



September 29, 2011

# Definitions: Shalva Alkhanaidze, Natela Grigalashvili, Guram Tsibakhashvili

By **ROBERTA SMITH**

*Newman Popiashvili Gallery*

*504 West 22nd Street, Chelsea*

*Through Oct. 8*

This magical little sepia-toned show of work by three unknown photographers from the country of Georgia echoes in miniature the point made by [the New Museum's excellent "Ostalgia" exhibition](#): Western art capitals have much to learn about the visual culture of the countries that once formed the Soviet Union.

The three photographers here are from different generations with distinct, almost paradigmatic photographic sensibilities. The self-taught Shalva Alkhanaidze (1927-1978) worked in a classic mode, making somber three-quarter portraits of people seated before a stretched tarp. They were usually cropped for use as passport pictures, but the four here, taken in the mid-1960s, are presented uncropped and printed large (a little too large, perhaps). They form striking meditations on dignified, hardscrabble perseverance, a bit like updates on Arshile Gorky's well-known painting, "[The Artist and His Mother.](#)" In photomontages from his "Definitions" series of 1997, Guram Tsibakhashvili (born 1960) prints combinations of his own photographs and found images on vintage X-ray paper that he turns into odd diagrams with additional marks in pencil and red gouache. They make a ghostly, gorgeous if slightly antique impression, reminiscent of Rauschenberg and Beuys.

The strongest works are in some ways the most old-fashioned. Taken around 1990 by Natela Grigalashvili (born 1965), they record the rural side of life in Georgia, sometimes zeroing in on shepherds or farmers, sometimes pulling back to show figures or animals in broader landscape views. Effortlessly composed, rendered in small, exquisite prints, the images both document and romanticize a harsh life lived close to nature with a memorably strange and lyric realism.

