



## Shades of Red, Strange and Familiar

By **WILLIAM MEYERS** | September 11, 2008

Are you happy with the picture on your driver's license? Your passport? Your workplace ID? They must bear a close enough resemblance to what you actually look like to serve their purpose, but are they flattering or psychologically acute? Who among the great portrait photographers would you chose to take your picture: Julia Margaret Cameron, Yosef Karsh, Henri Cartier-Bresson? These questions were prompted by two current exhibitions of portraits, "A Rare Breed: A Portrait Series on Redheads, works by Julia Baum" at the NY Studio Gallery, and "Michal Chelbin: Strangely Familiar" at the Andrea Meislin Gallery.

The white background Ms. Baum used for the portraits in "A Rare Breed" forgoes the clues that might have helped us place her subjects in social settings, but Ms. Chelbin has taken a very different approach to achieve her different aims. She is interested in not only the physiognomy and psychology of her subjects, but in the sociology as well. The late Arnold Newman (1918-2006) was renowned for "environmental portraits," and Ms. Chelbin works in his tradition. Her subjects are mostly children on the cusp of puberty, many of whom are performers of some sort — acrobats, dancers, athletes — and she typically shows them in their performance gear. Although Ms. Chelbin is currently based in New York, the pictures were taken in [Ukraine](#) and Russia, except for two from her native Israel.

Ms. Chelbin makes dramatic use of color. "Natasha, Ukraine" (2005) is young, pretty, and has her very blond hair pulled back so that her ears stick out a bit. She stands barefoot in a filmy purple-pinkish costume of some sort, against a black and enigmatic background. The ground is coal black. Four men emerge from the background with blackened faces and wearing black work outfits, boots, and hard hats. They have gas masks draped around their necks and hold tools: a hatchet, a saw. Natasha, with her pale skin and scanty pink outfit, is set off boldly from the background and the men — but who are they, and what is the picture about?

are obvious. There is nothing overtly threatening in this picture, but it exemplifies the show's title by being, in fact, strangely familiar.

"Jenya" and "Alicia," both taken in Ukraine in 2005, are about the same age as Natasha, but photographed in very different settings, although with similar effect. Jenya, a young beauty with long brown hair, wears a one-piece pink bathing suit and leans against the trunk of a pea-green car of a not very expensive type, parked under a tree near a body of water, probably a lake. The back lighting puts her features in dramatic shade, but falls on her chest in a way that shows her slight breasts. Ms. Chelbin photographs with a medium-format Hasselblad single-lens reflex, and the film captures enough information to see the gooseflesh on Jenya's legs.

Alicia was also shot in relationship to an automobile, this one a Prussian green four-door sedan of some eastern European make (I think), but rather than leaning on it, she is in it, sitting in the back seat and looking out, her face framed by the rear passenger-side window. A middle-age man (her father?) sits behind the wheel of the car, and we see his face in profile against the windshield. Alicia is another beauty, and has her eyes fixed on the camera, although her expression betrays no particular emotion. As in the other pictures, the color in this 37-by-37-inch C-print is important visually, but its precise meaning is elusive.

There are boys as well. "Sasha, Russia" (2004) stands rigidly erect in the middle of an allée, as stiff as the tree trunks. He wears black pants and a white long-sleeved shirt with a collar, the formal outfit matched by his remote expression. It is fall, and the yellow leaves on the trees and those on the ground contrast with the black tree trunks and Sasha's black-and-white outfit. In "Two Athletes, Ukraine" (2006) one boy sits on a dolly, the side lighting modeling the developing muscles in his arms and calves, his fair skin and blond hair contrasting with the deep aquamarine wall behind him. Again, Ms. Chelbin achieves an existentially ambiguous correlative for these youngsters coming into maturity.