

## Helga Pakasaar / THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF MIROSLAV TICHÝ

*The lens decides what's interesting. I see everything through the lens. Taking photographs is all about seeing – the camera is your eye – and it all happens so quickly that you don't have to see anything yourself .... I've never done anything except let the time pass ... I observe the world. But what is the world? In any case, it's only an illusion.*  
– Miroslav Tichý

The selection of photographs by the Czech artist Miroslav Tichý in the following pages – snapshots of everyday life in Kyjov, a small town in Moravia – suggests the illusory world of dreams. Often blurry and lacking in detail, his images immediately provoke the imagination. Miroslav Tichý's approach to taking photographs is that of a passive observer who thrives on chance encounters and fleeting impressions. Working intuitively, he scans the social world around him, responding to various sensations and momentary distractions. Tichý's primary subject has been women in the streets of the hometown that he hasn't left in fifty years. From the 1960s through the 1980s, he shot about three rolls of film a day producing a massive archive. Quite different from documentary photographers who claim to witness and "capture" reality, Tichý accepts lack of agency as a position of freedom to work from. He is a street photographer who has obsessively documented a particular subject while refusing to select the exceptional and "decisive moments," or even to make claims to interpretation. As a solitary urban stroller recording his social environment, Tichý might be called a *flâneur*. Yet unlike the self-possessed observer in control of his individuality implied by that notion, Tichý's restless wandering is much closer to that of a *badaud*, a gazer who is absorbed by the outside world which intoxicates to a point where he loses himself under the influence of the spectacle of society. It is precisely this sense of absorption that becomes so palpable in his photographs. Declaring himself an "atomist" who opposes the apparent solidity of the perceived world, Tichý's images vividly express states of dissolution between viewer and subject.

Miroslav Tichý's approach to photography defies the precision and technical control normally associated with the medium, especially now with digital means. Disregarding the rules of conventional photography, Tichý's snapshots are taken quickly and at odd angles. He uses handmade cameras inventively cobbled together from scavenged materials such as old tins, toilet rolls, plastic

drain pipes and cigarette boxes, with lenses cut from Plexiglas ground with sandpapers and polished with toothpaste and ashes. The imperfections from this improvised, faulty equipment – light leakage, blurs, overexposure, underexposure, scratches, dust – and other incidental “mistakes” are what make his images so compelling. Equally important are his low-tech production techniques, evident in a fondness for clotted surfaces from the ongoing chemical activity of silver bromides interacting with paper and the presence of fingerprints from handling the prints in the developer. Each photograph is treated as an object through idiosyncratic cropping and mounts with decorative drawing. In the post-production phase, the photographs are then left to age. Neglected, perhaps even slept on, they deteriorate further until rescued. From such clumsy instruments and processes emerge surprisingly evocative images. As with his refusal to comply with aesthetic conventions, the fact that Tichý forgoes the conveniences of the modern world by incorporating recycled detritus into his handmade cameras is not so much a matter of necessity, but rather, a philosophical and political negation of the heroics of progress and a declaration of independence from social conventions.

Miroslav Tichý is a type of alchemist who draws out what he calls the “poetics of bromide” to powerful effect. He returns photography to the notion of “painting with light” where blackness becomes a mysterious space – rather than inert blankness – animated by gestural illumination. People here are modeled and modulated by light as if they were apparitions. Often barely identifiable, the spectral figures in his photographs appear so luminous they seem at times almost electric. Since studying classical life drawing in the 1940s, Tichý’s primary motif has been the female body, evident in his figurative drawings and paintings as well as the photographs. His interest lies with articulating the dynamics of form, gesture, and movement. The visual confusion of Tichý’s images creates a sense of instability; nothing seems certain aside from the passage of time. They are animated by what Roland Barthes in *Camera Lucida* theorized as the *punctum* of a photograph, the indescribable detail that attracts and moves us, whether a tear in the print or a shimmering arm. Miroslav Tichý’s compelling photographs leave open a discursive space between what is shown and what can be understood.



































## LIST OF IMAGES

These images are drawn from the Miroslav Tichý photography exhibition at Presentation House Gallery in North Vancouver, Nov. 17, 2006 to Jan. 14, 2007. All of these photographs are untitled and appear courtesy of the Foundation Tichý Oceán.

1. Page 49, 18 x 13 cm
2. Page 50, 9.75 x 19.3 cm
3. Page 51, 13 x 18 cm
4. Page 52, 12.3 x 21.8 cm
5. Page 53, 18.7 x 24.25 cm
6. Page 54, 10.95 x 18 cm
7. Page 55, 28 x 11 cm
8. Page 56, 26.6 x 15.5 cm