

FORT GANSEVOORT

The Atlantic

The Israeli Artist Who Offends Everyone

By Judith Shulevitz

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"Massacre of the Innocents," 2023 (© Zoya Cherkassky. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.)

YOU CAN'T WALK FAR in Tel Aviv without encountering a raw expression of Israel's national trauma on October 7. The streets are lined with posters of hostages, and giant signs and graffiti demanding BRING THEM HOME. Making my way through Florentin, a former slum that has become an artists' neighborhood, to visit Zoya Cherkassky-Nnadi, one of the most popular painters in Israel, I passed a mural of a child being taken hostage. A Hamas terrorist in a green headband and balaclava points a rifle at the child, who has his hands in the air. The boy is recognizable as a version of the child in the famous photograph from the Warsaw Ghetto uprising in 1943. The artist first painted the mural in Milan, but images of October 7 are not always well received outside Israel. In Milan, someone scrubbed the Jewish child out of the picture.

Zoya-first name only, at least in the art world - also made drawings about October 7 that met with an unexpectedly hostile response abroad. Until then, Zoya's international reputation had been ascending. She was seen as a sharp critic and satirist of Israeli society-Israel's Hogarth, as it were. Like him, she sketches people whom others overlook; like his, her portraits editorialize.

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Perhaps you assume that overlooked means "Palestinian." Zoya has made paintings about the plight of Palestinians, but what really interests her are even less visible members of Israeli society, such as African immigrants, and the invisible and stigmatized, such as sex workers. Since her October 7 drawings were shown in New York, however, she has been accused of making propaganda for Israel. Similar charges have been leveled against other prominent Israeli artists since the start of the Gaza war, but the denunciation of Zoya was particularly public.

Zoya is an immigrant herself—born in Kyiv in 1976, when Ukraine was still part of the Soviet Union—and she has spent her life in a kind of internal exile. In Kyiv, she was a Jew. In Israel, she's a goy (non-Jew), at least by rabbinic standards, because her mother isn't Jewish, by the same standards. (Zoya's father was Jewish, and so was her mother's father.) She is married to an even more recent immigrant, Sunny Nnadi, who comes from Nigeria. She used to vote for the far-left, Arab-majority political party Hadash, but stopped when it, along with a coalition of similar parties, sided with Vladimir Putin in Russia's war on Ukraine. She has the word attitude tattooed on her left forearm, in English. Her art tests the boundaries of the permissible. When Zoya had a major solo show in 2018 at the Israel Museum, one of the country's preeminent institutions, the newspaper Haaretz noted the incongruity of the museum's embrace of Israel's "eternal dissident."

That exhibition, which was called "Pravda," depicted Soviet and post-Soviet immigrants struggling to acclimate to an unfriendly Israel. Two paintings, for example, lampoon the rabbinic authorities who enforce religious law. Many of the million or so new arrivals had never kept kosher or been circumcised, and roughly a quarter of those weren't considered Jews by Israel's rabbinic establishment, usually because their mothers, like Zoya's, weren't Jewish. A handful chose to undergo Orthodox conversions.



The Rabbi's Deliquium, 2016 (© Zoya Cherkassky. Courtesy of the artist and Rosenfeld Gallery, Tel Aviv.)

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That's the backdrop for *The Rabbi's Deliquium*, which is set in the home of two young Russian converts to Orthodox Judaism. The scene is only half fantastical. The man wears a kippah and his wife's hair is covered. Their baby's head is also covered—by a giant kippah. (In real life, infants do not wear kippahs.) A rabbi is inspecting their kitchen to ascertain whether they are really keeping kosher; this kind of thing actually occurs. He lifts the lid of a pot and finds himself face-to-face with a huge pig snout. Deliquium means a sudden loss of consciousness. We know what is going to happen to the rabbi next.

In the second painting, *The Circumcision of Uncle Yasha*, two ultra-Orthodox rabbis in blood-splattered scrubs perform the operation in a pool-blue operating room. One wields a pair of scissors while Uncle Yasha looks down at his penis in terror. The other rabbi covers his face with a book labeled torah, as religious Jews sometimes do with their prayer books, but in this case the gesture suggests a refusal to see. In the corner of the operating room lies a kidney dish filled with blood. The scene evokes the infamous anti-Semitic blood libel, in which Jews are said to drain the blood of a Christian child to use in their Passover matzah. The show's curator, Amitai Mendelsohn, understates the allusion's outrageousness when he calls it "slightly unsettling" in the catalog. The painting is so sacrilegious, it's funny—admittedly, it's also a Jewish in-joke that would probably work less well outside Israel, where a mordant reference to a slander that resulted in the deaths of countless Jews might well come across as simply distasteful.

Zoya's October 7 drawings are not funny at all. Days after the invasion, having taken her terrified 8-year-old daughter to Berlin, Zoya began putting on paper the scenes of horror that wouldn't stop tormenting her. She first posted her drawings on social media. Soon they were being projected onto the white facade of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art from "Hostages Square," the plaza in front of that building, which has become a site for public art and protest about the kidnapped. The Jewish Museum brought the drawings to New York, where Zoya occasioned a story in *The New York Times*, among other outlets, not on account of her artwork, exactly, but because she was heckled and did something unusual in response.

The incident occurred in February, and some of it was recorded on phones. Zoya and the museum's director, James Snyder, are about to have a conversation onstage when young activists in black surgical masks stand up and begin to shout. As they are hustled out, another group rises and yells from printed scripts: "As cultural workers, as anti-Zionist Jews of conscience, as New York City residents, we implore you to confront the reality of"—boos and cries of "Shut up" from the audience drown out their words. Clearly, the Jewish Museum crowd is not on the side of the protesters. Guards forcibly remove the second group of disrupters.

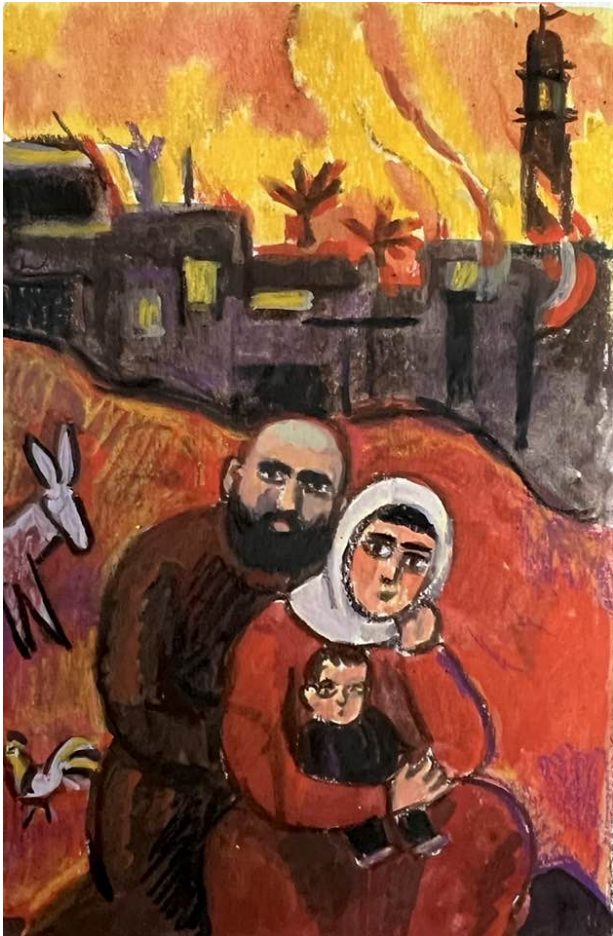
Suddenly, cheers erupt near the stage and Zoya comes into view, a large, long-haired, makeup-free woman in a stretchy gray dress and black boots, sitting calmly, apparently unfazed. You have to read the news accounts to learn what had just happened off-screen: Zoya had said, simply, "Fuck you."

When more protesters had been escorted out and the drama had subsided, Zoya caustically observed, "I am very, very happy that there are privileged young people from privileged countries that can know how everybody in the world should act."

The protesters had also given out flyers with an insulting caricature of "The Zionist Artist at Work," showing an artist in combat gear painting a missile. According to an Instagram post by a group called Writers Against the War on Gaza, the activists accused the Jewish Museum of participating in "violent Palestinian erasure" because Zoya had failed to include the Palestinian victims of the Gaza war in the show. Zoya's immediate response to that charge was that she may yet make art about the Palestinian victims. "Just because I have compassion for people in the kibbutz doesn't mean I don't have compassion for people in Gaza," she told *The Times*.

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Zoya has addressed Israeli cruelty toward Palestinians in the past. A 2016 painting called *The History of Violence* shows a uniformed Israeli soldier guarding two handcuffed men stripped down to their underwear, presumably Palestinians. *After Pogrom* (2023) portrays a couple and child in front of their burning home, an apparent reference to the 2023 settler rampage in the Palestinian village of Huwara, in the West Bank. It reworks a World War II-era painting by Chagall, *The Ukraine Family*, about Jews in a similar situation, as if to say, *Who's committing the pogroms now?*



After Pogrom, 2023 (© Zoya Cherkassky. Courtesy of the artist and Rosenfeld Gallery, Tel Aviv.)

Not everyone in the audience at the Jewish Museum opposed the protest. In an article largely sympathetic to the activists, the online art magazine *Hyperallergic* quoted an anonymous spectator saying that the audience's hostile response to the protest was "chilling." Two months after the incident, Zoya posted the following on Instagram: "The Central Committee of the CPSU"—the Communist Party of the Soviet Union—"allowed more freedom of artistic expression than [the] contemporary art world."

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In late may, I asked Zoya what she thought about the melee now, especially that “Fuck you.” Every aspect of her appearance says I don’t have time for this nonsense : her single-color stretch dresses (she was wearing black that day), her Velcroed sandals, her blunt bangs, her black rectangular glasses. We were at a printmaking studio in Jaffa that had invited her to learn how to make monotype prints. The process involves painting on a large piece of plastic, then taking an impression. She was turning a painting of hers into a black-and-white version of itself, using broad, confident strokes, and she didn’t stop as she answered my question. “I think this was exactly the level of discussion appropriate for this situation,” she said.

Zoya’s series 7 October 2023 deserves a place in the canon of art about war. Twelve small, meticulous drawings in pencil, marker, crayons, and watercolor form a mournful martyrology. The backgrounds are flat black and the colors are somber, except for violent reds and oranges that reappear in several works and sometimes burst into red-orange flames. Zoya uses an easy-to-parse visual language, part grim children’s-book illustration, part German Expressionism: You feel Max Beckmann, one of her favorite artists, in the slashing lines, darkened hues, and unflinching yet somehow religious representations of horror. “I’m quoting historical paintings that depict suffering,” she told me. She wanted their help channeling the pain “so I’m not alone in this series.”

Zoya portrayed victims only; perpetrators are nowhere to be seen. With one exception—a drawing of child hostages—she did not reproduce the faces of actual people. Her figures are all sharp angles and outsize oval eyes. In a drawing about the Nova music festival, where hundreds of Israeli concertgoers were killed, the sticklike upper arms of the young people running from their murderers stretch out while their forearms slant up toward heaven and their calves kick out behind them. The staccato repetition of limbs and hands and toes turns the scene into a dance of death. Two drawings do disturbing things with heads. In Massacre of the Innocents, based on the Giotto fresco of the same name, murdered children lie heaped on the ground, and you can count more heads than bodies (some bodies may be blocking our view of others, but the effect is still eerie). In Zoya’s rendering of a rape victim lying face down in blood, her head has turned too far to the side, like a broken doll’s, and her empty eye sockets stare at the viewer.

Israelis gave me strange looks when they learned that I’d come all the way from New York to write a profile of an artist. In the middle of a war? Maybe I was really writing about the cultural boycott? That too, I said. Many Israelis in the arts and academia dread the anti-Israeli fury—or at least the fear of protest—that is making curators, gallerists, arts programmers, publishers, university department heads, and organizers of academic conferences loath to invite Israeli participants. Being shut out of international venues is a constant topic. For two decades, the Palestinian-founded Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) movement and the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel have pressured cultural organizations around the world to exclude Israelis, with mixed results.

But now the mission is succeeding. The Israeli visual artists I talked with feel that the world turned on them in a day—on October 19, to be precise, when Artforum published an open letter signed by 4,000 artists and intellectuals calling for a cease-fire, an end to violence against civilians, and humanitarian aid for Gaza. To the outrage of Israelis and many Jews elsewhere, the original version of the letter failed to mention that Hamas’s atrocities had started the war—or to mention Hamas at all.

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A month before I arrived in late spring, Ruth Patir, the artist chosen to represent Israel in the Venice Biennale, announced that her show would remain closed until there was a cease-fire and the hostages were released. The message, relayed a day before the press preview of the Israeli pavilion, was idealistic but also strategic: It had become clear that protests would block Israel's pavilion. I went to see Mira Lapidot, the chief curator of the Tel Aviv Museum of Art, who helped hang the show in Venice and participated in the decision to cancel it. She has deep reservations about the way the war is being conducted, but she was shocked that people in the arts, of all fields, would fail to recognize that "a person is not their government and not their state, that people are multifaceted, have different views, that there is a place for individuality. It is all completely just wiped out."



The Terrorist Attack at Nova Music Festival, 2023 (© Zoya Cherkassky. Courtesy of the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York.)

No less unnerving than the cancellations are the opportunities that dematerialize: the once-friendly museum director who no longer calls, the dance company that can't seem to book its usual tours. When I asked Israeli artists whether they had any upcoming shows abroad, I found that if they said yes, very likely the show would be in one of three places: a Jewish-owned gallery, a Jewish museum, or Germany, where strict laws prohibit anti-Semitic activity. (In June, Germany's federal intelligence agency classified BDS as a "suspected extremist organization.") Artists from abroad are also staying away from Israel. Kobi Ben-Meir, the chief curator at the Haifa Museum, told me that he used to be able to talk reluctant artists into showing their work there; now, if they take his calls, they say Let's talk in a year or so. "We are kind of like in a ghetto right now, here and also internationally," Maya Frenkel Tene, a curator at the Rosenfeld Gallery, which represents Zoya in Israel, told me. "A Jewish ghetto."

Zoya being Zoya, she waved off my questions about boycotts. Being boycotted is not like having your home bombed, she said—and that, in turn, is not as bad as being in Gaza, she added. Later, she told me that she wished boycotts were her problem. What is your problem, then? I asked. "What to do to avoid the Holocaust," she said. Did she mean what would happen if Hamas or Hezbollah overran Israel? "It's not only Hamas and Hezbollah. The scariest part is what is happening within Israel," she said, "these crazy right-wing Israelis" who attack humanitarian aid convoys and terrorize Palestinians in the West Bank.

Zoya deplors the coalition governing her country, but about Gaza, she said, "I'm jealous of people who know what is the right thing to do. I have no idea." Like almost everyone I met in Israel, she wondered whether she and her family would have to leave; she and Sunny have thought about going to his village in Nigeria, but violence roils that country too.

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Zoya's dismissiveness notwithstanding, the boycotts are worrisome, and not just because they seek to censor the art of an entire nation. Zoya's work in particular is a reminder of what would be lost. Her art offers the world a chance to learn about the richly complicated reality underneath the schematic picture of Israel as a society of oppressors and oppressed that is all too often disseminated by anti-Zionists.

Zoya's art should not be defined by the October 7 series alone. She is prolific and protean, and those drawings are not necessarily her best work. When she arrived on the Israeli art scene in her early 20s, she was precociously sophisticated. Over the course of nearly three decades, she has made unforgettable art about art and searing art about society, and mastered a remarkable array of genres: manga, digital art, Jewish liturgical texts, even Soviet Socialist Realism, whose greatest artists she is determined to rescue from the trash heap of Western art history. "She can do anything and everything in art," Gideon Ofrat, a prominent historian of Israeli art, told me. "She does not repeat herself. She always develops a new style and a new language, and everything she touches is done expertly from a technical point of view."

What unites Zoya's eclectic body of work is her supremely jaded and very Soviet sarcasm—and an empathy for her subjects that has deepened over the years. "It's easy to be ironic as an artist, but it is not easy to be funny," Ben-Meir, the Haifa Museum curator, said of Zoya. Stupidity or hypocrisy or ideological rigidity activates her inner shock jock—in her art, and in person. These days she gets a lot of her comic material from postcolonialist lingo. Once, as we were leaving her studio, a shrieking sound came from somewhere in the building. What on earth is that? I asked. Wild parrots, Zoya answered. Parrots were brought to Israel as pets but escaped and reproduced; now they occupy all of Tel Aviv. "They are not indigenous to this land," she observed. "Genocidal settler parrots!" when the 14-year-old Zoya learned in 1991 that her family had finally received permission to move to Israel—as it happens, they left two weeks before the fall of the Soviet Union—she was excited: She would finally have access to all the Western culture forbidden to her, like music and art. Yet she had already been studying for four years in one of the best art schools in the Soviet Union, a nation that offered more rigorous training in the techniques of academic realism than any other country, and when her teacher told her that art students in Israel didn't master the same skills, she cried. "I thought, I will never learn how to draw," she told me. She got into one of the top Israeli high schools specializing in art and found that the students' draftsmanship indeed lagged behind hers. She had her friends back home send her their homework assignments and did them on her own.

Zoya belongs to a cohort of young émigrés from the former Soviet Union known as the "1.5 generation," the first set of child immigrants in Israel who didn't assimilate the way children usually do. The muscular sabra ideal never appealed to them; when they grew up, they held on to their hybrid identity, Liza Rozovsky, a reporter at Haaretz originally from Moscow, told me. The "Russians"—"in Israel they did become 'Russian' all of a sudden, even though most of them did not even come from Russia," she noted—had their own schools, their own theater and music-enrichment classes. Missing their biscuits, cakes, and very nonkosher sausages, they opened grocery stores that stocked Russian brands. The children were miserable at first: They dressed wrong, ate funny-smelling sandwiches in school, and were bullied. Pride came later, Rozovsky said. The teenage Zoya did fine. "I was in the art bubble," she explained. But she registered the unhappiness around her.

The Russians didn't fit into the Western racial categories often used to classify Israelis—white Ashkenazi overclass on the top; dark Mizrahi, or Middle Eastern, underclass on the bottom—because they were white and Ashkenazi, yet rungs below better-integrated Israelis socially; no one knew what to make of them. Whatever advanced degrees and white-collar jobs they may have had in the Soviet Union, now they worked as cleaning ladies and night guards. The run-down neighborhoods they moved into had previously been the domain of the Mizrahi Jews, and the two low-status groups engaged in a war of mutual condescension. The Mizrahim thought that Russian men were pale and unmanly and that Russian women were all prostitutes. Zoya remembers Israeli boys taunting Russian girls by calling out "Five shekels!," meaning five shekels for sex. For their part, the Russians considered the Mizrahim—indeed, most Israelis—loud, uncultured boors.

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Russians didn't fit into the Israeli art world, either. In 1990s Israel, realism was reactionary, passé. "It was embarrassing to know how to paint, but even more embarrassing to know how to paint like a Russian," Zoya said in a gallery talk in 2017. Good artists—serious artists—made abstract, conceptual, intellectual pieces. Cultural gatekeepers were Ashkenazi. There were almost no Russian gallery owners or curators. Zoya studied at the HaMidrasha School of Art at Beit Berl College, known as a home for avant-garde, nonrepresentational artists. The poststructuralist curriculum annoyed her.

She couldn't make sense of subversive French thinkers such as Georges Bataille and Jacques Lacan, because she wasn't familiar with the discourses they were subverting; that made her feel ashamed. To the great chagrin of her mother, she never graduated. "I'm not a philosopher, and I didn't go study art because I want philosophy," she told me. "I like painting."

Zoya didn't become a painter right away. She made conceptual works whose point seemed to be that they were amusing to make. An early collaboration with a classmate involved flying to Scotland with a lightweight, human-size sculpture of a friend in what looked like a body bag—U.K. customs officers were flummoxed—and then taking the "friend" into the forest, where they posed him in various positions and photographed him. Don't ask what the point was: They were 19. "At this age, you can't really explain what the hell it means," Zoya said.

Her breakthrough came in 2002 with a solo show called "Collectio Judaica." It was the product of a great deal more thought and care. Like "Pravda" 15 years later, it would probably not do well outside Israel; its attitude toward Jewishness is even more open to misinterpretation.

The show mostly consisted of Jewish objects, all perfectly designed and executed by Zoya. But it was not a simple celebration of Jewish material culture. Some of the items were traditional: a Passover Haggadah, two porcelain seder-plate sets, and four mizrach gouache paintings (a mizrach hangs on the eastern wall of an observant Jewish home in order to orient prayer). But other fabrications were, well, sui generis. In the gallery window lay three brooches, all 18-karat-gold replicas of the yellow cloth Star of David that the Nazis made Jews wear, complete with the word jude in the middle. A Tel Aviv council member in the pro-settler National Religious Party heard about the show and demanded that the mayor and Israel's attorney general close it. Her effort failed. The show was a hit. Why would anyone turn one of the most despised symbols of anti-Semitism into jewelry and display it as if it were a Jewish treasure? The seemingly bizarre undertaking encapsulated the fundamental gesture of the show. "I think this is the most important work Zoya did ever," Zaki Rosenfeld, her gallerist in Israel, told me. (Since 2019, Zoya has also been represented by the Fort Gansevoort gallery, in New York.) Zoya was erasing the line between the sacred and the vile, the Jewish artifact and the anti-Semitic image, then polishing the resulting monstrosities to a very high shine.

The inspiration for "Collectio Judaica" came from a mug in the shape of a hooked-nosed Jew, which Zoya found in an antiques store in Tel Aviv. "I asked the seller, 'How much is the anti-Semitic cup?'" she told me. "And he said, 'Why do you think it's anti-Semitic?' For me it was obvious it's anti-Semitic. And I said, 'Maybe this is how he sees himself.'" "Collectio Judaica" was in essence an homage to distorted Jewish self-perceptions, an aestheticizing of their masochistic attractions. As Zoya later put it, she wanted to show "how Jews see themselves through the anti-Semitic gaze."

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The objects are mesmerizing. Take the Passover Haggadah. Zoya, who knew virtually nothing about Jewish liturgy, wrote it herself, by hand, in a Hebrew font she invented that looks remarkably authentic. She then illuminated it in a style that combines medieval art and Russian Constructivism, tossing in a few references to Tetris, a computer game invented in the Soviet Union. Many of the illustrations portrayed rabbis with the bodies of birds. This was an allusion to a famous 14th-century Haggadah, the Birds' Head Haggadah, which sidestepped the medieval Jewish aversion to representing the human face by replacing Jews' heads with those of birds. But Zoya reversed the order and attached birds' bodies to Jewish faces, thereby invoking an old anti-Semitic trope in which Jews were portrayed as ravens.

Animal faces in the mizrach gouache paintings were based on a late-19th-century anti-Semitic German postcard depicting Jews as animals, according to the scholar Liliya Dashevski. The panels of another exquisite object, an East Asian-style folding screen, featured paintings of Orthodox Jewish men whose coattails flip outward like birds' tails. Dashevski speculated that Zoya was playing on a secular-Israeli slur for Hasidic Jews, "penguins." And then there were the seder plates. In their center, Zoya drew Gorey-esque little boys, one trussed in rope, the other naked and chubby like a Renaissance putto. Around them she delicately splattered red paint, like drops of blood. Did the bound children merely refer to the killing of the firstborn, part of the story of Passover, and did the drops of blood allude to the red wine dribbled by seder participants onto the plate to indicate their sorrow at Egyptian suffering? Or was she invoking the blood libel? Yes and yes. The objects held layers of meaning.

Gideon Ofrat, the art historian, was enchanted by "Collectio Judaica." "This surprising, shocking, satirical anti-Semitism. It was breathtaking. It was very daring," he told me. He bought a pillow—"perfectly done"—embroidered with the portrait of a big-nosed old man with a sack over his shoulder, a depiction of the Wandering Jew, another anti-Semitic trope. The Jewish Museum in New York now owns the Haggadah and a seder-plate set. Zoya's career as a high-concept prankster thrived, but toward the end of the aughts, she decided to do something really radical: learn to paint life again. The push came from a mentor she acquired during a stint in Berlin, Avdey Ter-Oganyan, a charismatic and transgressive Russian "action," or performance, artist with a fiery disdain for art-world norms. He encouraged Zoya to shed her intellectualism and recommit herself to seeing.