

No Direct Route

Photographs from Rostov-on-Don

Marina Smith / 2026



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This evening is the last of a series of gatherings that grew alongside a book. All the photographs in this exhibition were taken during the same trip to Rostov-on-Don in early 2026. The exhibition and the book overlap heavily, but they are not identical. Some photographs will appear in the book. Some will not. When I returned from the trip, I did not know exactly what I had made. I selected a group of images, printed them, put them on the walls, and started inviting people to look at them. This became a method as much as a presentation. Perfectionism is one of the easiest ways for a project to stop moving. I know this about myself. Instead of waiting until everything felt finished, I printed the photographs early and allowed them to enter the world in an unfinished state. People came. We talked. The photographs stayed on the walls. Over the following months, some of the images seemed to deepen. Every time I spoke about them, another layer appeared. Connections emerged between photographs that I had not noticed before. Certain details continued to generate questions. Some images became more interesting the longer I lived with them. Other photographs worked at first glance, but nothing much happened afterwards. The works in this exhibition include both groups. Thank you for being part of that process. I hope to see you again when the book itself is launched. The next gatherings will most likely take place at the end of July, the end of August, and the end of September.

Works

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Underground Passage
Valuable House

Double-Decker Train



Marina Smith, from *No Direct Route: Photographs from Rostov-on-Don*, 2026.

A horizontal winter landscape. Most of the photograph is snow. The ground appears almost flattened into long white bands stretching from one side of the frame to the other. Across this white surface run dark railway lines, cables, and metal structures. Thin black wires cut through the pale sky in several directions at once. Near the centre stands a small green building with a low roof covered in snow. Behind it sit larger industrial buildings in muted brown and grey tones. Everything is quiet and distant, blurred and softened by the cold. The image is taken from above ground level, from the second floor of a double-decker train leaving Moscow in winter. That height changes the feeling of space. The geometry of the railway becomes more visible from this angle: lines become parallel and perpendicular, the ground is cut into strips, the industrial buildings sit behind the snow like objects placed on a model railway. I took the photograph shortly after the train left Moscow, or perhaps while we were still inside its outer industrial belt. A voice had just come through the loudspeaker. It said something about closing the windows and not filming. I did not hear it properly. The announcement was distorted by the speaker and by the usual train noise. I understood enough to feel that filming was not allowed, but not enough to know where, or why, or from when. So I kept filming. Only later did I understand what the announcement had been about. At the end of the route the train would cross the Crimean Bridge. I was not going that far. I would get off in Rostov, before the train continued south toward the bridge.

Russia annexed Crimea in 2014. Almost immediately, the annexation began to be fixed into place through infrastructure: roads, checkpoints, maps, electricity lines, rail links, a bridge across the Kerch Strait. The physical connection mattered, and so did the visible proof of it. Crimea had to be made reachable from Russia, then made ordinary. The Crimean Bridge became the largest object in that effort. Its road section opened before the 2018 World Cup. The railway section opened at the end of 2019. Passenger trains could now travel from Russian cities directly into Crimea, across a piece of infrastructure built to make the annexation feel completed. Then, in February 2022, Russia began the full-scale invasion of Ukraine. After that, Crimea changed position again. It was no longer only the earlier annexed territory that many Russians had already absorbed into holiday plans, school maps, television language, and summer routes to the sea. It became one of the active military rear zones of the war. Ukraine began striking targets in Crimea and made clear that the peninsula remained part of the territory it intended to recover. The bridge was attacked more than once. Still, trains continued to run. People continued to travel to the sea. They travelled with children, suitcases, food bags, slippers, thermoses, chargers, wet wipes, crossword magazines. They bought tickets, checked berth numbers, argued about luggage space, drank tea from railway glasses. The danger entered the holiday structure. The danger sat in the journey as a small additional calculation. Low probability, serious consequence. The kind of risk people learn to carry without naming it every minute. The danger was small enough to consider it. It was also real.

The Balcony Was Bright



Marina Smith, from *No Direct Route: Photographs from Rostov-on-Don*, 2026.

Light entered through the windows in long stripes. Plants stood along the glass. In spring my grandmother grew seedlings there in plastic cups and cut-open bottles. There were jars of preserved vegetables, plastic containers, bottles, screws, tools, pieces of wire, things kept because they might be useful later. My grandfather had painted the cupboard pale green. The colour felt completely ordinary. I had grown up seeing it everywhere and never thought about it as a colour somebody had chosen. It appeared on stairwell walls, metal doors, fences, railings, pipes, playground equipment. It belonged to the background of everyday life. The room carried the accumulated logic of the apartment. Things were stored for future use. Containers waited for another season. Empty bottles were rarely just empty bottles. A balcony could become a greenhouse, a pantry, a workshop, and a storage room at the same time.

Crayfish on the Don



Marina Smith, from *No Direct Route: Photographs from Rostov-on-Don*, 2026.

Rostov-on-Don grew around the river, and the Don still shapes its food habits: fish markets, local catch, dried fish with beer. Crayfish belong to that world, but they have their own rhythm. You take one, twist it open, crack the shell, peel what can be peeled, pick out the meat, get at the small pieces, put the shell aside, wipe your fingers, take another one. Some of it is eating, some of it is extraction. The food slows the evening down. I told my friend Diana I wanted to eat crayfish. In my head this meant going somewhere, sitting at a table, ordering beer, and being given a plate of crayfish already cooked. Diana had a more serious version. For her, eating crayfish began before the table. You go to a place where they keep them alive in a tank. You look at them. You choose them. This one. That one. Then they are packed and brought home. Only after that do you cook them, with dill and special spices. I asked if she meant they were boiled alive. She said yes, as if I had asked whether tea is made with hot water. Her logic was practical. You see what you are buying. You know they are fresh. The animal is still moving, so the product is honest. There is also a test everyone seems to know. If a crayfish is boiled alive, its tail curls inward. If it was already dead before boiling, the tail stays straight. People notice this without making a speech about it. It belongs to the same ordinary knowledge as choosing the crayfish from the tank. I wanted to see the whole process, partly because I had never done it that way. But it was early March. There were no live crayfish. It was the

wrong season. The tanks were empty. So Diana took me to a place she trusted, and we bought them already cooked. This is what you see here.

Human Anthill



Marina Smith, from No Direct Route: Photographs from Rostov-on-Don, 2026.

This photograph began with the billboard. It says: “Tired of living in a human anthill?” Below that: “Only eight floors.” I stopped because the promise sounded surreal. Eight floors were being offered as relief, as something peaceful, almost pastoral. It felt like a bad joke. The Russian word on the billboard is *человејник*. It is made from *человек*, meaning human being, and *муравейник*, meaning anthill. Literally, a human anthill. In Russian, the word is immediately recognisable. It describes the huge residential complexes that have become a familiar part of the urban imagination: giant tower blocks, repeated windows, thousands of residents, thousands of lives compressed into one housing machine. A human anthill is rarely only a matter of height. It usually means a whole arrangement of daily inconvenience. Too many flats for the surrounding roads. Too many cars for the available parking. Too many people leaving for work and returning at the same time. Too little greenery. Schools, clinics, shops and transport trying to catch up with the amount of housing already built. So the advertisement is stranger than it first appears. It felt like a bad joke, but only at first sight. If you think about the places this joke is addressing, the promise becomes more precise. What kind of place makes an eight-storey building feel like relief? Part of the answer is already inside the photograph. This is the country I know. Russian cities are full of layers: wires, traffic lights, ads, signs, shopfronts, cars, fragments of older and newer buildings. The billboard speaks the

language of exhaustion from density.

The Descent into Rostov



Marina Smith, from *No Direct Route: Photographs from Rostov-on-Don*, 2026.

This is the road from the western part of Rostov down toward the railway station. The city appears here in layers. First the road, then the traffic, then the billboards, then the dark trees, then the older houses, and behind them the white church domes. Nothing is arranged for beauty, but the view becomes beautiful because everything is visible at once. This is one of the approaches to the old city. You come down from the higher western side, and Rostov opens below you as a mixture of transport, commerce, religion, weather, and unfinished urban order.

Tajik Rothko



Marina Smith, from *No Direct Route: Photographs from Rostov-on-Don*, 2026.

The phrase Tajik Rothko belongs to a particular Russian city humour. It names a surface produced by maintenance: graffiti painted over, dirt covered, an old word made less visible, a stain brought back into the acceptable range of the wall. The comparison with Rothko is partly visual. Blocks of colour appear on a flat field. Grey over yellow. Lilac beside beige. A small red panel. A darker rectangle. Edges remain soft because the work was done quickly, with ordinary paint, by someone solving an ordinary problem. The phrase is also socially loaded. It carries the presence of migrant labour inside the joke. The wall is “Rothko” because it accidentally enters the language of abstraction. It is “Tajik” because the labour of maintaining Russian cities has often been done by people who remain socially visible as a

category and personally invisible as workers. The person who painted this wall is absent from the image. The result of their work is the image. The surface has no artistic intention, but it is full of decisions. Each patch comes from a small administrative or domestic need. Something had to be made less visible. Someone had paint. The paint did not match. The mismatch was acceptable. Later another mark appeared. Another colour was used. The wall became a record of partial corrections. Nothing here is restored. Restoration would mean returning the wall to one coherent surface. This is a different logic. The wall is kept operational. It is allowed to remain ugly, provided the ugliness stays within a tolerated order. The repairs do not erase disorder. They distribute it. There is a whole civic system inside that difference. A city can be cleaned in a way that produces new dirt. It can be

repaired in a way that keeps showing the repair. It can hide language by creating another language: rectangles, smears, bureaucratic colour, the brushwork of low-budget concealment. The photograph is almost flat, which matters. The wall is not romanticised by perspective. It stands like a document. At the bottom there is the red curb line, dirty and scraped. Above it, the pale yellow field. Across the middle, the band of corrections. The marks do not quite become composition, but they are already more than damage. The red smear on the right is the part that catches me. It looks accidental, too vivid, almost bodily. The rest of the wall behaves like public maintenance. That red mark still has heat in it. So the title is useful, even with its discomfort. Tajik Rothko names a collision between high art, municipal neglect, migrant work, poverty of materials, and the strange beauty produced when a surface is corrected without being healed.

The Figure and the Surface



Marina Smith, from *No Direct Route: Photographs from Rostov-on-Don*, 2026.

In one photograph, it is the facade of a school: plaster, geometric lines, shadows, wires, a metal fence, a barred window, a figure in a niche. In the other, it is my grandmother's carpet: a large floral pattern, thick fabric, red-brown texture, and a tiny icon sealed in plastic. In both cases, what caught me first was the way a small human figure appeared against a much larger surface. The figure on the school facade is actually larger than a real person. If you stood next to it, it would probably feel almost giant. But from a distance, the facade is still stronger. The wall is stronger. The shadow is stronger. The geometry is stronger. The figure becomes small inside the school surface. The icon of the saint is small in a much more literal way. It is almost the size of a little calendar card, a cheap plastic object that could be kept in a drawer, on a shelf, inside a bag. The carpet is also just a domestic object, part of my grandmother's interior, but in the photograph the proportion becomes similar: a small figure inside a larger texture. At first I saw them almost in the same way. A figure on a wall. A figure on a carpet. A small body against a surface. Then the next layer appears. You start asking: who is this? What kind of person is this? What kind of saint is this? What kind of boy is standing on the facade? Why is he there? At first, the school figure looked almost like a grown man to me, probably because of his size and because he stands so high in the niche. Then I found out the building is a school. Then I found out there is also a girl on the facade, on the other side. I did not photograph her because the lines, shadows and proportions were better around the boy.

A formal choice carries consequences. I chose the surface, the geometry, the light, the small figure in the niche. Along with that choice, I also took the meaning of the figure, even before I understood what it was. The same happens with the icon. At first it is colour, plastic, scale, carpet, a small vertical image against a large floral field. Then it becomes a religious object. A saint. A household form of protection. Something that belongs to

someone's room, someone's habits, someone's private arrangement of belief and memory. You can begin with texture. That is often how the photograph starts. The eye reacts before the explanation arrives. It sees a relation, a rhythm, a disproportion, a small interruption in a larger field. You photograph because something in that arrangement has caught you.

There is the first level: the thing itself. Facade, carpet, figure, niche, plastic, shadow. There is another level: why I stopped. Why it mattered to me. What in me reacted to this small figure inside a large surface. Then there is the meaning that the photograph carries with it, even if I was not thinking about it at the moment of taking the picture. At first, I did not know what school it was. At first, I did not know who the boy was meant to be. At first, I did not think about the saint as a saint. I saw a small image on a carpet. But later I had to return and ask. A figure cannot stay neutral just because I first saw it as part of a texture. One belongs to the public surface of the city: a school, a facade, a Soviet idea of childhood, education, discipline, the future. The other belongs to a domestic surface: my grandmother's carpet, a small icon, private protection, everyday faith, an object that can be placed on a shelf, hidden in a drawer, carried somewhere.

View over Selmash



Marina Smith, from *No Direct Route: Photographs from Rostov-on-Don*, 2026.

This is the view from my father's apartment near the former Yubileyny cinema on Serzhanova Street. From here the city opens toward Ostrovsky Park and the Rostselmash Palace of Culture. This district is Selmash: the industrial part of Rostov where my childhood was concentrated. The park where I walked with my father. The Palace of Culture where children attended dance classes, performances, sports activities, and New Year celebrations. Apartment blocks, factory infrastructure, public institutions, and family routines all existed within walking distance of one another. Seen from above, the city becomes almost diagrammatic. Rows of buildings, winter trees, parked cars, roads, courtyards, and industrial structures remain visible together in one continuous field. Different historical layers continue occupying the same space. Nothing fully disappears when something new is added. For me it functions more like spatial memory: the place where I first learned distances, routes, neighbourhood scale, and the physical size of the world around me.

The Force of Good



Marina Smith, from No Direct Route: Photographs from Rostov-on-Don, 2026.

The sign stands low in the ground, almost at the level of weeds and broken earth. It is painted in the colours of the Russian flag. Blue, white, red. The words on it say: The Force of Good. Behind it there is a Cargill building. That detail changes the photograph. Cargill is not a local word. It belongs to another scale. Grain, feed, oil, logistics, contracts, ports, silos, commodities, ships, terminals, food security. The company is American and global. It works through supply chains that are larger than most political arguments and older than the current slogans around them. After the invasion of Ukraine, Cargill said it would scale back its activity in Russia and stop new investment there, while continuing what it called essential food and feed operations. Later it stopped exporting Russian grain through its export business. Some operations remained. So the name stays in the landscape. It sits here in the Rostov region, near Azov, in a place of roads, factories, small houses, utility poles, wet soil, fenced land, industrial edges. This is not the centre of Moscow, where the state likes to decorate itself. This is a working periphery. Things are grown, moved, processed, stored, bought, sold. The land does not become innocent because the sky is wide. The words The Force of Good are difficult to read without suspicion. Goodness, once it is written as force, begins to sound like an order. Force needs direction. Force needs an object. Force wants to move through someone else's space and call that movement necessary. At home in London, around the same time, we were reading *The Lord of the Rings* with my daughter. Tolkien is useful here in a very simple way. He understood that the wish to use power for good is already dangerous. Good, when it starts dreaming of command, changes its material.

Russia is full of such phrases. They appear on fences, billboards, military posters, charity boxes, school walls, official banners. They do not always look violent. Some of them look almost childish. This one is modest. A small sign in a field. No soldier. No weapon. Just a phrase and the flag. But the phrase has been placed in a country at war. Around it there is no heroic composition. There is a pile of sand. Bare branches. A factory wall. A utility pole cutting the sky. The Cargill logo on a pale industrial block. A road. Some rubbish in the grass. The usual land, still doing its usual work. That is what holds me in the photograph. Nothing here announces itself as a grand historical image. The landscape is too ordinary for that. It is the ordinary arrangement that makes it harder to leave alone. Global agribusiness, Russian patriotic language, steppe weather, broken ground, private houses, industrial food production, war at a distance that is not really distance.

Dacha Entrance



Marina Smith, from No Direct Route: Photographs from Rostov-on-Don, 2026.

The photograph was taken in the entrance room of my grandfather's dacha. The room contains the usual things that gather near a door: work gloves, sprays, bottles, bags, keys, tools. In the middle there is a small opening in the wall. Through it another room becomes visible. Above the opening hangs one of my photographs. The person in the image is my husband, Paul. My mother brought the picture from London. At some point it ended up on the wall of the dacha and stayed there.

Interrupted Surfaces



Marina Smith, from *No Direct Route: Photographs from Rostov-on-Don*, 2026.

These images belong together. The upper one is taken underground, in a pedestrian passage. The lower one is above ground, on a street façade. They show different parts of the city, but they describe the same operation. In both cases, a surface is interrupted in the middle. In the passage, the wall carries a tiled image - a space diagram on a dark grid. It is still visible, but the path is narrowed by a metal fence. Movement is redirected. The image remains, but access to it is partially blocked. Further along the same wall, there is another layer: a map of the region. It sits behind the same barrier. It is intact, but displaced from use. On the façade above, something similar happens at a larger scale. The building is not abandoned. Its edges are preserved: entrances, ornament, upper structure. But the central part is covered by a stretched protective layer. A temporary surface replaces the original one, flattening it, holding it in place without restoring it. Balconies push through this layer. They remain functional, but no longer fully belong to the surface behind them. In both images, the middle is treated as a problem. Not removed, not rebuilt, but covered, redirected, managed. What was once meant to be continuous - a wall, a façade, an image - is now split into layers that do not fully align. The interruption is installed.

The fence in the passage does not try to match the wall. The covering on the façade does not imitate architecture. Both declare themselves as additions, as temporary measures that have settled into permanence. This produces a specific kind of visibility. The structure does not collapse into ruin, and it does not resolve into a finished form. It stays exposed in its own process of holding together. The underground wall and the façade above ground are doing the same thing at different scales. They are not hiding instability. They are carrying it on the surface.

Underground Passage



Marina Smith, from No Direct Route: Photographs from Rostov-on-Don, 2026.

The photograph shows an underground pedestrian crossing in Rostov-on-Don. The corridor is narrow and brightly lit by harsh fluorescent light. The ceiling feels low. Pipes and electrical cables remain visible along the concrete. Temporary metal fencing divides the passage and redirects movement through a tighter route. On the left wall there is a tiled image of the Moon against a black geometric background scattered with small white stars. Further ahead, partly hidden behind fencing, there is another tiled image: a pastel-coloured map of the Rostov region. The crossing contains several different historical layers at once. The Soviet mosaics remain in place. People continue using the passage every day. At the same time, the space carries visible signs of exhaustion and continuous repair: exposed wiring, cracked surfaces, barriers, rough concrete, moisture stains. Nothing is fully concealed.

The fencing changes the emotional atmosphere of the corridor. An ordinary public passage begins to resemble a construction site, a restricted zone, and a functioning pedestrian route simultaneously. The mosaics intensify this contrast. The Moon suggests Soviet optimism, scientific imagination, and belief in technological future. The regional map suggests administration and civic order. Both images now exist inside a corridor filled with temporary barriers and exposed infrastructure. The city reveals its internal surfaces openly here: cables, repair seams, concrete, moisture, old decorative systems, and ongoing maintenance remain visible at the same time.

Valuable House



Marina Smith, from *No Direct Route: Photographs from Rostov-on-Don*, 2026.

A historical facade in the city centre had been covered with construction mesh. Pushing directly through the dark fabric was a bright green balcony. The balcony looked ridiculous against the mesh. A small domestic structure suddenly bursting through the middle of this huge dark temporary surface. On either side of it you could still see fragments of the original columns. One side remained unpainted. The other had already been covered in the same green. Whoever painted the balcony seemed completely uninterested in architectural preservation, historical consistency, or whether the building looked coherent as a whole. The logic was more immediate than that. The paint looked old. The facade looked dirty. The building looked neglected. So somebody painted the balcony green.

Then I looked at the lower floors. At first they seemed to belong to a different category. The green balcony looked amateur, almost comic. The lower facade looked more deliberate. Someone had repainted it in warm peach colours, outlined the decorative mouldings in white, installed plastic windows, hung a vertical sign advertising blinds beside the entrance. It had the appearance of renovation. But the effect was not so different from the balcony above. Both interventions treated the building as a set of separate usable fragments. One person painted the balcony green. Someone else renovated the ground floor for a business. Plastic windows entered the historical facade. A column was painted where the balcony began. The work stopped where the area of responsibility seemed to stop. The balcony looked more absurd because it was more exposed. The lower renovation looked more acceptable because it used the language of

improvement. Architecturally, both belonged to the same situation. The building was being changed piece by piece by people who needed it to function now. A shop needed windows, a sign, a cleaner facade. Someone upstairs needed a balcony that looked less neglected. Each gesture made sense at the scale of the person making it. Together, they damaged the building as a whole.

Colophon

No Direct Route: Photographs from Rostov-on-Don

Photographs and texts by Marina Smith.

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This version keeps the original texts and photographs from the working catalogue and standardises the layout for printing: title hierarchy, image scale, margins, captions, pagination, and print-safe spacing.