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 **HAARETZ**

‘Women Who Work’: Taking an Uncensored Look at Prostitution in NYC Exhibition

Zoya Cherkassky is influenced by Toulouse-Lautrec, YouTube videos and the streets of south Tel Aviv in her provocative new show

By Naama Riba – August 10, 2021



A drawing based on a scene Zoya Cherkassky saw in south Tel Aviv and featured in her new exhibition "Women Who Work."

A thin woman in a short black skirt and black leather, above-the-knee boots is leaning on what looks like the wall of a storage room. Her breasts are exposed. The man standing next to her is wearing Adidas pants and a black leather jacket. He's

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menacingly caressing her face with his left hand. Unsurprisingly, her wide eyes look shocked and fearful. The entire scene screams of violence.

The artist, Zoya Cherkassky, chose to call this drawing “The Pimp,” as if to signal the real subject of the sliver of life she is portraying: A cruel man who has exclusive control over the fate of a young woman by subjugating her body for the benefit of other men.

This picture is part of a series of more than 50 works Cherkassky has produced under the title “Women Who Work,” on display in an online exhibition by the Fort Gansevoort Gallery, New York, until August 28.

In all the drawings, prostitutes are seen alongside their clients. Sometimes, pimps and policemen appear as well. While the scenes are mostly invented, many of them are based on a film Cherkassky has seen, YouTube videos or things she noticed while wandering around south Tel Aviv. It’s a series that shakes one up, portraying the world of prostitution without a filter, a lot of compassion and the critical eye that characterizes all of her work, all while pointing an accusing finger at the culture that allows this.

“When I started to work on this series, I saw police materials on YouTube of brothel raids in Russia in the 1990s,” Cherkassky explains. “During that period, there wasn’t really any government and all sorts of gangs flourished. Perhaps in Israel there were also situations like that, but they weren’t filmed and posted on YouTube.”

The drawings are small – about the size of an A4 paper or smaller – and are created with markers, pencils and other materials. Cherkassky draws them quickly, almost like an obsessive assembly line of an idea that’s demanding to be expressed.

The pictures are priced at between \$2,000 and \$3,750. Half have already been sold, despite – or perhaps because of – the tough subject matter they portray. “I can see myself buying a picture by Otto Dix or George Grosz [two German artists who have influenced her] with similar content, even if they are difficult pictures.”

Cherkassky, 44, occupies a special place on the Israeli art scene. In this closed, often arrogant world that doesn’t always communicate with the wider public, she has been conducting a dialogue with the public for 20 years, producing thousands of pictures loaded with color and strong, prominent lines, in a language that’s figurative, illustrative and comic-like. That dialogue has become more intensive in recent years through social media, where she posts her works on a daily basis.

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She lives in Ramat Gan with her Nigerian-born husband, Sonny – whom she met in south Tel Aviv and asked to pose for her – and their 6-year-old daughter, Vera.

Her first important exhibition was in 2000 at Jerusalem’s Israel Museum, the most formal stage in the local art world. Six years later, she had a solo exhibition at the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion in Tel Aviv and in 2018 returned to the Israel Museum with a different solo exhibit, curated by Amitai Mendelsohn. This led to her teaming up with the New York gallery that’s hosting her current exhibition and is also selling her work for tens of thousands of dollars.

Last year, when the coronavirus was already upon us, she won the Sandberg Prize for Israeli Art (awarded by the Israel Museum). The judges called her “a singular, compelling voice,” adding that “many of Cherkassky’s works contain biting criticism, peppered with keen wit, of social conventions, government and cultural institutions, and even the art world.”

In addition, her exhibition “Lost Time,” exhibited by Fort Gansevoort in New York, was chosen as one of the 10 best art shows of 2020 by New York Magazine.

Red light

One of the drawings in her new series shows Erlinger Street in Tel Aviv’s Neve Sha’an an neighborhood. The entire street has in recent years become a hotbed of prostitution and drug use, relocating there from adjacent Fein Street after that underwent gentrification. The drawing shows a full-bodied woman wearing fishnet stockings and a red robe, her light hair gathered up as she holds a cigarette. “The picture was drawn from memory,” Cherkassky recalls. “I saw someone relatively old there, around 60, and the wind blew at her hair and her robe. It reminded me of a romantic tale from the early 20th century, of a girl that someone promised would come for her in a boat with red sails.”

The red dress stars in another drawing, too: this one of a thin woman with protruding breasts; a mustachioed businessman, carrying an attaché case, is staring at her as she walks past. There are office buildings and a hotel in the background. One can see the direct influence of French artist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, who often depicted prostitutes in his work.

“I’ve been very influenced by him,” Cherkassky confirms. “I grew up on him from an early age. The scene I depicted is very typical of large cities in the former Soviet Union.

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Every city had a hotel to which foreign men came to meet up with prostitutes. The women who worked there were a special 'caste,' and worked for foreign currency."

Female friendship also has a place in her work. Thus, for example, women can be seen in a few drawings watching television together, or eating in the kitchen, barely dressed or totally naked.

"When I watched police raids on YouTube, I saw that they lived in totally normal apartments. I realized that within their own homes, in spaces that were ostensibly designed to be tempting, there were homey, totally regular spaces. These were the places where they'd take breaks from the clients. There I left them with their clothes, like in the videos."

And what about their revealing, stigmatizing clothes in which they are seen in other drawings? "These are the clothes they wear while working and also on the streets of Neve Sha'anana. In the films I've seen, they were also dressed 'like prostitutes.'"

And then there's the drawing called "Three Friends." It depicts a scene that looks like a rape involving three men and a woman. One man is holding down the woman's hands, the second is holding her legs apart and the third is loosening his belt. The woman is faceless, without panties and with her bra lifted up.

"When I read about the experiences and trauma of survivors of prostitution and rape victims, I realized it was the same experience. Both groups experience a detachment from their bodies and most of the women who worked in prostitution have experienced rape. In these drawings, I'm depicting male friendship; they get together to rape a woman."

In the only drawing that doesn't look connected to prostitution or rape in one form or another, we see three women and three men in a forest, with picnic foods laid out on a mat on the grass. The drawing was inspired by the painting "The Luncheon on the Grass" by Édouard Manet. "This drawing also emerged after surfing YouTube," Cherkassky recounts. "I saw some orgy in nature and I thought of that painting. I remember that I had been exposed to it and 'Olympia' [another Manet painting], and I didn't understand why they were considered provocative. It's more a joyful painting; it could be a kind of nature party."

Not in the name of art

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Cherkassky was born in Kiev in 1976 and started high school in the state school affiliated with the city's Academy of the Arts. In 1991, she made aliyah with her family and studied at Thelma Yellin High School in Givatayim, and then at HaMidrasha Faculty of the Arts at Beit Berl, central Israel. That first exhibition at the Israel Museum in 2000, "A Doll's House," was presented in collaboration with Ruti Nemet, a classmate of hers from Thelma Yellin, but the two went their separate ways in 2002.

She continued to create on her own and developed her own style, which was influenced by Japanese aesthetics (primarily manga illustrations in comic books and graphic novels), but also by Russian Constructivism and Suprematism, along with symbols and characters from Jewish and antisemitic sources.

Among her best-remembered works are her design of a yellow star as a piece of jewelry in 2001 and her macabre yet amusing sculptural work "The Victims' Ball" (2004), which sought to hold a mirror up to society and its institutions. From 2005 to 2009 she lived in Berlin, where she underwent a significant change. She says she got fed up with the approach of "art for art's sake," with preoccupation with the artistic language, quoted motifs and masterpieces.

Her 2006 "Action Painting" exhibition at the Helena Rubinstein Pavilion featured large paintings of blatantly violent scenes that take place in the halls of modern art museums. Two years later, together with artist and theoretician Avdey Ter-Oganyan, she curated an exhibit entitled "Olga Sviblova is Shit or The End of the Critical Discourse," which displayed works that criticized contemporary art in general, and Russian contemporary art in particular.

When she returned to Israel in 2010, she and her friends Natalia Zourabova, Anna Lukashevsky, Asya Lukin and Olga Kundina – all of them graduates of art schools in the former Soviet Union – formed the group New Barbizon, after the Barbizon School of painters who were active in France from the 1830s to 1870s. They were supposed to launch a project in Amsterdam, but it was canceled by the pandemic.

Asked why she thinks she's been more successful than other artists during this period, Cherkassky responds that it's due to a lot of things. "There's luck and also hard work. I also think that the things I'm doing are relevant today. I'm not trying to analyze it, I'm just pleased that it's happening. During the pandemic, I continued to work as usual. It was even a good period, because there were no deadlines. I didn't set up anything new because I have to have strength to decide things. I said I would simply work."

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Mendelsohn, the curator of her work, believes that the artist “speaks a language that everyone understands – and she isn’t ashamed of it. She does it in a sophisticated but direct way, and she moved from an intra-artistic language to a language everyone understands. Her move to draw women in prostitution is characteristic of great artists. All the great artists in history drew prostitutes.”

Cherkassky also dealt with prostitution before her latest exhibition. In her work “Aliyah of the 1990s,” which was displayed in her 2018 exhibition “Pravda” at the Israel Museum, she drew a prostitute on all fours on a bed, looking at the viewer. Both her breasts and genitals are exposed.

In the text that accompanied the drawing, Mendelsohn wrote: “‘Russian whore’ is a racist epithet that was attached to Russian women who came to Israel from the Soviet Union during the big immigration wave of the 1990s. The drawing expresses the stereotype in strong and pornographic language, but its design is artistic. Together with the defiant display of buttocks, the penetrating gaze, the woman’s face influenced by icons and the small, replicated face that befits a stereotype – places a mirror in front of Israeli society and its stereotypical perceptions.”

Mendelsohn recalls that “Aliyah” was the last picture included in the exhibit, and he was somewhat wary of how the public would react (it passed without protest).

Cherkassky drew the current series of pictures for totally different reasons. “I think it started with a bout of depression,” she says. “I started to draw during the last lockdown and the trigger was something connected to rape, not to prostitution. The Russian rapist Viktor Mokhov – better known as the ‘Skopin Maniac’ – had been released after 17 years in prison. Seventeen years ago, he abducted two teenage girls and held them in a basement for almost four years, turning them into his sex slaves. They miraculously managed to flee. What the Russian media did when he was released was disgusting: they treated him like a celebrity, as if he was some kind of hero.”

When asked about the purpose of the series, she says it is “to say our most unequivocal ‘no’ to exploiting a woman’s body.” But after a brief moment of reflection, she adds: “There is no goal. The goal is to draw.”

Cherkassky says that, initially, she didn’t envisage “a defined geographical location for these drawings. But in the end it did happen: most of them take place in the post-

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Soviet space. Even when it's in Israel, the figures are of Russian women in the broad sense of the word.”

The artist is in favor of the new Israeli law that incriminates clients– “on condition that the state provide a solution for those women in prostitution. What will they make a living from the day after? I don't really trust our state on this issue, unfortunately. Of course I couldn't care less about the feelings of those who consume prostitution, but from women who work in prostitution I've heard that they have no solution. That takes the entire field to a place that's even more illegal and criminal, and the women become even less protected. It's something we must take into account. What will a prostitute do if there is no rehabilitative replacement?”

Cherkassky has attracted ire by some who say her drawings aren't feminist or are offensive to women. She is unfazed by the criticism. “That comes mainly from people who aren't necessarily art lovers or art consumers. I once got a comment that my drawings are a trigger from someone who suffered bad experiences. Every difficult subject is a difficult subject. The only way it won't be difficult is to avoid it – and I choose not to avoid it. But I learn from the online comments. It sparks an important discussion and I'm for it.”

And what about when she's accused of racism? “That's a side effect of being active on social media, because there you can't see the broader context of things, like in an exhibition. Sometimes, something jumps into someone's feed and people hasten to get outraged on Facebook and write, 'Here, look what she's done!' But I don't get upset by it because I know who I am, and I know that when they accuse me of racism, it's just a lack of understanding. But as I said, I learn things from this discussion.”