

FORT GANSEVOORT

FAMILY STYLE

American Studies

Kyiv-born Zoya Cherkassky traces her first year in America with paintings that recast its most ordinary symbols through an immigrant's eye.

Sahir Ahmed – September 16, 2026



Zoya Cherkassky, *Katz's*, 2026. Image courtesy of Fort Gansevoort and the artist.

Not long after her move to New York, Zoya Cherkassky visited Katz's Delicatessen, the old Jewish deli on the Lower East Side. It was one of those places, says the Ukrainian-born Israeli painter, that felt familiar before she had even been there, in the same way the city itself can seem half-remembered to someone arriving for the first time.

There was, of course, all the recognizable theater of the Manhattan classic: sausages hanging against the wall, sandwiches served across the counter, customers packed into a line and hunched over plates. But what caught Cherkassky's eye was an employee pushing a cart piled with pickles toward the kitchen. She pulled out a notebook and pencil and began sketching the scene. The moment inspired *Katz's*, 2026, one of the paintings in her new exhibition, "American Cooking," at Fort Gansevoort.

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Zoya Cherkassky, *Blossom in Greenport*, 2026. Image courtesy of Fort Gansevoort and the artist.

In the new suite of paintings Cherkassky shifts her eye away from the spectacle of the institution and focuses on the labor that keeps it running; the worker is easy to overlook in life but difficult to miss in the painting. For the artist, who uses everyday observation as a form of social portraiture, it is often these stray details that make a painting feel real: the employee pushing the pickle cart, or the fact that two of its bins are white while four are green. “It is why I cannot paint from photos alone,” she says.

Born in Kyiv in 1976, Cherkassky left the Soviet Union for Israel with her family at 14, the first of two major migrations in her life. She spent most of her adult life in Tel Aviv, until the political situation in the region pushed her to leave with her young daughter, first for Berlin and eventually the United States, a move she has described as made in panic rather than planned. Over the decades, she has made ordinary life, meals, markets, family gatherings, bureaucratic offices, people passing on the street, into access points for questions of immigration, class, politics, memory, and belonging.

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Zoya Cherkassky, *The New American Gothic*, 2026. Image courtesy of Fort Gansevoort and the artist.

Her move to Greenport on Long Island brought those questions into the present tense. America, Cherkassky says, has the peculiar quality of seeming familiar almost everywhere in the world, its culture exported endlessly through movies, books, products, and food. In fact, the title for “American Cooking” began with a 1970s cookbook that she found while rummaging at the dump on Shelter Island, where she keeps a studio. “Somehow it reminded me of Soviet food styling,” Cherkassky says, describing both as part of a since-abandoned international style of food photography in which meals, meticulously arranged, appear too perfect for eating.

Cherkassky began translating the page’s photographs into sketches, but the book was only a starting point. Food soon became, in her words, a *leitmotif* running through otherwise disconnected images of American life. What might once have existed as a distant image of the culture is now simply the view outside: In the watercolor *Blossom in Greenport*, 2026, a cherry tree blooms just beyond a white picket fence, an almost suspiciously perfect picture of domestic life.

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Zoya Cherkassky, *Street Scene in Little Haiti, Miami*, 2026. Image courtesy of Fort Gansevoort and the artist.

In Cherkassky's work, however, familiar symbols rarely remain quite what they were. *The New American Gothic*, 2026, borrows the composition of Grant Wood's famous 1930 painting of a stern couple posed in front of a white clapboard farmhouse, the man gripping a pitchfork. Long since absorbed into the country's visual vocabulary, Wood's painting has become shorthand for a certain vision of rural American life. Cherkassky replaces the couple with herself and her Nigerian husband outside their suburban home, and the pitchfork with a menorah, offering an interpretation of Americanness as a site where boundaries are constantly redrawn.

Food makes those shifting terms particularly easy to see. In *Borscht*, 2026, Cherkassky paints the ingredients she now buys in New York to make the beet-based Eastern European soup that she grew up eating. Then there is *Street Scene in Little Haiti, Miami*, 2026, drawn from a city block she encountered while in Florida for a monthlong residency: a red-and-yellow takeout spot beneath palms, its façade layered with breakfast and lunch menus, an ice freezer, and a sign advertising Bitcoin. Together, these images suggest a version of America defined from the everyday overlap of cultures, habits, and histories.

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Zoya Cherkassky, *Street Scene in Little Haiti, Miami*, 2026. Image courtesy of Fort Gansevoort and the artist.

Things that might strike an American as entirely unremarkable appeared almost surreal to Cherkassky, who remembers staring in awe at a fried Oreo during a street fair in Baltimore. She photographed the food stand's signs knowing she would eventually make something from them. In *Sweet Tea & Fried Oreo*, 2026, the canvas is split between an amber glass of sweet tea and enormous fried cookies. What could be more American? And yet, seen through Cherkassky's perspective, the familiar is inverted through the eyes of someone for whom it is still wonderfully strange.

When I ask what connects the many places Cherkassky has painted, from Ukraine and Israel to Nigeria and the United States, her answer is immediate: "Humans are the same everywhere." Nigeria, she tells me, can unexpectedly remind her of a Ukrainian village. "No matter where you go, even if people speak different languages," she says, "everyone's still kind of speaking the same ones."

"Zoya Cherkassky: American Cooking" is on view through November 7, 2026, at Fort Gansevoort at 5 9th Ave, New York, NY 10014.