

## Connections

# Alex Veledzimovich: The Kids are Alright

**Tim White**

A young person today would have to be somewhat unbalanced to look out onto today's geopolitical, societal and economic landscapes with any degree of optimism, with governments' mendacious tendencies growing, markets in freefall, corporate venality rampant and prospects for gainful employment eluding nearly all. And yet, islands of resistance and optimism are forming across the globe.

**To console despondent** progressives in 2004, Dan Savage framed the idea that we live in an "urban archipelago," places where affirmative culture could thrive despite the un-navigable seas of negativity surrounding them. Nearly a decade later, as the barriers that isolated us reveal their inherent shallowness, creative persons are building bridges, and communities of like-minded people are finding each other, composing the infrastructure for new ways of relating to each other.

Alexander Veledzimovich came of age on a landlocked island within this conceptual archipelago. Vitebsk, Belarus is a city of some

400,000 inhabitants that has exceeded its capacity to gain from the now far-less travelled trade routes between the Baltic and Black seas. Here, as a young man, he gathered with sympathetic friends whose own diminished prospects had led them to more expressive, self-gratifying pursuits. They talked, made art and immersed themselves in anthems of alternative culture. Alex expressed an affinity for songs like The Velvet Underground's "All Tomorrow's Parties" and other works from a long-ago fringe.

"I like the 'flower people time' (1960-70 in the USA and UK)," he says. "The same influence connects me with Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, etc. I like the melancholy of the Pink Floyd albums 'Wish You Were Here' and 'Meddle,' and especially the song 'Echoes.' Looking to the past inspired me, but it is not a real past. It is some kind of 'ideal world' which I build in my head."

The same year that Savage articulated his belief in linked islands, Alex found the means to create his ideal world when a friend had him look through the viewfinder of her Zenit with its 135 mm lens. He promptly fell in love with photography and purchased a Canon prosumer camera to document a forthcoming trip to the United States, where he worked as a dishwasher in Stowe, Vermont.

While digital's speed and ease of use were sufficient for travel, exposure to American photographers working with film such as Larry Clark, Alec Soth and Sally Mann led Alex to seek more deliberate means of image-making.



*Alex Veledzimovich (self-portrait)*



*Katerina, Vitebsk, 2011*



*Elena, Vitebsk, 2010*

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Through Internet videos he found the work of other artists like Lise Sarfati, Rena Effendy and numerous others who further affected his nascent visual sense.

Upon returning home, he ventured to Saint Petersburg and attended workshops on photography—one led by Lina Scheynius (who has risen from Flickr notoriety to international prominence as a fashion photographer), and another by conceptualist image-maker Nickolai Howalt. Though these artists worked in altogether different visual languages, Alex sought to learn a broad range of approaches to image construction and alternative aesthetic inclinations. He furthermore observed how others teach, which he now does.

In spite of the expenses incurred from these workshops, Alex learned to “kill the student inside your head.” His process was stimulated “because you pay money and that is why [in] one week you need to think only about photos and doing photos, or you lose time and money. Yes, you have new information, but if you have the Web, eyes, discipline and some brains, you can be doing a ‘self-workshop.’” He found that most often these tutorials’ “only usefulness is feedback. All that

I need I have inside me. I just need film, camera and time.”

**As Alex’s avidity** outpaced both his patience and finances, he pored over websites such as photoline.ru, and photosight.ru, where he encountered influential photographers like Evgeny Mokhorev and Oleg Videnin. He audited several classes in Minsk, and attempted to study formally for one year in a Saint Petersburg academy for photojournalism. He has said of school, and of journalism in particular, “I tried to do documentary pictures, but it was impossible—again and again I created my own world.”

St. Petersburg did however afford broader cultural opportunities. Alex attended informal salons with notable Russian photographers, and met Mokhorev, whose images he had seen only on monitors. He began shooting film with a Bronica SQ-A, and by 2009 had purchased his first Rolleiflex twin lens. His circle of friends with a similar passion widened, and he grew into a respected image-maker.

Through social media and photo-sharing venues he met (virtually) many equally precocious artists from this unusually rich aggregation of photographers: Masha Svyatogor, Olya Ivanova, Lesya Pchelka, Julia Zhuravskaya, Ira Mikryukova and more. Though each artistic voice is distinct, they look to share a common point-of-view that values the beauty of banality, and esteems honest, direct representation.

One compatriot, Katarina Smuraga (whom Alex finds of one mind, but believes she often works ahead of him), describes Alex as a “modest and totally calm young man.” She enthuses: “Alex really gets it. He is very serious and almost ascetic in his photographic activity. He is not just a photographer, but a discoverer. I infinitely admire his labour, tenacity and faith.”

She adds, “When I’m looking at Sasha’s pictures, humaneness wakes up in me. His pictures are real, not embellished, such as they are. They belong to our time and tell a lot of stories. [He] has some recipe: be honest with people, and be honest with yourself. Is it simple? I think it’s hard and inconceivable.” I agree to a great extent with Katarina regarding Alex’s regard for reality, but will elaborate further on where I believe he departs.

Alex and Katarina grew up together in Vitebsk. Smuraga describes their hometown as “quiet...with yard cats and gardens around, many retirees, gray square houses with an



*Ira and Dima, Vitebsk, 2010*



*Kate and Ivan, Vitebsk, 2011*

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echo of the Soviet Union." Alex recalls Vitebsk as "looking like a provincial town, not very fast. I feel good here, but one problem—the older people don't look happy." That lack of mirth might well account for his apparent fascination with youth, and with retaining an uncynical, vital outlook that age tends to pare away from many of us.

Two of his series, "Forever Young" and "Neverland," reflect this ethos, this need to resist both hardening and decline. Photography allows him the capacity to still time, and to create a chimerical state that otherwise could not exist. He has said, "When we take a photo—especially portraits—we fix a moment which would have never happened without the camera. My portraits are about people, but also about a place and a world which never exists; but the photos exist and are a proof that Neverland exists."

Perhaps more evident in Alex's work than this imagined world is his expressed love of fiction and affinity for Russian novelists—classicists like Nabokov, Turgenev and Tolstoy, but also contemporary authors like Mikhail Shishkin. Alex has said, "Sometimes I think I

understand the world in books better than reality." He is, like the authors he admires, at times polemical, but at heart a storyteller with an urgent need to convey human experience through vivid characterizations.

**Alex's subjects are** often his peers. Like him, they are bohemian by circumstance, not affectation; less than affluent, gaunt, physically striking persons in second-hand clothes, surrounded by well-used furnishings. They are richly drawn, realistic, yet look to inhabit roles—the romantic poet, the misanthrope, the struggling parent, the pensive scholar, the incandescent ingenue. He poses his characters in humble, naturalistic settings; garrets with once-cheery wallpapers soiled by decades of steam heat, steeping strong teas, seated on abraded wood floors, or balanced on sunny window ledges above archaic radiators amid layers of blistered paint.

His images' pleasures are narrative ones: discerning the possible meaning of a girl's kittenish smile as she stands in a sunlit kitchen holding an uncocked pistol at her side; wondering how a Mojave patterned couch made its way to Belarus; or watching an open window's light render a linen blouse translucent.

One of several benefits that writing about photographs affords is the ability to linger over actual prints or high-resolution scans. Given these, details emerge that casual looking seldom permits. A discarded apple core, one girl's bitten nails, another's threadbare hosiery, a face drawn in crayon on a pocked apartment wall, or a safety pin used in place of a button reward the viewer's careful attention.

Alex's finesse with the camera makes the pilling of a handed-down sofa palpable, or the gentle throttling of a stuffed horse keenly felt. His works are embedded with signifiers that seem deeply personal and placed with intention, like a bear's skull framed by a floral twin box-spring held by a woman like an oversized shield, or depicting his friend Katerina Dmitrieva (herself yet another gifted photographer) with a spine made of clothespins as though she were some sort of contemplative stegosaur.

Recurrent themes further enhance the literary interpretive possibilities in Alex's work, prompting viewers to fathom his frequent depiction of cycloptic gazes (a child covering her father's eye in one image, disembodied hands placing a feather before a woman's eye, and elsewhere a girl employing a UV filter



*Katerina, Vitebsk, 2012*



*Luba with Alena's hands, Vitebsk, 2011*



*Andrey, Vitebsk, 2011*



*Alexandra with Sverdlovsk-4, Vitebsk, 2011*

“[Alex] is very serious and almost ascetic in his photographic activity. He is not just a photographer, but a discoverer.”

as a monocle). Another trope is his use of mirrors. In “Andrey (portrait with 3 hands)” a figure embraces a mirror, creating a gesture not unlike Michelangelo’s “Creation of Adam,” though this being is conveyed to be self-created, autonomous.

In other works Alex employs mirrors in a manner much like Velázquez did in “Las Meninas,” placing the artist making the image within the image itself. A narcissistic trait perhaps, but another indication that what you are seeing is not truth per se, but a construction, and an exchange. We see the artist seeing us while seeing his subject—he looks out to you as well as at his subject. This makes us part of his image, and somehow more culpable, more complicit in the meanings we glean from them.

There is a directorial mind at work here, one of an auteur who creates what could only superficially be taken for incidental while making highly deliberated artistic statements. Through their staged qualities, Alex’s works accomplish something beyond mere documentation. In his “Minnesota Declaration,” Werner Herzog flogged Cinema Verité for confounding fact and truth, stating that “fact cre-

ates norms, and truth illumination.” While ostensibly documenting mere facts, Alex’s most successful works reach that something more—illumination.

**As Alex nears** thirty, the theatrical elements of his work have moved from the margins to become more strongly foregrounded. Props are given greater prominence—a paper moon, a cardboard rocking horse, a doll, or wings made of cardstock—while his images’ themes are less escapist counterpoints like coupling, occupations or parenthood. Despite the more burdened postures of figures in these recent works, the grace notes they hold do not look to me like flags of surrender, and seem more like emblems of protest—asserting that no matter how we arrive at our individual entropy, we will carry a vestige of something not as jaded, something more uncritically hopeful, and engaged.

I trust that Alex will more likely fall on the affirmative side of this precarious “older/wiser” balancing point due to something he said regarding the difference between European and Russian artistic traditions: “Maybe it depends on ‘Russian soul?’ I understand that visual art depends on the country where you grow up. For people from the USSR territory, feelings and emotion are very important. But in Europe, a big part of art is usually based on intellect.”

Given that he is simultaneously as thoughtful and cogent an artist as he is, and yet capable of making works with such abundant empathy, I look forward to seeing where he next takes himself, and us. Alexander Vekedzimovich’s art allows us to imagine a day when such differences as those between mind and heart, and those between the real and imagined, become increasingly irrelevant.

#### **Fact File**

Explore more of Alex’s work at:  
[www.flickr.com/photos/veledz](http://www.flickr.com/photos/veledz).



*Anton, Minsk, 2011*



*Eva and Kate, Vitebsk, 2010*



*Vera, Saint Petersburg, 2010*



*Polina, Vitebsk, 2011*



*Sergey with daughter, Vitebsk, 2013*



*Lesya and Katya, Vitebsk, 2011*