

# BORIS MIKHAILOV - RED



Red is a group of eighty-four colour photographs taken between 1968 and 1975 in Mikhailov's home town of Kharkiv in the north-east of present day Ukraine. A diverse array of subjects and situations are **depicted**: scenes from official military parades and political rallies, views of the Kharkiv cityscape, and **unofficial private moments** between family and friends. The **snapshots** do not **document** significant events; instead they trace the **banal mundanities** of everyday life in the Soviet Union under communist rule.

Mikhailov suggested that 'the more we can exclude the event from representation, the closer we can approach the most important thing – being'. Shot using colour film, an unusual luxury in the Ukraine at this time, the images draw upon the **aesthetics** of early twentieth-century Soviet **avant-garde** photographers such as Aleksandr Rodchenko with their **abruptly cropped compositions** taken from **unconventional perspectives**.

Every one of the eight-four disparate images in the series contains the colour red, after which the series is named. Red flags and placards are **ostentatiously** displayed at jubilant parades. Red infiltrates the Kharkiv landscape on building facades and painted monuments. Red clothes and lipstick adorn Soviet bodies. Red finds its way into the private sphere of the home, in wallpaper, curtains and flowers. In some images only the tiniest flecks of red are **discernable** – a pin on a lapel or a painted toenail – or the colour is **displaced** onto a pink flower or an orange swimming costume. Red is even **inscribed** on the human body as bruises, inflamed spots, seeping wounds or sunburnt flesh.

From the Red Army, to the red communist flag, to the use of red in Russian constructivist art, the colour has pervaded Soviet visual culture. Red also assumed **ideological significance** through its association with the Soviet political system, used in communist art and propaganda. By drawing attention to the presence of the colour in the Ukrainian social landscape, the series suggests the extent to which communist ideology had permeated all aspects of Soviet life.

Often harsh and **uncompromising**, Mikhailov's images **imply** an element of **social criticism**, an effect underscored by close framing and cropping that lures the viewer uncomfortably close to the subjects photographed. His images operate at the **junction** between the official and the unofficial, photographing scenes of Soviet reality stripped bare.