

Image 2: Audio Description Transcript

Evgenia Arbugaeva

From the series Dikson

[2018, 66.6 x 100cm]

This colour, landscape format photograph of an Arctic town is entirely in shades of turquoise, green and yellow, giving it an eerie, almost underwater feel. If we divide it roughly into thirds horizontally, the sky fills the top two thirds of the photograph. It's a bluish turquoise near the horizon but higher up is raked by bands of lurid greenish-yellow light – the aurora borealis. Stars pepper the sky.

Lower down, buildings are scattered across the width of the photograph from left to right. The dozen or so structures are of very different sizes and ages and most have broken windows and are half-buried in drifts of snow. A couple of buildings stand on the horizon, a few hundred metres away, while the nearest appear about thirty metres from us. Rough ground slopes down from the horizon, while closer to us, there is deep snow, the surface mostly untouched, with a few footprints or animal tracks near the bottom edge of the print. Most of the snow is the same colour as the sky, a murky green, but one ridge catches the light from the aurora borealis and appears almost white, resembling sea-foam on a shore.

The town of Dikson is located on an island by the shore of the Kara Sea. Soviet books called it the capital of the Russian Arctic. Only a few carefully selected professionals and polar scientists came to work here. In its heyday, in the 1970s and 80s, the island had about 2000 inhabitants. It was an important port on the Northern

Sea Route and part of the big Soviet dream of Arctic development. After the fall of the USSR in 1991, Dikson gradually emptied out. In 2013, the last house on the island was abandoned.

Arbugaeva spent three weeks walking the town's empty streets, in the pitch black of polar night. She was disappointed with her images and struggled to capture Dikson's atmosphere. One day, the aurora borealis appeared in the sky, rendering everything in bright neon colours. In this almost alien light, the monument in the town's square and its houses momentarily came to life. In deserted school classrooms, books appeared opened as if the class was in progress. When the aurora faded, the town started to slowly disappear in the darkness of the polar night again, finally becoming invisible.

Returning to the photograph, the architecture gives clues to this history. To the left is a two-storey L-shaped building that could have housed offices or apartments but now has broken glass in the windows and holes in the roof. It's surrounded by a litter of sheds. Loops of electrical cable run across to a building which faces us squarely in the centre of the photograph. It has a classical triangular pediment supported by pilasters, and could be a town hall or a library dating back to the settlement's foundation in 1915. Moulded decorations on the façade include wreaths, draped spears and, in the centre of the pediment, a hammer and sickle can just be made out. This building's windows, too, are broken. At the right edge of the frame, there is part of another two storey building half buried in the snow. Further back are more recent industrial buildings, single storey Portacabins, a long windowless hangar, a jumble of barrels, cables and timbers in the snow. On the horizon is the brightest of

all the buildings, a low metal rectangle with square windows, black holes punched in delicate jade green – the metal of the walls picking up the strange, luminous green and yellow of the sky.

[ENDS]

