


HEROES

IVAN PINKAVA

 **Galerie Rudolfinum**
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...there is certain insurmountable limit to what one is permitted to tell people about people.

Gustaw Herling-Grudzinski

Ivan Pinkava (born 1961) ranks amongst today's most renowned Czech photographers and is one of those who have also managed to successfully break onto the international scene. The exhibition entitled 'Heroes' is the first systematic gathering of his work from its beginnings in the middle of the 1980s up to now. Over one hundred and thirty selected works form an independent composition conceived directly for the premises of the Galerie Rudolfinum and follow the most important aspects of the author's creative development. The main theme of Pinkava's work is precisely pointed parallels, quotations and connotations to the great tales of European culture. Pinkava makes use of the human body and face as a mirror of cultural significances, without detracting from the authentic identity of a specific person. Thanks to its emphasised, purely personal physiognomy, his portrait works present references to icons of the European pictorial tradition. Figures in carefully arranged scenes of gesture, expression and attributes multiply their personal identity in favour of wider significances constructed on perceptible links to myths, biblical stories, introspection of inner life, but also towards a cultural memory drawn from the history of visual art and literature.

Petr Nedoma, 2004

Since 1985 Czech photographer Ivan Pinkava has made portraits whose austere elegance has strong affinities with the work of certain nineteenth century portraitists, in particular the Parisian Nadar. Like Nadar, Pinkava's interest is focused starkly on the figure alone. His pictures are pared down; all extraneous detail is banished in order to transmit the most powerful sense of a unified mental and physical condition. That this, in Pinkava's work, consistently materialises in some unearthly place – a rough-walled studio, dimly-lit, dank, underground, somewhere hidden we are led to believe – is our strongest sign of the sitters' relation to a social world and of the photographer's wider intentions.

Pinkava's subjects continually frustrate our efforts to place them – culturally, historically, or otherwise. They bare the traces of timeless conflict: scarred, heavy-lidded, emotionally frayed. They are hardened yet also vulnerable and tender. They appear to us as refugees who have gained temporary sanctuary in Pinkava's imagination, deprived victims or outsiders burned by excess.

One of Pinkava's first portrait series were photographs dedicated to various pillars of European modernism such as Artaud, Mayakovsky, Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, and in a sense all his subsequent work makes reference to a towering modernist legacy of alienated expression. But Pinkava deliberately places his portraits on the brink of overstatement, he refers to his figures as both "holy" and "foolish" and it is tempting to read them as "victims" of an ideology or belief system that has run aground. Pinkava sees them in this way, as cast adrift. "They are beings from the end of the century... beings of the universe: sexless, disowned and powerfully expressive."

David Chandler, London 1993

An excerpt from the text of Martin C. Putna's Znekrásněný svět for the book Ivan Pinkava / Heroes which the KANT publishing house published on the occasion of the exhibition of the same name in Galerie Rudolfinum.

This question is absurd for the majority of modern art and modern art theories. What beauty? First, after all, objective beauty does not exist, and all individuals have their own experience of aesthetic pleasure, no matter the stimulus. Second, the meaning of art – and particularly of photography – does not, after all, lie in portraying some beauty or other. Modern art may document, be provocative, propagandistic, polemical, shocking, create the most disgusting thing, take delight in upsetting the audience, modern art is allowed to do all that – but heaven forbid that it portray beauty.

Only in this comparison does it become clear why Pinkava is really, profoundly anachronistic. Not because he takes his subject matter from the Bible, paraphrases Caravaggio, or photographs carefully posed nudes, but because in his work he asks not only absurd, but also impudent, ridiculous, inexcusably naive questions about Beauty; simply because such a question occurs to the audience when looking at his work; because in Pinkava's work the audience has the opportunity to record these special extra qualities, these admittedly even almost imperceptible accretions, stains, deformations and distortions on the bodies and faces, as references to the canon of beauty, which in our day cannot, however, be depicted other than per negationem, through deviations from that canon.

Apart from his principal method of making bodies unbeautiful Pinkava uses a further two means in his progress along the via negationis.

In the first of these means, we have to give some title to the titles we bracketed off a few lines ago, that is the words in Pinkava's titles that entitle Pinkava to the appellation „Mannerist“. This time, however, I do not mean Mannerist in the general, vague meaning of a precious or mannered style (however much these might apply to Pinkava), but Mannerist as in drawing from the source of a particular artistic method, the conceit normally employed in emblematic writing. The Mannerist emblem consists in linking together the emblem and the lemma, which is not a simple naming of what is in the picture, but is a clever riddle, whose solution will then help us to understand the meaning of the picture. This is precisely the case in many of Pinkava's photographs. Sometimes Pinkava's title is formulated as a riddle (They Shall Look on Him Whom They Have Pierced and His First Sip or, O Sweet Blood !), but it is not necessarily so. The „straightforward“, apparently descriptive titles, like Abel and Cain, Tomáš and David Medek, Narcissus and Charon, also have the character of lemmas, that is, of riddles. Solving them is then a component of the work demanded of the audience. All those who solve them correctly will find that Abel and Cain are indistinguishable. Which one is the murderer and which the victim? There are also two Christs (Tomáš and David Medek): which is the true Christ ? Narcissus is pretty hideous. On the other hand, Charon is actually pretty attractive. Still, one and the same model represents both Narcissus and Charon. Why in the first case is the model „made unbeautiful“ so radically, whereas in the second case he is left relatively beautiful? Is Narcissus Charon and Charon Narcissus? The resolution of the relationship between word and image is not usually the end, but the beginning of inquiry: the fact is that the resolution is usually the realization that titles and things do not tally, that the traditional iconographic order does not function, that no beauty is unproblematic; this tends to be the solution.

The second means is the occasional disruption of an unending series of scars, shaven heads and grubby brows in a picture of a person who is not made unbeautiful either by Nature or the artist. For example we have a few portraits of young women (Zora and Little Jana), for whom the appellation „angels“ offers itself. Pinkava's „angelicity“ does not suggest some sophisticated, concealed eroticism, as is so often the case in modern art, nor does it suggest an histrionic and, if possible, repulsive hermaphroditicity, as is so frequent in postmodern art, but something more original, the refreshingly cool presence of an amiable being, with whom any contact is free of erotic oppressiveness. That is why these bodies may remain intact. That is why these “angels” may remain messengers: with their quiet, radiant existence they can remind us that, after all, beauty does exist – but beyond this world.

Martin C. Putna (born 1968) is a literary historian and essayist. He is Docent of Comparative Literature in Prague, and Editor-in-Chief of the Late Classical literature series of the Herrmann publishing house. As author he has published extensively in journals such as *Souvislosti*, *Listy filologické* and *Teologický sborník*. His own books include *My poslední křesťané* (Prague, 1994), *Chvály* (Brno, 2001), *Česká katolická literatura v evropském kontextu 1848–1918* (Prague, 1998) and *Órigenés z Alexandrie* (Prague, 2001). Among his published translations are *U řek babylonských: Antologie ruské emigrační poezie* (Prague, 1996) and *Órigenés: O Písni písni* (Prague, 2000).

Petr Kilian's Interview with Ivan Pinkava

Photography. Probably each of us has taken a picture at one time or another. It is so easy... But for only a few people it is a way for a person to comment on the events around them, on the world, on people, a way that speaks to others and simultaneously speaks about himself. In your opinion, where does the uniqueness of photography lie, what is its allure for you?

It seems to me that photography is a mirror. But surprisingly enough not a mirror of that which is shown in its image as most people have a tendency to initially perceive it, but a mirror of the photographer. The selection of a subject, the manner of depiction, the composition etc. actually secretly tells you a mysterious story of each author. You can deduce this without even ever meeting him. All you need are his photographs. I never much believed in photographers that purported to bring you an account of the World. Perhaps this can be part of their job, but it is always primarily an account of themselves. Maybe it is also because it is just that which is mysterious, what is hidden behind the photograph and what actually is not intended for everyone (even though much is said about the democracy of photography) that fascinates me in some way. You simply need a certain degree of intelligence and experience to read a photograph properly.

From the many genres of photography you primarily deal with portraits and nudes. Man has become your subject. Why that choice?

It was never a choice. I guess it was always the only thing about which I have never doubted in my photographs. I think that even if I were to photograph landscapes or still lifes, then somewhere, deep inside, the subject of interest would in fact still be man or his interpretation. It is only another way to "read" him. We measure the world around us through ourselves, whether we are aware of it or not. Each of us is born with a certain orientation which we either develop in ourselves or not, with a fascination for certain things and with indifference to others. I suppose we have the possibility to learn something about ourselves there, where our fascination is oriented.

When I spoke of the genres you deal with I must add that they are not portraits or nudes in the common sense of the word. Your photographs often resemble (with a little exaggeration) paintings by the "old masters." Sometimes the stylisation and staging evoke this association, sometimes the tonality and the playing with the light. Critics and reviewers often refer to the baroque and manneristic features of your photographs. No doubt all this forms a peculiar style. How readable is today's man? How much can it speak to him?

I don't know. That doesn't interest me. You do things one way and not another simply because you have to do them that way. You essentially don't exactly understand them yourself. You are being dragged along by your own fascination. When I will be interested in how readable I am then I will maybe make entertaining shows on Nova. Mystery interests me, not deliberate readability. And what is "today's man?" After all I am living now myself and thus cannot do anything for past or future man. By all this I don't want to arrogantly say that I do not care if anybody will understand my photographs or not, but that I cannot take that into consideration. How you will be interpreted in the end (if you will be at all) is the necessary risk of each art form. Playing on readability is orienting towards kitsch (in the better case) or manipulation.

Formal perfection, the beauty of pure photography, an emphasis on communication of content, the style of portraying intriguing characters, an author of large themes, an author close to decadence... That is how the critics write about you and your work. Evaluations that may seem like alchemist incantations in the ears of a layman... How would you characterise your photographs?

An effort at my own personality interpretation, an attempt at revealing my own shadow if I can use the psychoanalytical idiom. Looking for the common.

In one of his essays the Polish writer Gustaw Herling-Grudzinski wrote that "There exists a certain inviolable limit to what people may say about people." And you chose this quote as the motto of your Internet pages. Does a certain limit to what people may say exist?

I think so. Each of us has our own limit which we could probably not bear crossing. The poet Bohdan Chlibec found that quote for me. I think he was aware of the difficulty in its interpretation as well as its duality. It was because of this I used it. It is essentially more of a question than a statement.

A look at your photographs often does not arouse wonderment from pretty faces; instead of these we see peculiar faces that are almost freaks and oddballs. It is as if their eyes are staring at us though they actually suggest the faraway gazes of the bewitched. Is this because of your penchant for striking faces?

Who would be interested in uninteresting faces? Why dwell on pretty faces? There have already been a lot of flowering briar shrubs painted and they have not left that large of an imprint on art. In photography we still are not used to that which is completely common in painting or sculpture, for example. It's as if photography does not have a right to its own world view yet. If I made a portrait of a woman who looks exactly like the Mona Lisa, would you be appalled as to why I chose an ugly woman? And does the Leonardo's painting Mona Lisa seem ugly to you? Forget about the terms beautiful or ugly. Think in categories of truth or lies. Art is always partially an image of the unconscious. And there you will very rarely behold only pretty faces. But you will learn something about yourself there.

Siblings appear in several photographs, often twins. Obviously that is not a coincidence?

In almost all the photographs I am somehow trying to work with the principle of a certain duality (good evil, beautiful ugly, woman man, sin innocence, image and reflection). Siblings directly offer themselves to the subject. A clash of two images.

When I look at your photos I am often not sure whether they show a woman or a man. What does androgyny mean to you?

In essence precisely a brief connection of the aforementioned duality, a kind of contact when searching for answers. Forbidden, sacred, thus again that mystery, where it is necessary to behave very carefully. The forbidden part of each of us.

How do you choose your models and where do you find them?

I wait until they come themselves, as in life. Until I meet them. I have never worked with models from a modelling agency. Somehow it just isn't possible for me. It's as if it would be some kind of betrayal. I don't know how to explain it exactly.

As a photographer you surely know the human face. Do you think that it can expose a person, that it is possible to read from it?

But of course I believe it time and time again. But look out, it's a trap! But I don't photograph people in order to tell you the story of my models, but I try to communicate something general through them. That is a big difference. The models surely somehow sense it intuitively and that's why they are willing to participate in it. It is actually a great baring of oneself when you allow someone to "peek" at your face, at your soul, but in no way is it a striptease.

One of the characteristic features of photography (one of the properties that is attributed to photography) is the ability to stop time, as it were, especially when a person is standing before the lens. He doesn't grow old, he doesn't die... You said that the portrait of Petr Lébl is one of your first photographs which helped you find your own aesthetic (Mladá Fronta: June 10th, 2001). That was half a year after his death. Can you explain this more?

Yes, I can. It is a photograph from 1985. It is truly my oldest photograph which I am willing to exhibit in public and which I still stand behind today. It was from this one that my subsequent "Portrait for..." photographs developed aesthetically and contextually. The fact that it was a photograph of Petr Lébl is a coincidence, if such a thing exists. Incidentally it was never published during his lifetime; it has never been exhibited yet. A strange coincidence, too... I regret it today. I know that he spoke about it a week before his death.

It is interesting that people talk about death rather than timelessness in connection with photography. It's as if a powerful photograph has "killed" you forever in the likeness made material by the photographer. Surely you know the portraits of, for example, Franz Kafka. Do you know that he also looked different? That he was also younger or older and he looked different every time? It doesn't matter. The icons of those few likenesses of his from the most often published (and probably also most powerful) photographs will remain imbedded in your memory forever. It is a privilege, but also a curse, of photography.

The theme of death often occurs in your works (Salome, Cain and Abel, etc.). It will come for all of us eventually... Is that the only reason why you consider this theme to be topical?

I don't consider it to be topical but actually to be absolutely timeless. It is a question of finality, something absolute. Maybe today, in a period of absolute relativism and endlessness, it is one of the few themes which seems to constantly hang over everything and which we have not managed to displace. This absoluteness of Death in itself can also bring grandeur and paradoxically even dignity.

Nudity. It has many forms. Sometimes it is captivated by the beauty of the human body or arouses disgust in people, other times it becomes a stimulus to excitement or looks obscene and self-purposeful. Your last exhibition in Ateliér Josefa Sudka titled TNF (an abbreviation for the Teatr Novogo Fronta theatre troupe) offers another interpretation which is non-erotic nudity. What was your intention during the realisation of this exhibition collection?

Nudity is something that is indisputably characteristic of us all, in which we are more equal than in anything else. Yet it unbelievably points out the uniqueness and the mystery of man. Here I tried very hard to maximally force out any erotica whatsoever. I think that it would prevent understanding. After all it often blinds us in real life, too.

You have exhibited in the United States several times. It is often said about America that while it is liberal in many things, from a certain perspective it is very puritanical. They consider any kind of child nudity to be pornography, for example. Did you have problems with your photos there?

Not really, actually. I mainly travelled to cities like NY, Seattle, Houston and so on or was on university grounds. But I guess the situation there is not entirely standard. But you sense that elsewhere you could encounter it. It is often truly obscure.

Have you ever met with negative responses in the Czech Republic?

The Czech Republic is a very liberal country, surprisingly enough. You sometimes meet with misconceptions, envy or the refusal of your work as a whole instead. But I guess that's the way it should be. I also hate lots of things about the current art scene and I have every right to be correct or to be mistaken.

Which Czech photographer, whether living or not, appeals to you most with his work?

Probably Jan Svoboda.

The Ministries with their grants and the sponsors from the ranks of companies or individuals have become the modern patrons for the support of the arts. It could present a certain facilitation, especially for starting artists and for artists working on large or long-term projects. What is your experience with obtaining support from these sources?

It's more like I contribute from my taxes instead of drawing on anything. I have a strange feeling that it is the same people who have already learned how to correctly formulate them that keep getting the grants regardless of what they are actually doing. So far I have had only one relatively modest grant from the Ministry of Culture and only Switzerland's ProHelvetia has selflessly helped me out in our country. In fact not even a company like Kodak has ever helped me with a single crown, in spite of various assurances. Begging somewhere for money seems to be degrading to me. It almost seems to be faster to earn it. Maybe I am a lucky man in that so far I know nothing about grant politics.

At the end of the eighties you were a cofounder of the Prague House of Photography (Pražský dům fotografie) and the chairman of its board of directors later in the nineties. You also significantly contributed to it reopening in Haštalská ulice. I imagine that you had to spend a lot of time on that, at the same time, however, you are occupied with your own work and also work on contracts. What brought you to do this activity?

Most likely not knowing how much time it would take. You later find out that you feel some kind of relation to this amount of work and you feel sorry for getting rid of it. The main point of my activity in the 90's was saving this almost finished institution and this was a success despite relatively dramatic events. Then I was quite glad to leave the board of directors. I almost wasn't able to work on my own things at that time. It was quite a demanding period.

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