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Israel's True Colors: An Interview with Israeli Artist Zoya Cherkassky

David Sheen, September 2, 2013



David Sheen interviews Zoya Cherkassky about her experiences as a painter, as an immigrant, and as an Israeli with a deeply conflicted Jewish identity.

Throughout her career as an artist, 36-year-old Zoya Cherkassky has not lacked for public interest, critical acclaim, or financial compensation. Her pieces have been shown in premier Israeli art galleries for over a decade. Her work is continually covered in the mainstream media. And her sketches fetch anywhere from \$5,000 to five or six times that amount.

A four-year stint in Berlin allowed Cherkassky to challenge herself artistically, and prove that she was a big fish in any bowl, small or large.

But in 2009, she returned to Israel, wanting to work with the raw human materials that she knows best. Since her return, she has embraced traditional painting techniques, taking her easel out into the street and capturing everyday people in their natural elements.

In recent years, Cherkassky's work has focussed on the experiences of Jews who, like herself, immigrated to Israel from the former Soviet Union in the early 1990's. The piercing portraits of

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embarrassing Russian-Israeli culture clashes have earned her widespread notoriety on the social media circuit.

But Cherkassky's work has always been politically charged. Whether her targets were the sacred cows of the insular art world, rigid religious dogma, or sectarian strongmen in the Israeli Knesset, Cherkassky has always been irreverent and iconoclastic.

In 2011, when Israelis pitched tents in city centers to protest disaster capitalism, Cherkassky was ever-present, painting placards and marching with the masses. In January, when Israelis went to the polls to elect a new government, she contributed original artwork to the campaign of Da'am, a Jewish-Arab socialist party.

In an interview I conducted with Cherkassky at her South Tel Aviv studio in July, she discusses her own personal experiences as an artist, as an immigrant, and as a member of mixed families. Narrating a slide show of her works, Cherkassky speaks openly about conflicted Jewish identity, both of herself and of the State of Israel.

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