

THE 
GRIFFIS ART CENTER

INTERNATIONAL ARTIST-in-RESIDENCE PROGRAM – MAISON des ARTISTES
NEW LONDON, CONNECTICUT USA

Ivo HADJIMISHEV

2012 Griffis Art Center's International Artist-in-Residence
Bulgarian-American Creative Society
Sofia, Republic of Bulgaria



"Port Mystic – New London Series"

(A view of the Garden at the Griffis Art Center)

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Author: Veneta Pavlova

“I have taken photographs at so many places that perhaps it will be easier to say where I have not been”, this is what renowned Bulgarian photographer Ivo Hadjimishev tells about his work. It led him to remote corners of Bulgaria and the world, and introduced him to people of fascinating fates.

For example, in the end of the 1970s, he landed in Madagascar. He was travelling across the northern part of the island, and he made friends with the owner of the hotel where he was staying, and talked with him about pipes and tobacco smoking. Thus he learned from the hotel's owner that the first tobacco on the island was sown by his wife's great grandfather – Bulgarian Dimitar Ivanov. On the following day, Ivo Hadjimishev was already leaving through the family photo album of his fellow-Bulgarian who had once reached Madagascar onboard a French ship en route around the whole of Africa. Being very poor, he depended only on the bag of tobacco he carried. Five years had to pass before he was allowed to sow the seeds of the plant that later provided the means of living for people for many years to come.

The photographer has numerous such stories to tell of his experiences in corners of the world as different and remote as Siberia, Africa, the Aran Islands, Ireland, and North and South America. Ivo Hadjimishev is now working on a large-scale project for the Balkan civilizations in which seven countries are included. He is searching for the parallels between the Balkan countries, for the things that draw us together.

“We share common things and we must try and find them because it will help us live in a more pleasant and



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comfortable manner”, Ivo Hadjimishev says. While I was travelling across these countries (Albania, Montenegro, Turkey, Romania, Greece, Macedonia, and Bulgaria), I realized that the place where we live is like a piece of paradise if we compare it to other geographical latitudes. As far as our similarities are concerned, for example in Romania I took pictures of monuments of the Dacian civilization, and in Bulgaria – of the Thracian civilization. And it feels like some of the monuments were made by the hand of the same master. If these two images are placed next to each other, even a blind person would be able to discern the similarities. The project’s goal is for the scholars of each country where I take photos to comment on the relics that they have provided for this research.”

Ivo Hadjimishev graduated in photography at the British Bournemouth and Pool College of Arts and he was made an honorary member of the Royal Photographic Society in England for life. He is also Chairman of the Bulgarian Photographic Association. His first exhibition, which he made right after he graduated college, contains portraits of prominent Bulgarian intellectuals. Today, Ivo Hadjimishev, a universally recognized master of portrait photography, but also famous for his self-criticism, admits that he finds it increasingly difficult to take an interesting portrait photograph. Perhaps this is because now he is working more and more with old images. Two years ago, he participated in the preparation of an exhibition featuring photographs of the Russian-Turkish War of 1877-1878. Recently, in one of the Black-sea countries, he came across an archive keeping around 24 thousand glass negatives.

“When one sees how people worked in the past when the attitude towards photography was entirely different and it was in a way “a ritual act”, one feels humbler”, Ivo Hadjimishev says. “People at that time had a peculiar sense of time. They used to stand in front of these seemingly primitive, but actually perfect optical devices believing that this was their way to transcend time, to leave a trace. It is an entirely different experience today to point your mobile phone at your friends and take a picture of them. The deeper I go into the history of photography, the more I see how we have not really developed it. Technically, it has advanced a great deal, but the quality got worse. And only now, with the super powerful digital cameras, can we reach the level of quality of 100 years ago, but we have no guarantee that digital carriers will be able to preserve an image 100 years after its creation. Do you know that the United Nations archives with speeches have been recorded upon a metal slab? And they can be reproduced even today. The counterpart of this slab in photography is the glass. The photographer himself makes the emulsion. Early photographers worked without thinking how the process could be made cheaper. And we, the people of the 21st century, are continuously trying to surround ourselves with substitutes, with things of short-term value. The idea is to have devices that break down quickly so that we throw them away and buy new ones. People in the past endeavored to discover what the best way was to store these images. And this has come down to us.”

Three decades ago, Ivo Hadjimishev came across about 400 glass negatives in Sofia-based Ivan Vazov National Theatre that were prepared for disposal. Several years ago, another one thousand such negatives were found in a storage facility in the building. It turned out that the visual memory of the theatre in the period between 1920 and 1950 was stored on them. The negatives are of high quality, and photos can be made out of them. Then, theatre historians and critics will have their say and thus the history of our academic troupe will be enriched. In fact, when



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talking about the attitude to photography in the past, Ivo Hadjimishev omits to mention that his work is also subjected to the same desire – to preserve time and the people in a timeless image. It does not make a difference whether his subjects will be the residents of remote frontier villages, of the forgotten working class, children and adults from the different ethnic groups in our country, or masters of letters such as Dora Gabe, Elisaveta Bagryana, Pavel Vezhinov, Valeri Petrov, Radoy Ralin, painter Dechko Uzunov, film directors Valo Radev and Rangel Valchanov, legendary actors Apostol Karamitev and Nevena Kokanova, etc.

“My exhibitions are most of all documentary, they are not commercial, and are in a sense aimed at universities”, the photographer shares. “For example, two years ago, Bulgarian students at Harvard University called me. They had managed to make the authorities of the Boston Airport let them use a large wall at the arrivals lounge as an exhibition venue. They asked me how much it would cost to give them some of my photographs. I said that it would cost them nothing and I gave them a whole collection of photographs. This experience gave me great pleasure, bigger than that of being exhibited in a sophisticated snobbish gallery. For example, a professor from Sofia Medical Academy who was born in the town of Pordim in northern Bulgaria asked me about my exposition on the Russian-Turkish War, saying: “ Could you show this exposition in Pordim because it was where the headquarters of the Russian and Romanian troops were situated during the siege of Pleven? In our town, however, there is no arts gallery, but we can do it in the school.” I said to him: “Of course we will do it in the school, there are 400 children studying there from the whole of northern Bulgaria. Somehow, places like this are more exciting and meaningful to me than larger or private galleries.”

Translated by: [Rossitsa Petcova](#)

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Ivo Hadjimishev, or the talent of preserving time and people