

ON VIEW

## Andy Freeberg's 'Guardians' exhibit on display at Kopeikin Gallery in West Hollywood

*His portraits capture the women guards who sit patiently next to great works of art of Russian museums.*

April 11, 2010 | By David A. Keeps



Andy Freeberg

They sit for long hours on sturdy, unforgiving chairs, wearing stoic expressions and sensible shoes. Beside them, on vividly colored walls, hang the art treasures of the Hermitage in St. Petersburg and the Pushkin in Moscow. These babushkas are museum employees who, in dress and physical bearing, echo the art they protect in photographer Andy Freeberg's lush portrait series, "Guardians."

The show, a solo exhibition at the Kopeikin Gallery in West Hollywood, runs through Saturday.

"Andy's work is smart, funny and beautiful," says Christopher Rauschenberg, a board member of Photolucida, which published "Guardians" as a hardcover book. "Looking at the relationship between the art and the women who choose to work as guards, he addresses the meaning of culture, our relationship to our heritage and history and the role of art in preserving and enriching our lives across the generations."

There is also a more visceral side to the work, Rauschenberg adds. "Each of the images gives the feeling that one is watching a very satisfying play with no lines or action, but with great set design, casting and lighting

The "Guardians" prints, many as large as 5 feet tall, have the pinpoint detail and rich color of portraits shot on film but were taken with available light and a hand-held 35-millimeter digital camera. "If I'd brought a large format camera, tripod and lights, they would have told me to get lost," Freeberg says.

Freeberg, a veteran photojournalist based in San Francisco, is making a stir in the fine art world. His subjects, the unsung staff at galleries and museums, appear in precisely composed and naturally lighted environments that have the dramatic feel of a set.

Framed so as to draw you into the scene, Freeberg's often-deadpan slices of life raise questions about how we experience art.

In a 2006 series, "Sentry," an unnoticed Freeberg took candid shots of the imposing white cube reception areas at galleries in Chelsea, Manhattan's latest snooty art neighborhood. Looking closely behind these monolithic desks, one can just barely see the tops of employees' heads. "They were on their computers, connected to the whole world through technology, but they couldn't see real life -- me taking pictures -- in front of them," Freeberg says.

On a 2008 trip to St. Petersburg, Freeberg noticed that Russian museum guards wore their own clothes and sat close to the works on display. "You go to the museum to look at art," he says, "but take half a step back and a living person becomes part of the experience, which fascinated me."

At the Hermitage, Freeberg recalls one guard who became a muse: "She was wearing a blue and white sweater and I thought, this is unbelievable, the pattern is almost the same as the tablecloth in the Matisse still life behind her." Another looked like Vermeer's "Girl With a Pearl Earring."

On two subsequent visits, he would discover the passion of these women, who earn around \$200 a month and sometimes travel great distances to these jobs that give them great pleasure.

Through an interpreter, Freeberg gave his unposed subjects only one direction: Pay no attention to the man behind the camera.

"Life is interesting enough," says the photographer, who is drawn to the humor of human endeavors. "You don't have to stage it."