomenon!.. "**

Sergey Dovlatov

Discussing development of the Soviet photography, Lithuanian art critic Laima Skeivene points out the huge ideological pressure piled on all photoartists, who were forced to toe the party line. The requirements for the socialist fine art were applied to photography as well: "Politicians responsible for culture saw the aim of photography clearly: to demonstrate our fancy life, how beautiful we're ourselves, to create the luxurious facade of prosperity [...] However that photographic happiness was reflection not of the real life, but of the image that had been shaped up for decades."¹ Such pressure naturally caused a reaction and resulted in the emergence of nonconformist photography, which attempted to overcome the limits put on it. Kharkiv was one of the most powerful centers of its development, where a group of masters, who changed approaches to their artistic practices, has been worked since the 1960s.

It is not only pioneers who form a school, but also those, who adopt and consistently implement the new methods, who create art muscles surrounding the skeleton of ideas, techniques and instruments. The same thing happened to Kharkiv School of Photography. In one of her articles researcher Tetyana Pavlova cites the comparison that Boris Mikhailov once drew between the structure of Kharkiv photo environment and a building.² The role of its foundation, walls and roof was played by the representatives of the Time group (the Vremya group), which was organized at the regional photoclub of the House of Trade Unions in 1971 (Yuriy Rupin, Evgeniy Pavlov, Boris Mikhailov, Oleh Malevaniy, Oleksandr Suprun, Oleksandr Sitnychenko, Gennadiy Tubalev, Anatoliy Makiyenko). The representatives of the second generation that appeared in the 1980s acted like structural additions, finishing the image. They picked up and developed the trends initiated by the first wave of Kharkiv School of Photography. Born in 1947, Victor Kochetov held a special position among them.

Although he is almost the same age as Pavlov, Malevaniy and Surpun, Kochetov served as an intermediate between them and the "youth" (Gosprom group, Roman Pyatkovka, Sergey Solonsky and others). In his creative philosophy he was close to the Time group, and this fact was recognized by the group members.³ However, Kochetov never directly belonged to its composition,

¹ Skeivene, Laima. "Фотография и перестройка" in *Foto: Annäherung an die Sowjetunion. Ein fotografischer Dialog*, Fackelträger, 1989, 133-134.

² Павлова, Татьяна. "Веер в кулаке" in Галерея, 2005. Available at: <https://archive.is/BTtgP>.

³ Yuriy Rupin: "... I cannot include Victor Kochetov among the group, although he could undoubtedly be a part of it, according to the principles on which it was based" [Quote from Рупин, Юрий. *Дневник фотографа: тридцать лет спустя*]. Boris Mikhailov "He was the closest to me in terms of both photography and attitude to reality. He walks close beside me, he has a distinct face and he plays his own game" [Quote from Можейко, Инна. "Наш Палич". *Слобідський край*, 2013. — 6 червня].

but rather was a satellite that had got on the orbit of the group's creative influence without actually becoming its participant.

Unlike many representatives of Kharkiv School of Photography, who received engineering education and worked for research centres and institutes, Kochetov decided to devote his life to photography at an early age. It needs to be said, though, that in the beginning it was rather a craft and a source of income than art. He landed a job of photoreporter, worked for a photographic studio, did wedding photography and so on. This decision was due to two factors: sincere interest, as his first attempts date back to his childhood, when he developed pictures with his father, as well as desire to find a profession that involved possibility of growth. The limited professional opportunities made Victor leave his music studies after graduating from B. Liatoshynsky Kharkiv Music College.

Although, according to his own memories, Kochetov started taking his purposeful steps in photography as early as in 1968, he didn't rush to join the local photo club that had already been functioning in Kharkiv, because he did not like the idea of "grouping together" with anyone, as he put it. In the meanwhile, he actively took part in contests and exhibitions.

A really crucial moment in Kochetov's work was meeting Yuriy Rupin and Alexander Suprun, and, consequently, Boris Mikhailov. It was them who influenced his perspective of the essence of photography and who introduced him to their circle. First of all, they inspired him to start doing non-commercial works. Surprisingly, the very isolation from art-market contributed to the formation of his sincere emotional sensitivity and openness to the innovations that were typical of Kharkiv School of Photography.

One of the characteristic traits of Kharkiv photographic scene was constant experimenting with various techniques that gave fresh artistic effect. Kochetov tried his hand in most of those techniques used by Malevany and Rupin in the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, with the exception of solarization. It must be said, though, that his colleagues' favourite techniques, such as collage or overlaying, never became his signature ones either, only occasionally appearing in his works. But the very fact of their presence demonstrates the artist's complete involvement in and synchronicity with local tendencies.

While working as a photoreporter (particularly at the Southern Railway), he traveled a lot and was able to shoot at numerous locations: manufacturing plant, mass meetings, concerts and so on. Therefore, his earliest works represent the genre of direct photography — these are mostly the scenes that occurred during his work trips or walks around the city. They subsequently became the basis for the central direction in Kochetov's artwork, i.e. painted photographs.

Artificial adding of color to photographs was one of the popular techniques among Kharkiv masters. Suffice it to recall Boris Mikhailov's iconic series *Luriki* (1971–1985). Yet, if for Mikhailov that was only one of the fragments of his artistic biography, for Kochetov colouring became a technique that resonated with his creative outlook more than anything else. And even though the influence of Mikhailov is obvious, there is no reason to speak of imitation here, due to the originality of Victor's understanding of this technique. The motivation to use color was sufficiently subjective and, at the same time, obvious. As the artist said, he saw that the "painted image" was more powerful in terms of expressiveness than its black and white original.

The first colored photograph, as Kochetov recalls, was the picture *Yellow Bow*, in which he painted yellow a bow in a girl's hair. The picture itself was shot in 1982 during the work on one of the photo reports in Kharkiv. This episode can be called the reference point in the formation of the distinctive face of the artist.

For Kochetov adding colour to photos becomes not only an attempt of kitsch manifestation and criticism of the Soviet culture (as in Mikhailov's *Luriki*), or an effort to overcome the boundary between painting and photography (as in Yevgeniy Pavlov and Volodymyr Shaposhnikov's collaborative projects), but also a reflection of subtle dialogue with the image directly. The artist works with shots in various modalities that are rich in color, gamma and other nuances: the finalized work can be "loud", with completely transformed and luminescent Andy Warhol-like colour range, or have shades that are several "registers" more saturated than natural colors, but that does not violate the realism of the composition. Some works are just delicately accented with colour.

When analyzing Kochetov's colored photographs, it is necessary to take into account the fact that the artist created a significant number of them in collaboration with his son, Sergey Kochetov. Sergey fell for photography and started helping his father at an early age, and subsequently became a full-fledged co-author of the works. Their family tandem, which formed at least three decades ago, continues its work today. The photographers are deliberately trying not to keep distinct the authorship of works, speaking of themselves as of artistic "we", stressing their artistic unity. Stylistically complementing each other, they at some point started resembling Janus Poluektovich from the Strugatsky brothers' novel *Monday Begins on Saturday* — a character, who has two manifestations (A-Janus and U-Janus), unique in time and space. That is why all the way through the text "Kochetov" will alternate with "the Kochetovs" or will double and become "Victor and Sergey" in an absolutely chaotic way.

Kochetov never intentionally thinks through the degree and manner of processing images. He strives to save the spirit of improvisation and the element of surprise in his works, which is a feature formed by his experience as a reporter. Paradoxically, both father and son consider artistic interference with the shot not as an attempt to change reality, but, on the contrary, the illustration of reality. Due to the conflict with the documental nature of the photo, the color creates visual accents that catch the viewer's eye and force a person to take a more attentive look at the subject. As a result, a semantic distance is created, allowing you to read the work as a text dedicated to homo sovieticus. *Life of an average person is shown through the eyes of the another average person — the photographer himself*. This is the central difference between Kochetov's works and the projects by Mikhailov and Pavlov: while the works of the latter are anonymized and deprived of the sense of author's presence, Victor eagerly uses self portraits and images of friends and relatives with an ironic take on reality. The irony in them significantly softens the socio-critical component, which, of course, is present in these "pictures": the color emphasizes misery and poverty of Soviet and post-Soviet day-to-dayness.

This may be explained by the fact that a lot of photographs (especially from the mid-1970s and early 1980s) were painted many years after some of the shots had been taken. Situations and characters are reimagined over time, which is naturally reflected in the further artistic processing. The fact of coloring here may be seen as a peculiar symbolic gesture against the inevitable fading of brightness and details of memories in our brains or as substitution of some images by others —

a bitter trick our minds play with us. But we do not want to exaggerate the conceptualist side of the Kochetovs' artwork. On the contrary, Victor absolutely admits that he did not think in series and projects: the groups of works that were united thematically and/or artistically began to appear only in the 2000's when it became a standard practice in Ukrainian art.

However, in the entire array of Kochetov's colored and black and white photographs one can clearly see the dominant subject: the exploration of urban space. City streets become more than just a background for certain situations; they act as quite independent characters. Purely urban scenes are characterized by the maximum intensity color that makes the space captured in the photo look compact and dynamic. The almost hallucinogenic acuity of experiencing the image is achieved with a panoramic camera. Panorama is the technique that was very common among the representatives of Kharkiv School of Photography. For instance, it was used in some of their key series by Evgeniy Pavlov (*The Violin*, 1972) and Boris Mikhailov (*By the ground*, 1991, *At Dusk*, 1993). Yet, whereas the traditional panorama has to enhance the effect of the vastness of landscape, Victor and Sergey, on the contrary, squeeze it, while the color adds flat decorative effect to the works. The depth is also leveled out due to the large details that come to the forefront of the picture. Objects look like they are cramped in the frame and they want to go beyond its limits; foreshortened elements are highlighted, giving the impression that the image is turning inside out towards the viewer. Kochetov uses a wide-angle lens, and he does it in an unconventional way: taking vertical photographs, mainly street scenes with people. The vertical format compresses the frames even more, as if it is squeezing the private space of the models. It can be interpreted as a conscious or unconscious social allegory, because ignoring private boundaries of a person was a tactic typical of the Soviet society.

Among other features characteristic of Kharkiv photography in Kochetovs' works, we should mention his experiments with paired combinations of images (let's recall the series *Parnography* by Yevgeniy Pavlov and Vladimir Shaposhnikov, or *Stereotyp* by Misha Pedan). For this purpose the artist would use coloured parts of two photos, which, as a rule, had been taken at the same time and place with a change of angle. They could be located symmetrically or with displacement to the right or to the left. The highlighted juncture and the fragmentation of the images resembles transition from one frame to the other, as if you are looking at a film on which the shots continue one another. This is not literal continuation, but more of a rhyming at the level of rhythm, details and color, like in a free verse. The "doubling" of reality gives a cinematic effect and brings in the aspect of time to the works, since we have two moments compressed into one.

Speaking of the artist's work in the context of Kharkiv photo-art, it should be noted that in the 1980s and 1990s, Victor Kochetov paid much less attention to various embodiments of the category of physicality that were actively developed by the representatives of the first generation of Kharkiv School of Photography (e.g. "social body", "erotica, body as a sign"). Nude models begin to appear more or less systematically in the artist's works, created in collaboration with Sergey, only after the end of the 1990s, and they do not imply any protest against repressed sexuality and tabooed eroticism, as they did in the photographs of the previous years. But the very life philosophy of the artist was far from nonconformism: the photographer is rather a subtle observer.

Unlike many of his colleagues, who took transition from analog photography to digital imaging pretty hard, Kochetov didn't perceive those changes as something dramatic. On the contrary,

according to the photographer, he even felt relieved by the simplification of technological process. After he left his job as a photojournalist and retired, Victor continued to shoot, always taking his small digital P&S camera when heading for walks. In the 2000s his methods of work did not undergo a radical change; they still were dominated by two strategies: the use of manual coloring and direct photography. Digital processing allowed Viktor and Sergey to develop series combining image and text. Victor started making such attempts in 1991, in the project *Comments. Associations*, in which, in fact, he followed the way similar to that of Mikhailov's in *Unfinished dissertation*, making handwritten captions for photographs glued to paper. However, the idea of revealing the content of the images through captioning them was manifested to the full extent in the series *My Bigboards*, created in collaboration with Sergey. It is a reflection of information pollution of the modern world, based on the brightest of its embodiments — the aesthetics of billboards. The frames of everyday life are accompanied by idealistic captions that do not tie with the unattractiveness of the image content, or by mocking comments of the authors themselves. The use of Word Art-style fonts, set "by default", emphasizes the ironic and kitsch nature of the photos.

Kochetovs' artwork is based on a rather banal yet eternal artistic principle: "I reflect what I see." Although his works may seem surrealistic at first glance, they are not an attempt at artistic escapism, but a reaction to reality, the essence of which is revealed through the original artistic transformation. Therein lays the their profound realism — the "realism" inherent in the entire Kharkiv School of Photography.

Oleksandra Osadcha, art critic