

From the Soviet Fray

With curiosity and sympathy, Bertien van Manen captures the chronic sparseness of communist life, **William Meyers** writes.



How depressing. "A Hundred Summers, A Hundred Winters," the exhibition of Bertien van Manen's photographs at the Yancey Richardson Gallery, portrays life in the territories of the former Soviet Union. Ms. Manen shoots in color, in contrast to Jason Eskenazi, whose "Wonderland: A Fairytale of the Soviet Monolith," seen last year, covered much the same material in black-and-white, but both bodies of work expose the awfulness of three-quarters of a century under Communist rule: Every physical object is worn, and the people — not all, but most — appear spiritually depleted. Mind you, it is the subject matter that is depressing; the photographs are exemplary.

"Novokuznetsk (Two Boys)" (1991) is a marvelous illustration of the psychological lassitude that seems to be a chronic affliction of the Russian people. The two boys of Novokuznetsk, a city of roughly

A HUNDRED SUMMERS, A HUNDRED WINTERS

Yancey Richardson Gallery

from mid-chest up, and look squarely at the camera. The boy in front wears a newsboy-style cap and an inner jacket of bright lavender and aqua under his outer jacket of dark blue. Both boys have characteristically Russian features and look intelligent, capable, and attractive. Ms. Manen used a flash that blanched their pale, Slavic, wintertime complexions so that they stand out from the dark greenery behind them.

The boys are in their late teens, as much young men as adolescents, and their expressions — especially that of the boy in the foreground — are drained of emotion. There seems only to be a long, enduring sorrow, the psychic equivalent of Siberia's permafrost. Only the tiny white dots that can be seen in the centers of each of the four eyes, the reflections of

spark within.

Ms. Manen is a Dutch photographer — better known in Europe than she is here — with a long and distinguished list of exhibitions, books, prizes, and articles to her credit. She has the same eye and feel for domesticity as the masters of the Northern Renaissance, as well as their curiosity for how others live their lives and their generosity toward human weaknesses. The 20 pictures at the Richardson Gallery are all 16-by-20-inch chromogenic prints, many of which display a northerner's preference for muted earth tones. But, of course, there is no bourgeois amplitude for her to show off; mostly just people coping with what history dealt them.

"Kazan (Vlada on Bed)" (1992) is a girl of about the same age as the boys in "Novokuznetsk." She sits hunched over on the edge of her bed wearing only a camisole, her left arm draped listlessly in her lap, and her right arm balanced on her right thigh so that the hand covers the bottom half of her face. Again, Ms. Manen's flash has blanched Vlada's skin.



clothes behind her. Fine black hairs are visible on her forearms and shins. A small Japanese print of a kabuki actress or geisha is tacked to the wall, a marker of formal beauty. Vlada stares at the camera, but her mind seems lost in trying to figure out if it is worth getting up and actually getting dressed.

There are several pictures with no people in them. "Apanas (Vera's Laundry)" (1993) shows the torn sheets and other items hanging outside on a clothesline, frozen solid. "Kluyvinko, Siberia (Recreation at Brickmaking Yard)" (1992) shows a ping-pong table that seems barely able to stand as the only object in a room with a concrete floor, bare concrete walls, and two black iron doors, one of which is padlocked. "St. Petersburg (Birds in Room)" (1991) shows a small room with a naked lightbulb, its casement window open so

the flock of pigeons that have covered the chair and chest with their droppings can fly in and out. "Kazakhstan Sovkhoz (The Red Flag)" (1992) mocks the Dutch genre of ample larders and tables of heaped game with a pyramid of empty metal serving bowls stacked in the kitchen of a communal farm.

Not all is drear. In "Apanas (Michael and Pjotr after Bath-House) Siberia" (1994), two men stand in the ice and snow wearing only their skivvies, and pouring buckets of water over their heads; they seem pleased with themselves. In "Vachtan (Irina in the Snow)" (1991), an attractive young woman just come from a bathhouse stands in the snow and, in the harsh glare on Ms. Manen's flash, naked except for a cross on a silver chain, she smiles. "Novokuznetsk

Please see **MANEN**, page 18

From the Soviet Fray

MANEN from page 15

(Volodja and his Baby)" (1994) is playful, but fraught; Volodja has tossed the naked infant high up overhead, higher than it seems a prudent parent would. Ms. Manen clicked the shutter with the baby at the top of his trajectory, where he seems suspended in air, his arms outstretched in a gesture that incorporates the iconography of Jesus both as an infant and as a martyr on the cross.

The religious reference is not out of place. Volodja has a full beard like the one in the picture on the wall behind him of a mitered figure, apparently a venerated priest or saint. Above that is painted the esoteric symbol of one of Russia's mystical sects, and above that a conventional

**It is the subject matter that is depressing;
the photographs are exemplary.**

icon. We are somewhat appalled at the baby's exposure to peril, but hope that he — like all the people in straitened circumstances in Ms. Manen's sympathetic pictures — comes down safely. As for Russia, only a miracle can save it.

wmmeyers@nysun.com

Until February 16 (535 W. 22nd St., between Tenth and Eleventh avenues, 646-230-9619).