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## STUDIO VISIT: CONTEMPORARY ARTIST LYDIA BODNAR-BALAHUTRAK

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*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 contemporary 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.



“Scrubland” – Collage, acrylic, & charcoal; 64" x 92"

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 whether it’s the Arab Spring or – 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.





Collage in Progress





“Hearts-a-Bustin” – Collage, oil paint, & wax on canvas; 50.5" x 65"

Visually, her work is akin to a fascinating hide-and-seek that oscillates between found text and rendered imagery. Yet conceptually, it is not so lighthearted. 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.



So, wanting to catch a glimpse behind the scenes, I visited Lydia in her studio in Houston, TX to discuss her work, her influences, and what she's up to next:





Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak in her studio

**One of my favorite aspects about your work is that you actually take the time to sit down and cut out excerpts from the printed newspaper. Why is it that you don't use online sources?**

An artist friend often asks me why I won't use Photoshop or anything like that, but all I can say is that I'm just not interested. That's not the point of collage for me. It's the fact that I incorporate the real thing into my work.

**By that, you mean the act of discovering and gathering your materials?**

Yes. And there is something striking about the text. I don't want to scan my sources. I want to use the actual newspaper or magazine, which makes it... whatever... I don't know what it makes it. *[laughs]* Genuine. That's the impetus for me layering things on later in the studio. I clip from a source that I actually read, that I subscribe to. It's information that I collect and then lay out in a way that makes sense to me. It's my way of sharing information with others.





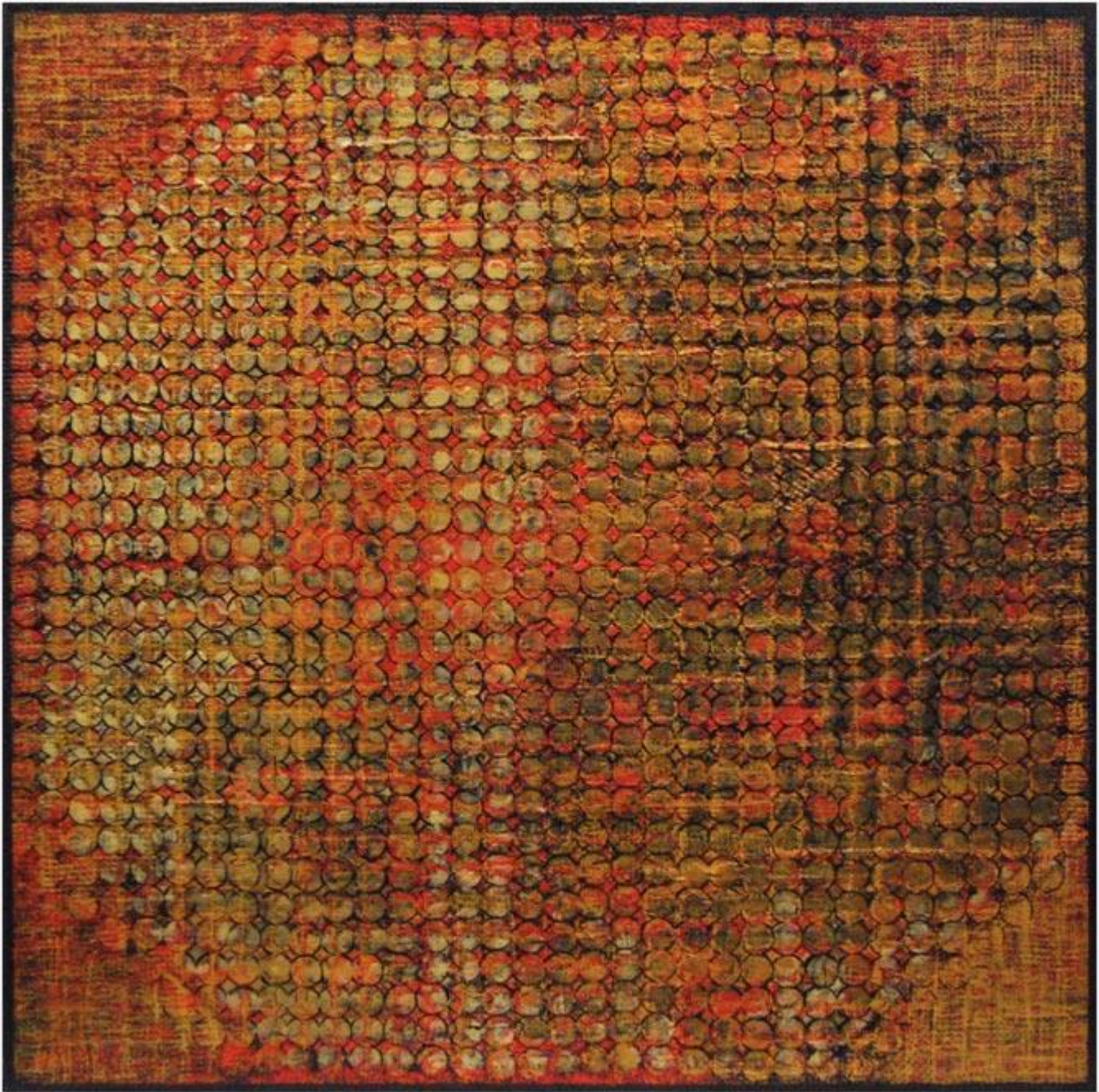
**That's something I've wondered about in terms of your collages – do they all come from the same source? Do you organize excerpts into categories?**

[Laughs] I have a fancy archive made up of old shoeboxes. But yes, I have a couple of sources that I trust, but that's just one aspect about collage for me. The other part is obscuring the text – or whatever I use. For example, some of my pieces have embroidery underneath them in addition to newspaper clippings.

**I assume that was part of a series?**



Yes. Those pieces center on Chernobyl.



**Lights Out** - embroidered linen, resins, wax, oil on canvas, 54 x 54

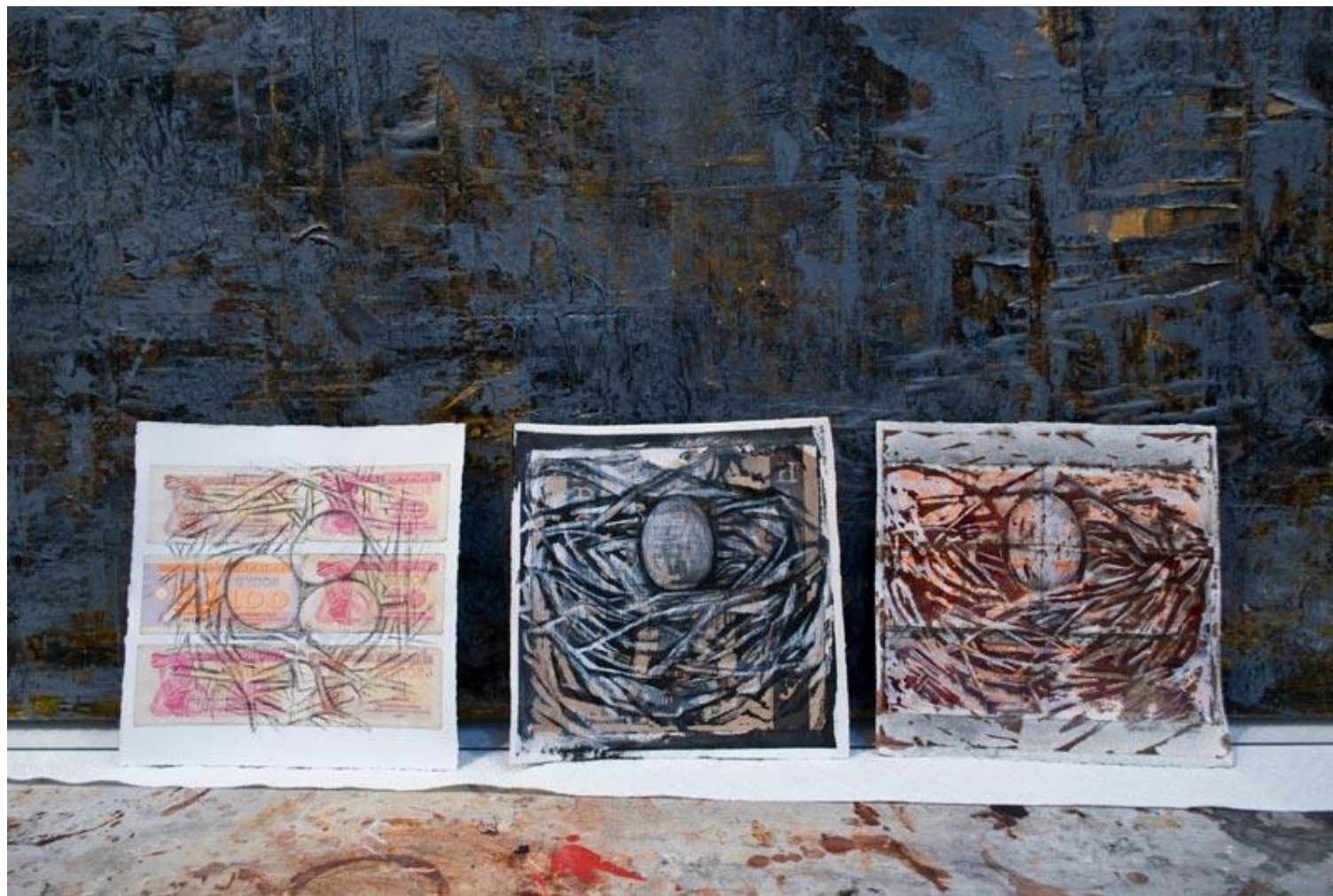
**Was the embroidery something that you found during your visit?**

Sort of. They are bits and pieces that women in the region gave to me. And some were pretty tacky, but somebody *made* them. Actually I kept some photographs of those collages before I started to paint over them so there's a record of what's underneath.



**I'm really interested in your idea of simultaneously concealing and revealing. Can you speak a bit about how that affects your process?**

In retrospect, I see that I've done it longer than I thought, but the turning point was a trip to Ukraine when I came back wanting to use text and objects that could reproduce the experience surrounding actual events. I started with objects that were given to me, and this whole idea of identity started piecing itself together – especially after the Chornobyl visit.



Nest Collages on Printed Ukrainian Currency

**What was it like to visit Chornobyl?**

It was difficult, but also somewhat uplifting. It was interesting because nature is so unharnessed in the zone. And there's a healing aspect about it – seeing buildings grown over with trees and roots breaking through the concrete. There was something really magical about it. And the silence was incredible. It was eerily quiet.

**Were the animals gone too?**



Right. There was nothing—a vast stillness. No sound of birdsong, no buzzing of insects, no fluttering of wings. The countryside was speckled with small towns that were built up for workers who were brought in to work in the plants, but they were mostly deserted. And there were small villages too, but nothing can be demolished because it will raise the radioactive dust. So it's almost like everything stopped – except nature. There were vines and ripe apple orchards everywhere.



“Tangles” – collage, charcoal, & oil stick on canvas; 60” x 55”

**But you can't eat the fruit.**

No that's another kind of enchanted fairy tale thing... those huge, ripened apples that look so luscious. Well then again people do eat them, and the mushrooms that grow nearby. Many local villagers came back because it's home to them.



## Have many villagers in the area have gotten sick?

I don't know what kind of documentation they have going. But it's not like the radioactive fallout happened and there were sightings of bizarre creatures, because the animals either died or couldn't reproduce. There were birth defects among children. That's where my series "The Innocents" began because I visited some orphanages with the doctor whom I accompanied throughout the zone. The children had sallow colored skin and many of them had hair missing, but they had bows stuck on them – as if gift-wrapped.



Inspiration Wall

**This was immediately after the incident?**

A bit later. The fallout happened in April of 1986, I went in 1996, and I had the show of my work in 2006.

**So what are your plans for 2016?**

*[Laughs]* I don't know. Something special I'm sure. But Chernobyl has left an effect on me – at least the healing properties. Somehow, out of the muck and out of the destruction, there is this sort of rebirth and regeneration. That image of vines growing over things has stayed with me.

**Jumping back to the present, how do you approach making work that centers on current events?**

Well I do a *lot* of archiving. I like to follow a particular news event over time, so I cut out everything I can find that has to do with whatever is going on. It struck me how over time, a given event will be spoken of differently. The heroes become the villains, wars turn into 'conflicts', and so on.



**Do you find that this is the benefit of retrospect or does it mirror changing opinions?**



Both. We just had the 10-year anniversary of the initial invasion of Iraq, and the assessment of that has been grim. Even seeing my own work, I look at it differently now.

Oftentimes, I'll make a collage but can't bear to look at it myself without covering it up. I had a series of pieces I did on war victims; these defaced people with missing body parts. I was at a loss of what to do, so I soaked a gauze towel in gesso and started to gently press it onto the canvas. I had to somehow get rid of the images. But it wasn't aversion so much as sympathy. It was almost like my way of tending to their wounds, of bandaging them.

**Are you influenced more by current events or common themes throughout world history?**

I'd say both, but current affairs are more immediate. I'll look through the paper and something will catch my eye; something that I feel is important. When the revolutions started in Libya, I was fascinated because I thought, 'wow, these regimes are falling.' So my way of keeping tabs on it was to cut out images and text from the news coverage. Then the revolution spread. The situation in Syria is horrible and it's still playing out. I thought it would be over by now, so I've found myself having several canvases devoted to it as opposed to just the one I originally planned on. I think I'm working on the last one in the series, but time will tell.



**How do you view the longevity of politically charged artwork? Are you worried that your work is limited to a specific generation?**

That's a good question. Hopefully there is something about my work that is timeless. If I were writing about something current that deeply moved me, I would hope that someone in the future could get something out of it – as we do regarding past events. I like the idea of connection and think that words and images resonate over time. Granted the particulars may get lost. Take Mona Lisa for instance, we don't know much about who she was but there is something that is communicated on not just an aesthetic level – a basic human empathy. It's intrinsic. There are certain visual metaphors that everyone can access, and I hope that my work achieves that.

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