

European Photos Confront Russian Women With Aging

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Women in the photos, like “Rachel,” question social attitudes to aging. **Benita Suchodrev**

Women over 40 know what happens to them. The aging process is inevitable and has the same features regardless of national boundaries. What is different, however, is the attitude to this process in Europe and in Russia — something one can fully appreciate at the ongoing exhibition “Woman in Heat” by Russian immigrant Benita Suchodrev.

The exhibit at FotoLoft shows portraits of more than 25 European women, aged 40 to 70 years old, who braved to go in front of the camera with or without makeup, sometimes with body parts exposed and their wrinkles and cellulite not Photoshopped.

“We live in a world where everyone wants to hide their shortcomings. I was happy that there are women who are not afraid to be themselves,” Suchodrev said.

Though European women in the photographs were willing to show off their aging bodies,

Suchodrev said Russian women are still more anxious about peeling off the facade of eternal youth.

“In Europe, in this respect, there is less madness about this as here in Russia,” she said. “Women in Europe do not think about what they look like as much. They are more concerned about having a personality.”

Public places in Moscow are filled with examples of high-heel-clad women who are skillfully maneuvering the streets’ high snowbanks and dangerous black ice. These women are so beautiful that you can’t understand at first how old they are and how they manage to look so good.

But visiting the gallery full of images of middle-aged women who freely show their souls, emotions and bodies in the pictures, you feel the desire to trade your pumps in for comfortable footwear, wash off your make up and embrace aging.

“I wanted to show women who are not afraid to show themselves for what they are, even though they understand that today’s society values youth, smooth skin and perfect body shape,” Suchodrev said. “It was important for me to show the female body, which varies. But even more important for me was to convey how women look and feel in their bodies.”

Suchodrev was born in the Soviet Union and immigrated to the United States when she was 15 years old. There she received a master’s degree in art history and literature and made a name for herself as a portrait photographer. In 2008, she moved to Berlin, where she now lives and works most of the time.

The “Woman in Heat” project took her two years to complete. Each of the characters shares an intimate thought in the written statements that accompany the portraits, as if to start a dialogue with those who are standing in the gallery.

“Getting older is good for the spirit, not for the looks,” one statement reads. Another laments, “We live in a society ruled by old people and an obsession with youth. Yes, I am afraid of getting older.”

Though these statements might appear sad at first, Suchodrev said they actually show how women try to free themselves from the burden of youth. They are happy with who they are and do not hunger to go back in time.

In this manner, one of the women quips, “Wrinkles look better than pimples,” and another insists, “I owe my good looks to my positive attitude.”

The exhibit, which Suchodrev calls her “Russian experiment,” has received mixed reactions from Russian audiences, including fear and embarrassment.

“Some find it hard to keep eye contact with the portraits. They are looking directly at you,” the photographer said. “Some feel vulnerable in front of the portraits because these portraits graze on raw emotions. Some of the visitors like this, but others don’t want the confrontation.”

She added that she was happy to meet women at the exhibit who were not fixated on the usual

female stereotypes and responded positively to her work. Suchodrev herself identifies with such women, who she said are more emancipated and live nonstandard lives.

The reaction from some Russian men was even more surprising. They first look at the technical aspects of the photograph and then catch the philosophical meaning of the image, Suchodrev said.

“Young men cannot express it in words. They freeze in front of the portraits,” Suchodrev said. “The mature ones have fewer questions and more answers. They see their own body and how it is changing as well.”

The artist’s next project will be devoted to men over 40. The focus of the photographs will still be on the psychology of the subjects as it was in “Woman in Heat” but with some additional visual supplements because men are afraid of the camera and less willing to open up, Suchodrev said. Instead, they try to create the right image for themselves, so their photographs come across as less sincere.

"Woman in Heat" runs until March 31 at FotoLoft Gallery, 1/6 4th Syromyatnichesky Pereulok, www.fotoloft.ru. Tel. +7 495-987-3874.

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