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Boris Mikhailov's Temptation of Death

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Mikhailov's most recent body of work blends old and new photographs to reflect on life, death, and his own autobiography

A half-finished crematorium in Kyiv, Ukraine, inspired Boris Mikhailov's latest project *Temptation of Death*. Construction began in 1969 but, 13 years on, as work

neared completion, the crematorium was abandoned. Problems plagued the process. The original design, it was thought, would provoke memories of the mass incineration of Ukrainian Jews in Nazi concentration camps. The revised plan, developed by artists Ada Rybachuk and Vladimir Melnichenko, was more ambiguous and comprised an elaborate Wall of Remembrance. “The outcome was a mysterious concrete agglomerate that seemed to have been poured onto the site from another planet, midway between a science-fiction film and the organic profile of the Chapel of Notre-Dame du Haut,” writes Francesco Zanot, who curated the exhibition and the accompanying text for CRASH, the 11th edition of Biennale dell’immagine in Chiasso, Switzerland.



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In 1982, party leaders, likely fearful of a design that would influence its onlookers too strongly, concealed the Wall of Remembrance with concrete. When Mikhailov visited the crematorium in 2017 he created new work inspired by the architecture and its gradual deterioration. But, the experience also encouraged him to reflect on his extensive oeuvre of pre-existing work. The photographer employed diptychs, an arrangement he had not previously used, to combine new photographs of the crematorium and his own old images. “Before, I did not take pictures like this,” says Mikhailov. “I did not combine pictures in an aesthetic way like this. I did not put pictures from other places and other times together.” For Mikhailov, the diptych, which dates back to classical art, recalls the layout of a book and allowed him to view his work in new ways. The photographer created more than 150 pairings, 35 of which are on show at the 11th Biennale dell’immagine.



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The diptychs exist as a visual autobiography of sorts — collectively, they embody different moments in Mikhailov’s life located in different places. “I selected my pictures following my story,” says Mikhailov, “it is like a novella”. The pairings also evoke a sense of uncertainty: a collision of sorts reflecting the Biennale’s theme CRASH. While the pairings create new visual meanings, every single image also acquires additional significance. “Perhaps I am employing the diptych now because it is not possible to explain something with just one picture,” says Mikhailov. Political and symbolic narratives run through the body of work — the capitalist present and the communist past; life and death — tying the series’ disparate elements together.

Boris Mikhailov’s Temptation of Death is on show at the 11th Biennale dell’immagine in Chiasso, Switzerland, until 08 December 2019.



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