

fondazione donnaregina
per le arti contemporanee

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BORIS MIKHAILOV*io non sono io / I am not I***terzo piano / third floor****14.11.2015 – 1.02.2016****Curated by Andrea Viliani, Eugenio Viola****In collaboration with Incontri Internazionali d'Arte****Polo museale della Campania, Villa Pignatelli-Casa della fotografia**

Curatorial Coordination, Silvia Salvati

Organized by the MADRE in collaboration with Incontri Internazionali d'arte and the Polo museale della Campania, Villa Pignatelli-Casa della fotografia, *I am not I* is the first exhibition by an Italian public institution devoted to Boris Mikhailov (Kharkov, 1938), together with the retrospective which, in autumn 2015, was held by Camera-Centro Italiano per la Fotografia in Turin.

Mikhailov is one of the most influential contemporary photographers. Born in Ukraine, his work – begun in the 1960s while working as an engineer in a factory – was repeatedly boycotted by the Soviet regime. In his photographic series Mikhailov deals with a broad range of themes, investigating the far-reaching, radical, and often traumatic changes that have affected his homeland and still do. The artist himself has said: “I think that the phenomenon I am telling the world about is post-communist and post-Soviet in its essence. Russia has always been a world of social cataclysms, and this was obvious along the entire 20th century.” But, by extension, the social disintegration that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union, in terms of community structures and living conditions, as well as its impact on individual consciences, is raised in Mikhailov’s images to a universal value capable of representing the contemporary identity in its fragmentation between inclusion and exclusion, progress and marginalization, identity and displacement, migration and permanence. In this way he bears witness to an irrepressible dignity as well as the common ethical roots of all human beings.

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The human body is often featured, uncensored in its suffering and frailty, as in the series that gives its name to the exhibition, *I Am Not I* (1992). Here the artist depicts an exhilarating sequence of actions that are both classical and mocking. The images caused a scandal when they were originally displayed, resulting in the closure of the exhibition by the Soviet police. Yet in their poetic irony and radical sincerity they present the self-portrait (a recurrent theme in the artist's practice) of an individual who, though relegated to the margins, finds a surreal, estranging liberation in artistic expression. The exhibition at the MADRE explores the theme of the portrait and the self, hence the intimately autobiographical matrix of all Mikhailov's research, in which the themes of the crisis of identity and social oppression, iniquitous poverty and sheer misery, abandonment and solitude, constantly oscillate between war and peace, isolation and the attempt to overcome it in relation to others. It is within this dynamic that Mikhailov turns the gaze of his camera onto the recesses of reality, searching for a common truth that, traversing the boundaries of space and time, echoes the tones of great European art, from Baroque painting to a concern for the "defeated" of 19th century painting and photography, and leading to a search for personal and civil responsibility peculiar to the historical avant-garde of the 20th century, whose utopian and experimental impulse the artist shares. These possible influences and references are embodied in the exhibition in the juxtaposition between certain of Mikhailov's triptychs and photographs in small format and two paintings by the Spanish artist Jusepe de Ribera (Xàtiva, 1591-Naples, 1652) respectively representing *St. Paul the Hermit* (c. 1638) and *St. Mary of Egypt* (1651). The image of an aged or suffering body, the unashamed mourning for its deformation and decay or its mortification and suffering express a common longing for transcendence in the face of earthly corruption. In Mikhailov's triptychs (including *Self-Portrait*, specially conceived for the exhibition), the colors are somber (from green to blue to dark brown), evoking – in poses symbolically hovering between interior and exterior, present and future, life and death – the disintegration of the flesh after death and our destiny as mortal beings, yet, at the same time, the force of endurance and redemption. Therefore his art embodies the theme not only of *memento mori* but above all the supreme theme of a *memento vivere*.

The other series in the exhibition, including *Yesterday Sandwich* (1972-1975), *Salt Lake* (1986), *By the Ground* (1991), *Football* (2000), *Superimpositions from the 60/70s* and *The Wedding* (2005), are so many chapters of a story that oppose banality, fractures or the grotesque of history with the resilience of many individual stories, sometimes playful, sometimes merciless. In this way the exhibition presents a gallery of portraits and self-portraits of the most important of all 20th century photography, disturbing and yet deeply human in their urgent, universal, and even spiritual testimony of a personal and collective dignity. Different and the same ("I am not I") in giving representation to who we are ultimately as "human beings."

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During the exhibition a new artist's book will be available, the most extensive publication to date devoted to Mikhailov, published by Camera-Centro Italiano per la Fotografia in Turin and Walther Koenig Verlag, with the support of the MADRE museum. Since the early 1990s, when his research was also presented in the West, some of the most important museums in the world have presented extensive retrospectives of the artist's work (in 2007 he represented the Ukraine at the Venice Biennale), including: MoMA-Museum of Modern Art, New York (2011), Sprengel Museum, Hannover (2011, 2007, 1998), Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna (2010), Moscow Contemporary Art Center, Moscow (2008), Centre de la Photographie, Geneva (2005), Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, Centrum Sztuki Wspolczesnej Zamek, Warsaw (2004), Fotomuseum, Winterthur (2003), Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, BildMuseet, Umeå, Orchard Gallery, Derry, The Photographic Museum, Helsinki (2001), Museum of Modern Art, Ljubljana, Centre National de la Photographie, Paris (1999), Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (1998), Kunsthalle Zürich, Zurich, SCCA, Soros Center of Contemporary Art, Kiev (1997), Portikus, Frankfurt, The Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia (1995), Museum of Contemporary Art, Tel Aviv, List Visual Arts Center, MIT, Cambridge (1990). After receiving the *Hasselblad Foundation International Award* in 2000 and the *Spectrum International Prize for Photography* in 2012, the artist has been awarded with the prestigious *Goslar Kaiserring Award* in 2015.



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