Anna Skladmann  

**LITTLE ADULTS**
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When he visited the new United States in 1831–1832 to study the fledgling country and a moment of economic and territorial expansion, the future Marquis de Tocqueville returned to Paris and produced his epic Democracy in America. In this famous work, de Tocqueville noted tendencies in America towards a disappearance of wealth as great fortunes were made which reached its apex 50 years later in what became known as the Gilded Age. More presciently, he also predicted the rise of then Transatlantic Russia as a future rival on the world stage to the United States. Both countries were experiencing radical changes in social structure, economic power and territorial expansion.

In America, the new wealth came from fortunes made in steel, railways, mining, oil, and banking. These new fortunes of the so-called Robber Barons, or Captains of Industry and Titans of Finance, the Mellons, Carnegies, Rockefeller, Gettys, Crocker, Stanford, and some others also instigated a blossoming of patronage of the arts, the likes of which had never been seen before in America. Art museums, libraries, and orchestras were founded in all the big cities but especially in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia as well as San Francisco. The finest painters of the day, James McNeill Whistler and John Singer Sargent, became the court painters of the new rich and produced exquisite, and occasionally controversial, portraits of the new rich and their families. As with traditional court painting, these Gilded Age portraits sought both to legitimate the status of their subjects and also to present their personalities, hopes and dreams in the strangest possible fashion.

In Russia, the 1860s up to 1917 in the nobility and the new rich, court painters also existed. Portraits, of whom islands Seny is by far the best known, performed a similar role in Russian high society in the period just before the First World War and the October Revolution. They painted the families, women and children of the nobility in a highly personal style that included influences of classic French court paintings with post-impressionist and Art Nouveau.

Seny’s portraits of M. Ya. Simonovitch, V. S. Mamontova, Mika Morozov, Henriette Gribman, and Grand Princess, Osja Alekseevna, all from 1887 to 1905, set the precedent for the work of the young
photographer, Anna Skadlarska, born in Bremen, Germany, of Russian parents, in 1986. However, we are getting ahead of ourselves.

Although the Revolution did not stop artistic production, it did set an end to both the nobility and many of the Tsarist-era paintings while channeling painters and other artists into areas that more directly served the interests of the state. In America, of course, the story was different, and although photography was widespread in the then-Soviet Union, portraiture did not exist as it did in the United States.

Even under the Soviet Union, Russia maintained its traditional outlook as a nation between East and West just as it had under emblem of the double-headed eagle, the lion’s imperial symbol for the rulers of antiquity and Soverignty, both the leaders and the people looked to the West as a source for innovation and aspiration whether in the field of science or in popular culture, music, art, androll and popular movies. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the pant- up desire for consumer prod- ucts from DXC to luxury goods swept the country while at the same time a modern form of Wild West capitalism totally overturned Russian society making fortunes and destroying pensions overnight.

The upheaval that marked the end of the Soviet Union in the 1990s led to economic and social chaos under Boris Yeltsin. An age of rampant capitalism began that revealed nothing else but the Global Age of the United States in the 1950s. Victims were made of it and over the next 15 years as the Soviet Union transformed itself into the “New Russia.” In 2008, according to the Russian business paper Finans, there were 101 billionaires in Russia, more than in any other country, and the serial MBA grads were, perhaps, the most gaudy, ostentatious ccm marketing party the world had ever seen. Some of the excess was captured in the caricatures and objects on sale at the “Museum of New Russians” in Moscow’s famous Artist neighborhood—figure of golgotha konrowmen with golden mobile phones and half clad women perched on their laps in fancy automobiles. The eco- nomic crisis that set off over the collapse of the housing and financial markets in the West, a product of what the former US Treasury Secretary Alan Greenspan, citing the collapse of another such bubble, described as “irrational exuberance,” had changed that number down to some 40. The new rich, says, whether Captains of Industry and Titans of Finance or they might have been collected America, or Dictators as they are called in Russia, or the mere very wealthy, have established themselves as collec- tors and patrons of the arts and bull frogs or refurbished Tsarist era palaces and star filled mansions.

Now that the dust has settled in Russia, photographer Anna Skadlarska has begun a project to photo- graph the children of the elite of the “New Russia.” Skadlarska, who is not yet 30 years old, studied in New York at Parsons The New School Design and in Paris. She has made her project to portray her subjects, all between six to twelve years of age in their own environments in a give-and-take environ- ment that combines the desires of the photographer to make a revealing portrait with the willful assertions of a child who seems assured and confident of his or her position in his or her new world. Indeed, the self-assurance of his subjects is almost otherworldly, and it is for this reason that she has named her project: “The Little Adults.”

Skadlarska, too, is marked by her Russian roots and brings an insider’s perspective from the outside. Her grandfather worked as a doctor in Moscow’s legendary Bolshoi Theatre; another mother “practi- cally grew up there,” as she puts it. Thus it is easy to imagine the future photographer hearing tales of the theatre and legendary performances by the stars of the Soviet Union. This has clearly marked Skadlarska’s aesthetic as much as Western culture has. This theatrical history and the fantasy world of childhood are “an essential part of their psyche,” and anything else is just for their lives and the future at the time of Skadlarska’s approach to photography and to her subjects, the “Little Adults.”

Skadlarska first visited Moscow in 2002, for the Millennium, immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Her parents took her to Arkhangelskoye Bolshoi Theatre and held in it a very pompous place called Grand Opera. At the new party’s party there was a table where children sat down and ate their dinner like Max adults, dressed up for masquerade. The formality of the event and the pretentious pose of the child made a strong impression on her. She writes that she was intrigued by these phenomena. The serious- ness or those young is something one does often find in the West where childhood and youth are encouraged to be reimbursable. It made her think about the new society forming in Russia and about how its new forms are the most gaudy, most ostentatious.

Several years later, Skadlarska returned to Russia as a newly trained photographer working on various photography projects for the New York Times Magazine, Marie Claire, and Rover Russia that explored the lives of children and adults in Moscow, Sochi, and elsewhere. She was not introduced to the world of the “Little Adults” until eight or nine days after her engagement. She writes, “I started this project with one girl, whom I visited various times. Each time I thought about new ideas and concepts. She lives in a house with a Moorisc spa and an English heath house, so we had enough space in her oriwnlyt to not run. After that I realized that she saw me as a sort of medium to tell something to this world.”

Anna Skadlarska poses her project thusly: “The series Little Adults explores what it feels like to grow up as a privileged child in Russia, a country where political history still rules the daily life. It is the explo- ration of the rapidly growing society of the Nouveau riches in which children are rapidly raised to become the elite and to behave like little adults. Photography children of Russia’s Daguers to reflect
the extreme contrast between social hierarchies touches on the control of family aspirations, ideas of normalcy, the loss of childhood, and constant desire for fame."

During the interactions with her young subjects, Skladmann, who is herself very young-looking, must project the aura of an older sister or cousin rather than a controlling adult figure. In a way, her youth allows her to share some of the same fantasies other subjects even though she is almost a generation older than they are. Indeed, they share a common culture of movies and theatre which makes the exchange of ideas so much easier and has clearly played a role in Skladmann’s style of portraiture. It also enables Skladmann to use a directoral style with her subjects by making them complicit in the staging of their own shared “movies.”

She uses the conventions of portraiture both personally in the manner of Valentino and more modern photographers of the American portraitist, Tim Barney. Her work, however, is less about photographing the children of Russia’s Olgaists and thus less about the Olgaists and the sources of the wealth that enabled the privileged position of the young children posing before her camera. Unlike in the series of Servi, for example, her subjects are not named with either patronymic or family names, but rather with their given names—Alia, Vaida, Roman, Antonina, etc. Perhaps because they are of a different age, the children, but also serves to provide for portrait of this generation; virtually all of whom have been born in this new Millennium and more than five years since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Her text accompanying an earlier catalogue of works, Hess, Schmutz, Chief Curator of the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, writes: "these are "children who are aware of their unique place as distinct from the major. [They] and children who are aware of other missions and who are members of every elite club. When the children do know that they are different—be they little worldlings or kings—a mark of the knowledge reveals (them) in their fashion: ‘It’s Schmutz, Skladmann—show [these] Little Adults’ as such.”

Skladmann’s stories indeed reflect this combined sense of style and responsibility both on the side of the children and on that of the photographer. The image Nikita and Alexei at the Ismail Embiassy is a prime example of the children still present in her charges. "Nikita told me at the photo shoot that I should go visit his hippocampus and when telling him when he knows the term 'agitated' from his dad and turned to his sister looking for protection” this charming image of Nikita is a sort of miniature suit with short pants, tennis shoes, a man’s top hat and cane, and Alia, a key party dress, posed on a table in a Tbilissi museum the Ismail embassy is both serious and playful at the same time. Similarly, the portrait Janina in her Home Cinema shows the girl her fur newly braided and wearing a canary-yellow Chine dress, "she kindly moved when [Składmann] posed her on the stage. [but soon] started jumping up and down as if she was butterfly trying to get out of her corner.”

The theatrical world infects Anna Składmann’s approach to photography both from the perspective of family history, but also with the theatre as the primary site of role-playing and the acting out of fantasies.

The games of dress-up play a major part in the lives of the girls Składmann photographs. Many of these games are nearly universal, as seen throughout the wardrobe of a theater director’s movie set. Another genre is one flower-patterned diaphanous matching dress having just offered: no doubt with perfect etiquette, a perfect cup of tea with cookies before her photo sitting. The boys, too, are also into dress-ups. Antonina, here dressed as a ballerina and standing before what appears to be a white marble entrance hall so064 not in a production of Tschikawka’s The Nutcracker, speaks to Składmann about his choice of costume. She says, “Antonina only agreed to this shoot if we could do it together with the girl she has a crush on. He met her in school and they acted together in a school theatre piece. At the shoot, he put on this costume from the play. It was too small, uncomfortable, and this didn’t even look as nice at all myself. All these little things you make out of love, no matter what age you are”.

The edge between childhood and adulthood is explored in this image. Anna Standing in Her Grandfather’s Theatre. Despite her determined pose at the camera, her is apparently unsure of what he wants to be when he grows up. “To be an archaeologist or to be a Spiderman, that is the question? In the end Anna Składmann photographing on the stage of the theatre. Ottawa, he is posing his grandfather, a theatre director. "Anna Składmann’s own history becomes a part of this photograph." Other portraits are more worldly, Some of the girls have already worked as models in Moscow’s super-charged fashion world. Alia is a heroin失者 for example showing the high collapsed in a pink piled on a table after a shower in short. He works it as close intimate and revealing of the pressures and stresses placed on these “little Adults” who are themselves still often enough really children even if their image has been associated advertising campaigns for the city. Lydia, the daugh- ter of models lies on her deployed with the expression of the experienced in all aspects of a modeling career. Indeed, she looks back at the camera with self assurance of the young, albeit dressed, Brodie Shields or Susan Sperling Stanley, Eric Ribic Lithka.

Skladmann staves a love of this cinema with many of her subjects and they enact their own mini-movies whether something out of Federico Fellini’s La Dolce Vita, perhaps—or Jean-Pierre Jeunet— City of Lost Children or Amelie. Of course, some other images might suggest David Lynch’s Wild at Heart or Nikita Mikhalkov’s Obsessed. In Russia—of yesterday, today, and tomorrow—that is as much her subject matter as the “Little Adults.”
An “Director” of “Little Adults,” Skladskaya sets the mise en scène and poses several of her subjects with simple props of wealth or power that would not be out of place in London or Beverly Hills. Anna Larina Gage也許is a young teenager dressed as Catherine Devereaux leaning on an antique Mercedes, apart of her father’s collection while, to Skladskaya’s surprise and admiration, regaling her with tales of Harold Dorrance. Anna also poses at her home with wigs, kabas and Sifis of her mother’s jewelry box. In what must be her most surreal composition, Jacobs poses with his Nazi era machine gun to a white gold coin filled with broccoli and stuffed animals before a plasma screen TV that bemedders lemon. It is an image out of the latest John Carr: Our Kind of Butler. One gets the feeling that young Jacobs feels like a blind in agitated cage yearning to break out. Perhaps he shares this feeling with Venus, the white poodle.

Roman at the Tatler Parish shows another potential tear-way. The boy of eight years old is so, sits perched on a table against a wall of satin tablecloths including, of course, a voluptuous nude woman in tailored stockings complete with a black pauper and a dead head. In Skladskaya put it, “Women follows the footsteps of his mother, who lives and is decorated by beautiful fashions. On the photo he note to the interested older girls like the one standing in the center, Nahaana, a 30 year old styler. Gets his age only cry and are busy speaking at the time.”

These images represent the hopes and dreams of Skladskaya’s “Little Adults,” of the “New Russian,” while other images more directly reflect the court paintings of an earlier era. In the aforementioned catalogue, Irina Yinikina’s essay is accompanied by a series of French and Russian paintings from the 1700s to the late 1800s of the children of the nobility that paralleled many of Skladskaya’s photographs. They are quieter images that rely on the power of poses to make their point that these are uniquely situated individuals who know that they have inherited power and position thrust on them. An image such as Skladskaya in Paris: Oss is a classic drawing room portrait that could have been produced in 1870 or so complete with the Mona Lisa-like portrait in profile behind her on the wall. That is, it looks easy of access from the reign of Alexander II were it not for the lack of candles in the candlestick, the reflections of an electric chandelier, and, of course, the array of Baroque dolls on the marketplace.

Still other images resemble those of the first Impressions and American society panters Sargent and Whistler. Sitka Sitting on the Bear Rug resembles Whistler’s Symphony in White, No 2 (The White Girl), 1862, in its use of very white dress and animal’s skin. While the life size image is a study of white on white with, perhaps, a hint of nudity inferred by the rag, Skladskaya’s is more conventional and up to date—indeed there is a series of family photographs on her parent’s mantelpiece. Olive

Descending the Staircase despite its Dutchman title could easily reflect a Sargent in its white on white composition and consciously self-aware pose.

Anna Skladskaya’s “Little Adults” are totally aware of being photographed. They are at ease in their self representation as the artists in representing them. The boy in his satijm and incongruously large hoolow in this image, Jadim on his Red Terrace opted not to sell through the whole shoot, he was at least answering to his own wishes not those of the photographer. When Jadim asked me how many photos I was planning to do, “Skladskaya wrote, ‘I returned maximum ten and meant about of them. As the first busts of flash its up he slowly counted on his head till ten. After my first roll of ten images was finished, he went back inside put on his pants and asked for a cup of tea with which he sat in front of the television,” Jadim is clearly a little boy who can count, knows his limits, and is not shy of asserting his authority. There are indeed links to a director’s control over his actions, after all—especially with child.

Similarly, Lisa, seen sitting on her dining room table—who is it in which posing children on tables— is described as counting the minutes it would take for the shoot to end so she could get out of the dress Skladskaya and her mother selected for her. She would, of course, prefer to be playing football or skateboarding through her white crystal house.

It is in the faces of the young generations that Anna Skladskaya, scarcely older than her subjects, finds what she is looking for in her “New Russians,” “Little Adults.” Beyond the bling and trapping of the new rich, she evidences in group after group looks of confident authority on their faces that mark them as inheritors of a country emerging after chaotic change and another Golden Age. They will be the ones, when they grow up, who will fill Asia de Jocopa’s prophecy of Russia, that country two between East and West, taking its place on the world stage. They seem to be ready, for all their childhood years, to take the world.

For Anna Skladskaya, it is Afra, seen in Afra: Standing outside the Gacha who seems to represent the strength of character and self assertion that the photographer finds in her “Little Adults.” She writes of Afra, posed arms akimbo and almost kneel deep in snow. “It was below zero when we were shooting Afra, and the heating in the summer house was off. However she didn’t complain at all. I followed her true Russian character of strength and willpower.”

Bill Kouwenbuwer