

BORIS MIKHAILOV

SPROVIERI - LONDON

Boris Mikhailov has surprised, shocked and intrigued audiences for over 50 years, providing imagery that is by turns tragic and absurd. In “Triptychs,” Sprovieri hosts a mini retrospective of Mikhailov’s work, featuring photography stretching back to the late 1960s. Despite the small size of the space, the show presents a coherent overview of his oeuvre.

As its title suggests, the exhibition showcases works from different series grouped in sets of three. Ten series by Mikhailov are represented, the earliest being “Yesterday’s Sandwich” from the late ’60s to the early ’70s, which features at its center two sun-drenched, rather dandy tennis players overlaid with a photograph of a Communist poster. This is the only set of images here created before the collapse of the regime, and the figures appear confident, boldly posing for the camera.

In his later series, Mikhailov addresses some of the difficulties of life in post-Soviet Ukraine. Several triptychs focus on the poor and homeless. While these images feel closer to documentary in style, Mikhailov continues to incorporate conceptual ideas into his work, carefully staging his subjects and using

religious and art-historical references. One man, in a triptych from the series “Case History” (1997-8), is shown held as if in a Pietà. Mikhailov himself appears in a number of more humorous works, which provide light-relief to the physical and mental suffering on display elsewhere. In the series “I Am Not I” from 1992, the artist appears naked, posing with various objects — including a large dildo. His exaggerated facial expressions portray a clown-like range of emotions, from power to introspection.

It is Mikhailov’s work with the homeless that proves most absorbing, however. As with the work of Roger Ballen, and even the early photography of Richard Billingham, Mikhailov’s photographs raise difficult questions about the relationship between photographer and subject. In their portrayal of the vulnerable, naked and often drunken, these images are troubling and unsettling, yet remain utterly compelling.

Eliza Williams



BORIS MIKHAILOV, Untitled Triptych from the series “Case History” (detail), 1997-1998. C-print. Courtesy Sprovieri, London.

YAYOI KUSAMA

VICTORIA MIRO - LONDON



YAYOI KUSAMA, My Forsaken Love, 2010. Acrylic on canvas, 162 x 130 cm. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London.

After a career spanning over six decades, Yayoi Kusama is still as prolific as ever. The new paintings and sculptures presented at Victoria Miro are only a small part of a body of work originally conceived as a series of 100 artworks — a number that was eventually outgrown. They are renewed proof of Kusama’s commitment to her art. Each painting was made in a single session, a *modus*

operandi that gives the whole experience a significant temporal frame while at the same time casting some doubt about their effective relevance. Kusama is, after all, an artist who has developed an immediately recognizable visual language. No matter how beneficial, this often has the unwanted effect of redirecting the work into mannerism or design. This is not the case here, as a first glance at these new paintings is sufficient to confirm. Stunningly fresh and vibrant, they combine familiar grids of colors and forms with an instinctive and personal approach to painting. Even when defined by geometrical precision and chromatic harmony, the gentle indecision of brushstrokes suggests an innate honesty and an overall feeling of vulnerability. This sense is borne out by titles like *Standing on the Riverbank of My Hometown I Shed Tears* (2009) and *Love, Birth and Death, and Illness and What is Happiness?* (2009). If distinctions between abstract and realist or internal and external look blurred, it is because these paintings don’t seem to follow any particular logic. Kusama has spent most of her life in a dark place, and one of the main issues emerging from her retrospective at Tate is the

gap between her early, less-known work and the gregarious, playful installations and flashy polka dots paintings she is now universally acknowledged for — two apparently diverging aspects that the exhibition at Victoria Miro successfully reconciles.

Michele Robecchi

Love, Birth and Death, and Illness and What Is Happiness?, 2009. Acrylic on canvas, 162 x 130 cm. Courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro, London.

