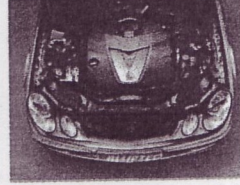


pulse

NORTH SHORE GUIDE TO ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

The raw vision of Miroslav Tichý

Czech photographer's uncompromising work is featured in a new exhibition at North Vancouver's Presentation House Gallery: page 25



visual arts

Shooting from the margins

Miroslav Tichý documents his singular world

■ Tichý at Presentation House Gallery Nov. 18, to Jan. 14, 2007. Opening reception tonight at 8 p.m.

John Goodman

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NOTHING is a given in Miroslav Tichý's world — no outside rules apply.

The Czech photographer (who celebrates his 80th birthday on Nov. 20) has an uncompromising vision hardened by decades of political oppression. His poetic images, created with homemade cameras constructed out of cardboard and salvaged parts, reflect a punk do-it-yourself esthetic informed by classical concepts.

Three years ago Tichý was completely unknown outside of his hometown of Kyjov, Moravia but thanks to the efforts of neighbour and friend Roman Buxbaum that has all changed:

"He's known me longer than I've known him," laughs Buxbaum, a visual artist and practicing psychologist who lives in Zurich, Switzerland. "My great-grandfather was a friend of his father. They lived next to each other and my uncle was Tichý's good friend when they were going to school."

One of Buxbaum's earliest memories is of the artist building a toy for him when he was a baby. "He was like an interesting uncle. I remember a camera he made for me when I was five years old. A shoebox camera. He was very inspiring and good to have around for a kid."

By the time Buxbaum came on the scene Tichý had already burned through several lives. Born in 1926 he studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague in the years just after the Second World War. The Communist takeover in February 1948 resulted in severe changes throughout society. Tichý, who was considered an excellent draftsman and a popular student, quit school and went into the military to satisfy compulsory service requirements.

"We do not know a lot about that time," says Buxbaum. "He doesn't like to talk about it. I have only little fragments from him

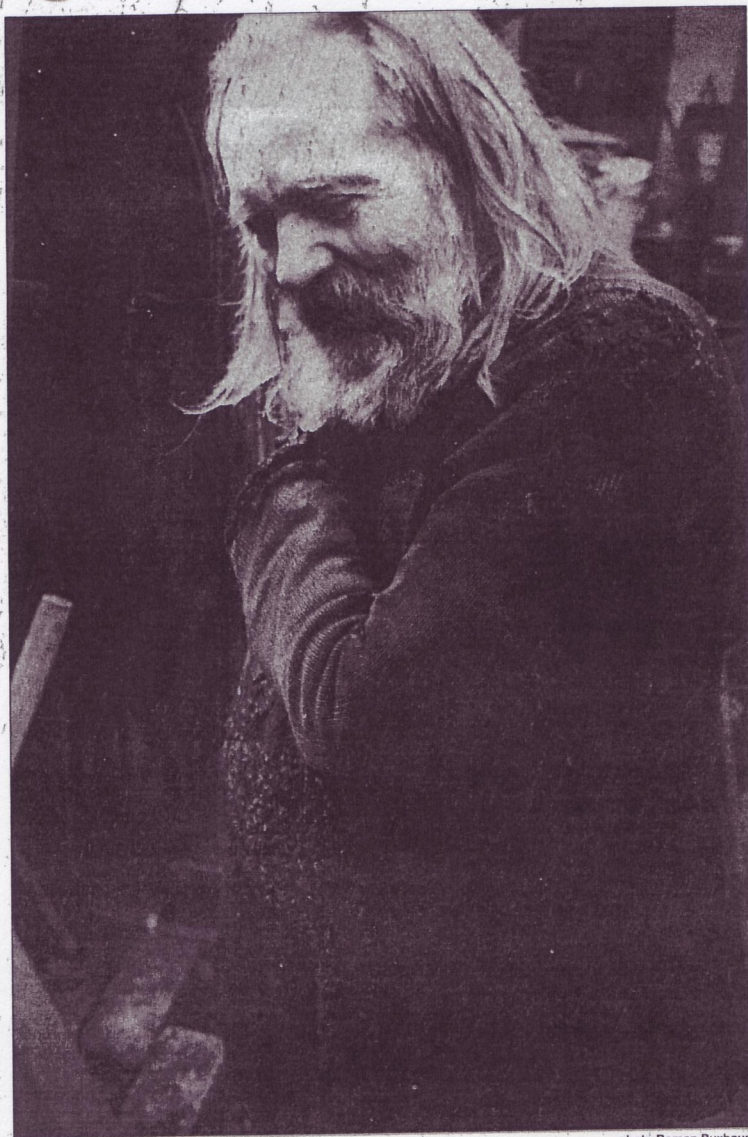


photo Roman Buxbaum

CZECH photographer Miroslav Tichý has lived most of his life outside the public eye. He had his first solo exhibit in Seville in 2004.

but it must have been quite terrible."

The stubbornly independent Tichý, who always did his own thing, suffered greatly during the Stalinist era. Individuality was not prized highly by the totalitarian regime and the artist was put behind bars.

"In the '50s they didn't need much reason to imprison someone," says Buxbaum. "If he had been born 200 miles further east he would certainly have ended up in the Gulag so you can say

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Photographer as dissident

VIEWFINDER | Czech artist defied communist imperatives for social realism while resisting the glossy lure of the West

MIROSLAV TICHY
Photographs

Presentation House Gallery
333 Chesterfield Ave., North Vancouver
Until Jan. 14

BY CLINT BURNHAM

Miroslav Tichy is a Czech artist, born in 1926 in Moravia. For most of his life he has lived in the town of Kyjov. There, in the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, he took thousands of photographs, from which this selection — of perhaps 100 photos — is drawn.

Tichy's photos are haunting in their foggy and smeared imprecision; often compared to Impressionist paintings, they return photography to its beginnings.

At first glance, Tichy's art and life appear to be that of the consummate outsider artist. His photographs look amateurish, blurred, unfocused. They are often mounted with hand-coloured frames, and may be in terrible physical condition: folded, torn, stained.

The cameras he uses, as well, are decrepit, perhaps scavenged from Soviet-era plastic cameras, or with home-made telephoto lenses, held together with dress-makers' elastic and aged, fraying, tape.

Also, the photographs betray the outsiders' obsessions. Almost all of them are of women, and they have a furtive quality to them — often they are shot through a fence, so the chain-link diamond patterns overlay the women in their tight bikinis.

As well, Tichy himself comes across as a madman, a hermit, a recluse. As shown in a documentary airing at Presentation House, made by Tichy's compatriot Roman Buxbaum, he lives in filth, his pants hacked off into shorts like a cartoon Robinson Crusoe, his art piled around him in stacks of squalid archives. At one point he wipes dust off a painting, noting that the dust is part of the work itself. He drinks beer or wine and tosses photos around the room in disdain.

And yet, for all this, Tichy is not the usual, self-taught amateur. As documented in a monograph from the Tichy Foundation, he studied at the Prague academy of fine art after the Second World War, in the brief interlude between the Nazi era and the communist take-over. Tichy didn't do well under new imperatives for social realism, however, when instead of drawing women models, students were ordered to paint pictures of workers in overalls. Over the next few decades, Tichy would spend eight years in communist prisons or mental hospitals.

In spite of this brutal treatment (he was often arrested on the eve of communist holidays, for instance, to avoid embarrassing local authorities) or perhaps because of it, he continued to make art and, in the 1960s, began taking photographs. Recently, he has

been discovered by the art world, showing work at the Seville Biennale in 2005 and placing a solo exhibition at the Kunsthaus in Zurich.

As much as his do-it-yourself cameras and scraggly appearance are part of the mythos of Tichy, his style of taking photographs also deserves attention. Beginning in the 1960s, he would wander the streets of Kyjov, camera under his sweater, and then quickly whip it out — usually to take a photograph of a woman.

He often took three rolls of film a day, a hundred photographs. And yet, it seems as if photography was incidental to Tichy's perambulations.

As Tichy remarks in the documentary: "I never did anything but pass the time. Because I had set out for the town and had to do something there, I took snapshots. I didn't determine anything. The time I spent on my walk determined what I would photograph. Everything is determined by the world spinning round. You can't live longer than the number of times the world spins round. That is a given, and it's called, for example, Fate."

In looking at the photographs, two interesting contradictions come to mind. First, that between his object of interest — women — and the tawdry condition of the photographs themselves. If Tichy fetishizes women, is fascinated by their bodies and lines and shapes, the same cannot be said of his approach to the photograph. This is striking, because it points to a similar distinction in erotic photography or pornography: on the one hand, there are the slick commercial magazines (*Playboy*, *Penthouse*) as well as the art-porn tradition (Robert Mapplethorpe). And on the other hand, there is the clandestine world of online porn, which ranges in quality dramatically, from lubricious full-colour to grainy webcam or surveillance shots.

As well, the political dimensions of Tichy's life history are telling. He is a true dissident — not only did he bravely defy the ironbound rule of communist totalitarianism in Czechoslovakia, he also, incredibly, resists the glossy lure of Western-style capitalism.

Francis Fukuyama, in his book *The End of History*, argued that communism collapsed because of the attraction of consumer goods like the VCR. Tichy is a testament to the status and possibilities of the artist under both communism and capitalism.

One of the possibilities makes itself evident in the postmodernism of Tichy's work. That is, while the photographs have the gauze-y look of pictures from a century ago, the women's clothing and hairstyles are obviously from the 1970s and '80s.

So each picture is a bit of a time warp. Tichy's art straddles the contemporary and the historical, the communist East and the capitalist West.

Clint Burnham is a Vancouver freelance writer.



...ROMAN BUXBAUM

Miroslav Tichy in 1987 holding one of his decrepit cameras (above); elsewhere, a selection of untitled photos from his exhibit at Presentation House Gallery. The gallery is also showing a documentary about the artist.



November 18, 2006 to January 14, 2007

TICHY

Television media coverage

Week of November 20th

CTV

5:30 and 11:00pm Newshour

- coverage of the exhibition with filming in the gallery with Peter Grainger

January 4th, Thursday

5:30 and 11:00pm Newshour

French CBC Television

– coverage of exhibition with filming in the gallery and clips from the Tichy documentary