

CHORNOBYL
by Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak

April 26, 1986 unleashed a cataclysmic moment of unparalleled unbridled energy. It continues to awe and humble in its divine display of horror and tragedy as well as beauty and grace.

On a misty autumn day, 10 years ago, a Ukrainian radio-oncologist and I embarked on an officially sanctioned visit to the Chornobyl Zone. The Chornobyl nuclear power complex is situated 65 miles northwest of Kyiv, the capital of Ukraine. It is ground zero, saturated with radioactive dust, a fenced 40-mile wide circle called the Zone of Estrangement. At the first designated checkpoint, we were shown to changing rooms and issued gauze-like shoes, pants, jacket, gloves, and a mask to filter outside radioactive particles. After we donned our protective gear, our affable guide herded us into his car, and our tour began.

The air was laden with moisture, a continuous sprinkling of rain. It was eerily quiet. The silence permeated the vast open spaces and shrouded the nearby forest of charred trees. There were no sounds of birdsong, no buzzing of insects, no fluttering of wings.

Passing vast stretches of flat land and sheared forests, we drove toward a cluster of block-like Soviet-style structures – the town of Pripyat. Stopping, we wandered through the wildly overgrown buildings and grounds. I felt I was inside an enchanted tale. Apple trees were weighed down with scores of golden ripe fruit. Here was the story of the poisoned apple, the allure of deceptive beauty.

Left untamed, nature was resolutely reclaiming herself, regenerating life and spreading her healing mantle over the dust and decay. Tree limbs were forging their way in through broken windows, saplings were breaking through concrete floors and taking root.

Inside the crumbling, condemned buildings, it looked like people left in a hurry, intending to return. The children's daycare center still had neatly lined up shoes and slippers, rows of tiny metal frame beds readied for naptime, painted murals peeling off the walls, toys and dolls strewn everywhere. I picked up some children's drawings and scrawled bits of notepaper scattered on the floor. "You can take those with you," our guide informed me," but they'll need to go through the decontamination process." I followed his directives. Those saved bits and pieces of child's play were later woven into my work.

As we drove back to the orientation center, I gazed out into the distance and followed the tall gray silhouette of the sarcophagus shielding the remnants of nuclear reactor No.4. It jutted out against the sky, this memorial to the desperate nightmare after the 1986 explosion. I thought of all the cleanup workers, now interred with other victims of radiation, all the tons of lead and sand dropped by helicopter through the reactor's roof to quench the fire, all the steel and concrete poured to encase the melting core. It was the recollection of all that accumulated human effort and trauma, of all the building up and layering of organic and inert material to contain the "beast", that later informed my mixed media artwork. Indeed this was at the heart of my compulsion to combine seemingly disparate materials and processes, like lead and cloth, gold-leafing and torching.

Our official tour ended inside the power station. I stood in the control room of a reactor virtually identical to that of the destroyed No. 4. The graph bars and squiggles flashing on the monitors were mesmerizing, strangely familiar and alluring. In their visual patterning and color they mimicked the twists and turns of embroidery threads deftly worked into scraps of cloth. The women at the facility had gifted me with embroidered mementoes - works of their hands. I came to regard these remarkable women as Chornobyl's grace notes and later incorporated their handiwork into my art.

The control room provided the coda. I was riveted by the monitor screens. Sensors were continuously relaying the temperature and other information in vivid traffic-signal colors. I imagined the screen lighting up with yellow, then orange, then red -- the flickering lights signaling condition red, a release of too much heat and radiation, an impending meltdown.

Chornobyl continues to impact the lives of people who suffer from all manner of serious illness. For me, that experienced by children is most heartrending. In some measure, through the artwork, through words, and with related special projects, I address this, our human condition. I cannot save the world, but I can hopefully point in the direction of respectful vigilance, reverence, and compassion.

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