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The view from The New Yorker's photo department.

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A SOVIET CONEY ISLAND: YELENA YEMCHUK'S "GIDROPARK"

Posted by Maria Lokke

Before the Ukrainian-born photographer Yelena Yemchuk emigrated to the U.S., at the age of eleven, she spent her summers in Gidropark, a recreational area along the Dnieper River. Much like the Seine in Paris, the Dnieper plays a central role in Kiev's cultural geography, and during the hotter months the woods and waterfronts of Gidropark turn into a summer playground, a "Soviet version of Coney Island," as Yemchuk puts it.

In 2005, Yemchuk went back to Gidropark for the first time. "The smell of the trees, dried fish, and spilled vodka brought back my childhood," Yemchuk told me. "It felt like a dream; I was afraid I'd run out of film." After that first visit, the park kept drawing her back. "Often, after I'd take some pictures, people would ask me to join them and tell me jokes and stories," she said. "I learned a lot about politics in Ukraine. Once I spent an afternoon shooting and hanging out with two older ladies. They made me promise to return the next day and join them for champagne and cherries."

The friendly spirit of the park is tangible in these wistful photos of lazy picnics, sun bathing, lawn acrobatics, and waterside games. This work represents a more personal outlet for Yemchuk, who is well known for her portraiture and fashion photography. "Gidropark" is her first book, which is represented in a show at Gitterman Gallery through July 16th. (You can also find one of these photos on the art-listings page of our current Summer Fiction issue.) Here are some of my favorites.