

Loring Knoblauch (Photobooks, Collector Daily, August 7, 2019)

Most of the imagery that we have seen from the Euromaidan demonstrations that took place in Ukraine in 2014 came from photojournalists who were on the ground in the chaotic streets of Kiev at the time. And in those pictures, we largely saw the determined faces of protesters, the despairing ones of the many mourning families, and the makeshift barricades and weaponry that provided some level of protection to those doing the fighting.

The historical timeline of the protests actually starts back a few months earlier in 2013, when then-president Viktor Yanukovich decided to abandon plans to build closer ties with the European Union and instead turned back toward the influence of Russia. Initially peaceful protests turned increasingly bloody as the government attempted to crack down on the opposition, especially when snipers moved in. Soon, the protests evolved into the broader-based Euromaidan revolution, with the flashpoint of the confrontation taking place in Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) in Kiev. By bringing the corruption of the Yanukovich government to the forefront, the civil unrest ultimately led to the ousting of the president, and the subsequent election of Petro Poroshenko, who promised to restore basic human rights and wean the nation from its entanglements with Russia. Soon afterward, while active movement toward the EU was restarted, Russia provocatively annexed the Crimean peninsula and ongoing pro-Russia unrest took place in the eastern part of the country.

David Denil's photobook *Let Us Not Fall Asleep While Walking* approaches the complex subject of the Euromaidan revolution from an intriguing new angle. In an attempt to get inside the history and into the mindset of the Ukrainian people, he collaborated with a variety of subjects in Kiev, making staged photographs that re-enact their stories or reflect their ongoing thoughts, struggles, and concerns. In all, he made a total of 137 images, the specific number matching the number of people killed during the unrest.

Stylistically, Denil's photographs take the careful staging of Jeff Wall and amplify that mannered frozen-moment feeling a few notches, adding a wash of bright flash (both indoors and out) that heightens the constructed drama and the sense of the surreal. The sequencing of the images loosely follows the rough timeline of the conflict, and Denil begins with images of injured and dead protesters, some being tenderly carried like Jesus in religious paintings, while others lie as corpses or are piled into grotesque heaps. He smartly recreates the tension in the air indirectly, with images of people clustered around TVs to watch news clips, darkened trains filled to overflowing, and separated young lovers finding each other and embracing.

Many of Denil's best images are more symbolic or metaphorical rather than strictly literal. An older man uses garden shears to sever the cord to a clock, thereby stopping time. A wrapped political statue is blown to bits, revealing a Levi's ad standing in its wake. A man lights a fire at the mouth of a very dark tunnel. And kids set up a mock firing squad against a graffiti-covered wall, the prisoners dispatched with the kick of a soccer ball.

Several images are more like still lifes, each pregnant with meaning – a house of cards on an elegant pool table, a rusty drip of wet residue streaming onto the street like blood, windows alternately tied open or bricked up. And the overlooked details of information flow and guerrilla tactics take shape in many forms: men practicing jumping over a wall, kids taking shelter behind containers, girls wearing gas masks, young men crouching, sharing plans, and

scuttling under train cars, teenagers forming relays, crouching in tall weeds, and fixing bikes, other people hiding amid laundry bags, with radios, gun stocks, and electronic wires clustered at the ready.

After a symbolic washing off with hoses and in a wooded lake, Denil's photographs turn to the aftermath of the riots and the ongoing struggles that remain. The sense of being watched, like fish in a fish tank or alert deer in the forest (two still life images), recurs again and again – one woman wanders the red-tinted streets of the night, pacing a methodical square for the surveillance cameras. As people try to settle back into everyday routines, health is a priority – the injured visit hospitals and rehabilitation centers, patients are tended to by teams of doctors, and amputees and other damaged people persevere, symbolically matched by a broken toy soldier who continues to fight. Remembrance is also a common theme in this world, with people visiting craters and other scenes of death bearing flowers and makeshift memorials sprouting up on fences. In the end, the rebuilding begins with reasserting the bonds of community, from passing water and saving kittens, to the recognition of elders, the fixing of roads, the cleaning up of debris, and the return of love. While Denil's vignettes travel a difficult road, the end point is suffused with a mood of tentative optimism.

*Let Us Not Fall Asleep While Walking* is actually filled with much more than Denil's consistently strong photographs. Interleaved among the images are essays (on yellow paper) and newspaper clippings (in enlarged type, sometimes of half cut pages) that provide context to the events on the ground. Denil has also included seven sections of personal obituaries of the fallen (on slightly smaller/thinner pages), each with a crumpled family photo, a biography (including the way the person was killed), and some anecdotes about their participation in the protests or their lives more generally. This approach gives faces and personalities to the faceless, making the political abstraction of the uprising much more human. Additional found imagery and ephemera (including a few children's drawings) are also interspersed, providing further allusions to tides of religion, war, and faded memories. As an integrated flow, the ideas merge and reinforce each other, with Denil's photographs providing the backbone framework of the photobook and the other materials adding richness and nuance. The overall design is dense and often complicated but undeniably well-executed, the varied pieces coming together naturally and without distraction.

Denil's use of overtly cinematic staging in this project is definitely an artistic risk, but one that pays off handsomely in the ways it opens up the subtle psychology of Ukrainian people. *Let Us Not Fall Asleep While Walking* is a layered study of protest and its real human consequences, one that takes the specific circumstances of the Euromaidan situation and broadens and stylizes its outcomes, lessons, and meanings. The result is a memorably excellent body of work and photobook, one that seems to get more vivid and touching with each reading.