

FORT GANSEVOORT

moment



7 October 2023 (Photo credit: Artwork © Zoya Cherkassky, Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York)

Visual Moment | Depicting Devastation

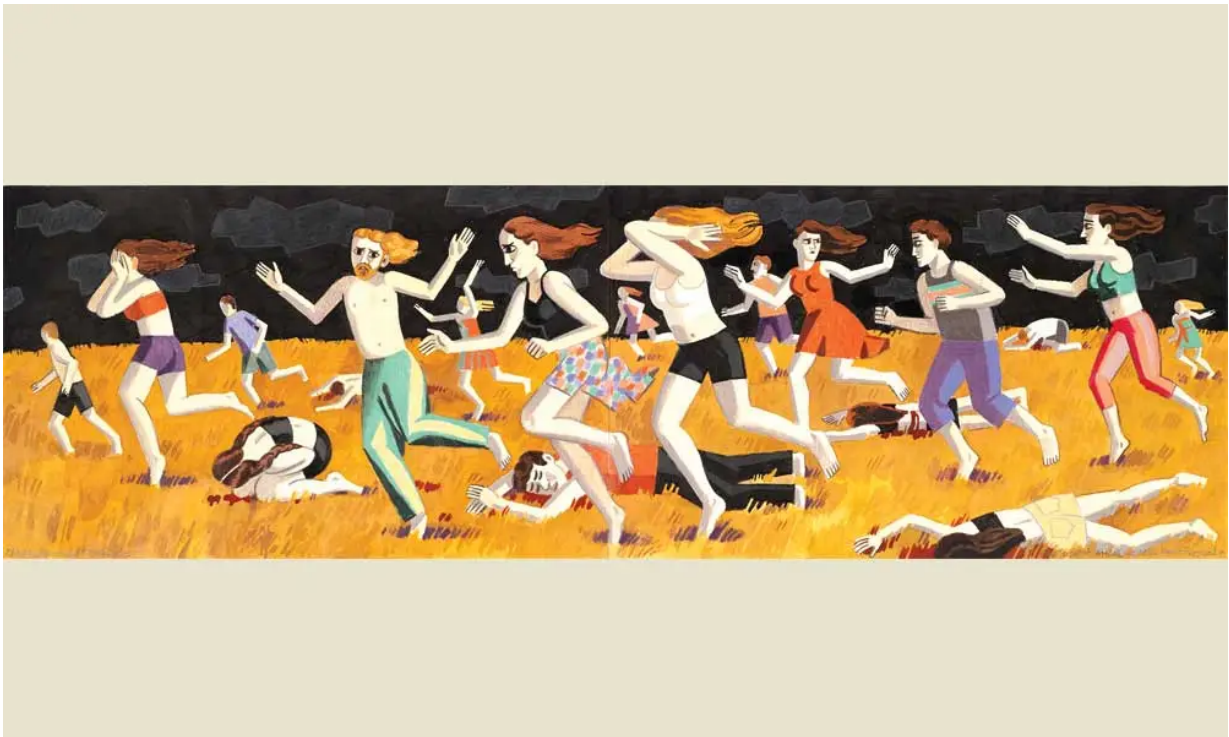
By Diane M. Bolz, April 11, 2024

Walking into the room in New York’s Jewish Museum where Israeli artist Zoya Cherkassky’s darkly vivid and intense drawings, “The 7 October 2023 Series,” were on display, one felt a visceral sense of assault. The immediacy, the urgency of the images was palpable. They seemed to leap from the walls, confronting the viewer with the trauma they embody. The works’ bright colors—saturated hues of orange, purple, green and red—created a counterpoint to their black backgrounds and evoked a feeling of queasiness and dread.

Cherkassky began making these mixed-media drawings about a week after the war began. She created all 12 in the weeks immediately following. The drawings provide a snapshot, a window in time, raw in its intuitive response and reflective of the artist’s state of mind. “I think it was some sort of psychotic reaction to the shock,” she says. “It happened to me before, when the war in Ukraine started. You feel so helpless and don’t know what to do, so you just do what you always do; for me it’s drawing.”

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Cherkassky had been living in the Tel Aviv suburb of Ramat Gan with her Nigerian-born husband Sunny Nnadi and their eight-year-old daughter, but flew to Germany soon after October 7 to get her daughter, who was extremely distressed by the sounds of war, away from the violence. Packing in haste, Cherkassky tossed pencils, wax crayons and watercolors into her suitcase. “In a moment like this,” she has said, “you can’t think about anything else, so I knew I would be making art about it.”



The Terrorist Attack at Nova Music Festival. (Photo credit: Artwork © Zoya Cherkassky, Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York)

Born in Kyiv in Ukraine in 1976, Cherkassky immigrated to Israel with her family in 1991 at age 14. Over the last two decades, her bold, distinctive style and dedication to addressing suffering and social issues such as antisemitism and racism in an uncompromising manner has made her one of Israel’s leading artists.

Her first solo exhibition at the Israel Museum in 2018 addressed her experience as an immigrant and brought her a wider audience and critical attention. Such personal experiences and an awareness of her heritage pervade Cherkassky’s art. During the pandemic, she produced a folk-art-like body of work titled “Lost Time” that pictured the vanished world of Eastern European Jewish life before the Holocaust. In a 2022 series, created after Russia invaded Ukraine, she contrasted reimagined scenes from her childhood with depictions of the same locations destroyed during the war.

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Massacre of the Innocents (detail). (Photo credit: Artwork © Zoya Cherkassky, Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York)

Ten days after the October 7 attack, Cherkassky posted the first of her “7 October” drawings on her Instagram account. The drawing depicts three generations of a clearly traumatized family. A mother covers her baby’s mouth as if to silence it. The figures all stare directly out from the drawing, pulling the viewer into their horror. Hovering above the group is the image of a lone light bulb embedded in an emblem of the sun—a reference to Pablo Picasso’s 1937 painting *Guernica*, his iconic depiction of the horrors of war, where the same image of a light bulb within a sun appears at the top. After seeing images of the destruction in Kibbutz Be’eri in southwest Israel, Cherkassky described it as “the Israeli *Guernica*.”

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A Burned Family (detail). (Photo credit: Artwork © Zoya Cherkassky, Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York)

Cherkassky draws on a rich history of artistic representations of war in her images, including those of Picasso and of German artist Käthe Kollwitz. Furthermore, the artist's childhood in the Soviet Union, where social realism dominated the visual arts, exposed her to the power of that style and its inclusion of salient political messages.

In *Massacre of the Innocents*—a reference to the story in the Gospel of Matthew of the execution in Bethlehem ordered by King Herod the Great of all male children two years old or younger—Cherkassky portrays a mother clutching her child close amid the chaos, echoing the medieval fresco of the same name by Giotto di Bondone. “It’s something that we didn’t believe could happen in Israel,” says Cherkassky, “and in such a brutal way.” In *Kidnapped Women*, she highlights the particularly ruthless treatment of women. She included an Auschwitz tattoo number on the arm of an elderly woman to call attention to the fact that there were Holocaust survivors among the hostages. Another image, *A Burned Family*, is rendered exclusively in black, white and gray. It depicts a family of four, all naked, their faces straight out of Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*.

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Kidnapped Women. (Photo credit: Artwork © Zoya Cherkassky, Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York)

Cherkassky, who describes herself as being on the political left and has been critical of the current Israeli government's role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has depicted the suffering of a variety of different groups, including Palestinians. Last year, for instance, she did a drawing titled *After Pogrom*, a reference to Marc Chagall's 1940s painting *The Ukrainian Family*. In Cherkassky's rendering, however, instead of Jews fleeing their burning village, it was Muslims fleeing the Palestinian West Bank town of Huwara, set ablaze by Jewish settlers.

Given the highly polarized, emotional nature of the current Israeli-Hamas conflict, it is no surprise that Cherkassky's "7 October" series, which was on display through March 18, generated controversy. During a conversation in February at The Jewish Museum between Cherkassky and museum director James S. Snyder, a group of protesters calling themselves "anti-Zionist Jews" disrupted the event, claiming that the exhibit was "imperial propaganda" and a way to "manufacture consent for genocide." Cherkassky, in response, uttered an expletive and de-fended the museum's decision to display the "Israeli perspective."

"I just wanted to show what the Israelis feel," she says. "This voice is often being silenced by the art world. Israelis should have the right to mourn their dead." She also told *The New York Times* that just because she has compassion for people in the kibbutz doesn't mean she doesn't have compassion for people in Gaza.

Now back in Israel and back at work, Cherkassky is "emptied and exhausted." Her hope, she says, "is to stay alive and to see the end of the war in Israel and in Ukraine." She feels the best way to deal with her trauma and the collective trauma of all Israelis is to create art and share it with the world. "Unfortunately, art can't change the world, but it's important to keep making it because it keeps the souls alive."