

Anna Skladmann **LITTLE ADULTS**

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KEHRER

PORTRAITS FROM THE NEW RUSSIA

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 Alexis de Tocqueville returned to Paris and produced his epic *Democracy in America*. In this famous work, de Tocqueville noted a tendency in America towards a disequilibrium of wealth as great fortunes were made which reached its apogee 50 years later in what became known as the Gilded Age. More presciently, he also predicted the rise of then Tsarist 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, railroads, mining, oil, and banking. These new fortunes of the so-called Robber Barons, or Captains of Industry and Titans of Finance, the Mellons, Carnegies, Rockefellers, Gettys, Crockers, Stanfords, and some others also led to 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 strongest possible fashion.

In the Russia of the 1880s up to 1917, in the nobility and the new rich, court painters also existed. Portraitists, of whom Valentin Serov 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.

Serov's portraits of M. Ya. Simonovich, V. S. Mamontova, Mika Morozov, Henriette Girshman, and Grand Princess, Olga Alexandrovna, all from 1887 to 1905, set the precedent for the work of the young

photographer, Anna Skladmann, 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 put an end to both the nobility and many of the Tsarist-era painters 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 evolve 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 Tsar's imperial symbol. For all the rhetoric of autarchy and Sovietization, 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, especially rock and roll and popular movies. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the pent-up desire for consumer products from CDs 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 upheavals that marked the end of the Soviet Union in the 1990s led first to economic and social chaos under Boris Yeltsin. An age of rampant capitalism began that resembled nothing else but the Gilded Age of the United States one hundred years earlier. Fortunes were made and lost 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 annual Millionaires Fair was, perhaps, the most gaudy extravaganza-cum-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 Arbat neighborhood—figures of gangster-businessmen with golden mobile phones and half-clad women perched on their laps or in fancy automobiles. The economic crisis that set in with 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," has chopped that number down to some 49. The new rich in Russia, whether Captains of Industry and Titans of Finance as they might have been called in America, or Oligarchs as they are called in Russia, or the merely very wealthy, have established themselves as collectors and patrons of the arts and built villas or refurbished Tsarist-era palaces and started families.

Now that the dust has settled in Russia, photographer Anna Skladmann has begun a project to photograph the children of the elite of the "New Russia." Skladmann, who is not yet 30 years old, studied in New York at Parsons The New School for Design and in Paris. She has made it her project to portray her

subjects, all between six to twelve years of age in their own environments in a give-and-take environment that combines the desires of the photographer to make a revealing portrait with the willful assertiveness of a child who seems assured and confident of his or her position in this brave new world. Indeed, the self-assurance of her subjects is almost otherworldly, and it is for this reason that she has named her subjects "Little Adults."

Skladmann, too, is marked by her Russian roots and brings an insider's perspective from the outside. Her grandmother worked as a doctor in Moscow's legendary Bolshoi theatre, and her mother "practically grew up there," as she puts it. Thus it is easy to imagine the future photographer hearing tales of the theatre and of legendary performances by the stars of the Soviet Union. This has clearly marked Skladmann's aesthetic as much as Western culture has. This theatrical history and the fantasy world of children playing "dress-up" and trying out roles for their lives as adults in the future is at the base of Skladmann's approach to photography and to her subjects, the "Little Adults."

Skladmann first visited Moscow in 2000, for the Millennium, immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Her parents took her to a Masquerade Ball which was held in a very pompous place called Grand Opera. At the New Year's party there was a table where children sat down and ate their dinner like little adults, dressed up for masquerade. The formality of the event and the preternatural poise of the children made a strong impression on her. She writes that she was intrigued by these phenomena. The seriousness in those so young is something one does not often see in the West where childhood and youth are encouraged to be rambunctious. It made her think about the new society forming in Russia and about how its inheritors are being shaped.

Several years later, Skladmann returned to Russia as a newly trained photographer working on various photography projects for *The New York Times Magazine*, *Marie Claire*, and *Tatler Russia* that explored the lives of children and adults in Moscow, Sochi, and elsewhere. She was re-introduced to the world of the "Little Adults" through a girl she met on assignment. She writes, "I started this project with one girl, whom I visited various times. Each time we thought about new ideas and concepts. She lives in a house with a Moroccan spa and an English tea house, so we had enough space to let our creativity run free. After that I realized that she saw me as a sort of medium to tell something to this world."

Anna Skladmann 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 its radical history still rules the daily life. It is the exploration of the recently growing society of the Nouveaux Riches in which children have been raised to become the elite and to behave like little adults. Photographing children of Russia's Oligarchs to reflect

the extreme contrast between social hierarchies touches on the control of family aspirations, ideas of normality, the loss of childhood, and the 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 of her 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 directorial style with her subjects by making them complicit in the staging of their own shared “movies.”

She uses the conventions of portraiture both painterly in the manner of Valentin Serov and the more modern photographic of the American portraitist Tina Barney. Her work, however, is less about photographing the children of Russia’s Oligarchs and thus less about the Oligarchs and the sources of the wealth that enables the privileged position of the young children posing before her camera. Unlike in the works of Serov, for example, her subjects are not named with either patronymic or family names, but rather with their given names—Alina, Vasilisa, Roman, Antoshka, et cetera. Partly this is to protect the children, but it also serves to provide for a portrait of this generation, virtually all of whom have been born in this new Millennium and more than ten years since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In her text accompanying an earlier catalogue of this work, Irina Tchmyreva, Chief Curator of the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, wrote, these are “children who are aware of their unique place as distinct from the majority. [They are] children who are aware of their mission and who are members of a very elite club. When the children do know that they are different—be they little wizards or kings—a mark of the knowledge reveals [itself] on their faces.” To Tchmyreva, Skladmann “shows [these] ‘Little Adults’ as such.”

Skladmann’s stories indeed reflect this combined sense of play and responsibility both on the side of the children and on that of the photographer. The image *Nikita and Alina at the Italian Embassy* is a prime example of the childish still present in her charges. “Nikita told me at the photo shoot that I should go visit a logopaed and when asking him where he knows the term ‘logopaed’ from, he blushed and turned to his sister looking for protection.” This charming image of Nikita, in a sort of miniature suit with short pants, tennis shoes, a man’s top hat and cane, and Alina, in a lacy party dress, posed on a table in a Rococo room in the Italian embassy is both serious and playful at the same time. Similarly, the portrait *Varvara in Her Home Cinema* shows the little girl, her hair newly braided and wearing a canary yellow Dior dress. She “slowly moved when [Skladmann] posed her on the stage, [but soon] started jumping up and down as if she was a butterfly trying to get out of her cocoon.”

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

The games of dress-ups play a major part in the lives of the girls Skladmann photographs. Many of these games are nearly universal. Nastia plays in the wardrobe of her grandfather’s movie set. Another girl sits on a flower-patterned daybed in a matching dress having just offered, no doubt with perfect etiquette, a perfect cup of tea with cookies before her photo shooting. The boys, too, are also into dress-ups, Antoshka, here dressed as a Hussar and standing before what appears to be a white marble entrance hall as though in a production of Tchaikovsky’s *The Nutcracker*, speaks to Skladmann about his choice of costume. She writes, “Antoshka only agreed to this shoot if we could do it together with the girl he has a crush on. He met her in school and they acted together in a school theatre piece. At the shoot, he put on his costume from the play. It was too small, uncomfortable, and he didn’t even like it too much himself. All these little things you make out of love, no matter what age you are!”

The edge between childhood and adulthood is belayed in the image, *Vova Standing in His Grandfather’s Theatre*. Despite his determined glance at the camera, he is apparently unsure of what he wants to be when he grows up. To be an archaeologist or to be Spiderman, that is the question! In the end Anna Skladmann photographed him on the stage of the Theatre Operetta. He is posed like his grandfather, a theatre director. Again, Skladmann’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. *Alisia in Her Mother’s Fur Store* for example, shows the girl collapsed in a pile of furs piled on a table after a stressful shoot. The work is at once intimate and revealing and evocative of the pressures and stresses placed on these “Little Adults” who are themselves still often enough really children even if their image has been used in advertising campaigns all over the city. Lyuba, the daughter of a model, lies on her daybed with the expression of one experienced with all aspects of a modeling career. Indeed, she looks back at the camera with self-assurance of the young, albeit clothed, Brooke Shields or Sue Lyon in Stanley Kubrick’s *Lolita*.

Skladmann shares a love of the cinema with many of her subjects and they enact their own mini-movies whether something out of Federico Fellini—*La Dolce Vita*, perhaps—or Jean-Pierre Jeunet—*City of Lost Children* or *Amelie*. Of course, some other images might suggest David Lean’s *Dr. Zhivago* or Nikita Mikhalkov’s *Oblomov*. It is Russia—of yesterday, today, and tomorrow—that is as much her subject matter as the “Little Adults.”

As “Director” of “Little Adults,” Skladmann sets the *mise en scène* and poses several of her subjects with trappings of wealth or power that would not be out of place in London or Beverly Hills. *Arina in Her Garage* depicts a young teenager dressed as Catherine Deneuve leaning on a vintage Mercedes, a part of her father’s collection while, to Skladmann’s surprise and admiration, regaling her with tales of Isadora Duncan. Arina also poses at her horse club while Liza, Katya and Sofia sit around their mother’s jewelry store. In what must be her most surreal composition, Jacob poses with a Nazi-era machine pistol in a white-gold room filled with tchotchkas and stuffed animals before a plasma screen TV on which ballerinas twirl. It is an image out of the latest John le Carré, *Our Kind of Traitor*. One gets the feeling that young Jacob feels like a bird in a gilded cage yearning to break out. Perhaps he shares this feeling with Varvara, she of the yellow dress.

Roman at the Tattoo Parlor shows another potential tear-away. The boy, of eight years old or so, sits perched on a table against a wall of sample tattoos including, of course, a voluptuous nude woman in fishnet stockings complete with a black panther and a death’s head. As Skladmann puts it, “Roman follows the footsteps of his mother, who likes and is decorated by, beautiful tattoos. On the photo shoot he told me that he prefers older girls like the one standing in the corner, Natasha, a 26 year old stylist. Girls his age only cry and are too busy squealing all the time.”

These images represent the hopes and dreams of Skladmann’s “Little Adults” of the “New Russia,” while other images more directly reflect the court paintings of an earlier era. In the abovementioned catalogue, Irina Tchmyreva’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 parallel many of Skladmann’s photographs. They are quieter images that rely on the power of poise 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 *Vasilisa in a Pink Dress* is a classic drawing room portrait that could have been produced in 1870 or so complete with the Marie Antoinette-like portrait in profile behind her on the wall. That is, it looks easily of a piece from the reign of Alexander III were it not for the lack of candles in the candelabra, the reflections of an electric chandelier, and, of course, the array of Barbie dolls on the mantelpiece.

Still other images resemble those of the Post-Impressionists and American society painters Sargent and Whistler. *Sonia Sitting on the Bear Rug* resembles Whistler’s *Symphony in White, No. 1 (The White Girl)*, 1862, in its use of a very white dress and an animal’s skin. While Whistler’s image is a study of white-on-white with, perhaps, a hint of sexuality inferred by the rug, Skladmann’s is more conventional and up to date—indeed there is a series of family photographs on her parents’ mantelpiece. *Uma*

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

Anna Skladmann’s “Little Adults” are totally aware of being photographed. They are as complicit in their self-representation as the artist is in representing them. If the boy in his suit jacket and incongruously large red bow tie in the image, *Vadim on His Roof Terrace* opted not to sit through the whole shoot, he was at least asserting his own wishes not those of the photographer. “When Vadim asked me how many photos I was planning to do,” Skladmann writes, “I answered ‘maximum ten’ and meant ten rolls of film. As the first bursts of flash lit up, he slowly counted in his head till ten. After my first roll of ten images was finished, he went back inside, put on his pajamas and asked for a cup of tea with which to sit in front of the television.” Vadim is clearly a little boy who can count, knows his limits, and is not shy of asserting his authority. There are indeed limits to a director’s control over her actors, after all—especially with child stars!

Similarly, Lisa, seen sitting on her dining room table—what is it with 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 Skladmann 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 this young generation that Anna Skladmann, scarcely older than her subjects, finds what she is looking for in these “New Russians,” these “Little Adults.” Beyond the bling and trappings of the new rich, the directness of gaze and the knowing looks of confident authority on her subjects’ faces mark them as inheritors of a country emerging after chaotic change and their own Gilded Age. They will be the ones, when they grow up, who will fulfill Alex de Tocqueville’s prophecy of Russia, that country between East and West, taking its place on the world stage. They seem to be ready, for all their childhood years, to take on the world.

For Anna Skladmann, it is Alina, seen in *Alina Standing outside the Dacha* who seems to represent the strength of character and self-assertion that the photographer finds in her “Little Adults.” She writes of Alina, posed arms akimbo and almost knee-deep in snow, “It was below zero when we were shooting Alina, and the heating in the summer house was off, however she didn’t complain at all. It showed her true Russian character of strength and willpower.”

Bill Kouwenhoven