

Reality Check

Directions in Contemporary Art since Ukrainian Independence

by ADRIENNE KOCHMAN

Ukraine's 1991 independence from the Soviet Union, and the opening of geographic borders, altered long-held perspectives of Ukraine and the West by its respective citizens. This was arguably clearest as native Ukrainians and those in the third wave diaspora began to interact through travel, open interpersonal communication and accessible public media, such as the printed press, television and radio.⁽¹⁾ Witnessing firsthand Ukraine's momentous social, economic, and political changes, became a genuine opportunity.

For Ukrainian professional artists, the collapse of the Soviet Union created an opportunity to learn and engage with current artistic developments occurring in the west, as well as delve into those of the past from which they had been excluded. Freedom to openly explore the sphere of avant-garde aesthetics and its omission of dogma was a prevailing attraction, modeled in the establishment of the Soros Foundation's Center for Contemporary Art in Kyiv (1993). Its encouragement of artistic experimentation and exposure to the work and creative process of foreign artists through lectures and exhibitions, demonstrated the ways in which visual communication could occur, ideally opening new modes of thought. Indeed, the Center declared its mission on its brochure front cover, "Contemporary art allows people to experience the discomfort not knowing all the answers".

The early to mid 1990s coincided with western contemporary art's diversification – a shift from a movement-based avant-garde concerned with progressive aesthetic developments to individual exploration visualized through contemporary art's discursive language. 'There was no avant-garde to join' was an often-stated comment heard of Ukrainian artists, their eagerness to be part of an international avant-garde momentum sobered by its absence. Although this 'reality check' may have been deflating initially, the individualized nature of engagement with the avant-garde enabled artists to approach issues evenhandedly - no one style, medium, or cultural perspective, was superior to another's.

How an artist chose to negotiate formal concerns with subject matter and its effectiveness in conveying the work's idea remained the professional standard, and the freedom to make those choices provided rich and fertile ground for innovative visual exploration.

Reality Check explores the work of eight artists affected by Ukraine's 1991 independence: Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak, Anna Bogatin, Yhelena Hall, Michael Hall, Roman Hrab, Natalka Husar, Yulia Pinkusevich, and Valya. Among the group are members of the pre-independence diaspora or third wave - Bodnar-Balahutrak, Hrab and Husar, and those of the fourth-wave, who immigrated post-independence: Bogatin, Yhelena Hall, Yulia Pinkusevich, and Valya. For the former, Ukraine was an inaccessible homeland, known primarily through the experience of older family members, and those of the community, who had left as a result of World War II. Ukraine's independence was the end of decades-long waiting, and the beginning of reconciling past trauma. Bodnar-Balahutrak and Husar address their entry and firsthand exposure to Ukraine through different but interrelated approaches. Bodnar-Balahutrak's catalyzed her work in a new direction, angry over the ravagement of her ancestral home, through the consequences of Chernobyl, but also Soviet dominance and persecution. Nature is often a metaphor for Ukraine in her work – in the form of soil, grass, sticks, found organic material on the ground, the picture plane synonymous with its land, as in the *Nests*, 2014 series, as are textile patterns from indigenous folk dress, pictured in *If You Had Only Known*, 2014. Husar assessed the state of Ukraine's situation through the behavior of its citizens. 'Why They Behave Like Russians' is a narrative she began upon visiting Ukraine after the 2004-2005 Orange Revolution. Diligently watching passers-by on the escalators of Kyiv's Metro stations, she noticed the high number of men looking like mobsters. Tough guys, dressed to intimidate, they exuded a sense of power through fear, and yet Husar was aware that their appearance masked a gentler side. Indeed, their cover was a necessity for survival, addressing

⁽¹⁾'Third wave' refers to Ukrainians who immigrated as a result of World War II, as well as their children born abroad.

the notion that “innocents will be handicapped in a corrupt and violent world”, in the way that “a father is burdened if he wishes to shield his innocent child.”⁽²⁾

Hrab creates saturated imprints of color and light from multiple images re-worked into various altered forms - distilled, obstructed and otherwise. *Horizon Line (signal to noise)*, 2012, is a Carpathian Mountain landscape extracted and reassembled into pure sensory experience, evocative and raw. It reads as a juxtaposition of rural vs. urban; untainted nature vs. modern industrial worlds, as the artist’s memories of the site are combined with the kind of noise traffic and diagnostic read-outs we experience in modern day life. The blurring of information and consequential confusion about what can be taken for truth is suggested in *Green Zone Kilim*, 2008-2009. Assembled from low-resolution satellite photographs of Baghdad into a beautifully patterned field for prayer, Hrab has reversed the anticipated U.S. government’s reaction to the situation in Iraq from one of criticism and aggression, supported by human anonymity to one of respect and shared reverence for the human condition.

Bogatin’s interest in color saturation and line as they are found in nature, are driven by her quest for profound peace and harmony. Each subject’s inherent color composition, be it [a] *Chameleon*, 2014, *Aurora*, 2015 or *Iris*, 2016 is set into an ordered structured pattern. Close inspection reveals every color nuance, subtle brushwork unraveling a slowed down process of looking, observing and understanding a single object or scene. These defy the modern-day propensity for scanning information quickly, often arriving at an assessment incomplete, superficial and distorted.

The ubiquity of technology and the benefits of the latest amenity in modern industrial society are questioned by Yhelena and Michael Hall. Found objects and/or one’s rendered obsolete by changes in manufacturing processes, labor demands or social necessity, such as the bellows in *Bullafollis Cylinder*,

⁽²⁾Gerta Moray, “‘Bringing Things to Justice,’ Image and Story in the Paintings of Natalka Husar”, *Husar Handbook*, ed. Dawn Owen, Guelph, Ontario: Macdonald Stewart Art Centre, 2010.

2016 point to human perceptions of need and technological dependence. Their displacement from their original purpose - here, in a context designed for active play and amusement – transforms the component from a vehicle for accomplishing practical tasks to a hands-on toy, designed to bring joy, laughter and improve the human spirit.

Conscious of the role of media and its distorting effects –akin to Hrab, Pinkusevich noticed the degree to which conflict in the west is largely understood through the media. *Silencing the Cacophony*, 2015 is a recreation of Kyiv’s Maidan Square and the 2013-14 revolution that ensued there. Mimicking media exposure, she designed the painting based on series of drone images, and included the black and white striping of dazzle camouflage, used by Britain and the U.S. on ships primarily during World War I, to disorient the enemy’s ability to pinpoint them as a target. The addition of pulleys and sandbags provided greater tangibility and imposed the conflict into the viewing space, the outpouring of violence made ever more real.

Valya perforates, color dyes, weaves and paints felt and other fibers to create highly tactile works designed to evoke the spirit and presence of individuals, some long gone, in *Cell Memories* and the triptych *Shadows of Our Golden Ancestors: Seeding; Between the Worlds; Golden Ancestors*. *Cell Memories* considers the genetic imprint left by our ancestors and the concept of molecular origin at the fundamental biological level. *Shadows...* illustrates a similar idea as a shared historic and organic process, from fertilization in *Seeding*, through maturation and the solidification of forms in *Between the Worlds*, to the existence of humans in *Golden Ancestors* – here notable literary and historic Ukrainian figures whose contribution defined its culture. The overarching interconnectedness of individuals globally through time and the fundamental connection binding humans to one another – however a stranger they may seem - begs humility and mindfulness, particularly in today’s tense global political climate.