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For some Israeli artists from Ukraine and Russia, creativity is sole solace from war

As Ukrainian and Russian Israelis organize art fundraiser to help refugees, they also contemplate life far from their now-beleaguered homelands

By Jessica Steinberg – March 9, 2022



A work by Ukrainian-born Israeli artist Zoya Cherkassky showing the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and sold in 'WithDraw the War: Art Fundraiser for Ukraine,' March 2022. Courtesy of WithDraw the War: Art Fundraiser for Ukraine.

When Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, many Tel Aviv artists hailing from the former Soviet Union spent the first hours distraught, in utter disbelief about what was happening in Europe.

Masha Malakh focused on moving her parents from their home in frontline Kharkiv to Lviv, in Ukraine's west, contacting "thousands of people" as she sat in Tel Aviv and worked her phone during their 30-hour journey.

"I don't understand what exactly is going on there," said Malakh, 32, who came to Israel at 25 after first moving from Kharkiv to Russia's St. Petersburg. "I see pictures and fear but I'm here. I think people in

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Israel feel that we're used to war here, but Israel was born in war, and Ukrainians were not, they don't have bomb shelters."

Once her parents were safe in Lviv, Malakh, who usually works as an art gallery tour guide for Russian and Ukrainian-speaking Israelis, tried to figure out what to do next.

"No one was going to any exhibits, it felt like the world had stopped," said Malakh.

So she turned to the artists she knew and organized a fundraiser, *Withdraw the War: Art Fundraiser for Ukraine*, in which local artists donated artworks for purchase by donors, bypassing all artist or agent fees.

All earnings from the purchases will be donated to charities aiding Ukrainian refugees, and each buyer can choose the charity they prefer from a list of vetted organizations.

The event, taking place March 8-10 at 9 Mazeh in Tel Aviv, has four floors of art, including street art, video art, paintings, drawings, photography and poetry.

"It's not a curated show," said Malakh. "I wrote to many people, and they all wanted to participate and help as quickly as possible."

Withdraw the War includes established artists such as Ukraine-born Zoya Cherkassky, whose 2018 solo exhibit, "Pravda," at the Israel Museum showcased her usual Pop Art palate and edgy humor to portray the early 1990s post-Soviet experience of immigration to Israel.

Cherkassky and her family immigrated to Israel in 1991, when she was 14.

She still goes back to visit all the time, she said, seeing friends and cousins.

Cherkassky posted a new painting on Instagram on Monday, an image in blacks, grays and oranges, of a mother and child standing on an apartment balcony, watching Kyiv burn.

As she read about the events taking place in her beloved hometown, Cherkassky drew two small images on paper, the one pictured below and another, showing a girl watching Russian tanks roll into the snow-lined Ukrainian street outside her apartment window.

"For me, drawing helps me get through situations, it's my platform," said Cherkassky. "I have to draw, because it helps me deal with what's happening."

One of her cousins escaped Kyiv with her two children, leaving her husband behind. And for the last six days, Cherkassky has been helping her stepsister and her stepsister's daughters and granddaughters acclimate to Israel, after they arrived last Friday.

"I'm in shock that this is happening," she said. "I never imagined that I would see something like this but for now, I have no time to deal with it."

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Another Ukrainian-born artist, Igor Revelis, known as Klone, who is also featured in WithDraw the War, posted an upside-down canvas version of a childhood photo, spray-painted in the now-familiar Ukrainian colors of blue and yellow.

“Ukraine is the place of my childhood and right now this place is under attack,” Klone wrote on Instagram.

Work is a solace for some artists, as they mourn and pine for their homeland. Others feel frozen by pain and worry.

Natalia Zourabova, a Tel Aviv-based, Moscow-born painter with works in WithDraw the War, said she has been unable to lift a paintbrush since the start of the invasion.

“I’m asking myself what to draw now,” said Zourabova, remembering a recent series about fond memories from Russia. “I can’t be in my studio right now, my head is empty. The world outside lifts me in its light and intensity and takes me to another place.”

A Russian-speaking Israeli who has lived in Israel for the last 18 years, Zourabova said she feels tongue-tied, distraught about what is happening but silenced because of her Russian nationality.

“I feel torn,” she said. “It’s a huge tragedy, a whole world that has just fallen. A war between neighbors is the hardest thing.”

Clearly, it’s not only the Ukraine-born Israelis who are suffering and trying to figure out their next steps.

Zourabova initially came to Israel on a tourist visa, fell in love, married, had a child, divorced and chose to remain here. Her sister and widowed mother now live in Minnesota, but she still has close friends in Russia.

Her friends in both Russia and Ukraine are “on planes to Israel right now,” she said. They are people who never planned to move to Israel, but have now changed their minds given the situation, as they are eligible for Israeli citizenship.

Maria Nasimova doesn’t think she’ll ever return to Russia. Nasimova, an art curator, moved to Israel from Moscow last summer to produce the Regarding International Arts Festival. The event launched in November 2021 and is meant to continue this coming November and then annually, as a citywide performing arts festival across Tel Aviv.

When Nasimova moved to Tel Aviv in October 2021, she posted the news on Facebook, both as an announcement and as part of her sublet search. At the time, her plans were to move to Israel for six months.

“For those who are worrying more than my Jewish mom, I have to say that you should not as I am gonna always be around Moscow and EU,” she wrote then.

Now she’s not so sure.

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Nasimova's friends and colleagues, including artists, designers, urbanists, directors and curators, are all liberal Russians who are deeply distressed about Vladimir Putin's Ukrainian invasion and crackdown on remaining freedoms in Russia. Many are on their way to Israel, she said — some 100 people so far from her circles.

"They ran from Russia; they're not moving from Russia, they just left their belongings and came here," said Nasimova, who was previously the chief curator at the Jewish Museum and Tolerance Center in Moscow. "They feel like refugees, no language, no opportunities, no connections. Ten days ago they felt like successful people, now they have their own tragedy."

Nasimova's parents, brother and cousins are all still in Russia, some of them "waiting for the point of no return" before deciding to shift their lives, she said.

As for the Regarding International Arts Festival, Nasimova stopped working on the November 2022 event on February 24, the day Russia invaded Ukraine.

She has no sense if the festival will happen again as it is funded by Russian Israeli sponsors and includes European performers, many of whom come from countries currently sanctioning Russia.

"I don't feel like I have a right to talk about it to anybody," she said. "We have to save people first."