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Can't These Privileged White People Feel Compassion for Israelis Murdered by Hamas?

Israeli artist Zoya Cherkassky had a blunt response for the pro-Palestinian protesters who disrupted her talk at New York's Jewish Museum last week, calling her drawings depicting the October 7 Hamas attack 'imperial propaganda'

By Allison Kaplan Sommer, February 22, 2024



Zoya Cherkassky in her Tel Aviv studio this week. Credit: David Bachar

Controversy over Israel's war in Gaza continues to spread in the art world, with Zoya Cherkassky the latest Israeli artist caught in the crosshairs.

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Tel Aviv-based Cherkassky, 47, was in New York last week to discuss her "7 October 2023" exhibition at the Jewish Museum with its director James S. Snyder. As the pair took the stage before an audience of 200 attendees, a small group of protesters began to disrupt the event. In waves, they rose from their seats at the sold-out event and began reading in unison from a script.

"As cultural workers, as anti-Zionist Jews of conscience, as New York City residents, we implore you to confront the reality," they chanted, calling the Kyiv-born Jewish artist's work "imperial propaganda" that serves to "manufacture consent for genocide."



"The Survivor," by Zoya Cherkassky, part of her "7 October 2023" series. Credit: Courtesy of Zoya Cherkassky and Rosenfeld Gallery

They handed out flyers featuring a caricature of "The Zionist Artist at Work," showing an artist painting a missile, and charged that the museum "propagates the Zionist tropes and IOF (Israel Occupation Forces) propaganda upon which the current genocide of Palestinians hinges."

Cherkassky, who was sitting on the stage and holding the microphone, kept her response brief.

"Fuck you," she said.

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In an interview with Haaretz after returning to Israel, Cherkassky said the disturbance was unfortunate but that she was not at all surprised by it. The ruckus, she pointed out, was relatively small compared to what had taken place earlier that week in a different part of Manhattan, when hundreds of protesters streamed into the Museum of Modern Art for a stunt they labeled a "reoccupation." Another group did the same at the Brooklyn Museum.

Unlike those two events, which were designed to pressure cultural institutions into taking a stronger pro-Palestinian stand (and in MOMA's case, to spotlight the politics and financial ties of board members), the protest against Cherkassky was aimed directly at her creative response to the war: Her depictions of kidnapped and murdered Israelis – bleeding women, sobbing soldiers, slaughtered children, burning homes and terrified partygoers at the Nova trance music festival fleeing across an empty field – and the museum's decision to display them.



Zoya Cherkassky's "The Terrorist Attack at Nova Music Festival," Credit: Courtesy of Zoya Cherkassky and Rosenfeld Gallery

Cherkassky said she had been "really disappointed" by what she sees as the inability of the art world to understand the devastation on the Israeli side as well as the plight of Palestinians in Gaza.

"Listen, it's hard to defend the current Israeli government to them because I think the government bears major blame for what happened. On the other hand – on October 7, babies were kidnapped and killed. Can't they feel compassion for these people? I was very happy that my personal friends reacted normally, but in this massive

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negative reaction from the art world, I see white people coming from privileged countries who think they know how to solve the [Israeli-Palestinian] conflict."

Raw response

The 12 mixed-media works on display represented the artist's immediate, raw response to the atrocities. What became the "7 October 2023" series was first shown on social media and soon went on display in [Tel Aviv's Rosenfeld Gallery](#), with whom she is affiliated, as part of a group show titled "On Hold". The Jewish Museum asked to pull the exhibit together in time to open in December, only two months after October 7, and it is set to remain there until March 18.



"Crying Female Soldiers" by Zoya Cherkassky, from her "7 October 2023" exhibition.
Credit: Courtesy of Zoya Cherkassky and the Rosenfeld Gallery

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"The museum felt it was very important to react to the situation," Cherkassky said, "so it came together extremely fast."

The works she created stylistically but graphically depict the horrors of October 7 – corpses, fires, blood and all. None of them show identifiable victims of the attacks, save one: a painting of a group of child hostages.

Art critics have compared these works to other artists who have grappled with war, including Pablo Picasso, whose famous 1937 "Guernica" has been evoked by numerous Israeli artists confronting the events of Black Saturday.

The works were all created in Berlin in the turbulent and confusing weeks immediately following October 7. On that Saturday morning, she was hosting guests visiting from Saint Petersburg at her home in the Tel Aviv suburb of Ramat Gan, where she lives with her Nigerian-born husband Sunny Nnadi and their 8-year-old daughter Vera. When the air-raid sirens woke them up, like many Israelis they thought it was a mistake.



Zoya Cherkassky's "A Burned Family," one of the 12 works in her "7 October 2023" exhibition.
Credit: Courtesy of Zoya Cherkassky and the Rosenfeld Gallery

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"I laughed and said, 'This must be fake Russian news,'" Cherkassky said of the moment she heard of the October 7 attack.. "Like everyone in Israel, I didn't believe it was possible that the terrorists could be somewhere for hours and the army wouldn't get there to save the people."

Her guests checked Russian news sites and told her: "We see in our news that terrorists are going from house to house and killing people."

"I laughed and said, 'This must be fake Russian news,'" Cherkassky recounted. "Like everyone in Israel, I didn't believe it was possible that the terrorists could be somewhere for hours and the army wouldn't get there to save the people."

Her 8-year-old daughter soon began "really panicking" and trembling uncontrollably. Her niece, who had fled the devastating Russian airstrikes in Ukraine in 2022 and moved to Israel, was similarly traumatized.

In a spur-of-the-moment decision, the Cherkasskys, her niece and their daughters boarded a plane to Germany on October 9. She and her daughter stayed in Berlin until December, when the schools in Israel had fully reopened and they felt ready to return.

Having hastily packed her art supplies in her travel bag, she created the works in her temporary home, following the news in Israel in "utter disbelief" that the events she was drawing and painting had actually occurred.



Zoya Cherkassky at her studio in Tel Aviv. Credit: David Bachar

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Cherkassky made an early decision not to draw or paint specific victims of October 7, "because the biggest shock and fear for Israelis stemmed from the fact that this could have happened to anyone in Israel – these were people just like us."

Cherkassky, who herself immigrated to Israel from Ukraine at age 14 in 1991, was in total shock. "It was the second time I woke up in such shock," she said. "When the war in Ukraine broke out, I also didn't believe it could happen and that it had happened. I woke up and saw tanks in my old neighborhood in Kyiv [on the news]."

She also turned to her art then as well. "When the war broke out in Ukraine, I felt so helpless," she said. "You want to do something – but what can you do? So with both wars I just started to draw. I guess that's my natural reaction; it's how I gather myself and keep going."

Cherkassky made an early decision not to draw or paint specific victims of October 7, "because the biggest shock and fear for Israelis stemmed from the fact that this could have happened to anyone in Israel – these were people just like us. I wanted to depict it as if any of us could have been there. The only exception is the image of the kidnapped children. At that point, though, we only knew that 18 kids were taken, and so that is the number I painted. Later, we found out there were many more," she added, referring to the 32 known kidnapped children.



Zoya Cherkassky's "The Kidnapped Children," which was created when it was believed 18 had been kidnapped by Hamas.
Credit: Courtesy of Zoya Cherkassky and the Rosenfeld Gallery

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Snapshot in time

Even before the wars, Cherkassky was no stranger to political upheaval in her art. Her work has always confronted these issues, sometimes sparking criticism from art purists who reject her hypercritical, sociopolitical approach to art. She has generally been embraced, though, particularly after her 2018 solo exhibition at the Israel Museum, "Pravda" – which focused on her immigrant experience – catapulted her to the highest levels of Israeli art.

She co-founded the New Barbizon group, which includes five women artists from the former Soviet Union who create and sometimes exhibit together, and are noted for their distinctive perspective of Israel and the immigrant experience. Cherkassky's take on identity and alienation in Israel, including the Palestinian conflict, became even more complex when she met and married her Nigerian husband.

The couple is now reunited and she is readjusting to war-torn Israel after her unexpected personal and artistic sojourn seeking to distance her daughter from the missiles in Israel – which, she said, her immigrant experience did little to prepare her for.

"The difference between being a refugee and an immigrant is more or less like the difference between being an immigrant and a tourist. Fleeing suddenly is so unplanned. When you immigrate, you're organized and ready; when you're a refugee, you're not."



Zoya Cherkassky's artwork on display at the Jewish Museum in New York. Credit: David Dee Delgado/Reuters

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She views the October 7 works on show at the Jewish Museum as a "hermetic" snapshot in time: raw in their immediacy and reflective of her state of mind.

Since completing the series, she has returned to the long-term projects she had been working on before. "I was lucky to have a prescheduled illustration project that was easier to come back and work on. I needed something very planned because I'm not functioning very well during the war, so it's good to have something in which it's clear what to do."

She has not returned to the theme of the war and isn't sure when, or if, that will happen. Under normal conditions, she said, she addresses an issue artistically only after she has had time to work through her view on it. It took her more than 20 years to grapple with her immigration experience fully, as she did in the works featured in "Pravda."

When it comes to the Gaza war, its effect on Israel and on her own life, she said that "it's too soon to do that. The situation is changing every day. The first shock is behind me – but it's far too early to look back and reflect on what this all means."



The collected "7 October 2023" series by Zoya Cherkassky, Credit: Courtesy of Zoya Cherkassky and the Rosenfeld Gallery