



Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak

dialogues

november 2, 2015 - january 4, 2016

dialogues

LYDIA BODNAR-BALAHUTRAK'S work is both a visual documentary of pivotal world events and an ongoing exploration of the essence of human nature: at its most base manifestations – power, greed, and abuse – and its more noble expressions – generosity, perseverance, and courage... With both word and image, Bodnar-Balahutrak calls for attention, consideration, and discussion of what is taking place around us today.

A visit to Chernobyl, Ukraine, the site of one of the most disastrous nuclear events in history, marked a transformation in Bodnar-Balahutrak's work, both in her creative process and personal approach to the incomprehensible atrocities that take place everyday. She became intrigued by post-disaster recovery, when tragedies become shrouded in memory, roots break through concrete, and vines grow over wreckage. Nature, she states, simultaneously heals and helps us forget what is too difficult to remember.

Her trip also left her with the desire to incorporate the text and objects she had collected over time into her work. She explains that in addition to her own voice she wanted the memories and voices of the world that she sees present in her pieces... She began to collage these mementos – newspaper articles, letters, Ukrainian embroideries, dolls, money, and maps – onto canvas and paint over them, sometimes scraping away paint only to add it back on later. The process of layering words, images, and paint reflects the artist's deep interest in how experiences submerge, resurface, and unravel over time.

Text, in the form of newspaper clippings or poems embedded into her work, plays a primary role in her process. Bodnar-Balahutrak firmly believes in the power of language, that a single word can affect tremendous change.

Particularly interested in how humans wield or manipulate words to conceal and reveal truth, she takes meticulous note of how different newspapers and journals cover the same event, “one paper puts it on the first page,” she states,” and the other barely writes about it.” By arranging numerous articles on the same canvas and subjectively covering and uncovering the text with paint, Bodnar-Balahutrak ultimately questions the power of the media and the authenticity of information.

In her most recent *Nests* series, the artist has incorporated a fable-like language in which a menagerie of animals act as stand-ins for very human dramas. A common house-fly rises to snare a mighty predator (represented by a Soviet coin), a spider lures one into its shiny nest full of worthless ruble notes, and a newborn squirrel is urged to wake up and reclaim its home. Each collage acts as a political parable, inviting discourse about the very nature of humanity.

As a displaced witness of the fragmentation of her familial home, it is natural that Bodnar-Balahutrak’s work focuses on current circumstances in Ukraine; however, her metaphorical language lays bare inherent human flaws, strengths, and emotions that we can all relate to. Fundamentally, her work calls for consciousness, as both artist and viewer navigate the layers of meaning gathered in each piece.

Excerpt from *Nature Studies* exhibition at Hunter Gather
Written by Laura Rossi and Julie Kesselman

Yakby Ty Znav / If You Had Known

Ivan Franko
(1856-1916)

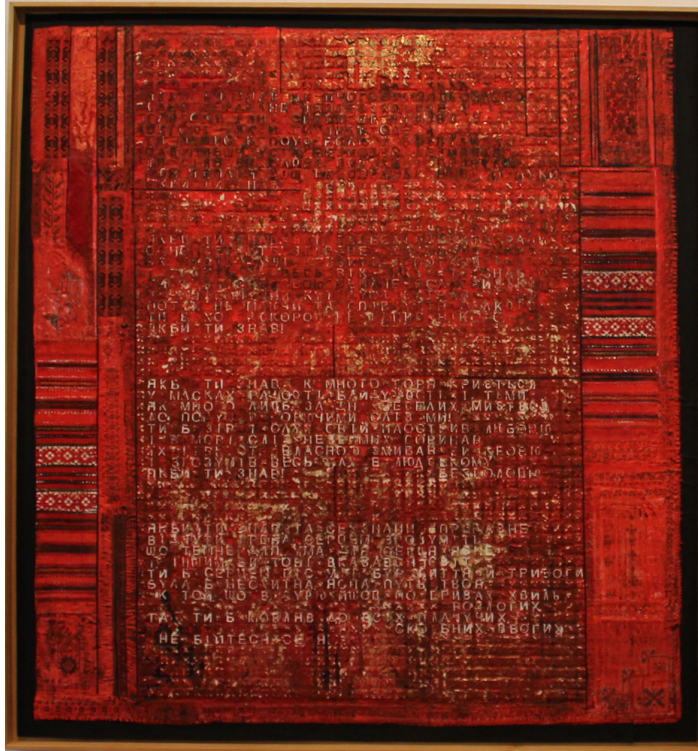
If only you had known
The might and weight of words.
One heartfelt word of kindness
Heals a wounded heart...
How wondrous – Had you known of that,
You'd surely not confront despair and pain with silence,
And mutely move away with stiffened lips, without a word;
You'd offer words of hope and consolation,
That'd rain onto the parched and thirsty fields and meadows -
If only you had known of that.

If you had known how deep a wound is cut
By uttering an angry, thoughtless, bitter word,
How innocence is cruelly bent and sullied
And poisoned for all time - were you aware of that
You'd banish anger like a rabid dog
To the far reaches of your darkest soul,
And seek compassion, love, and passion,
To not hurt anyone -
If you had known.

If you knew the amount of anguished sorrow
That's masked in comedy, indifference, apathy and gloom.
How many faces, by day happy, are washed in tears at night, alone.
You'd bathe your eyes and ears with love
And plunge into the roiling sea of tears,
Cleansing away the bitterness with your own blood,
And come to understand the folly of all humankind –
If you had known.

If you had only known. Such wisdom is archaic, rare;
It's felt, not known.
What's strange to reason, to the heart shines bright and clear...
A different world awaits, reveals itself to you.
You grow in spirit, midst the storms of life and anguish,
There is laid out a solid, shining path for you to take.
Like He who walked on crests of waves of spacious waters,
You'd say to all who seek, those yearning and the hopeful:
"Do not despair, fear not, 'tis I."

(Translated from Ukrainian by Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak)



If You Had Only Known and detail, 2014
67.5 x 62.5 inches
Embroidery, metal leaf, acrylic, oil, wax on wood panel

*Where has that life gone, and what has become of all that awful torment and torture?
Will it really be that no one will answer for everything that happened; that it will all be forgotten
without any words to commemorate it; that the grass will grow over it?*

– Vasily Grossman

It wasn't long after sitting down with artist Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak that these words were dictated from an enormous archive of gathered texts and images. As she read aloud, I heard the voice of an entire people: generations and ethnicities; citizens deemed dissidents; subjects to the toppled, yet lingering aura of the Soviet Union.

One could extrapolate many things from Lydia's work, but the most pertinent for me is the importance of discourse. Though you might not know it from afar, many of her paintings begin as extensive collages consisting primarily of articles, headlines, and photographs clipped out from various newspapers. Arranged in a sort of self-perpetuating dialogue, these excerpts usually center on a specific theme – more prominently the current political climate in Ukraine. It takes anywhere from several weeks to many months to gather and arrange the clippings. It may be even longer before she begins to paint over them – more or less obscuring the collage in its entirety.

Visually, her work is akin to a fascinating hide-and-seek that oscillates between found text and rendered imagery... Her collaged paintings investigate the written word, as well as the general nature of disseminated information. To what extent does diction broadcast hidden agendas? Conversely, what happens when rhetoric fails to conceal truth? Who decides what is circulated as opposed to what is suppressed? It is with these questions in mind that Lydia's work challenges the viewer to assess what is actually revealed in the dubious guise of context.

Written by Jake Eshelman



Will The Grass Grow Over It?, 2013
48 x 96 inches
Collage, oil, pigmented wax on linen

Europe Was Silent

Oleksander Oles'
(1878-1944)

When Ukraine fought for life,
Battling her hangman, living and dying,
And waiting in vain for some signs of compassion,
Europe was silent.

When Ukraine, in unfairly weighed battles,
Drained of blood, drenched in tears,
Looked to friends for survival,
Europe was silent.

When gripped in chains and brute force,
Ukraine was enslaved, not a master of the land that she tilled,
When her cries even stirred the immutable cliffs,
Europe was silent.

When Ukraine reaped a harvest of sorrow
For her lord executioner,
Herself dying of hunger and unable to speak,
Europe was silent.

When Ukraine was accursed
And replaced with mass graves,
When the demon himself had shed tears for her plight,
Europe was silent.

(Translated from Ukrainian by Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak)



And Europe Was Silent, 2015
48 x 96 inches
Oil, chalk, collage on distressed canvas

Fire and Ice

Robert Frost
(1874-1963)

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if I had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.



Fire and Ice (Maidan), 2015
48 x 96 inches
Oil, chalk, collage on distressed canvas



Testament Triptych, 2014
40.5 x 30 inches each
Oil, wax, mixed media on charred wood



(from left) *Whiteout, Curtains, Snags*, 2010
133 x 83 inches each
Mixed media over collage on unstretched canvas



Tangles, 2006
60 x 55 inches
Print media collage, acrylic, oil stick / canvas



Hedge, 2008
60 x 55 inches
Print media collage, acrylic, charcoal / canvas



White House, 2006
35 x 65.5 x 15 inches
Newspaper collage on wood and tree branch





Eek! They are Coming!, 2014
30 x 24 inches
Oil, wax, resins, metal and vinyl letters / distressed wood



You Are What You're Fed, 2014
9 x 9 inches
Inks, ruble coin, stamp on paper



Fly Eye to Eye, 2014
9 x 9 inches
Collage, inks, chalks, Soviet coin on paper



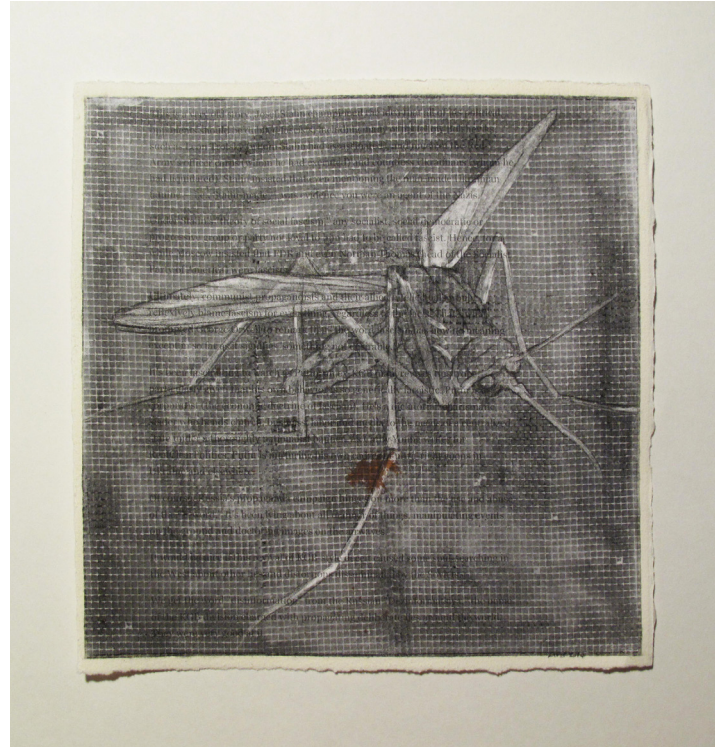
All That Glitters Is Not Gold, 2014
9 x 9 inches
Inks, chalks, ruble on paper



Wake Up!, 2014
9 x 9 inches
Charcoal, map, Ukrainian hryvnia on paper



Bites from Home, 2014
9 x 9 inches
Egg tempera, inks, stamped envelope on paper



It Sucks!, 2014
9 x 9 inches
Charcoal over printed text on paper



Newborn, 2014
9 x 9 inches
Graphite over map on paper



Shadowboxing, 2014
9 x 9 inches
Collage, ruble coin on paper



A Ravelling, 2014
9 x 9 inches
Charcoal, inks, Ukrainian hryvnia on paper

BIOGRAPHY

Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak was born in Cleveland, Ohio, completed her undergraduate art studies at Kent State University, studied at the Corcoran School of Art and, in 1977, received her Master of Fine Arts degree in painting from George Washington University, Washington, D.C. That year she moved to Houston, Texas, where she continues to live and work.

The artist first traveled to Ukraine in 1991 on a grant from the International Research and Exchanges (IREX) organization. In 1996, she toured the Chernobyl Zone. Those experiences changed her world view and her creative approach. Since 1991, she has participated in several national and international exhibitions and been awarded artist residencies in France, Ukraine, and U.S. venues. A monograph of her work was published in 2005.

In 2012, the Pearl Fincher Museum of Fine Arts presented her solo show *Thresholds*, featuring a selection from 20 years of work. Her most recent 2015 show *Nevermore* was featured at UIA in the historic Fletcher-Sinclair mansion in New York City. She is currently on the Studio Faculty of the Glassell School of Art, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.

Selected Permanent Art Collections:

Oxford University, England
Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, Arkansas
The Hoyt Institute of Fine Arts, Pennsylvania
El Paso Museum of Art, Texas
Tyler Museum of Art, Texas
Amarillo Museum of Art, Texas
Art Museum of South Texas, Corpus Christi
The Ukrainian Museum, New York City
UIMA, Chicago, Illinois





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