

Marc Erwin Babej

Photographer

15 West 18th Street
7A

New York, NY 10011

+1 646 652 1734

m@marcerwinbabej.com

<http://www.marcerwinbabej.com>

Chernogirls

This series portrays the uneasy coexistence between a post-Soviet generation and relics of its prehistory. The images were created in August 2013 around Minsk and in Ukraine's Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant Zone of Alienation (also known as the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone).

The Chernobyl Nuclear Plant, and the city of Pripyat that housed its employees, were intended to symbolize the Soviet Union. In one of history's more chilling ironies, the image-makers exceeded all expectations: The disaster itself shone an unwanted spotlight on gaping inadequacies in a notoriously secretive state. The ill-managed, torturous, aftermath mirrored the collapse of that system. Down to the present day, the Chernobyl tragedy casts a long shadow – and has become a metaphor for the Soviet system.

The aptly named Zone of Alienation straddles the border of Ukraine and Belarus. Fittingly, it turns out – for this border is more than a line on a map. The differences between the two former Soviet Republics start in the zone itself: Ukraine allows access to its Zone of Alienation (albeit with special permission); the Belorussian exclusion zone is off-limits to visitors.

The deepest physical scars of the Chernobyl disaster might be on the Ukrainian side. However, Belarus is more deeply marked by the Soviet past – operated by a regime that wallows in visual and textual language of the “good old days.” Streets in the center of its capital, Minsk, are still named after Marx, Engels and the [Komsomol](#). Lenin statues still stand on their pedestals. Even the secret police is still called “[KGB](#).” Homage heaped upon homage, to conjure up a past in which this impoverished present country of 9½ million was a constituent part of a superpower. But the very surfeit of nostalgia unintentionally reveals another association: that of a swansong, with all its terrifying inevitability.

Against this backdrop stand the Chernogirls. Heiresses of the Soviet past but decidedly not its products. Emancipated, worldly, highly educated; individualistic, self-sufficient and disinclined to obey authority. Framed by Soviet-era settings, but misfits in them, they're flagrantly unrepresentative of their own societies – arguably of any mainstream. They embody what lies ahead: a clean break with the past.