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EVGENIA ARBUGAEVA: AMANI



Untitled #50 from Amani, 2015 © Evgenia Arbugaeva

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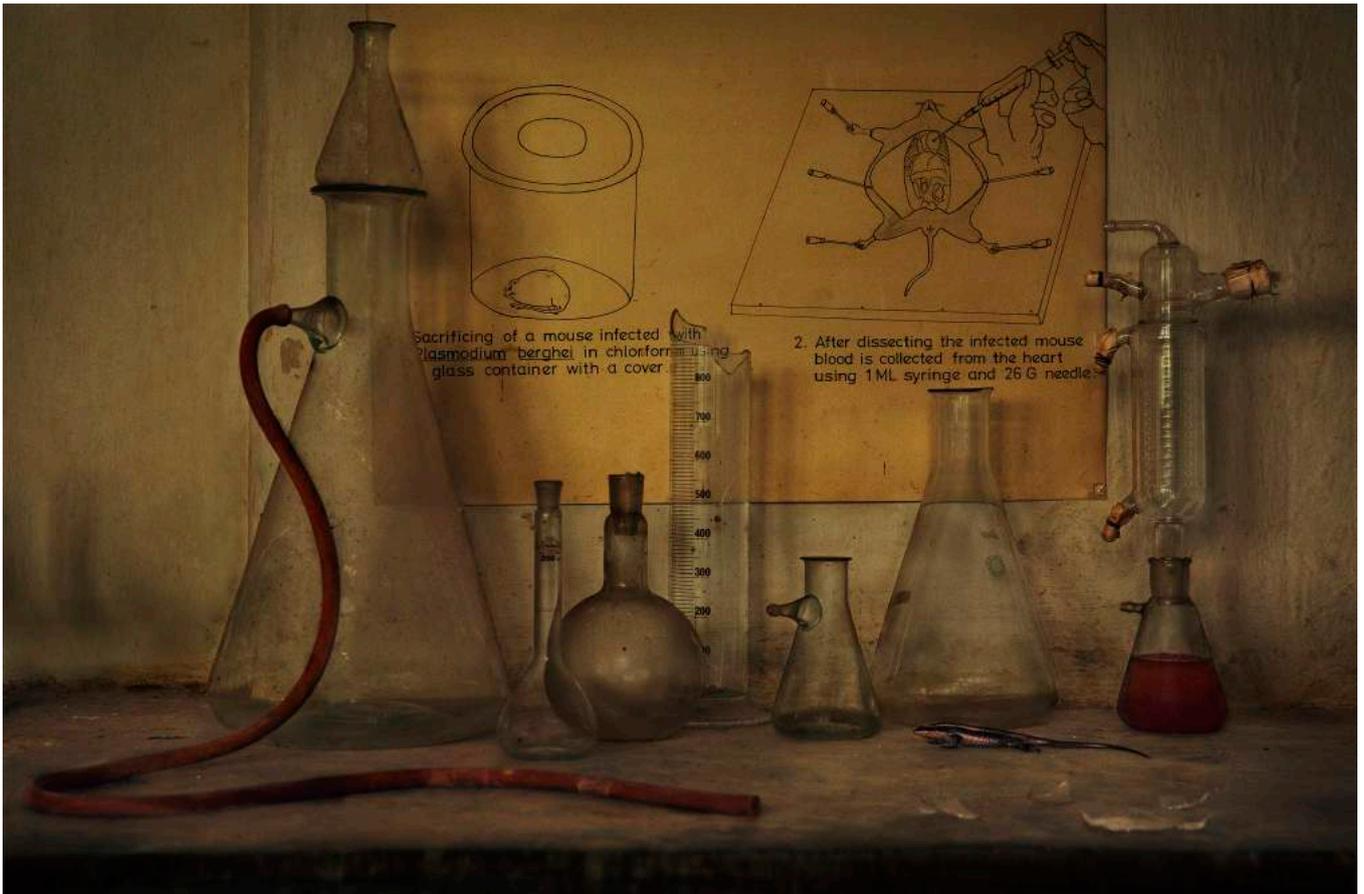
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EVGENIA ARBUGAEVA: AMANI

5 May - 18 June 2017



Untitled #59, 2015, from the series Amani © Evgenia Arbugaeva

This latest body of work from Siberian-born photographer Evgenia Arbugaeva tells the story of the semi-abandoned Amani Malaria Research Station in East Africa.

Located in the northeastern reaches of Tanzania, the lab was established by German colonial scientists in the late 19th century. The rich biodiversity of the surrounding forests provided ideal conditions for research into the control and prevention of tropical diseases such as Malaria. The centre was taken over by the British after World War I, who enlisted the help of the local community to continue its development. It continued as a fully functional lab until the end of British colonial rule in the 1970s, when the site was deserted.

Arbugaeva spent two months exploring and documenting the now defunct lab, its library and natural surroundings under the guidance of former lab assistant John Mganga. The resulting photographs beautifully document John's past routines from looking after the specimens and instruments, to caring for the remaining colony of white mice and in doing so, captures the echoes of a once ordered existence and its subsequent demise.

EVGENIA ARBUGAEVA (b.1985, Siberia)

BIOGRAPHY

Evgenia Arbugaeva was born in 1985 in the town of Tiksi, located in the Russian Arctic. In 2009, she graduated from the International Center of Photography's Documentary Photography and Photojournalism program in New York and since then works as a freelance photographer.

Her critically acclaimed series *Weather Man* (2013) and *Tiksi* (2010) combine documentary and narrative styles that reflect the photographer's romantic fascination and childhood nostalgia for the Arctic. Her works communicate personal stories in magical realist compositions seeped in fairytale and fable, whilst using fleeting traces of the Arctic polar nights to create a heightened sense of space and perspective.

Arbugaeva has been a winner of various competitions, including the ICP Infinity Award (2015), Leica Oskar Barnack Award (2013) and the Magnum Foundation Emergency Fund Grant (2012). Her work has been exhibited internationally and appeared in such publications as *National Geographic*, *mare*, *Le Monde*, and *The New Yorker* magazines, among others.

EXHIBITIONS

30 March–2 April 2017: *Weather Man* series on view at AIPAD's *The Photography Show*, New York, presented by The Photographers' Gallery, London.

27 January–18 March 2017: Solo exhibition of *Amani* series at In Camera gallery, Paris

27 January–26 March 2017: *Traces of the Future* exhibition of Evgenia Arbugaeva and Mariele Neudecker at the Nunnery Gallery, London.

19–22 May 2016: *Weather Man* series on view at The Photographers' Gallery booth at Photo London.

5 November–16 January 2016: *Arctic Stories*. Exhibition at the Photographers' Gallery, London.

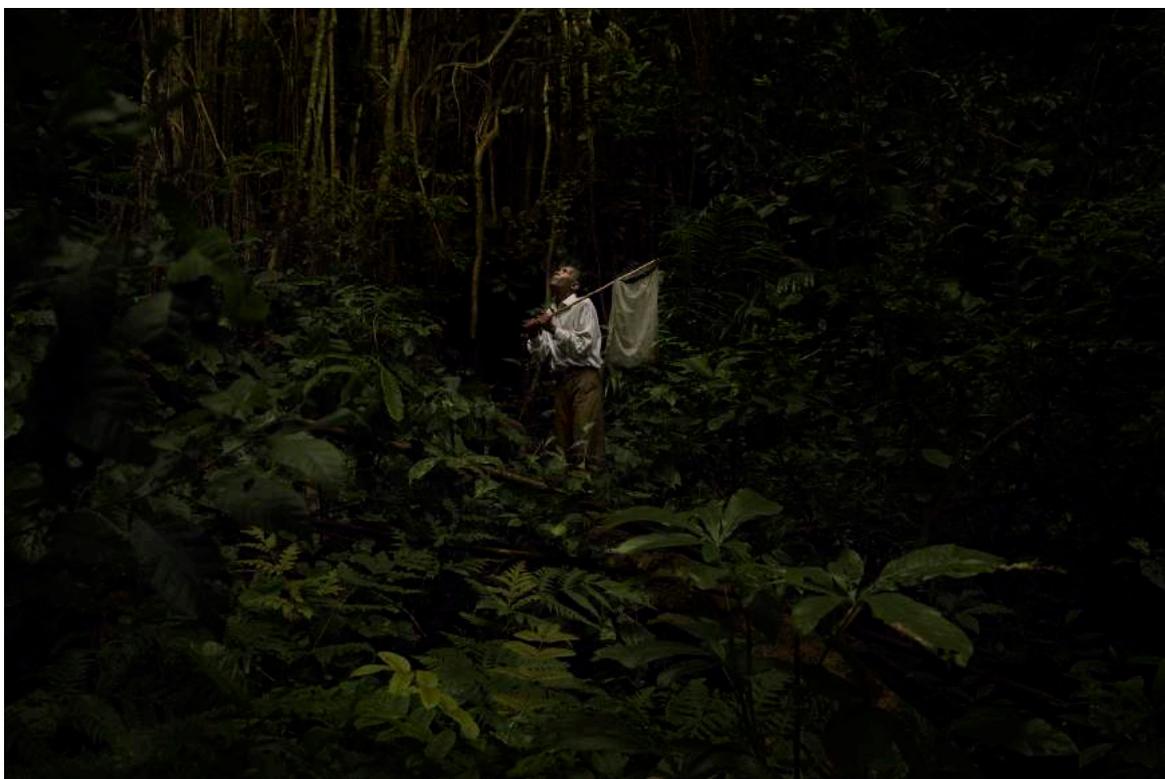
16 July–27 September 2015: *Weather Man* series is exhibited at the Cortona On The Move Festival, Italy.

12 February–4 April 2015: *Weather Man* series is exhibited in In Camera gallery, Paris, France.

| PICTURE STORIES |

Dreams of Science and Progress Haunt Shuttered Lab

In a postcolonial research station in Tanzania, a photographer sees the promise of the past—and hopes that never quite came true.



John Mganga, 67, is a former assistant at Tanzania's Amani Hill Research Station. From 1970 to 1977 he worked with British entomologist John Raybould, using insect nets to snare specimens.

On a hilltop in northeastern Tanzania, high up in the Usambara Mountains, memories are tangible things. Modernist buildings litter the lush jungle. European trees and medicinal plants, affixed with Latin labels, mingle with local species. Scientific instruments and a fully stocked library are poised for use.

This is what's left of the Amani Hill Research Station—a past vision of the future, suspended in time. It's also what brought Siberian photographer Evgenia Arbugaeva to East Africa two years ago. Her aim? To document the nostalgia that lingers here and create images that “bring back the atmosphere of this dark, magical place.”

Arbugaeva worked closely with Wenzel Geissler, an anthropologist at the University of Oslo. For the past several years, he and his team—an international consortium of scientists, historians, and artists—have been studying old research stations in the tropics. Their project examines the memories, perceptions, and expectations of those who used to live and work at these postcolonial scientific sites.

Yet Amani is not a ruin. A staff of 34—elderly watchmen and maintenance workers, a librarian, a few lab attendants—still lives there in the shells of houses, many without water or electricity. Some say they're waiting for the site to be revived.

“Amani stands for the dreams of science and progress bequeathed upon colonial populations,” says Geissler. “When funding dried up here in the early 1980s, dreams did too. But hypothetically it's all there to be switched on again. In these buildings—in these people's memories and dreams—the idea of a potential future lives on.”



Mganga puts a lab shelf in order. “Local people used to think the scientists here were making potions in these bottles,” says photographer Evgenia Arbugaeva. Other science was also deemed supernatural. Researchers were called *mumianis*—Swahili for “vampires”—because they took blood samples to study malaria.

Amani was founded in the late 19th century as a German botanical garden and coffee plantation. After World War II it became a British malaria research institute. Since 1979 it's been operated by Tanzania's National Institute for Medical Research, which pays the current staff to maintain the site for future use.

To “channel the spirit, motion, and beauty of the place” as it stands today, Arbugaeva spent a lot of time in the past—“in the library, amid all the dusty old books on natural history and diseases, reading by candlelight.” She also shadowed John Mganga, a retired lab assistant.

“He loved to tell me stories,” she says. “And to dream—to imagine what the people who used to work there are doing. He loves the idea of being part of something bigger, part of science. He's still connected to Amani. And he still misses it.”

Geissler says collaborating with Arbugaeva was invaluable because she was able to turn workers' memories of old routines and rituals into images. “That helps us read the traces of a once ordered past—this idea of progress in a landscape that seems like it's only ruins and loss,” he says. Her photos capture a sense of “shared nostalgia for ... a modernity we never quite reached.”

Arbugaeva agrees. “I want people to see what I saw: a hidden world that existed before and that still exists in memories. Somebody's still dreaming about it. I want to bring people there.”



Unlike some assistants at Amani, the now retired Mganga—here resting in a lab—“really lost something when the whole place folded,” says University of Oslo anthropologist Wenzel Geissler. “He had truly believed in science and the country's future. He lived that dream. And he suffered from losing it.”

SELECTED PRESS

L'Oeil De La Photographie
6 Feb 2017

L'OEIL DE LA PHOTOGRAPHIE

THE EYE OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Evgenia Arbugaeva, Amani

FEBRUARY 6, 2017 - FRANCE , WRITTEN BY BRIGITTE OLLIER

Following the *Weather Man*, exhibited in 2015 at the In Camera Gallery, Evgenia Arbugaeva is showing *Amani*, her latest series shot in northeastern Tanzania. In eleven pictures, the Russian photographer documents what, in the twentieth century, was the last malaria research station, and is today a unique place preserved from oblivion by former lab assistants who have kept it alive.

“We tend to romanticize the past, and I love being in this wonderful place between reality and fiction.” Evgenia Arbugaeva thus explains what might well be a constant in her work: the quest for lost time, recovered here and there, which she comes to interpret as if by magic. The series *Amani* reveals how the artist goes about recreating a certain time and space, at once vast and constricted, without appropriating the territory, but instead striving to share it. The power of suggestion? Perhaps, but it's more than that: born in 1985 in Tiksi, in eastern Siberia, Evgenia Arbugaeva taps our own imagination to construct a world that is less fictional than it might appear.

The story began in Norway, where anthropologists from the University of Oslo described their work at a colonial-era research lab called the Amani Station, now half-abandoned in the Usambara hills in Tanzania, the land of legendary biodiversity. “I was literally captivated by their study,” recalls Evgenia Arbugaeva. “They were concerned with the memories and dreams associated with this mysterious place, for both the British scientists and the Tanzanians who assisted them. Because they wanted to collaborate with artists, they invited me to participate in their project...”



Untitled #48, 2015, from the series *Amani* © Evgenia Arbugaeva



Untitled #57, 2015, from the series Amani © Evgenia Arbugaeva

This was her first visit to Africa. This northerner, raised in the tundra, found herself overwhelmed by nature and the lush vegetation. Deep in this spectacular landscape, she recalls, “the Amani Malaria Station is like an oasis in the middle of a national park, visited by tourists, students, and scientists. Time stands still. Everything is just the way it was left first by the Germans—before the First World War, they had planted a botanic garden and coffee plantations—then by the British who were intent on expanding the activities of the research lab and called on the local population to participate in the experiments, both as subjects and assistants.” Since the late 1970s, after the British had departed, the Amani Station has been looked after by a handful of former assistants and groundskeepers who have protected it against the assault of nature. John Mganga is one of them. He is the protagonist in the photographic series; he embodies the past and symbolizes the present, awaiting the revival of this unusual garden of Eden. Days go by peacefully. Some groundskeepers rest in the shade, others go about their daily tasks: feeding the lab mice, dusting the specimens, opening and closing the library at the designated hours, even if no one comes to visit, besides a few ghosts...

Like Vyacheslav Korotki in the series *Weather Man*, the Artic meteorologist who read Hemingway, John Mganga shares his dreams with the young Russian photographer. Not too long ago, he caught butterflies and insects for the lab entomological collection. Today, he takes her for a stroll around the German botanic garden, populated with exotic trees planted over a century ago.

When she photographs him, Evgenia Arbugaeva gives her subject complete freedom. She has a gentle touch: John Mganga inhabits his own reality, and she doesn't try to catch him unawares. The viewer, however, may find the proximity somewhat disconcerting. This universe frozen in time is shown with no special effects or exoticism: nothing has been moved or touched. Evgenia Arbugaeva puts her faith in natural light. Rather than black and white, she prefers touches of ochre, yellow, and green which create such an unsettling impression of sedimented color. The photographs seem dominated by reason and developed with passion, as if refined with brushstrokes.

Photography

Slava of the Arctic: the extreme weatherman living in a timewarp

Slava works at the most remote weather station in the Arctic, with his Morse code machine and his Yuri Gagarin cuttings. Then one day, a photographer came bearing oranges, champagne and a parrot

f t e ...
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Simon Bowcock
@simonbowcock
Monday 26 October 2015 07:00 GMT



Slava walks to the old lighthouse near Khodovarikha meteorological station in the Russian Arctic. Photograph: Evgenia Arbugaeva/The Photographers' Gallery

Evgenia Arbugaeva was born in Tiksi, a tiny port in arctic Russia, but moved to Moscow to study, before becoming a photographer in New York. Life in the Big Apple couldn't have been further from the frozen world she had left behind. But, despite all its distractions, she yearned to go back. "It was isolated," she says of Tiksi. "But it was fun. We had to create our own little world."

Arbugaeva returned to the Arctic for her latest project, Weather Man. "There was a meteorological station in Tiksi I used to go to with my dad," she says. "He had friends there. There are many of these stations in the Arctic, far away and hard to reach. I was always curious about who would move to the middle of nowhere."

She set off in search of "these people who are so dedicated to the north, so open and calm", boarding an icebreaker that delivers annual supplies to remote outposts. "I spent two months on the ship and visited 22 weather stations," she says. "I was looking for this romantic person of the north, a lonely arctic wolf. But most of the stations weren't at all as I imagined. Many have been modernised into characterless facilities staffed by young people using new technology."

One station, however, stood out: Khodovarikha, on the Pechora Sea. "It's like the worst of all the arctic stations. Nobody wants to work there. So I was curious. When we landed, I saw Slava. His place was absolutely frozen in time. He had a portrait of Yuri Gagarin cut out of a 1961 newspaper. He still had a Morse code machine and his wallpaper was from another era. I felt so comfortable with him."

After that initial brief encounter, Arbugaeva vowed to return to Slava. She tried contacting him by radio but, after several frustrating days with no response, just took a chance and went anyway.

“I hired a helicopter and flew there for the [2014] new year. I brought him some oranges, champagne and a little bird. When the helicopter landed, he met me. ‘Did you know I was coming?’ I asked. ‘No, but you’re welcome,’ he replied.”

She stayed for two and a half weeks, photographing Slava, who was 63 and had been there for 13 years, as he measured temperature, precipitation and wind. He had been posted to Khodovarikha after a career on ships and was due to retire soon. “He is this place,” says Arbugaeva. “It was winter, so it was very dark. I was looking for a character who could deliver this feeling of polar night. That’s something I grew up with. Slava was the perfect representative.”



Slava having lunch in his house and talking to his bird, Keshka.
Photograph: Evgenia Arbugaeva/The Photographers' Gallery

Before shooting the Weather Man project, Arbugaeva had also been taking photos around Tiksi. “I’ve been haunted by the idea of going back ever since we left.” This happened when she was eight, the disintegration of the Soviet Union forcing her family to leave for Yakutsk, the regional capital, 1,000 frozen kilometres inland and the coldest city on Earth.

“My childhood memories of Tiksi were all really bright, really beautiful,” she says. “I started to question myself: was it really this way, or did my mind make it up? It felt like a very important part of my childhood had ended there and I desperately wanted to revisit it.”

She was shocked by Tiksi’s decline. “Everything was different. There was nothing there, nothing of what I remember.” She didn’t like any of the photographs she took back home to New York, but a little later she noticed something she had overlooked. “This picture – of a girl I met on the shore, throwing stones in the water – was the only one that caught my attention. I realised this meant something, this girl, this cold sea.”

So Arbugaeva went back and tracked the girl down – not too daunting a task in such a small community. “I went to her home and everything in their apartment was almost exactly like ours. It was like a flashback. And Tanya, the girl, reminded me of myself.”

In contrast to the darkness of Weather Man, Arbugaeva’s Tiksi photographs are bright and whimsical, their compositions and vivid colours redolent of the books she read there as a child.

Where will Arbugaeva find herself next? “I’m exploring new landscapes – Africa, southeast Asia – but I’m always thinking about the north. I’ll keep working in the Arctic. My family is there – and my heart.”

Culture › Art › Features

Arctic Stories: Photographer Evgenia Arbugaeva returns to her childhood town of Tiksi in Siberia

When Arbugaeva returned to her childhood hometown after two decades away, she was perturbed by the desolation she found - until she struck up a friendship with a young girl

Holly Williams | @Holly_bops | Saturday 7 November 2015 17:05 GMT |  0 comments



Tanya and her friend Pasha during Kolyada, a Russian ritual on Christmas Eve when people dress up and go from door to door singing and dancing for treats © Evgenia Arbugaeva

A typical impression of Siberia and the Arctic might tend towards blasted landscapes, daunting expanses, frozen tundra. Few would think fairy-tale magic and picture-book nostalgia. Yet Evgenia Arbugaeva would beg to differ, and her photography project “Tiksi”, illuminated by sparkling northern sunshine and suffused with the charm of a little girl with pigtails exploring a snowy wonderland, provides her touching evidence.

Tiksi is the town in which Arbugaeva grew up, on the shore of the Laptev Sea, which feeds into the Arctic Ocean, and which was then home to a USSR military base, an Arctic research outpost and a major seaport.

When she was eight, her family, like many locals, moved to the larger city of Yakutsk, a two-and-a-half-hour flight south. “We moved after perestroika in 1991,” she explains. “There was a massive migration from the town at that time, as the state stopped supporting its northern projects. People saw no future in Tiksi.”

Arbugaeva found the move painful, missing the “seemingly never-ending tundra, wind so strong that it could pick you up and take you to faraway places, snowstorms, and the outer-space feel of polar night”. Such early memories burn bright. She has since travelled extensively as a photographer, but says nowhere has quite matched her memory of Tiksi. “As often happens, childhood memories began to transform into some surreal images,” she says. “I wondered whether this place really exists as I remembered it; 19 years later, I decided to come back to find out.”

Such returns are seldom easy, and Arbugaeva was saddened by what she found. She hardly recognised the now-rundown town, which seemed “nearly abandoned... the bright colours of houses faded, windows boarded, ships left rusting in sea water”. The population had dwindled from the 12,000 of her childhood to about a third of that number.

She took some photos, but was disheartened by the project – until, back in her new home of New York, she was struck by one image of a little girl skimming stones into the sea. “I couldn’t stop gazing at it. I was wondering, how is life in Tiksi for her, does she see the magic of it as I used to?”

So Arbugaeva returned to Tiksi. In such a small town, the girl wasn’t difficult to find. She was called Tanya Semivelichenko, and she invited the photographer to her 13th birthday party, where the pair “became friends right away. She showed me her collection of children’s books, all of them were from the Soviet times, the same ones that I used to have. I spent so much time looking at them that I think their aesthetic influenced the way I was taking photographs – simple central composition, bright colours, each image telling a magical story.”



Tanya sitting in the window of an abandoned meteorological station © Evgenia Arbugaeva

Over the following two years, Arbugaeva repeatedly returned to Tiksi, staying with Tanya’s family and photographing the town through her eyes. “Tanya showed me her Tiksi, which was full of imagination and a childish sense of freedom and play. She reminded me what it is like to be a kid.” Hence photographs of playgrounds sticking twig-like out of deep snow, or lit so strangely by the green glow of the Northern Lights that they look like something from Button Moon. A rusty old “cemetery of ships” at the port became their “playground, and a set for a Titanic movie”.

While shooting is more difficult in frozen conditions – Tiksi rarely rises above 12C, and hits -35C in winter – the gorgeous light makes up for it. “Light is very special in the Arctic,” says Arbugaeva. “I think people of the north are generally more observant of the light and colours. When the sun starts to appear in February, it reflects from the snow and clouds, making every colour shine in its full saturation. In the dark months, the Aurora Borealis, moon and stars create all kinds of hues and shades of the snow. Sometimes a camera cannot pick up all the beauty of it – you have to be there to really experience it.”

SELECTED PRESS

The New Yorker
15 Dec 2014



Vacheslav Korotki is a man of extreme solitude. He is a trained polyarnik, a specialist in the polar north, a meteorologist. In the past thirty years, he has lived on Russian ships and, more recently, in Khodovarikha, an Arctic outpost, where he was sent by the state to measure the temperatures, the snowfall, the winds.

The outpost lies on a fingernail of a peninsula that juts into the Barents Sea. The closest town, by any definition, is an hour away by helicopter. He has a wife, but she lives far away, in Arkhangelsk. They have no children. On his rare visits to Arkhangelsk, he has trouble negotiating the traffic and the noise. Arkhangelsk is not Hong Kong.

Korotki is sixty-three, and when he began his career he was an enthusiast, a romantic about the open spaces and the conditions of the Arctic. He watches the news on TV but doesn't fully believe it. Polyarniki were like cosmonauts, explorers for the Soviet state. There are fewer now. Who wants to live like this anymore?

Evgenia Arbugaeva, a photographer who grew up in the Arctic town of Tiksi, spent two extended stays with Korotki. "The world of cities is foreign to him—he doesn't accept it," she says. "I came with the idea of a lonely hermit who ran away from the world because of some heavy drama, but it wasn't true. He doesn't get lonely at all. He kind of disappears into tundra, into the snowstorms. He doesn't have a sense of self the way most people do. It's as if he were the wind, or the weather itself."

AMANI SERIES (2015)



Untitled #48



Untitled #49



Untitled #50



Untitled #51



Untitled #52



Untitled #53



Untitled #54



Untitled #55



Untitled #56



Untitled #57



Untitled #58



Untitled #59

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