

MICHAL CHELBIN

Sailboats and Swans

"Chelbin is always looking, drawing what is hidden to the surface. She captures—we shudder."
A.M. Homes from her essay in *Sailboats and Swans*

For Immediate Release

Media Contact: Maureen Sullivan

maureen@redartprojects.com, 917.846.4477

Exhibition: October 18 – January 19th, 2013

Andrea Meislin Gallery, NYC, 534 West 24th Street, New York, NY 10011

Publication: Twin Palms Publishers, featuring 62 full color plates on 120 pages; essay and interview by acclaimed writer **A.M. Homes** with Michal Chelbin and her partner Oded Plotnizki. PDF available for media review now; book release November 1, 2012.



Michal Chelbin's latest body of photography, shot in seven prisons in the Ukraine and Russia over the past six years, explores what it means to be locked and constantly watched – and to be looking back at such a person in this surreal world within a world. Chelbin's portraiture is renowned for its visual contrasts – old and new, odd and ordinary, fantasy and reality –and for unmasking the legendary qualities not immediately apparent in individuals. The title, *Sailboats and Swans*, refers to the idiosyncratic, and almost mocking, bucolic and fantastical murals and wallpaper backgrounds she found throughout the prisons. These contradictions of life in prison abound in girls' flowery dress prison uniforms, murderers working as nannies to other women's babies in the new mothers' prison, young girls serving time alongside grandmothers – perhaps witness to their own futures, and the mesmerizing human blend of fear and cruelty in the boys' and men's prison - where big tattooed bodies are now zombie-like, worn down by the daily travails of trying to survive being locked up in a world devoid of hope.

For the past decade, Michal Chelbin has been traveling to shoot in the Ukraine and Russia, the countries of her ancestors, drawn to the extreme contrasts and mythological qualities. Through the connections she made, she gained incredibly rare access to create portraits of the prisoners. Never asking the crime until after finishing the portrait allowed the artist to see the

individual through her lens, not the prisoner, in sittings that sometimes lasted for hours until the mask wore down. "I usually photograph people outside the mainstream, and I look for faces and eyes that express the complexities of life and for a gaze that transcends from the private to the common," stated Chelbin. All of her projects have been centered on a group who share something in common - *Strangely Familiar* focused on the small town circus performers, *The Black Eye* is comprised of portraits of wrestlers and athletes, and those locked up are her subjects in *Sailboats and Swans*.

In Chelbin's work there is always a sense of mystery and multi-dimensional narratives. Nothing is obviously resolved, and questions linger for the viewer to struggle with as she does: *who is this person? Why is he dressed like this? What does it mean to be locked? Is it a human act? Is it fair? What do we see when we look at a locked person? Do we punish him with our eyes? Does a killer still look like a killer? Is it human to be weak and murderous at the same time?*

Michal Chelbin *Sailboats and Swans* will be on view from October 18 – January 19, 2013, at Andrea Meislin Gallery, 534 West 24th Street, NYC. www.andreameislin.com

The Artist

Israeli-born and based artist Michal Chelbin's work is in many prestigious private and public collections including The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Jewish Museum, New York, The Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, The Kadist Art Foundation, Paris, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, The Portland Art Museum and The Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Israel. Her work has been short-listed for the Taylor Wessing Portrait Competition at the National Portrait Gallery in London. She previously had solo shows at Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Israel and Andrea Meislin Gallery, New York who represent the artist. In addition to *Sailboats and Swans*, previous publications include *Strangely Familiar* and *The Black Eye*.