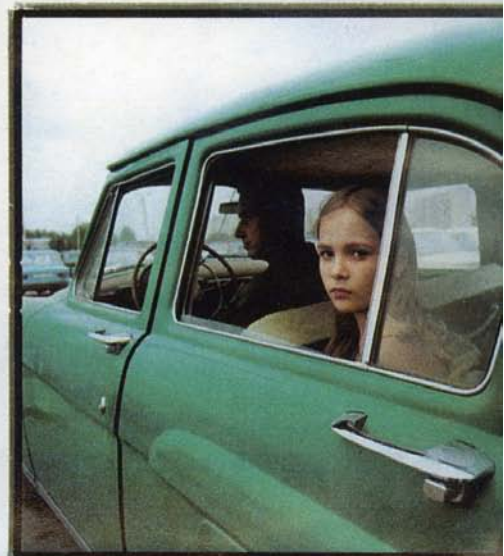


# EXPOSURES

Do you have a special photography project? Contact section editor Anthony LaSala at [alasala@pdnonline.com](mailto:alasala@pdnonline.com), PDN, 770 Broadway, New York, NY 10003. E-mail: [alasala@pdnonline.com](mailto:alasala@pdnonline.com)

by Anthony LaSala

The range of photographers who have focused on the alluring and deviant realm of the circus is extensive. From Mary Ellen Mark's images of the Great Royal Circus in Junagadh, India, to Bruce Davidson's photographs of a dwarf in a traveling circus to Veronique Vial's work with the Cirque du Soleil, the subject has been well explored. In this month's Exposures we feature the images of Michal Chelbin, a 32-year-old Israeli photographer who delved into the world of acrobats, trained animals and colored costumes while traveling through tiny communities within Russia, the Ukraine, Italy and Israel. Chelbin's six-year project has produced a portfolio of eye-catching photos that can be placed alongside the work of some of the greats.



## A Circus of the Strangely Familiar

By Edgar Allen Beem

UPON FIRST ENCOUNTERING ISRAELI PHOTOGRAPHER MICHAL CHELBIN'S photographs of young circus performers, a blogger named Raul pretty much hit the nail on the head when he pronounced "one part Balthus, one part Arbus." This admiring characterization suggested both the disquieting eroticism of the reclusive painter and the offbeat melodrama of the legendary photographer.

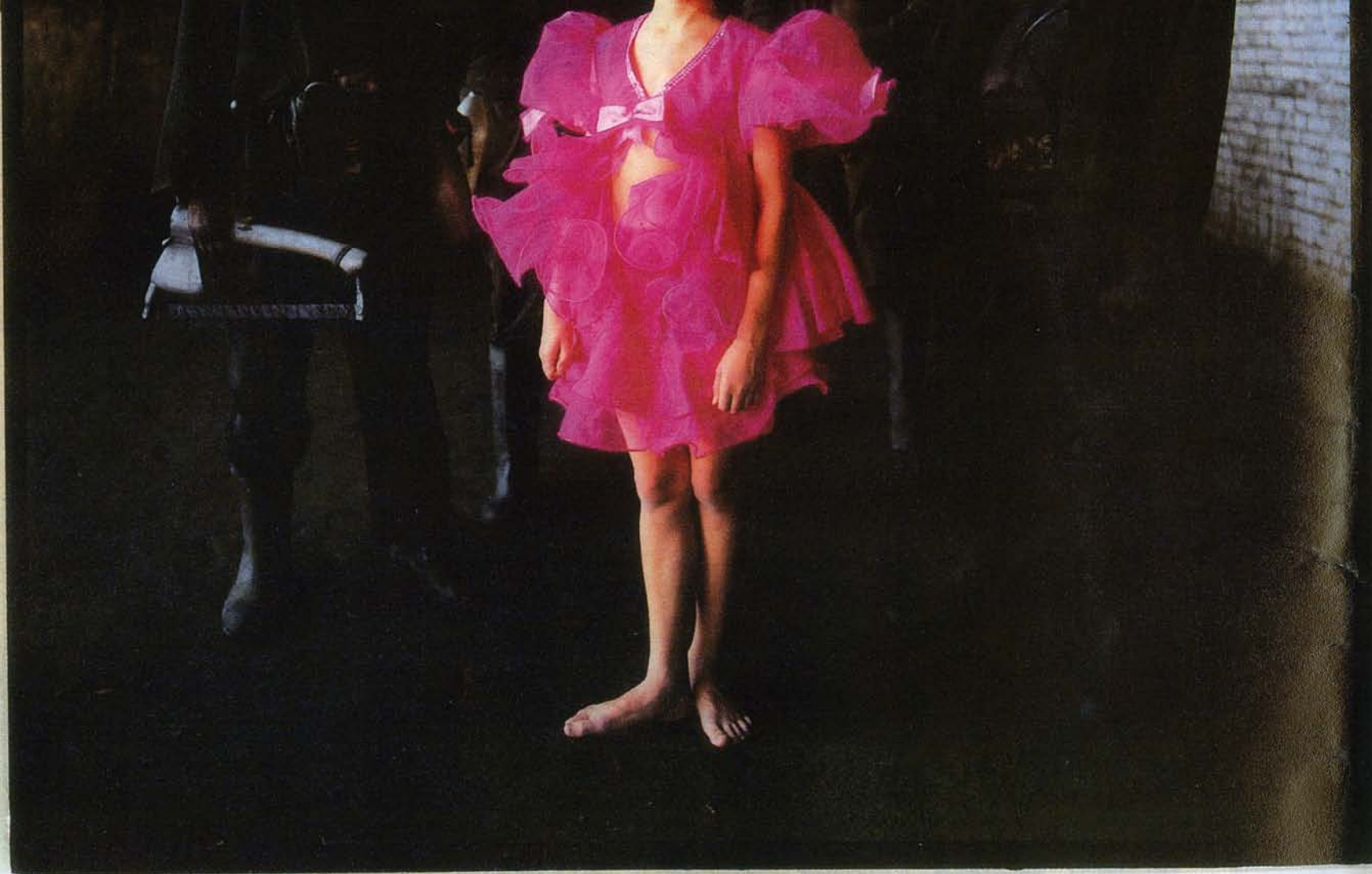
In selecting Chelbin as one of nine photographers featured in the Center for Photography at Woodstock's Photography Now '06 of the past summer, Natasha Lunn, photography editor at *The New York Times*, elaborated on the fantastical quality of Chelbin's photographs.

"Michal Chelbin's images of small-town performers in Russia

*continued on page*

from left: Xenia on the playground, Russia, 2003; The Balkansky Boys, Israel, 2004; Alicia, Ukraine, 2005.





## **A Circus of the Strangely Familiar**

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the Ukraine,” wrote Lunn, “are filled with tension that present the viewer with layered contradictions. In the photographs, her subjects appear before us floating between their two worlds, that of the illusionary grandeur as circus performers and their more sedate private realms. They reveal an inner struggle between who we are and who we may become.”

In one Chelbin photograph, for instance, a pair of pre-teen Russian girls, topless and wearing fuchsia tutus, hug one another on a woodland road while a third girl watches from a distance. Xenia, one of the girls pictured in the

**Left: Natasha with some local workers, Ukraine, 2005.**

**Chelbin’s series has been shown at Fahey/Klein, London’s Photographers’ Gallery and elsewhere.**

**Right: Sasha stands between a row of trees in Russia, 2003.**

little boy contorting his slender body in such a way that he looks armless. In another black-and-white photo an even odder pair poses together on a bed: a large chimpanzee wearing a suit and shoes and a small boy whom the chimp wraps his arm around tenderly.

When Lunn first saw Chelbin’s portraits at a Santa Fe Center for Photography workshop last year, she says she was initially struck by the way “there is something slightly off to all of her pictures. It doesn’t go over the top like a lot of photographers. It’s not forced, but it is so formal.”

Chelbin herself simply calls her photographs “Strangely Familiar.”





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Haifa, Israel. She first took up photog-  
 as influenced by the work of Diane

Arbus, Julia Margaret Cameron, Mary Ellen Mark, August Sander, "and a lot  
 of photographers who did portraits."

After compulsory service as a photographer in the Israel Defense Force,  
 Chelbin studied for four years (1997-2001) at the Wizo Academy of Art & De-  
 sign in Haifa. As a student she worked very much in the contemporary idiom  
 of staged photographs. In two series inspired by the paintings of Velasquez  
 and Caravaggio, she created the illusion of wall paintings with very theatri-  
 cally orchestrated images that used live models in costume and makeup  
 against painted backgrounds. Each tableau was staged in front of the lens  
 with no digital manipulation.

"Michal's always interested by the line between fantasy and reality, by try-  
 ing to create an image that is both fiction and documentary," says her hus-  
 band, cinematographer Oded Plotnizki.

Beginning in 2000, Chelbin took her search for the theater of reality out-  
 side of the studio with a series of portraits of circus performers shot in Is-  
 rael, Italy, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia. Entitled "Lazarova" after a Cossack

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horseback rider, the black-and-white portraits earned Chelbin her first U.S. show at Yossi Milo Gallery in New York in 2002. In 2004, her circus portraits were exhibited at Fahey/Klein Gallery in Los Angeles. This year, Chelbin was one of five female photographers featured in "Portraits" (May 5-July 15) at The Photographers' Gallery in London.

Chelbin's ongoing "Strangely Familiar" portrait series currently numbers close to 60 photographs, most of which are black and white. She has photographed a handful of her subjects in the same poses in both black and white and color however, because, while she prefers the timeless quality of black-and-white photography, she also enjoys "the contrast between the vivid and glamorous colors of the costumes and the gray backgrounds these people are surrounded by."

Chelbin shoots with a Hasselblad 6 x 6 using fast film and available light in order to achieve a sense of intimacy in her photographs. She spends a great deal of time with the people she photographs and she says she finds that not using a flash makes people more comfortable.

"The main themes in my work are not social or topical, but private and mythical; I search for people

vehicles to address universal themes: family issues, ideas of normality, puberty with its all incumbent pains and distractions, the desire for fame."

Her search for "legendary" characters often takes Chelbin to Eastern Europe where both she and her husband have family roots.

"The people there are very determined, very tough, but also very warm," says Plotnizki, "and the landscapes there are very beautiful."

"It's like time stands still there," adds Chelbin.

The exotic nature of the circus and carnival performers she portrays, the subtext of adolescent sexuality, and the timeless quality of the Israeli and Eastern European settings all conspire toward a sense of strangeness—at times sinister, at others just magical—in Chelbin's work that is at once both formulated and found.

"Many viewers tell me that the world discovered in my images is strange," writes Chelbin. "If they find it strange, it is only because the world is indeed a strange place. I just try to show that."

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*To see more of Michal Chelbin's "Strangely Familiar" series, check out the Spotlight section of [www.pdnonline.com](http://www.pdnonline.com) this month.*

