



Window, Birch Tree, Gravestone, photograph by Gary Tepfer. White Lotus Gallery, 2004.

Photography of Gary Tepfer

Sees the soul of the city.

“St. Petersburg: The Essence,” now showing at the White Lotus Gallery, is Gary Tepfer’s first exhibition of urban photography. It focuses on buildings, landscapes and interiors. As much as his previous images from the American West and North Asia, these works showcase Tepfer’s technical excellence.

Conceived by Peter the Great as a window into Europe and meant to reflect the tsars’ authority and might, St. Petersburg was built over the marshland of the Neva Delta between 1703 and 1917 by some of the most outstanding architects from Switzerland, Italy, France, Britain, Germany and Russia. It displays some of the finest 18th and 19th century European architecture: Baroque, neo-Classical, French Empire, Art Nouveau ... palaces, cathedrals, churches, bridges, triumphal arches, ceremonial columns.

Tepfer’s exhibit title reflects the widely shared view that the “essence” of St.

Petersburg is its architecture. You will find no trace of Leningrad among Tepfer’s images, only pre-1917 St. Petersburg. This show is strictly about the city of stone and brick and plaster painted in soft watercolor tones, not merely an homage to glorious architecture but also an acknowledgement of how the pre-revolutionary city has weathered.

In Tepfer’s images, age has softened its former splendor into a kinder gentility. Time has muted the arrogance of the city’s gilded youth. Eroding stone, crumbling plaster, faded and peeling paint provide gentle, painterly texture. Conversely, time has enriched the austere. The concrete wall of a bunker on the fortress island of Kronstadt becomes a natural abstract fresco painted with lime, rust and lichen.

Tepfer seldom provides a view of a building in its entirety — *Chesma Church*, showing one of the few neo-Gothic buildings in the city, is a notable exception. Instead he focuses

on a part (a section of façade, a dome) or a motif (a door, a vase, a statue), bringing detailed texture, form and color to the fore.

The vast majority of the pictures share a similar compositional structure: a frontal view with a centered object of focus. The square format reinforces the biaxial symmetry of the image. This static symmetry imparts a sense of formality and monumentality even to the small detail. The intimacy in the detail is balanced by a decorum of the subject-matter. The point of view is detached, and the absence of people contributes a lonely mood.

The straight-on frontal view often results in a flattened perspective. In *Window, Birch Tree, Gravestone*, one of the few images in which the focus is not centrally placed, depth was deliberately collapsed with the use of a telephoto lens, creating a flat painterly composition.

In most of the urban landscapes, strong horizontal lines bisect the entire image, keeping one’s gaze poised over the surface where often the reflection of trees shimmers in rain-water pooled over the ice on the ground. Exceptions are *Canal, Kronstadt*, where the focus point is off-center. Converging diagonals and the Kazan Church colonnade, where the eye is drawn in by diagonals and curves, convey a dynamic sense of direction and depth.

Another recurrent compositional device is the use of doors, arches and gateways to frame his subjects, often further entrances themselves. Even then, despite the parallax effect and diminishing sizes, the perception of depth is flattened because background and foreground are both sharply in focus. This compression of depth works best when the subject-matter is abstract: the kaleidoscopic effect of the Trinity Cathedral dome in the Alexander Nevsky Monastery complex, the minimalist abstraction of ship parts at Kronstadt, the intricate motif of a carved door.

Tepfer beautifully captures the cool diffuse Baltic light, often warmed by the ochres and golds of the architecture. Between May 1995 and September 2002, Tepfer made six trips to the Russian city, returning at different times of year to get different qualities of light: “I strategize where to be for a certain time and timing is everything.”

All pictures were shot on Ektachrome 100 ASA film and without flash, requiring long exposures. Taken with a Hasselblad medium-format camera and printed on Ilfochrome archival paper, the photographs are crisp and sharp. The colors, richly saturated and exquisitely nuanced, are a visual delight in themselves.

Tepfer is among the few color photographers who do their own darkroom work. This allows him to control the photographic process in all its stages.

The project was first conceived as a book to be titled *A Foreigner’s View of St. Petersburg*. Unfortunately, the Russian state publisher went out of business. The initial impetus for the project, however, still informs the exhibit.

Given the documentary nature of the photographs and the largely unfamiliar terrain, the exhibit would have benefited greatly from accompanying descriptive text. Meanwhile, the white overmat surrounding the photographs creates the feel of margins on a book page.

This is documentary photography at its best, and we may hope Tepfer finds a publisher able to reproduce these images with their original clarity and vividness of color. **EW**

“ST. PETERSBURG – THE ESSENCE: COLOR PHOTOGRAPHS BY GARY TEPFER” remains at White Lotus Gallery until Oct. 30.

1ST ANNUAL WAX FOR THE CURE

Come in for a wax & help in the fight against Breast Cancer


Friday, Oct. 22 • 9:30am-5:30pm


All proceeds from waxing go to the Oregon & SW Washington affiliate of the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation

Call 344-7789

Services by students are discounted!

NW Aesthetics • 2371 Oakmont Way • www.estheticnw.com





17th Anniversary Sale 20% Off All Jewelry

Every Sunday & Tuesday in October

NEW STOCK ARRIVING

RUBY CHASM

152 W. 5TH • M-SA 10-6 SU 12-5 • 344-4074