Manhattan in Moscow is an exhibition of intensely atmospheric photographs by Philip Sayer, depicting seven Stalinist skyscrapers built in late 1940s/early 1950s Moscow. The photographs were originally commissioned for Domus, the Italian architecture and design magazine, for an article written by Catherine Cooke, leading expert on Soviet avant-garde architecture. In the article, also entitled ‘Manhattan in Moscow’, Cooke asks, ‘What made Stalin build Russia’s answer to Gotham City?’ Sayer’s accompanying photographs gave some visual clues that could answer this question, and can now be seen in their original format at Marsden Woo Gallery.

His expert mastery of the black and white photographic form captures the brooding architectural dominance of these colossal structures, including the 27 storey Foreign Ministry, 24 storey Transport Ministry and the 240m tall Lomonsov State University, which encircle the city of Moscow. In ‘Manhattan in Moscow’ Sayer uses his distinguished artistic vision to grasp, and reveal, the underlying essence of his subject matter. These striking architectural representations of social realism, although fuelled by optimism for the future, can be seen as huge exercises in Stalinist propaganda. He captures the complex history of these immense, commanding, and highly symbolic constructions – as awe inspiring feats of engineering, as anti-monuments to a failed optimism, and as sinister markers of a dominant regime.

A freelance photographer since the late 1960s, Sayer transfers his skills across a broad range of photographic media, including photojournalism, portraiture, interiors and architectural photography. All carry his personal stamp, and all are recognisable as ‘his’ photographs. It is not only his remarkable vision that is shown in all of Sayer’s work, but his status as a master of traditional photographic printing processes. Sayer himself has said ‘It’s the craft of hand printing which I love... I feel more like a craftsman than an artist.’

He learnt much of his craft as apprentice to eminent photographer Maurice Broomfield, who documented the regeneration of heavy industry in post war Britain. Broomfield’s influence can be seen in Sayer’s photography, particularly in the ‘Manhattan in Moscow’ series, which uses the black and white form to its most powerful and expressive potential. Like Broomfield, Sayer uses light and shadow to capture the drama of these socialist buildings, which appear visually stunning in his photographs. He concentrates on space, light, and form to ensure his striking signature style is felt in every one. In ‘Manhattan in Moscow’ Sayer elevates his subject matter above that of architectural documentation, seeing in these huge structures the complexities of their history, and conveying this in a way no one else could.

Many of these photographs transmit an almost voyeuristic feeling. The act of watching, and being watched, is portrayed with a subtle conviction – this unnerving voyeurism is not literal, but does indeed radiate from within Sayer’s photographs. Military guards stand to attention in the foreground of one image, whilst the tower of the Lomonsov State University looms in the background, combining a reference to 1940s state authority with Moscow’s architectural symbol of education. Statues stare soberly both out from and onto these buildings, enhancing the idea that this architecture did not only surround the city, but acted as a symbol of permanent, omnipresent surveillance, turning Moscow into a Soviet panopticon.

These powerful black and white photographs convey not only the sinister architectural dominance of the subject matter, but also the inimitable skill of this immensely talented photographer. Sayer is, however, possibly one of the most overlooked photographers working in the UK today. A founding member of influential architecture and design magazine Blueprint in 1983, his work has appeared repeatedly in numerous prestigious periodicals, such as Blueprint, Domus, RA Magazine, Crafts Magazine, World of Interiors and the Museums Journal, as well as newspapers The London Evening Standard and The Times. He has worked with architectural author Gavin Stamp on his book about Scottish architect Alexander ‘Greek’ Thompson’s work in Victorian Glasgow, and Deyan Sudjic’s The 100 Mile City, as well as sculptor Anthony Gormley in 2009 for the photographic book Gormley on Guernsey, to name but a few of his collaborative projects.

Sayer has the rare and uncanny ability to connect with his subject matter on a profound level. His photographs not only provide a historic record of the subject he captures, but also leave a major artistic legacy. Philip Sayer’s arresting images of these Moscow skyscrapers show the extent to which his exceptional photographic skills reach, and prove just how uncommon his artistic talent is.

© Rachael Crabtree, January 2011

1 Catherine Cooke, ‘Manhattan in Moscow’, Domus no.840, September 2001, p88-102
2 Amanda Fielding recognized this in her catalogue for Sayer’s Studio exhibition at Ruthin Craft Centre, Wales, 2010