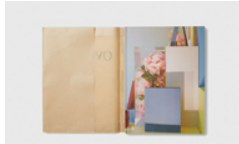


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The Overcoat



*The Overcoat*, by Nikolai Gogol, art by Sarah Dobai, was published by [Four Corners Books](#).

### The Overcoat

By Nikolai Gogol (Text), Sarah Dobai (Art)  
Hardback, 88 pages  
ISBN 978-1-909829-03-9  
Published by Four Corners  
£15.99 retail  
Reviewed by **Sophy Rickett**

Published in April, 2015, Sarah Dobai's interpretation of Nikolai Gogol's *The Overcoat* depicts only one corporate brand logo, unexpected perhaps in a series of large format works, made predominantly on location, in the commercialised shopping districts of London and Paris. That corporate brand is lens manufacturer Zeiss, a discreet form of product (context) placement, in the form of a label that corresponds so precisely with the plane of the image that it is not clear if it is a subject in the image or a graphic placed over it. It is just one of many strategies Dobai uses to explore the themes of Gogol's narrative, both on its own terms, but also as a text mediated through a photographic understanding of the environment, which relates to surface, to the frame, to composition, to form and to perspectival depth.

Originally published in 1842, Gogol's *The Overcoat* centres on the life and death of Government copyist, Akaky Akakievich, and the acquisition and subsequent theft of his newly tailored overcoat. As a fable, it is a darkly humorous, yet scathing attack on the desperation, hope, pomposity, complacency, money, politics and the greed endemic in a deeply damaged society, where divisions in the social order are the cause of a fundamental breakdown in the political and economic fabric of life. Dobai has described how her project first began to evolve during the 2008 crash in the global financial market – a series of events that seemed to signal the failure of the free market, the collapse of some of the world's biggest financial institutions, perhaps even capitalism itself. In this new context, Dobai explores the shop display as a seductive façade, where the real subject (of image and scene) is both literally and metaphorically, displaced. In different ways, each work references the processes of photography itself – the frame within a frame, flattened perspective, reflections of things, refractions of light and differentiated focus all hovering somewhere between the invisible flatness of the plane of the image and the restricted depth of the glass vitrine.

Many of the works explore themes of transience; the precariousness and the fragility of appearance against the brightness and seductiveness of the contemporary urban space. Entitled *The Overcoat – Opticians, Mile End*, the Zeiss image comes towards the end of the book, the penultimate work in a series of seventeen, and corresponds with Akaky's emergence as apparition following his death. Through the loss of his physicality, Akaky has achieved a symbolic presence that enables him to take a critical position and to exact revenge on the prominent personage who had humiliated him when he was alive. It is one of three works that Dobai reconstructed in her studio and shows a display case loosely lined with folds of red satin to one side of the image, the white plastic structure of a modular shelving unit containing a selection of glasses and lens cleaning fluid to the other. Centre stage, against the shadows of a grey backdrop, like the apparition in the text, is the reflection of the camera, an image of the mechanism producing an image of itself; the precariousness of the relation between subject and periphery, the processes of seeing and being seen seeing, revealed.

The images themselves do not fit comfortably into any one category; they combine the formal rigour, and slightly stark oddness of Dobai's unique visual language with something more fluid. In some of the works, dirt on a window reveals the presence of that same window, the fox suggests both artifice and menace, display plinths are left empty, subjects cropped, an image stands in for an object – all different kinds of displacement, deflection, denial. It's as if the artist's 'rules' of determinacy are subject to nuanced, yet persistent, revision. There is a subtle discontinuity between the images: a disjointedness both in relation to subject matter and approach. The restlessness of moving through the urban space, the 'invisibility' of the photographer, recalls Walter Benjamin's seminal *Arcades Project*, where the arcades of Paris in the 19<sup>th</sup> century are evoked as bustling, cluttered spaces, where "street and interior merge and historical time is broken up into kaleidoscopic distractions and displays of ephemera"[1]. From the other side of that modernist vision, how might these spaces now be understood, and in the age of one-click purchases and same day deliveries, what is their symbolic function? Are they threatened by the advancement of obsolescence, haunted by the ghosts of their modernist past, "neither present, nor absent, neither dead nor alive[2]"?

– review by [Sophy Rickett](#)



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