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Zoya Cherkassky Interviewed

Painting race and society

Will Corwin, May 31, 2023



Zoya Cherkassky, Simone, 2022, Acrylic on paper, 51.25 x 78 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort. © Zoya Cherkassky.

Zoya Cherkassky's oil paintings cast an ebullient and complex depiction of race relations in Tel Aviv, Paris, and a myriad of locations where she's stopped to sketch. The Red Grooms-like lightness of her aesthetic is disarming and strips away some of the trepidations we have in examining the points of intersection where racial friction takes place. Her own Israeli Nigerian family serves as a blueprint for analyzing these intersections, and layered onto that are Russian and French realistic painting traditions. In the following interview, we discuss how a return to the Barbizon school helped her to describe contemporary social conditions in Israel.

—Will Corwin

Will Corwin

Let's begin by talking about style and subject matter. You were born and first studied painting in the former Soviet Union, so in my mind this brings up Socialist Realist painting. You've talked about your great-grandfather who was a painter in that genre. What is the interaction there for you?

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Zoya Cherkassky

Actually, there is a painting by my great-grandfather that triggered me to make my current show and also gave the exhibition its name. This is the kind of art I grew up on; and even before Socialist Realism there were older Russian art movements that were about storytelling, like Peredvizhniki (the Society for Traveling Art Exhibitions).



Zoya Cherkassky, *Arrival of Foreign Professionals* (after Abram Cherkassky), 2023, oil on linen, 69 × 55.25 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort. © Zoya Cherkassky.

WC

What was your great-grandfather's painting that inspired this show?

ZC

The painting was made in 1932, and it's called *Arrival of the Foreign Professionals*. Somebody sent it to me on Facebook; I had never seen it before. They said, "Look, this is your family," and I was like, What's going on here? Because even now there aren't many Africans in former Soviet countries. I started looking for information, and I found that in the '30s when the Soviet Union was going through industrialization and they were building new factories and had bought new machines, they were looking for professional workers to come and teach the locals how to operate these machines. They went to the United States, which was in the middle of the Great Depression, and they tried to tempt qualified workers to come to the Soviet Union by offering good conditions. A certain number of Black people agreed to come because for them it was even harder to find jobs in the US. Robert Robinson even wrote a memoir of this story entitled *Black on Red: My 44 Years Inside the Soviet Union*. I believe that this helps explain my great-grandfather's painting because you also see the factory in the background, and it's a Black family, and they're being welcomed by a Soviet family. So I believe these are Black people who came to work in the Soviet Union. So I've decided to remake this painting, but I changed the composition. I wanted to show continuity, like in my family, because this subject was important to me. And I had never seen the original

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version of this painting until someone wrote me from Kiev that it was included in an exhibition; so just two months before the war, I went there for one day to see it.

WC

Your great-grandfather's image is trying to promote a Soviet utopia. Are you critiquing the utopia? What are you trying to do with your version?

ZC

I'm just creating a connection because I think in my painting the situation is much more human; it's attached to my personal story and this interesting African community. I'm not African, but I'm really tied to it because of my husband who's from Nigeria.

WC

In terms of an aesthetic, you've started a movement.

ZC

Yeah, the New Barbizon.

WC

How do you go about starting a movement? It's you and four other artists—Natalia Zourabov, Asya Lukin, Anna Lukashevsky, and Olga Kundina—who originated in the former Soviet Union.

ZC

I was living in Berlin for five years, from 2005 to 2010

WC

Why were you in Berlin? Did you have a studio there?

ZC

I went there because I started my career very early in Tel Aviv, and I felt it was moving too fast. I hadn't decided what kind of artist I wanted to be, so I wanted to go to a place that was more central to art, and Berlin was the last cheap capital of Europe. It was very intense at that time, and it was easy for me to go there.

WC

In 2005, you were a relatively recent graduate of art school in Tel Aviv.

ZC

I didn't really finish.

WC

What was the Israeli scene like that you were leaving? Were you painting at that point?

ZC

I was painting, but I was not solving painting questions. I was painting to illustrate my ideas. It was much more graphic; I did not solve questions of line and form. I had a big show at the Tel Aviv Museum of Art that focused on, What is an art institution? and, What is being an artist? and these kinds of conceptual things. Then I went to Berlin, and I met an artist from Russia, Avday Ter-Oganyan. We started working together, and we brought this

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“talking about art” scene as far as it could go: we made an art exhibition in Moscow that was called Sviblova Is Shit: Or the End of Critical Discourse.

WC

Where was that in Russia?

ZC

It was at Guelman Gallery in Moscow. Then I had the feeling that I'd closed this question of criticizing the art scene. Avday was pushing me to go back to painting. I started sketching a little bit, and then somehow I understood that I needed the company because when you work alone you fall into your own clichés very fast. He showed me some paintings by Kundina, and I saw that the landscapes looked familiar to me, and I saw that she was in Israel. I found her online, and I wrote to her; somehow we found each other automatically. I think we all had this experience of abandoning painting for a while and being a little bit ashamed of being a painter, so we decided to bring it back as a legitimate art medium. We started doing plein air, but in the city.

WC

Which city?

ZC

Tel Aviv. But actually, we've been everywhere. We started in Tel Aviv, but we tried to find any possibility to go wherever, so we've been at a kibbutz, and we've been in Palestine; we've been in Germany, and we've been in Russia. We use every opportunity to go. We have large canvasses, and my husband used to have a little truck, so we would bring the whole studio outside, including the easels and the canvasses that were two meters by one-and-a-half meters.

WC

Like Claude Monet, sure.

ZC

It was very intense, especially in Tel Aviv because there's always interaction with people.

WC

How did people respond to your plein air painting?

ZC

In Germany they didn't disturb us, but in Tel Aviv they come between you and the canvas and take selfies because . . . they “have no God” in Tel Aviv. (laughter) Or people would ask us, “Is this for the municipality?” or, “Who is paying for this?” I was amazed that seeing a painter on the street pushes people to tell their stories. It's very intensive, and after a session I was dead at home for a week. We were very active for six years. I think we managed to have an influence on the local art scene, and we were very happy about it because I see more and more people taking their inspiration from the reality around them. Now it's not a shame to paint. We see younger artists who adopt this attitude and develop it in their own way, and we are very happy and proud of that.

WC

Was this movement just the idea of bringing painting back? It sounds like, especially in Tel Aviv where you were interacting with people constantly, that was part of the project, but there was also a performance side to it.

ZC

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Yeah, there was a side of performance to it too. Growing up inside an artist's bubble, it was the first time I understood where I was living, what Israel is. Before, I would go from my home to my studio, and all my life I was in art school, so I didn't really see life beyond it.

WC

There's a picture of an African woman tending to a Holocaust survivor. Refugees interacting with refugees is a recurring theme in your work. What is the story there? Because that's a very poignant image of an African nurse taking care of a survivor.



Zoya Cherkassky, Caregiver, 2022, oil on linen, 39.5 x 27.5 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort. © Zoya Cherkassky.

ZC

I had to bring the clash of these stories. In Israel we all grow up with these stories of the Holocaust, and there are Holocaust survivors. When I came to Israel, I saw people with numbers on their arms on the public transport. On the other hand, this society is rejecting the Other so much. For me it was impossible to understand: How can someone who grows up with these Holocaust stories reject the Other in such a way?

Zoya Cherkassky: *The Arrival of Foreign Professionals* is on view at Fort Gansevoort through June 3.

Will Corwin is a sculptor and writer based in New York City.