

# METRO PICTURES

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## ARTFORUM

### Paulina Olowka

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Nostalgia is a dodgy gambit when it comes to contemporary art. After all, it is, in its evocation of the past, not *contemporary* and, in its inherent familiarity, not in and of itself *art*. What's more, as with kitsch and cliché, the accompanying emotion tends toward a mawkishness that smotheres exegetic impulse, leaving one to wallow in simplistic pleasures. Even its ironic deployment would seem a spent gesture, post-post-Pictures generation: Is there anything more referentially threadbare at this point than pulp fiction or dystopian sci-fi? Yet in my book, Paulina Olowka gets a pass. In bringing a conflicted, transcultural perspective on the past to bear on the present, the Polish-born and bred, American-exiled and educated artist puts nostalgia in the service of comparative stylistic and ideological analysis. For this exhibition, staged in the relatively intimate upstairs space at Metro Pictures, Olowka trained her attention primarily on the architecture and everyday culture of Minsk, the capital city of Belarus, wherein past and present look to be virtually one and the same. Frozen in time and somewhat hemmed in and isolated—Belarus is a landlocked republic bordered by Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Russia, and Ukraine—Minsk outwardly appears as a city interrupted by former Soviet annexation. Inwardly, it bears the psychic scars of numerous historical tyrannies and conquests. No wonder then that the dominant impression gained from this exhibition was that of wistful alienation.

Ascending the staircase to the gallery's upper level, one was beckoned by the enticing strains of the exhibition's soundtrack—an original four-part score attributed to Belarusian musician Halina Zalatukha that felt at once modern and traditional, popular and classical, and whose enchanting vocals, though semantically opaque to non-Slavic speakers (except by recourse to a translation sheet at the front desk), plucked gently at the heartstrings. Upon entering the show, one became entangled in a web of associative imagery issuing from three monitors—one wall-mounted, the others affixed to freestanding poles—and three large vertical-format paintings. A fourth screen, also pole-mounted, faced the far corner and was thus outside the viewer's initial field of vision. Each of the monitors played, simultaneously, a different looped video (these ranged in duration from roughly four to twelve minutes) that corresponded to the four audio tracks, yet these were played sequentially. The imagery was consistently rich and alluring, heavily featuring dreamy slo-mo Eastern Bloc- and fashion-inflected montages of sampled and self-authored footage. The videos each described a particular liminal space or phenomenon: a joyous parade of youthful, red-clad citizenry; the frigid stasis of the Northern European winter; the suspended reality of the modern shopping complex; and the architecture and machinations of the international airport. The last two videos featured surreptitious captures of employees and customers going about their business at, respectively, the city's GUM (Glávnyj Universányj Magazín), one of a chain of Russian department stores, in this instance selling only goods made in Belarus; and the Minsk National Airport. By contrast, the paintings, serviceably rendered and ad-like, were pared to signficatory basics, presenting variously attired—from smart to glamorous—female figures set against backdrops of archetypal Eastern European scenarios.



Taken as a whole, and in concert with the evocative soundtrack, the encircling, spatially interwoven suites of emblematically Olowskan paintings and color-saturated, fantasy-laden video montages elicited an entrancing, bittersweet melancholia. Moreover, both bodies of work projected a sense of stylistic contrivance whose seductive artifice was further intensified by the discernible presence of reliably gloomy Soviet-era gravitas, which, in an American context, comes freighted with an added layer of ideo-cultural exoticism. In sum, the show induced a heady affect, akin to an aesthetic sugar rush. But as the stimuli subsided, my euphoria converted to ennui and I began to crave something more nutritious. Just as I was wondering if I should rescind that pass on nostalgia, I stepped beyond Olowka's theater-in-the-round to view the fourth video—the voyeuristic airport trawl—which sat with its back to the action, facing into the corner. Exuding real-life banality and palpable boredom—either occupational or circumstantial—this piece quickly sucked the atmospheric fog out of the room, exposing the aching lack that lurks at the heart of all conformity, whether stylistic or ideological.

—Jeff Gibson