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Art in Review



YANCEY RICHARDSON GALLERY

"St. Petersburg" (1991), by Bertien van Manen, part of an exhibition of photographs she took in the former Soviet Union between 1990 and 1994.

Bertien van Manen

A Hundred Summers,
A Hundred Winters

Yancey Richardson
535 West 22nd Street, Chelsea
Through Feb. 16

Traveling through the former Soviet Union between 1990 and 1994, the Dutch photographer Bertien van Manen used an automatic camera to snap pictures of people in and around their homes. The photographs were collected in a book of the same title as this show (now out of print), but they were never exhibited in New York. Viewed today, her portrait of a society in transition is a welcome counterpoint to the oligarch-dominated public image of the New Russia.

Ms. van Manen may have undertaken her journey in the spirit of Robert Frank, but the seductive proximity of her photographs is more reminiscent of Nan Goldin. Many of them appear to have been taken in bedrooms, or beds in communal living rooms. As in a separate series on French immigrants, Ms. van Manen also pays close attention to still lifes of domestic clutter — family portraits, lace doilies, postcards pinned to faded wallpaper — all of which gives her photographs a collagelike presence.

The series does not shy away from the sheer gloominess (to a Western eye) of post-Soviet life: an elderly woman curled up next to a radiator in a railway station, a rickety gray Ping-Pong table in an uninviting recreation center. More often, however, Ms. van

Manen captures brief flares of exuberance: men and women standing naked in the snow outside a bathhouse, or a boy playing the accordion at a gypsy camp.

In a photograph taken toward the end of the trip, a bearded man tosses his baby high into the air. It is tempting to interpret this sunlit infant, limbs extended and dramatically foreshortened, as a national symbol. Ms. van Manen's casually intimate camerawork, however, pulls the scene back down to earth.

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