

A photograph of a pond in a rural landscape. In the foreground, there are tall green reeds. The pond's surface is dark and reflects the sky and the surrounding greenery. In the middle ground, a large, dense, dark green bush stands prominently. To the right, there is a grassy field with more trees in the distance. The sky is overcast and grey.

Anna Shteynshleyger

Essay by Tim Davis

A Landscape Purged

Tim Davis

I have no idea what Albrecht Altdorfer was thinking when he set about painting "View of the Danube Valley near Regensburg," a small vertical panel executed around 1510. It is an unglamorous swath of space receding habitually from the viewer's vantage. Stands of maybe hickory and something coniferous grind their way toward the horizon with the inevitable weighty gravity of perspective. The castle of Worth stands a mile or so down the road; nestled, really, between the fact of heavy trees and the atmospheric bluing down the Danube and in the distant hills. The scene is unremarkable in art history. It would look ideal out the window of any Renaissance Annunciation or in the background of any Flight into Egypt.

It could drop comfortably into Albrecht Dürer's "St. Jerome in the Wilderness," in which the old scholar kneels with the Latin bible he translated, beating his breast with a stone. The lion whose paw he dethorned lies nearby, looking a lot like a lion painted by a great artist who has never seen a lion. The saint has cast his red mantle and cardinal's hat aside and stares at a crucifix someone has stuck into a tree. Only in Altdorfer's painting there is no crucifix. No saint either and no lion. It is one of the first known works of art where landscape seems to be its ostensible subject, and as such its unremarkableness makes it so remarkable. Suddenly, a devout artist has abandoned familiar religious subject matter.

We know he wasn't a very good figure painter. His characters, classical and biblical, are clunky and abrupt, with nothing of the Mantegnan dynamism of his clouds and land and architecture. But it is also easy to see in "View of the Danube" the end of the medieval sense of Wilderness that is spooky and obscure, and the beginning of the Romantic location of sublime desire therein. For a swath of space to have replaced an artist's biblical vocabulary, it must have been deeply felt and saturated with meaning. Altdorfer may have traveled to Italy, but he was devoted to the Danube valley, and became an avid Rambler of its byways. He was also the city architect of Regensburg, and a member of its council of external affairs. In that capacity he helped with the city's exile of the Jews in 1519, the destruction of the local synagogue, and its replacement with a new church of the Beautiful Virgin Mary.

As such it becomes possible to read the absence of figures in "View of the Danube" as more than a post-Medieval and proto-Romantic idyll, but as an idealized allegory of absence. The landscape is sublime, and sings with a Renaissance painter's devotion to the immediate and the material. It is a sign of the banishment of the wolves and devils of the medieval mind. But alongside this intellectual and spiritual banishment, a political one has occurred. The landscape has been purged.

In three trips between 2001 and 2002, Russian-Jewish émigré photographer Anna Shteynshleyger returned to the nation she had fled in 1992 as a 15-year-old girl. A lot had happened socially in Russia in the intervening decade, enough to fill a warehouse of Dostoevsky's pencil-scrawled notebooks (including the one that contains "the mind is a scoundrel, but stupidity is straight and honest") — a cultural breakdown chronicled desperately, despairingly by photographer Boris Mikhailov's *Hogarthian Case History* (1998) in which the struggles of marginal people in the radically shifting post-Soviet economy are displayed in the rawest, most explicit and deranged fashion.

A lot had happened to Shteynshleyger too. She'd become an Orthodox Jew. She'd grown up in suburban Maryland, finding it "extremely isolating" compared to her Moscow youth. In response she has written, "that's where I started photographing. Without the language to connect with the surrounding environment there was little left to do." Photography became an arbiter of exile, a way of finding very certain responses to endlessly uncertain events. The camera speaks every language.

Shteynshleyger studied at the Maryland Institute of Art and at Yale University. She learned a lot about photography. One thing she learned is how unlikely a candidate photography is for recording history. In Beaux-Arts hierarchies of genre, such as the one formulated by André Félibien in 1667, history painting is considered the "Grande Genre," being most capable of conveying moral and intellectual sentiment. History painting included newsworthy, mythological and religious subjects, and was followed in descending order of importance by portraiture, genre scenes, landscape, still-life, and sometimes something called "rhopography," the overlooked or everyday castoff stuff of life. In photographic terms, these values are reversed. A photograph of a great historical subject is always a diminishment of that event; made from one vantage point in one analytical moment. But a photograph of a castoff object or standard view is rendered with the edge-to-edge thoroughness of a photograph of a lover or an enemy. The camera doesn't care what is put in front of it. It can't tell the difference between Lincoln's death mask and a can of Diet Slice; it can't distinguish between a gulag and a landfill.

Shteynshleyger's photographs of Siberia, a territory as suffused with suffering as any place on the planet, do not "bear witness" to anything. They are not documents of anyone's journey. They are not war monuments; they are not apologies. Though her camera is pointing in the direction of historical sites of unremembered trauma, her pictures are not records of the locations of past crimes. They do not reckon with the past. They sidestep the inevitable failure of the photograph to stand for historical events. They are oblique and difficult, refusing any Spielbergian urge to heal through reliving previous horrors. They are closer to Altdorfer's purged Danube than Mikhailov's perestroika Kharkov, rendering with conviction, pictures that depict mostly the artist's desire to reach us.

Shteynshleyger's landscapes take the daring and truly redemptive path of letting us see what a Siberian exile might have noticed in a moment of relief, through the slats of a cattle car, say, or beyond the wires of the gulag. In Andrei Tarkovsky's 1969 film *Andrei Rublev*, during the sacking of the city of Vladimir by the Tartars, the camera at one point falls off a stabbed victim, and lingers on the front quarters of a white horse. Though film historians have ascribed various symbolic meanings to the animal, Tarkovsky, in an interview, insisted "Sometimes a white horse is just a white horse." Amid insane tumult we are reminded of the redemption of seeing, beyond meaning, and beyond recognition. Shteynshleyger's careful, thorough, dignified, unsentimental photographs of cold, but passionate space, remind us what a relief it is to see. Photography has an enormous negative capability — it can handle so much horror— because of the generosity of its seeing. History is a series of seen things.

On June 8th, 1968, Paul Fusco, a Magnum photojournalist, rode the train transporting Robert Kennedy's body from its funeral in New York to its burial in Washington, DC. Rather than document the journalistic events of the day, Fusco photographed the patches and stands of mourners lining the tracks. He photographed the yearning to see history, rather than the history itself. His book, *RFK Funeral Train*, is a nationwide reaction shot, depicting the last moment anyone in America really believed in a politician.

On April 21st, 2005, Anna Shteynshleyger wrote to me, saying, "I'm not interested in the political side of it at all. I don't deny it and know it filters into the work, but I'm just not approaching it from that perspective. I'm interested in exploring inner exile and profound beauty as redemptive and liberating. There is that famous Dostoyevsky quote that 'Beauty will redeem the world.'"

If it gets the chance. Before the first of her three trips to Siberia, Shteynshleyger read Shalamov. She read Solzhenitsyn and underlined the following: "The soul which was formerly dry, now ripens from suffering," and "Darkness renders a person more sensitive to light." Like most exiled artists, her cunning exceeds her expectations. Not being "interested in the political side" of her investigation means, to me, that the politics are not located on a side. They have leached into all vectors of investigation and are inextricable. I must beg forgiveness to all the former Soviets reading this for bringing Marx into it, but wherever there is struggle (even spiritual struggle), there is politics. Suffering is political. Struggle is friction. Politics is energy and these images are very good conductors of energy.

A good conductor has an unstable atomic bond. It allows electrons to be shared with objects and forces that surround it, enabling, in effect, for things to pass through each other. Shteynshleyger's Siberian photographs are nexuses of shared sympathies. Far from the poles of propaganda and maudlin self-expression, and however "true" to political or historical concerns they are, they lock us into a feeling for a place, and allow sense, uncertainty, gnosis and pure visual information to flow back and forth through the picture plane. They conduct this information so well, and so complexly, that they remind us of Roland Barthes' insistence in *Camera Lucida*, "that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time. From a phenomenological viewpoint, in the Photograph, the power of authentication exceeds the power of representation."

Those of us less intimate with God or gulag have a hard time with the idea that there can be redemption through suffering. It is doubly hard for viewers of pictures like these, who can feel so much with sympathy but without pain. Perhaps it is Jean-Luc Godard who is the governing deity—or at least the proper publicist—for these images. "Photography," he said, "is truth."

Tim Davis is a photographer and poet based in Manhattan and Tivoli, NY. He is the author of three books of photographs, MY LIFE IN POLITICS (Aperture), PERMANENT COLLECTION (Nazraeli), and LOTS (Coromandel Express); and two volumes of poetry, AMERICAN WHATEVER (Edge), and DAILIES (The Figures). His work has exhibited widely and is the collection of the Guggenheim, Hirshhorn, Milwaukee and other museums.