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No. 41—Untitled, 2009, silver chloride contact print,  
8" x 10" (opposite)



# From Moscow to Maine

Photographer Ilya Askinazi's artistic odyssey

## PROFILE ILYA ASKINAZI

by Bruce Brown

Photography Sean Alonzo Harris

Ilya Askinazi describes himself as “a car salesman by necessity and an artist by fate.”

In 1984, the then 21-year-old stepped into a car dealer's showroom in Caribou—an event that set him on his way to the successful sales career he still pursues today.

Despite his chosen career, Askinazi seemed destined from early childhood to become a master photographer, whose artistry would be informed by a personal odyssey that crosses great distances, disparate cultures, and countless hardships along the way.

Born in Moscow in 1963, Askinazi was immersed from a very early age in the city's contemporary theater, film, and cinematography worlds, thanks to his mother, Alla, a sound engineer at the Documentary Film Studio. “I saw photographers and cameramen going to the field

with beautiful cameras and huge lighting devices. I wanted to be like them,” Askinazi says. As a Jew, however, the young artist knew he would not be allowed to make documentary films when he grew up. His mother nevertheless scraped together enough money to buy him a Pentacoon 6 camera when he was 12 years old. He divided his free time between the hockey rink and photography lessons with the renowned Israel Goldberg. Rigorous and often merciless critiques of each week's homework assignment by both his teacher and classmates taught Askinazi “an understanding of rejection and separation of what is so dear and personal.” He had some early success. Several photographs appeared in *Soviet Life*, a magazine that was also available in English in the United States, and at age 13 Askinazi was the official photographer on a school-exchange program to Dresden in East Germany. The trip taught Askinazi the value of freedom, but it would take nine difficult years before Askinazi and his mother were able to leave Russia.

On July 13, 1981, the refugee mother and son arrived in New York with only \$180 between them. The 18-year-old scrambled to learn

## PROFILE ILYA ASKINAZI



No. 42—Untitled, 2009, silver chloride contact print, 8" x 10" (above)

Passion and endurance are key to this master photographer's success (below).

English and took whatever odd jobs came his way, while his mother studied accounting. His very first job—selling peanuts on the street—ended within a week, when he was chased by Manhattan police because the vendor he was working for did not have a permit.

Lacking the time and money he needed to pursue photography, Askinazi quit the city after three years and headed north with the intention of making his living off the land. At the invitation of friends, he arrived by bus in Caribou, recalling that “the longest trip of my life” would also turn out to be a turning point: he has remained in Maine ever since. Within a year, he married Marlene Tracy. Five years later, Askinazi’s camera was still in the closet as he struggled to buy a farm for his growing family, which included two stepsons and two young daughters. But the farm burned to the ground while he and Marlene were in Bangor celebrating New Year’s Eve in 1991, and the family lost everything. At a crossroads and in search of

greater opportunity, Askinazi moved his family to Bangor, where they still live today.

Fast forward to 2001. In New York to celebrate his mother’s birthday four days after the World Trade Center attacks, Askinazi was haunted by the ever-present photographs of missing or dead victims posted around the city. “The old photography seed started to germinate again,” he recalls. Askinazi bought a classic Deardorff 8x10 camera in 2003 and returned to the darkroom like an artist possessed. Within a year, he had printed 1,500 images and has since increased his output to roughly 2,000 images a year. “I am not stopping now, even if it kills me,” he wrote in 2008. “I find most of my inspiration from music, painting, books, and first and foremost, cinematography, thanks to my Mom.” His subjects are wide-ranging: abstractions, nudes, still lifes, urban architecture, the annual Bangor State Fair, and the landscapes



For more information, see Resources on page 112.

## PROFILE ILYA ASKINAZI

and seascapes of Maine are among the themes that engage him.

His world is our world, and yet his distinctive eye and poetic spirit make the familiar fresh. "I am drawn to the blend of Eastern European and American aesthetics that imbue his photographs," notes Elizabeth Moss, who recently began showing Askinazi's work at her gallery in Falmouth. "The way he renders light and tonality in his black-and-white photographs make them romantic and dream-like. I could never have imagined downtown Bangor looking soft and tender. But there it is in his images."

Askinazi describes his working process this way: "I show what I see. I walk into my photographs. They are as real to me as life itself. My vision of a final piece is very vivid in my mind when I stand in front of the subject. I don't have a preconceived idea when I start. I just know when I feel it. It is purely instinct."

Askinazi experiences as much pleasure in the darkroom as he does when composing an image. "I love darkroom work. It's magical and very personal. To me it's all about the print—it has to grab me and suck me in. It is photography as a combination of a pure vision—art you can see—coupled with manipulating the process in the darkroom that gives me excitement. It is a constant battle between the two and is not easy to live with."

The master photographer's patience and perseverance are beginning to pay off. His work is finding its way with increasing frequency into gallery and museum exhibitions around the state, including two upcoming solo exhibitions at the Elizabeth Moss Gallery and the University of Maine Museum of Art in Bangor. In January, Askinazi achieved his long-held goal to travel to Israel for the first time. He toured the country, incessantly recording hundreds of images from yet another life-altering journey. It's safe to say that several photographs from Askinazi's latest odyssey will capture the hearts and minds of those fortunate enough to attend his upcoming exhibitions. **MH+D**

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