

Semyon Faibisovich Razgulyai
23 September – 15 November 2009
Second Floor Galleries

This is the first UK exhibition of work by Russian artist Semyon Faibisovich (b. 1949). Faibisovich trained and practised briefly as an architect before he began painting in the 1970s. His work then, as now, was photo-based with subject matter often drawn from domestic interiors and street life.

Ikon's exhibition features a new series of paintings depicting scenes of everyday life in Razgulyai, the Moscow district where Faibisovich lives. Its name ironically is the Russian word for a kind of extravagant fun enjoyed traditionally by a local bourgeois merchant class, involving music and dancing, drinking and wasting money.

Two Merry Tramps (2008) depicts a man and a woman in a rough outdoor space. Evidently poor, but happy, they look directly at us with a demeanour that suggests homelessness and a fondness for alcohol. The artist treats them sympathetically as if encouraging us to share their company. This idea is reinforced by the presence of his own shadow, also betraying the fact that he is holding a mobile phone to take the picture.

Faibisovich first used a mobile phone to take photographs in 2005 and was immediately impressed, fascinated: "Its camera, short of pixels, was destined to 'create' ...[giving] its own original version of reality rather than photos." Referring to the mobile phone as "ultimately democratic" it is an ideal tool – along with the fine art of painting and Photoshop – for the production of a portrait of Russia today. According to the artist it is a corrupt place reminiscent of Soviet times, with a "crumbling schizoidness, disrupting or destroying cohesion, comprehensibility and the integrity of the whole."

In *Take The Weight Off Your Feet* (2008), the pattern on the short-sleeved blouse of the woman has a bright abstract pattern which Faibisovich plays off the no parking zig-zags on her side of the street. It's a detail that reminds us of the artist's more formalist concerns – his desire to create "a painterly product of [his] own"

– the reason, above all, why we are looking now at paintings and not modified photographs. Besides composition, the artist's pictorial interest expresses itself through the translation that occurs out of his original pixellated imagery. Colours and scenes he chooses are broken down through mobile phone technology into a kind of digital impressionism – luminous reds, greens and blues – to be remixed, to lesser or greater extents in oil on canvas.

Though painterly in their execution we are in no doubt that Faibisovich's works depict people and places that are or were real. In *I Love Moscow* (2008), against the backdrop of a billboard that insists on an affection for their city, two women coldly stare into the artist's phone lens. Through this confrontation they raise questions concerning his place there, the ethics of surveillance generally, and, within the context of an art gallery, the degree to which we as audience might be complicit.

Elochovsky Passage (2009) involves a self-reference absolutely characteristic of Faibisovich. Here we see an elderly woman, in a heavy coat and fedora-style hat, walking past shop-front windows. Closest to her, and us, is an illuminated display of mobile phones, these little objects capable of transmitting and receiving voices, words and images. They are the products of a technology that enables this painting to be made and subsequently experienced by us.