

# FORT GANSEVOORT

## Le Monde

At the Jewish Museum in New York, expressionist requiem for the victims of October 7

Since December, the Jewish Museum has been exhibiting twelve works by Israeli painter Zoya Cherkassky, created in the aftermath of the Hamas massacres. A reactivity equal to the trauma.

By Raphaëlle Besse Desmoulières, February 3, 2024



“Oct. 7. 2023”, by Zoya Cherkassky, a work in which the artist slipped a reference to Picasso’s “Guernica”. ZOYA CHERKASSKY, COURTESY FORT GANSEVOORT

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Before entering the exhibition, on the third floor of the magnificent Jewish Museum building in New York, a sign warns the visitor. In the small room with black walls and floors, Israeli-Ukrainian artist Zoya Cherkassky shows the massacres perpetrated by Hamas in Israel on October 7, 2023, in which one thousand two hundred people died. Produced in the wake of the attacks and exhibited two months later, these images express the urgency. "It's a sort of psychological reflex, I suppose," she explains by email. "Like at the start of the war in Ukraine: I made a series of drawings during the first two weeks. When everything falls apart, I draw."

On October 7, the forty-year-old was at her home in Tel Aviv with Russian friends. One of them told him that she had "read in the media that terrorists were going from house to house and killing people." "I replied: "It's your fake Russian news! It is not possible !" But we all had to believe the incredible." The next day, she flew with her 8-year-old daughter and her niece Yasmin to Berlin. "Yasmin fled Ukraine two years ago. We had a feeling of déjà vu." She herself, born in 1976 in Kiev, emigrated to Israel in 1991. Although she returned home to Tel Aviv, it was in the German capital that she produced the series hanging at the Jewish Museum.

Since October, the 5th Avenue institution has been thinking about the best way to respond to this tragedy. Zoya Cherkassky's drawings were spotted by a member of the team on Instagram. The brand new director, James Snyder, found them "incredibly moving". With this exhibition, extended until March 18, the museum inaugurated a series of initiatives around the conflict and the world of art. "Many artists have started to react to October 7 and what happened afterwards, but it seems that we are the first museum, perhaps the only one so far, that is questioning its role in these types of events," adds James Snyder.



"The Terrorist Attack at Nova Music Festival", by Zoya Cherkassky, 2023. Watercolor, marker, colored pencil, and wax crayon paper, 9.75 x 33 inches.

The twelve expressionist images of Zoya Cherkassky cannot leave you indifferent. While some explicitly present scenes of great violence, most express horror without depicting it. This is the case of Oct. 7, 2023, where terror can be read in the eyes of the members of a family and in these hands applied to the mouth of a grandmother and that of a newborn to not to be spotted by their attackers. Above their

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heads, the artist reproduced the same sun eye that Picasso had painted in his famous painting Guernica, created in 1937 to denounce the bombing of the Basque city by Nazi Germany. "It was the first work of art I thought of when I learned about what had happened in the kibbutzim in southern Israel," she says. "The cruelty of this massacre made me think of Guernica."

## **"Women are always victims"**

Made with watercolor, markers, colored pencils and wax, his drawings stand out against a black background where the characters are particularly expressive. "Usually, my colors are much brighter," explains Zoya Cherkassky. "I was thinking about what language to choose to talk about war, death and suffering. The style I used resembles art from the World War II era, especially German modernism."

How can we not be struck by these young people who run among the wounded and corpses to escape the bullets of their attackers, like those at the Tribe of Nova festival fleeing Hamas assassins? Or by the sadness of this group of kidnapped women who advance with their backs bent, injured or crying? "In all these wars started by men, women are always victims," denounces the painter.

If her scenes mostly represent anonymous people – "it could happen to any of us" – BRING THEM BACK HOME! (The Kidnapped Children) reveals the true faces of kidnapped children, the vast majority since released by Hamas. In the latest images exhibited, Zoya Cherkassky candidly reveals the atrocities of October 7: flames, tied hands, piled up, mutilated bodies, a bloodbath, a raped woman. But also survivors who are forever traumatized.

## **Criticism of the Israeli government**

As the war between Israel and Hamas enters its fifth month, the artist prefers to no longer talk about politics. At the end of October, in an interview with the American Jewish newspaper The Forward, the woman who defines herself as "left-wing" and a supporter of a two-state solution was very critical of the government of the Jewish state. "It's because of its members that this happened: they abandoned this side of Israel – all these people from the kibbutzim. The army only protected the hooligan settlers in Judea and Samaria [biblical name of the West Bank]," she accused, before judging that "all these killings, all these bombings in both directions are of no use."

When, the day after the attacks, she picked up her pencils to get down to work, in this Berlin studio where she had found refuge, Zoya Cherkassky did not think of a particular message. "I just wanted to remember the horrible events of October 7, to mourn the victims, to show them through the eyes of Israelis. It was a sort of requiem for me."