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Andrew Miksys, Portraitist at the Gypsy Court

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ANDREI CODRESCU

Andrei Codrescu (b. 1946) is a professor of English at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge and a regular commentator on National Public Radio. He is also the editor of *Exquisite Corpse: a Journal of Life & Letters* – www.corpse.org. Born in Sibiu, Romania, he moved to America in the 1960's. In his hit documentary *Road Scholar* (1993) Codrescu drove across the United States in a cherry red '68 Cadillac convertible uncovering America's "wonderful excesses and ironies" along the way. He has published over 30 books of poetry, fiction, autobiography, and essays. Two recent publications include *It was Today: New Poems* and *Wakefield*, a novel.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there was a wholesale rejection of the symbols of communism. The first to go was the wooden ideological language of the Party, which was the code by which apparatchiks sought to appear both obedient and authoritative. The dustbin of history received a fresh supply of outworn phrases and words, such as "the five-year plan," "the golden future of humanity," "party discipline," "healthy social origin," along with kilometers of quotation from Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin & Co. Also into the dustbin went much of what passed for the "Marxist-Leninist" reading of history, humanities, and most of the sciences. The names of newspapers, streets, and buildings were also relegated to this capacious bin. I saw a high-school friend of mine in Romania in the actual process of purging her doctoral thesis of socialist buzz-words and quotations from communist ideologues; she had been caught by the collapse of the regime a few days before delivering her work, and she worked furiously at picking the suddenly-obsolete clichés out of her text like anchovies out of a pizza. In the end, she gave up the whole thesis because, as it turned out, there wasn't much there after the politically correct armature had been removed: it was more of an infrastructure than she had thought. While it was relatively easy for most people born and raised in the socialist epoch to discard bits of language, it wasn't so easy to rid the surroundings of the physical remains of the dead empire.

These remains surround Andrew Miksys' subjects with silent stubbornness. The boy in the Superman shirt (p. 15) is throwing a rock at a wall that may be vintage cement, dating to a time when Cement was capitalized, one of the sacred materials of Stalinism. On the other hand it could be the wall around the church looming ahead, which predates communism. The other boy is holding a grate that could have come from an old workers' apartment building or some demolished structure of unknown origin. The grate is certainly being saved for use with the piles of bricks announcing some kind of future construction. The car next to the boys could well be a "Pobeda," a Soviet-vintage auto based on an old Pontiac. In Russian, "pobeda" means "victory." The children are playing in a transitional world, one that is still full of the stolid objects of the past, and one that is arriving in the form of new construction. The materials of the past and those of the future are seemingly identical: the only thing that differentiates them is the attitude of the child wrapped in his Superman flag, throwing a defiant rock at the wall. The other child, holding the grate, isn't so sure. Maybe he's waiting to see what effect the first rock throw will have before he hurls something at the wall. The wall itself is ambiguous: if it's a Stalinist wall, the kid's throwing a rock against the godless past. If it's a church wall, he's aiming at the distant past which is making a bid for the future. Churches, suppressed by communists, made energetic dashes into the post-commie world, presenting themselves as symbols of resurrected spirituality and dashed national yearnings. Is it a wall of the past or a wall of the past-future? What's certain is that the kid throwing the rock doesn't care what kind of wall it is. He is the Superman of the West throwing a rock at a wall, but if you take away his Superman T-shirt he'd still be a kid throwing a rock at a wall, daring his pal to be bad. In other words, the layers of ironic symbols that constitute these children's physical world remain behind like discarded shirts or abandoned ideologies when one sees what Andrew has actually photographed: an archetype, a kid throwing a rock, with his friend by his side. Andrew has photographed lasting innocence in a context doomed to the transitory nature of its history.

The capitalist West in the guise of T-shirts and blue jeans has barely touched Andrew's Roma subjects. There is an irony here that is not immediately evident to even the most astute readers of recent history, namely that the Roma were among the first Soviet citizens who were able to smuggle Western goods during socialism, but that for all the exposure they had to these things both before and after the Soviet collapse, they remain some of the most traditionally-minded people in the ex-commie fiefdom. Depicting the intense humanity of these people who live traditional lives in a modern world that they have quickly learned to adapt is the subject of numerous artistic gazes. Notably still is Emir Kusturica's 1988 film, "Time of the Gypsies," a powerful drama about Roma trying to maintain the ways of a nearly-feudal society in a violently hostile modern world. The cultural clashes and ironies surrounding the Roma will continue to be a treasure-trove for artists for a very long time. Collectively, they embody as many historical paradoxes as the Jews, another people forced by history and prejudice to be both modern and traditional.

The subject of Andrew's specific inquiry is finding the unchanging human qualities that dwell within his subjects. These qualities shine from their eyes and are evident in the way they hold themselves to Andrew to be photographed. In these portraits of the young, the adolescent, the middle-aged and the old, Andrew has uncovered bedrock humanity. On the other hand, he has not muted their surroundings and the multitude of meanings they convey. He allows objects to narrate history, and encourages the viewer to note the humor and ironies. He does not prettify or idealize his subjects, even though (or perhaps because) he loves them. Every photographer needs to gain his subjects' trust, and Andrew is a master of it, but there is something more here, something that emanates from the artist. By the time they have been "caught," Andrew's Roma have already gained an insight into Andrew's personality. The teenage boy with his macho cigarette holding his seductive girlfriend has an air of mock aggressivity that seems to say simultaneously, "I know what I'm holding her and you can't (or can) have her." The girl herself floats above both men in perfect awareness of her sexual powers. (p.11). The two young women on p. 11 and p. 21 are both flirtatious, but they say vastly different things: the girl on page 21 in her transparent blouse with brassiere showing, is in love with the photographer; the other is exhibiting herself in a much colder, more mercantile light; she's more interested in the camera.

If Andrew were merely an ambitious photographer, he could have chosen to jam his images with enough information to keep busy any number of spectators. As it is, viewers both familiar and unfamiliar with history, Soviet history, Lithuania, Romas, or Lithuanian Roma, can expand a great deal of useful exegetic energy looking into these pictures. But Andrew is not merely ambitious, he's great. I say this fully aware of how difficult it is to make such a freighted judgment. His greatness lies, I believe, in the extraordinary swiftness with which he establishes a relationship with his subjects, a relationship that is unfailingly empathic. The surfaces of the world in which we all play are full of seductive byways and dead ends. Andrew Miksys sees them, doesn't avoid them, but finds his way somehow straight to the heart. That's great, I think. And there is something else: when post-communism threw out everything it could move into the dustbin of (post)history, it may have thrown out a baby or two with the bathwater. One of those things, immensely compromised by authority and censorship, was the so-called doctrine of "socialist realism." The technically skilful artists of "socialist realism" were mandated by ideology to present their subjects in the clear light of good and evil, according to Stalin's (changing) notions of it. In so doing, they sometimes achieved a heroic sublimity that transcended their mandate. It will be a long time before any art historian will have the stomach to view the multitude of objects produced under the auspices of this doctrine, but once past the valleys of Marxes, the rivers of Lenin faces, the mountains of Stalins, he or she may find something interesting: monumental clarity. Artists usually find intuitively what is useful about past art, or at least what can be quoted without being mistaken for imitation, and, if they are great, they use it. "Socialist realist" art hasn't yet revealed its new uses, with some exceptions. Christo is one of them: he put monumentality and public effect to good use. Andrew Miksys has also found in the clarity and monumental banality of Soviet art something to meditate on. That's another mark of greatness in my book: no fear. The people who pose for Andrew in these photographs expect something idealized and heroic from him, something that they have been through years before in the truly "artistic" portrait. Whether they know it or not, their ideas of art were formed by "socialist realism." In seemingly granting them their wish, Andrew does something of a triple summersault: he quotes their ideas back to them without offending them, while he makes the multiple ironies accessible to everyone, including his subjects. How he does that is art, that's how.