

Anastasia Samoylova, Image Cities

SUMMARY

Fundación MAPFRE presents the exhibition *Image Cities* by the photographer Anastasia Samoylova. *Image Cities* represents the winning entry in the first edition of the **KBr Photo Award** launched by Fundación MAPFRE in 2021. This biannual competition brings the winner a significant cash award, the organization and installation of an exhibition of the chosen project at the KBr Fundación MAPFRE exhibition space in Barcelona and at the fundación's space in Madrid, as well as the publication of an accompanying book.

INTRODUCTION

Image Cities, Anastasia Samoylova's winning project, is a visual study of the increasing integration of the photographic image and the urban environment. Our cities are becoming collages. Lifestyle advertising, real-estate billboards, and hyper-photogenic architecture make city space feel like a fantasy stage set of ever-shifting scenery. International brands smother local history. Global capitalism imposes its visual order. In the spectacle, vision is distracted. Anastasia Samoylova photographs all this with an eye both critical and aesthetic. Her complex compositions frame our urban complexity in all its troubled beauty, flattening its layers into seductive and estranged visual poems. Human presence is almost entirely absent, or if figures do appear they are on a tiny scale in comparison to the vast size of the buildings and advertisements.

The project began in Moscow and New York in the early summer of 2021 and has been completed in fifteen other cities including

Amsterdam, Paris, London, Brussels, Tokyo, Madrid and Barcelona thanks to the KBr Photo Award.

WORKS

50 photographs.

THE ARTIST

Anastasia Samoylova lives and works in Miami, Florida. She completed a master's degree in environmental design at the Russian State University for the Humanities in Moscow and a master of fine arts degree in interdisciplinary art at Bradley University, Peoria, Illinois. She published her projects *FloodZone* and *Floridas* with Steidl in 2019 and 2022 respectively, receiving significant international attention.

Samoylova's photographs have been exhibited at the Kunst Haus Wien in Vienna, Austria, the Kunsthalle Mannheim, Germany, and the Museum of Multimedia Art, Moscow. Her work is represented in the collections of the Pérez Art Museum, Miami, the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago, and the Wilhelm-Hack Museum in Ludwigshafen, Germany, among others.

KEY THEMES

KBr Photo Award: This prize, first offered by Fundación MAPFRE in 2021, is an ambitious initiative intended to support and promote contemporary photographic projects that have connections with documentary photography. Since 2007 that photographic tradition has been one of the principal axes of both Fundación MAPFRE's photography exhibitions and its photography collection, which has holdings of work by Walker Evans, Lee Friedlander and Lisette Model,

among others. Following in the wake of that tradition, Anastasia Samoylova's project represents an updated language and vision of documentary photography. *Image Cities* features vibrant photographs of urban landscapes in today's ambiguous and contradictory world, which is currently experiencing a series of major crises of an economic but also an environmental and socio-cultural nature.

The non-city: In the present era, characterized by Neo-liberal economics, interconnected financial markets and global images, the world's banking and cultural centers are becoming increasingly alike. Nonetheless, cities such as New York, Moscow and London attempt to promote their individuality, often giving a new meaning to their particular histories. Despite these intentions, all these cities are gradually becoming a generic urban landscape of anonymous steel and glass architecture, in which homes, offices and shops are all exactly the same. Samoylova's project offers a close-up analysis of the role played by photography in the creation of this ideological breach between a supposed urban identity and the reality that these images show.

Collage: Since the outset of her career, one of Samoylova's key concerns has been the composition of her images, which are meticulously studied and involve superimposed elements that are fundamental for achieving the desired results. These visual *collages*, which first appeared with her series *Landscape Sublime*, are notably influenced by the work of a number of Russian artists of the historic avant-gardes, such as Natalia Goncharova and Liubov Popova.

In her series *Landscape Sublime* Samoylova generally created her *collages* from non-copyrighted images taken from the internet, which

she printed, cut out, assembled, mounted and transposed into three-dimensions in order to subsequently return to the two-dimensional once she photographed them; a working process that emphasized manual and artisanal aspects. In *Image Cities*, collage remains an obvious resource and inspiration, but, in this case, it is born from the composition of the photographic image.

The *flâneur*. Various experts have observed that Samoylova could be seen as the female equivalent of the male *flâneur*, Charles Baudelaire's concept of the wanderer through the urban landscape. As such, she would be a modern-day *flâneuse* who traverses the 21st-century city, revealing its least recognizable side and questioning the role of women in global society.

THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition is structured around 50 photographs selected from those that make up the project *Image Cities*, a corpus that acquires its full meaning as a series, as it is precisely that serial nature which makes the city and its individuality disappear. The men and women visible in these urban settings walk along the streets with seeming indifference, almost invariably self-absorbed and located in front of large buildings and billboards featuring advertisements for new luxury real estate projects, fashionable perfumes and beauty products. In all these images - which are brightly colored and have crisp outlines as well as interplays of reflections and compositions structured through successions of planes - Samoylova emphasizes the monumental scale of the buildings and skyscrapers in relation to any other motif in the image.

The final group of photographs in the exhibition is devoted to women in the city. Women lie at the heart of consumer society as the subjects and objects of advertising, which associates life with luxury and glamour but has little to do with the problems and everyday concerns of the majority of individuals.

Finally, Samoylova's work resounds with echoes of the documentary photographic tradition of the type represented by figures such as Eugène Atget in the early 20th century, as well as women photographers such as Berenice Abbott and Lisette Model. The interplay of reflections and mirrors and the cropped compositions inevitably recall the work of Lee Friedlander, one of the artists most admired by Samoylova and among those who renewed the field of documentary photography in the late 1960s alongside Diane Arbus and Garry Winogrand.