

FORT GANSEVOORT

ZOYA CHERKASSKY

Women Who Work

July 22 – August 28, 2021

**An online exhibition in
conversation with
Alison M. Gingeras**



Zoya Cherkassky, *Untitled*, 2021, Mixed media on paper, 7.5 x 10 inches.

Beginning Thursday, July 22, Fort Gansevoort will present *Women Who Work*, a solo exhibition of works on paper by Zoya Cherkassky. This online presentation is accompanied by a conversation between the artist and curator Alison M. Gingeras.

Born in Kiev in 1976, Cherkassky grew up in the Soviet Union before migrating to Israel in 1991. Her personal experiences and the visual landscape of her youth appear as common themes throughout her work. For *Women Who Work*, the artist takes a detour to explore the topic of contemporary female sex work. The featured series of new drawings was inspired by the horrific story of Viktor Mokhov, better known as the “Skopin Maniac.” After abducting two teenage girls in 2000, whom he raped and held hostage in a subterranean bunker for nearly 4 years, Mokhov served 17 years in a Russian prison. Upon his release this year, the Russian media treated Mokhov as a celebrity, much to the chagrin of human rights activists across the globe.

Using this event as a springboard for the drawings on view, Cherkassky also draws influence from a genre of dramatic Soviet films, such as *Intergirl* (1989), in which female prostitutes appear as ancillary characters, rarely integral to the plot but memorable for the consistency of their role as chattel. The artist’s works on paper also reference real life Eastern European sex workers, whom she has observed outside a brothel visible from the windows of her studio in Tel Aviv and in YouTube videos that feature groups of young Eastern European sex workers living in quotidian communal settings where they also take clients. In these supposedly candid videos, the women on screen are seemingly caught unaware and subsequently shamed by the videographer for their role in illicit sexual behavior.

Cherkassky highlights the gendered power dynamics, exploitation, and shame associated with the harsh reality of the sex work industry. Simultaneously, by depicting the comradery and banality of the workers’ everyday lives, she presents a worldview in which her subjects are not defined merely as archetypes.

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In one drawing entitled *Washing It Off*, a nude woman showers while her red lingerie and high heels appear hastily strewn on the floor in the foreground. According to the artist, this woman has just engaged in her first job as a prostitute. The image emphasizes the subject's desire to physically clean her body and symbolically wash off her feeling of shame. Depicting this solitary act, Cherkassky additionally points to the emotional isolation that is often associated with women who enter into the occupation of sex work, whether voluntarily or involuntarily.

In contrast, an untitled drawing shows the comradery of a group of off-duty sex workers casually lounging in their underwear while watching TV together. At once intimate and banal, the image evades simplistic stereotypes of prostitutes who are more often depicted as presenting their bodies for male consumption. Cherkassky purposely avoided glamourizing her subjects. As she describes them, "They look like the girl next door. They are not models; you know they are normal women." The artist likewise acknowledges that the relationship of the women in this scene reminds her of a typical Friday night in which she might hang out with her own girlfriends, albeit more clothed. By creating images of prostitution from a female perspective, Cherkassky ambushes common stereotypes of prostitutes (primarily shaped by a male point of view) that routinely appear in film and media.

The postures of Cherkassky's figures and arrangement of composition often conjure art historical references—sometimes obliquely, at other times specifically. She cites the influence of Toulouse Lautrec's caricatures, less in style than in subject matter. In some of her images, the women's reclining poses are reminiscent of the odalisque figures of Ingres and Titian. In a drawing entitled *Le Déjeuner Sur L'Herbe*, Cherkassky riffs on Manet's 1863 painting of the same title. In contrast to the Manet work, in which the men—engaged in conversation—appear to almost ignore the nude women in their presence, Cherkassky imagines an alternative scenario in which the picnic evolves into a wild orgy. The drawing deliberately leaves unanswered the question of whether some of these subjects are sex workers or if this is simply a group of friends. In presenting a parody of Manet's famous painting, Cherkassky leverages humor to equalize the power dynamics that are ambiguous in the original. The environment depicted in her version of *Le Déjeuner Sur L'Herbe* additionally references the cliché of a typical Russian landscape filled with birch trees. By employing this visual signifier, Cherkassky subtly translates the recognizable art historical setting into her own personal and cultural vernacular.

With *Women Who Work*, Cherkassky is explicit about her desire to refrain from criticism of sex work. Instead, her drawings present open-ended narratives from which the viewer can form opinions and draw conclusions. In her conversation with Cherkassky, Alison M. Gingeras remarks, "I think the fact that you try to use a certain amount of objectivity in presenting these different vignettes and scenes is by default a sex-positive, feminist point of view. I mean you are not denouncing sex work; you are presenting it." However, Cherkassky is insistent that she is not familiar enough with the discourse and complex ethics of sex work to assert a pro or con viewpoint. Rather than politicizing her subjects, Cherkassky aims to humanize them. Combining intimacy, humor, and shock-value with her dynamic style and distinctive visual language, the artist's drawings initiate a nuanced dialogue around the topic of sex work: "It was important to me to bring images that would make the audience uncomfortable because this is when you are open to discussion."

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Zoya Cherkassky was born in Kiev, Ukraine in 1976. In 1991, she immigrated to Israel. She attended HaMidrasha School of Art at Bier Berl College. Her work has been shown internationally at institutions including; Rosenfeld Gallery Tel Aviv, Henrich Böll Foundation Gallery Tel Aviv, Circle1 Gallery Berlin, Kuenstlerhaus Bethanien Berlin, Guelman Gallery Moscow, and The Tel Aviv Museum of Art. In 2018, the Israel Museum in Jerusalem held a mid-career survey of her work. Cherkassky's work is included in the permanent collections of The Jewish Museum New York, Jewish Museum Berlin, Jewish Museum Vienna, The Israel Museum Jerusalem, Tel Aviv Museum of Art Tel Aviv, and The Doron Sebbag Art Collection Tel Aviv. Residencies include Chiliufim: Exchange of Artist and Art in Germany and Kuenstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin.

Cherkassky currently lives and works in Tel Aviv, Israel.