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VOGUE

“It Is Also an Invasion of Our Childhoods”: A Ukrainian Artist Reflects on How the War Has Changed Her Memories

By Marley Marius – February 27, 2023



Zoya Cherkassky, *Tanks in the City (after)*, 2022. Mixed media on paper. Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Rosenfeld Gallery, Tel Aviv.

The Kiev of Zoya Cherkassky-Nnadi’s childhood had already long ceased to exist when tanks rolled into her former neighborhood last February. In an effort to protect her memories of the Ukrainian capital—which she and her family left for Israel just weeks before the fall of the Soviet Union—the artist, who is now based in Tel Aviv, had started a series called “Soviet Childhood,” rendering in vivid detail (and an engagingly schematic style) certain “sentimental, nostalgic” moments from her formative years in the USSR. Now, one year into Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Cherkassky-Nnadi has added significantly to that body of work, reimagining the Ukraine that she once knew in its brutal contemporary context. The work is emotional, unsparing, and, for Cherkassky-Nnadi, a meaningful way to take stock and make sense.

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Last week, during the final days of a group show in Tel Aviv featuring all female, Ukrainian-born artists, Cherkassky-Nnadi spoke to *Vogue* about capturing Kiev, then and now.

Can you tell me a bit about what those early years were like for you? What was your family life like before you moved to Israel?

I came to Israel just two weeks before the collapse of the Soviet Union. I was sure Kiev was the capital of the world. This is how I saw it, because it was the capital of Ukraine, and it was a very beautiful city with a lot of things going on. I thought, This is the center of the world. And it was the Perestroika time. Everything was permitted and everybody was in euphoria because it was something new. Suddenly you can do things that you couldn't do before. Actually, it was a great time for me as a youth, because everything was open and you could listen to music from the West. But I guess my parents, they were a little bit afraid about where it was going. I think that was the reason they decided to immigrate.

And over the years, after you moved, did you visit Ukraine often?

When I came [to Israel], I was in high school and it was my dream to go to Kiev again. And then I went there in 1996, and it was sort of an awful time to be there because it was very wild. The government was not in control and there were a lot of criminals and it was scary to walk on the street in the night—or even not in the night; it depended on the neighborhood. And when I look back at it, I think I just had some issues with being an immigrant. After that experience, I didn't [return] to Kiev for 18 years, but then I went there again because of an art project that I was working on in 2013.



Zoya Cherkassky, *Roundelay* (before), 2015. Markers on paper. Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Rosenfeld Gallery, Tel Aviv.

And how was it in 2013?

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Well, it was such a powerful experience, because I hadn't been there for such a long time. It was amazing to see how the memory works, because as I was working I went to the neighborhood I used to live in. If I had to show on the city plan how to get from place to place, I wouldn't succeed. But my body somehow remembered everything. My legs took me to the right place. It was a very weird feeling.

That's amazing.

Yes. And then I also met my family and my friends—I used to study in an art school there. It was the main art school for Ukraine, and actually many contemporary Ukrainian artists, they also went to this school. It was amazing to meet them [again] because I knew everybody, but I remembered them as children and they're now grown-up people. And I think I just sort of fell in love again, and I started going all the time, like every year.

Has your daughter been there?

Yes. My daughter was born in 2015, and I started going with my daughter all the time, especially because my cousins have children of her age. So I wanted them to have common memories from childhood. So I was really making an effort to be there every year.

Has reflecting on your childhood through your work changed the way that you think about that time? Or given you a different perspective on it? Given that you also work from photographs and from research, I wonder how you reconcile all of that with your personal memories.

I was working on an exhibition that was telling the story of post-Soviet immigration to Israel, and I noticed that every time I tried to draw Kiev, it came out [looking like] Berlin, because they're somehow similar. But they're also very different, and this is the reason why I traveled. I thought, I have to refresh my memory. I have to remember things. But I didn't know it would be such a powerful experience. Especially because I used to go to Russia quite a lot—Moscow, Saint Petersburg—because most of my friends were from Russia. In Soviet time, Moscow and Kiev had the same vibe, Moscow was just much bigger. But when I went to Kiev in 2013, I noticed that it was very different. In the 18 years that I hadn't been there, it became much more—it now had the same vibe as Prague, and the East European countries. Not like Russia.

Is there still a narrative about growing up in Soviet Russia that you want to challenge or complicate in your own work? Or are you just sort of telling the truth of your own experience?

There is no truth; it's all personal experience. I'm not pretending to tell the truth. I'm just trying to evoke my memories as a teenager.

And can you tell me a bit about how you approach medium in the Soviet Childhood works? Are the uses of markers and watercolor—which are themselves evocative of childhood in a way—quite deliberate?

This is how I usually work: I like to sketch ideas, and I use [those drawings] as sketches, but they're independent artworks, too. I started this project when I was pregnant with my daughter, and I was thinking about how the world changed and this country that I grew up in does not exist anymore. And somehow, I had the feeling that I have to paint, have to draw it for her, because maybe one day I will

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forget. And I started with just 10 little drawings. I was at home—I couldn't go to the studio anymore—so I was using everything that I had on my table. This is how I usually [work]; I just use whatever is there.



Zoya Cherkassky, *Mama (before)*, 2016. Markers on paper. Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Rosenfeld Gallery, Tel Aviv.

Since the invasion of Ukraine a year ago, I've seen on Instagram how you've created these sort of before-and-after scenes, revisiting works that you created several years ago. I wonder how doing that has maybe helped you to process the invasion, or think about what's happening there now.

I think that many Ukrainians who live in diaspora have a feeling that this is not only an invasion of Ukraine, but it is also an invasion of their childhoods somehow. Because when I woke up on the 24th of February a year ago, the first thing I saw was the tanks entering Kiev, and they entered from the neighborhood that I used to live in, because it was from the north.

I've seen that reaction from many people who come from there: They're just shitting on our childhood. When everybody was asking "Will there be war? Will there not be war?" I even said, "I cannot imagine Russian tanks entering Kiev." And then they just did. Of course I panicked, because my family was there. But in the beginning, it took us time to understand how serious it was. It took us time to understand. I felt very helpless.

Sure.

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So I thought, maybe I will just make a drawing and sell it for Ukraine. So the first drawing I made was a girl looking from the window and seeing a man trying to stop a tank. And actually it's based on the drawing that is one of my sweetest memories: how I was waiting for my mother to come back from work when I was living on the seventh floor. I was watching the bus stop. And [in the new drawing] there is the same situation, but the girl, she's seeing this man trying to stop the tanks. I put it on Facebook and I said it's for sale; donate to the Ukrainian support organization of your choice and just show me a screenshot and that's it. And I sold it in 15 minutes, I think. And then I kept doing these drawings. I was always against using art as a therapy, but that's what I did [this time].