

# FORT GANSEVOORT

THE TIMES OF ISRAEL

NEW ONLINE EXHIBIT RUNS THROUGH MAY 10

## Locked down? Open up to... artist Zoya Cherkassky

In departure from her signature works portraying Soviet immigrants in Israel, Ukrainian-born artist digs into the shtetl for inspiration for drawings created during COVID-19 crisis

By **RENEE GHERT-ZAND** 4 May 2020, 4:41 pm



An Open Air Minyan' by Zoya Cherkassky (Courtesy of the artist)

A quorum of 10 Orthodox Jewish men praying in a dispersed group outdoors, a girl peering out a window, and a family group gathered together in the room of a house are just some of the images in a new online exhibition of works by celebrated Ukrainian-born Israeli artist Zoya Cherkassky.

In terms of style, the artwork seems to depict pre-World War II Jewish life in the shtetl, yet Cherkassky created the works of ink, water color and wax crayons on paper very recently while self-isolating with her family at home in Tel Aviv during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The images in the online exhibit, “Lost Time” at New York artist’ hub Fort Gansevoort that runs through May 11, diverge from the theme Cherkassky is best known for: The huge wave of Soviet Jewish immigration to Israel three decades ago. In 2018, the Israel Museum mounted a solo show called “Pravda” of her paintings highlighting this work.

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'In the Shtetl' by Zoya Cherkassky (Courtesy of the artist)

Despite the bright colors and cartoonish style employed by the artist on many of her large canvases shown in Jerusalem, the scenes she portrayed are far from funny or lighthearted.



Artist Zoya Cherkassky poses in front of one of her works in her solo exhibition 'Pravda' at the Israel Museum. (Eli Pozner/Israel Museum)

While often humorous, her works are not joyful. It's an intentional provocation, meant to force viewers to confront the harsh realities faced by over one million Soviet immigrants in Israel as they struggle to adjust socially, culturally and religiously.

Cherkassky's most recent works completed during the coronavirus crisis are far more melancholic. Muted hues of black, grey, blue and brown dominate in this show, which the *The New York Times* described as evoking the styles of Marc Chagall and Edward Gorey.

According to *The New York Times*, Cherkassky's new series of works was initially inspired by a recent YouTube video she saw of a wedding at a cemetery in the ultra-Orthodox Israeli city of Bnei Brak.

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For centuries, some Jewish circles have had the custom of conducting weddings at the edge of cemeteries during times of plague as a superstitious means of warding off illness from communities.

Cherkassky made a black and white drawing of such a couple (“Black Chuppah”) and shared it with Brooklyn-based curator Alison Gingeras. The two worked together for a month by email and over Zoom to put together Cherkassky’s online exhibition, aptly titled, “Lost Time.”

As Cherkassky began creating these works just ahead of Passover, symbols of the holiday crept into more than a few of them. For instance, some include a lamb, a reference to the pascal sacrifice, as well as to the “Chad Gadya” song from the end of the seder meal.

A WWII-themed diptych inspired by the final two verses of “Chad Gadya” departs from the color scheme of most of the images. Here, Cherkassky uses fiery red and orange in ravaging flames, as the Angel of Death (a skeletal Nazi soldier) kills Soviet citizens. In the second part, the Holy One (Stalin) strikes down the Nazis.



'Black Chuppah' by Zoya Cherkassky (Courtesy of the artist)



'The Angle of Death and Stalin' by Zoya Cherkassky (Courtesy of the artist)

“That image of Stalin does have a particular resonance right now. We’re seeing authoritarian regimes that are basically extending their abuse of democratic rule of law through this crisis. Even in this country, there’s a lot of anxiety about what’s going to happen with the elections this year,” Gingeras told The New York Times.

Cherkassky continues to produce prolifically as the lockdown persists in Israel. She recently posted on social media an image of her great-grandparents, who were murdered at the Babi Yar massacre. Another is of her grandmother’s cousin Sima Dubrovskaya, who at age 19 was burned alive by the Nazis in the city square in her hometown of Stryi, Ukraine.

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There are definitely signs of Cherkassky's signature dark humor in some of these new works — the men in the prayer quorum standing two meters apart, for instance — but there is an unmistakable underlying sense of sadness, and even terror. What we are going through now is no laughing matter and has made Cherkassky dig back to the greatest traumas experienced in modern history by the Jewish people and the world.

“I think it's about my subconscious,” Cherkassky told The New York Times.

It's about our collective subconscious, as well.



'A Girl at the Window' by Zoya Cherkassky (Courtesy of the artist)