

# FORT GANSEVOORT

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## Compassion Not Just For Israelis

Zoya Cherkassky responds to the Oct. 7 attack by drawing.

By Marc Tracy – February 20, 2024



Zoya Cherkassky, a Kyiv-born artist, at the Jewish Museum with her series of drawings “7 October 2023.” She claims Modernist works as her touchstones, including Picasso’s “Guernica” and Munch’s “The Scream.” Credit: Clark Hodgkin for The New York Times

It was just 10 days after the [Oct. 7 attack](#) in Israel when the artist Zoya Cherkassky [posted](#) a drawing on her Instagram account. The drawing, “7 Oct. 2023,” depicts three generations of a family seemingly in hiding, the mother covering her baby’s mouth to keep it quiet; all stare desperately at the viewer, their horror unmasked. Above them a solitary lightbulb emits jagged illumination — a direct quotation from Picasso’s “Guernica,” the totemic Modernist depiction of war’s horrors.

Shocked and terrified, like other Israelis, by Hamas’s early-morning attack, in which Israeli officials say militants killed around 1,200 people and kidnapped approximately 240, Cherkassky left Israel and flew

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to Munich with her daughter, Vera, 8, the next day. (Cherkassky's husband stayed behind.) From Munich they traveled to Berlin, where she once lived and has family.

Then Cherkassky, who tends not to leave her home near Tel Aviv without colored pencils, began to draw.

"The same thing happened when the war in Ukraine started," the Kyiv-born Jewish artist, 47, said in a recent interview. "When everything has changed and you don't understand what's going on, being able to draw — it's something that gives me a feeling that I'm still who I used to be."



Zoya Cherkassky, "Oct. 7. 23, 2023," a work on paper at the Jewish Museum. It shows three generations of a family hiding in a safe room and quotes "Guernica" in its depiction of war's horrors. Credit: Zoya Cherkassky and Fort Gansevoort, New York

After that first drawing, 11 more quickly followed before she returned to Israel. By Dec. 15 — in art-museum terms, the life span of a fly — an installation of her series, "7 October 2023," debuted in a small gallery at the Jewish Museum in Manhattan, where it is on view through March 18.

The small, figurative images, produced on paper with markers, pencils, crayons and watercolors, show the gruesome toll of a day Israelis now call "Black Shabbat": A violated corpse, her hands bound behind her mostly naked frame; a woman and child standing above a pile of mangled bodies, an allusion to

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Giotto's "Massacre of the Innocents"; a family of five sullenly eating amid the charred aftermath — a drawing titled "Breakfast in Ashes."

Cherkassky's extraordinary response represented her dominant mode as an artist: to answer events to which she feels an intimate connection — Soviet Jewish emigration, Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Israeli violence against Palestinians and now Oct. 7 — by recasting earlier images in the light that circumstances have made new. And to do it rapidly.

"The personal aspect of her work touched me, that diaristic response," said Alison M. Gingeras, who curated a [virtual exhibition](#) of Cherkassky's paintings responding to the coronavirus lockdowns that began its run at New York's Fort Gansevoort gallery in April 2020. "There were not that many artists who were able so quickly to assimilate and respond with such authority."



Zoya Cherkassky, "Breakfast in Ashes," 2023. Credit: Zoya Cherkassky and Fort Gansevoort, New York

The Jewish Museum exhibition arrives at a fraught moment for both the American Jewish community and the American art world. Each has been riven by Oct. 7 and Israel's ongoing response, a bombing campaign and invasions in Gaza that have killed more than 28,000, according to Palestinian officials.

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The art community has witnessed a divide between artists, who are often critical of Israel, and donors and buyers, who tend to be supportive — a dynamic seen in the [firing](#) of Artforum’s editor in October after the influential magazine published [an open letter](#) calling on the art establishment to support a ceasefire and Palestinian self-determination.

“The biggest shock,” said Mira Lapidot, the chief curator of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art and a friend of Cherkassky’s, referring to the debate in the art world, “was this feeling that this big place where contemporary art can hold complexity and is built on nuance and understanding that things can be contradictory — suddenly, it’s totally polarized.”

These divides were manifested at a conversation the Jewish Museum held between Cherkassky and [James S. Snyder](#), the museum’s director, this month. Roughly a dozen of the attendees staged surprise disruptions during the talk. They accused the museum of “manufacturing consent for genocide” and implored attendees to “confront the reality of the ongoing siege of Gaza.”

The protesters also said the Jewish Museum, in mounting Cherkassky’s show, had chosen “to proliferate imperial propaganda and participate in violent Palestinian erasure,” [according to](#) the group Writers Against the War on Gaza.

Cherkassky considers herself to be on the political left, and has represented the suffering of many groups in her work. Last summer, she posted to Instagram a [drawing](#) that referred to Chagall’s World War II-era painting, [“The Ukrainian Family,”](#) but instead of the original’s Jews escaping their burning village, Cherkassky drew Muslims — the woman wears a head scarf, the village has a minaret — and captioned it, “After pogrom.” It was a reference to an attack by radical Jewish settlers, praised by right-wing government ministers, on the Palestinian town of [Huwara](#) in the West Bank that winter.

Image

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Zoya Cherkassky, "Massacre of the Innocents," 2023. Credit: Zoya Cherkassky and Fort Gansevoort, New York

Cherkassky defended her choice to devote her post-Oct. 7 art to Israeli victims. "For me, it's obvious to have compassion for these people," she said. "We were in shock. Something happens, and our friends in the world, they seemed to be like, 'It depends on the context.'"

Cherkassky has not drawn Gazans in the wake of Oct. 7, because, she said, "the situation is not finished yet."

She added, "Just because I have compassion for people in the kibbutz doesn't mean I don't have compassion for people in Gaza."

The politics of the moment have put artists like Cherkassky between a rock and a hard place, according to Lapidot.

"With this series," Lapidot said, "she put herself out there in this way — toward the outside world, not just within the Israeli community. This has been something that attracts fire."

Seismic world events have often provided grist for Cherkassky's highly personal art. She is someone whom history seems to follow around.

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In 1991, when she was 14 and already a student at a prominent art school in Kyiv, her family — her father was an architect, her mother an engineer — emigrated from Ukraine to Israel weeks before the Soviet Union collapsed. The struggles Soviet Jews experienced assimilating to Israeli society were the focus of her first solo exhibition, “Pravda,” which opened at Jerusalem’s Israel Museum in 2018.



Zoya Cherkassky, “The History of Violence,” 2016. This painting, part of a series, depicts a Soviet émigré turned Israeli soldier. Credit: Zoya Cherkassky and Fort Gansevoort, New York

In a 2018 [review](#) of her work in the Israeli newspaper Haaretz, the critic Shaul Setter praised the unsubtlety of the “Pravda” paintings. “Cherkassky paints the social truth sharply and clearly; one sees it and is immediately convinced of it,” he wrote. “It hits the viewers like a bolt of lightning.”

Shortly after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine two years ago, Cherkassky drew inspiration from her earlier “Soviet Childhood” series [in depicting](#) contemporary Ukrainian children confronting war.

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Cherkassky's show at Fort Gansevoort last year, "The Arrival of Foreign Professionals," showed African migrant workers in the Soviet Union, Europe and Israel. It was partly inspired by the experiences of her husband, Sunny Nnadi, who was born in Nigeria and came to Israel. (She met him while painting portraits outside her Tel Aviv studio, she said; having approached a group of men, she "picked the best-looking one.")



Zoya Cherkassky, "Working immigrants are illegally crossing the Israeli-Egyptian Border," 2023, from a series that showed African migrant workers in the Soviet Union, Europe and Israel. Credit: via Zoya Cherkassky and Fort Gansevoort, New York

Cherkassky picked up what she calls "appropriation art" from the Russian artist Avdey Ter-Oganyan, whom she encountered in Berlin. Works in "7 October 2023" allude not just to "Guernica" and Giotto but to Munch's "The Scream" and Picasso's "Two Women Running on the Beach."

"There's an approachability to her figuration," Gingeras, the curator, said. "She's not coming from a realist school. There's more of this idiosyncratic, sometimes a little cartoony illustration that allows you

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to connect without being intimidated by a painterly language that can be alienating for someone who doesn't know art history."

The cartoonishness has arguably been toned down in the Oct. 7 series, though. The Jewish Museum's Snyder, who was director of the Israel Museum when it hosted Cherkassky's "Pravda" show, told her he had observed an absence of her typical "satire, caricature, dry humor" in this series.

"There's just nothing funny about Oct. 7," Cherkassky responded. "There was nothing to be ironic about."

Cherkassky's images have been projected onto the facade of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art that faces a plaza known as "Hostage Square" for its status as the headquarters of the loved ones of Israeli remaining captive.

Yet like the Modernist artists who serve as her touchstones, Cherkassky can appear uncomfortable being drafted into a group's agenda.

At the Jewish Museum talk this month, as security guards escorted one group of activists out, Cherkassky bade them farewell with an expletive. After another set was made to leave, she told the audience of more than 200, "I am very, very happy that there are privileged young people from privileged countries that can know how everybody in the world should act."