

New York, So Good They Took Photos

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As one of the most photographed locations in the world, New York City has acquired a mythical status that, at times, almost overshadows the real metropolis. Ubiquitous images of the city's staples — Times Square, the Statue of Liberty, the former Twin Towers — have become so familiar that people may feel they already know New York even if they have never been there.

Now a new exhibition at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art challenges the public's imaginary construction of "the Big Apple" with photographs that are as surprising as they are deeply subjective. "New York, Then and Now," which opened Tuesday at MMOMA's venue on Tverskoi Bulvar, samples the work of 29 international photographers who each found their own definition of the city — and, in the process, are working to redefine its image for us.

"These are photographs by New York citizens from all over the world, who look at their city differently than do tourists," said exhibition curator Andrei Martinov. The exhibit will move on to Hungary, Germany and France before ending in New York in 2012, he said.

The exhibit traces the evolution of the city since the 1940s with nearly 250 images that range from works by photo veterans Walter Rosenblum and Arthur Leipzig to snapshots taken with an iPhone. Together they show New York as a city of vertical extremes, constant dynamics and striking personalities.

Spanish photographer Carlos Escolastico focuses his lens on individuals while New York-based Barry Kornbluh juxtaposes images from the city's legendary jazz scene with the gritty faces of the Meatpacking District. St. Petersburg photographer Andrei Chezhin, combining multiple shots taken through a cutout frame, creates an Escher-like kaleidoscope of skyscrapers.

“The experience was incredible,” Chezhin said of his first visit to the 107th floor of the World Trade Center. “You look down through the glass thinking you’re going to fall, but all you see is pencils, pencils, pencils.”

Most of the display is in black and white and focuses on what one photographer calls the “fantastic architectural creature” that is New York. Its photogenic geometry, dizzying heights and glass-paneled superstructures that at first seem indistinguishable from the sky become objects of awe in front of the camera lens.

Other works explore the role of humans within this architectural maze. People occupy the city on the ground and in the air — they sit in diners, dive off bridges, teeter on the edge of high-rise construction sites — and their movement is captured by some photographers as a frozen snapshot, by others as a colorful blur. The result is a collective portrait of New York that is at once place-specific and universal.

“New York, Then and Now” runs until July 31 at the Moscow Museum of Modern Art. 9 Tverskoi Bulvar. Metro Tverskaya. Tel. 694 2890, www.mmoma.ru.

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