

# MICHAL CHELBIN



**L**ike fairy tales from the Brothers Grimm, Michal Chelbin's photographs transport viewers to a world of childlike enchantment, one that is comfortably familiar yet filled with dark wonder and mystery.

"Many viewers tell me that the world discovered in my images is strange," agrees the 30-year-old, Israeli-born photographer. "For me, the image is the gate to a story waiting to be told in an appealing yet troubling way. I feel the image should undermine our perception of what we know. I'm drawn to fantasy and fantastic elements in real environments, and in my work I try to create scenes where there is a mixture of straight information and riddles. If people find these images strange, it's only because the world is indeed a strange place."

Chelbin's photographs of circus life are part of an ongoing project she began in 2003. It has taken the artist throughout Israel to Eng-

land and Russia—in the latter country she photographed at a children's circus where the performers ranged in age from three to 20.

Visiting and often traveling with the circus artists for extended periods of time, Chelbin is fascinated with the contrasts between the performers' public lives and their private identity, and how they seem to inhabit two fantastically different worlds.

"To me, they are all stars in a strange and intriguing play," says Chelbin of her subjects, who are often photographed reclining or in repose.

"When I photograph I'm not interested in the act of the performance or the performer's 'mask' but in the individual's own, naked persona. When they are in front of the camera, I try to let their own personality and determination tell the story. This is especially important when dealing with people who perform, because they are used to wearing 'masks' on their faces.

Intimacy is also important in portraiture, and when I get my models to repose, it helps me to penetrate that 'mask' and uncover who they are underneath. It also helps me accomplish a sense of casualness in my work, which is otherwise mostly staged."

Chelbin first studied photography in high school, before being drafted into compulsory military service in the Israeli army, where she served as a photographer.

"I was sent on a great variety of assignments, everything from covering foreign visits to documenting three-day drills in the desert," she recalls. "I'm not at all a militant individual, and I don't miss that period of my life, but looking at it from today's perspective, I can appreciate the experience I gained there in documentary and field photography."

After the army duty, Chelbin worked as a photojournalist for various Israeli newspapers and magazines, but eventually became disenchanted with being forced to intrude on private moments of personal anguish in covering the news. Quitting the news business, Chelbin enrolled as a photography and art student at the Wizo College of Art and Design in Haifa. After graduating, she embarked on a freelance career and began working exclusively on independent projects.

It was this desire to engage more directly in the lives of her subjects that prompted Chelbin to take on in-depth projects like the portraits of circus performers, as well as another project, focusing on a group of girls from a community of Russian immigrants

who arrived in Israel during the last decade.

Since 2002, Chelbin has exhibited in Los Angeles, New York, Tel Aviv, Brussels, London and Athens. Her work has been published in *Art Tomorrow*, accompanied by text written by British curator Edward Lucie-Smith, as well as in the magazine *Art Review*. She is currently working with the Fahey/Klein Gallery on a project leading to the publication of her first book.

Chelbin's work is represented in the permanent collections of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Verona, Italy. More of Chelbin's photography can be viewed at [www.michalchelbin.com](http://www.michalchelbin.com).

"It's my hope that my images come across as having several layers," says Chelbin of her desire to expand the boundaries of documentary photography. "The portraits are my way of documenting the world as a combination of strange and normal, a place so full of fantastic elements, yet so real."

—Richard Pitnick

#### ■ PRINT INFORMATION

All photographs are gelatin silver prints, printed on 20x24-inch paper in editions ranging from 6 to 25. Prices start at \$900 and increase incrementally to \$4,000 as the editions sell out.

#### ■ CONTACT INFORMATION

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