



nature studies

February 2, 2015 · by Laura Rossi · in Featured Artists

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. In its exhibition, *nature studies*, Hunter Gather presents a selection of Bodnar-Balahutrak's works that chronicles the current adversities in Ukraine, the artist's ancestral home. With both word and image, Bodnar-Balahutrak calls for attention, consideration, and discussion of what is taking place around us today.

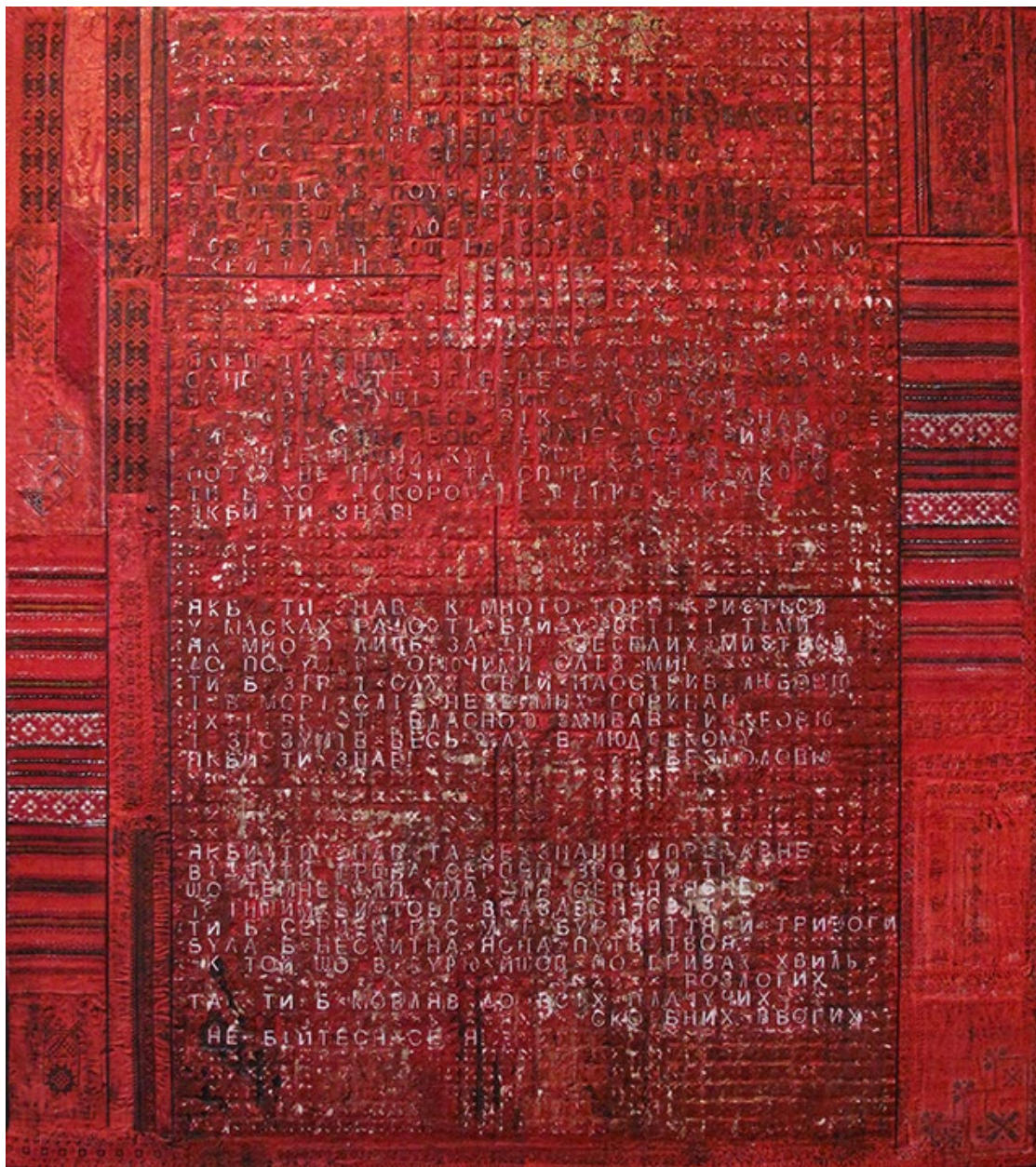
A visit to Chernobyl, the site of one of the most disastrous nuclear events in our history, marked a transformation in Bodnar-Balahutrak's work, both in her creative process and personal approach to the incomprehensible atrocities that take place everyday. She became intrigued by post-disaster recovery, 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.



Will the Grass Grow Over It? (2014, collaged printed matter, pigmented oil, wax, and resins on linen, 48” x 96”). A ground saturated with text and images of Stalin’s 1932-33 Holodomor in Ukraine is overgrown with blades of grass and shielded with the words of witness Vasily Grossman: “Where has that life gone? And what has become of all that awful torment and torture? Can it really be that no one will ever answer for everything that has happened? That all will be forgotten without even any words to commemorate it? That the grass will grow over it?”

Her trip also left her with the desire to incorporate the texts and objects she had collected over time into her work. Bodnar-Balahutrak explains that in addition to her own voice she wanted the memories, voices, and pieces of the world that she sees present in her pieces. This signaled a departure in her artistic career, whereas previously “painting was painting, oil on canvas, and drawing was drawing...there was no mixing.” 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.

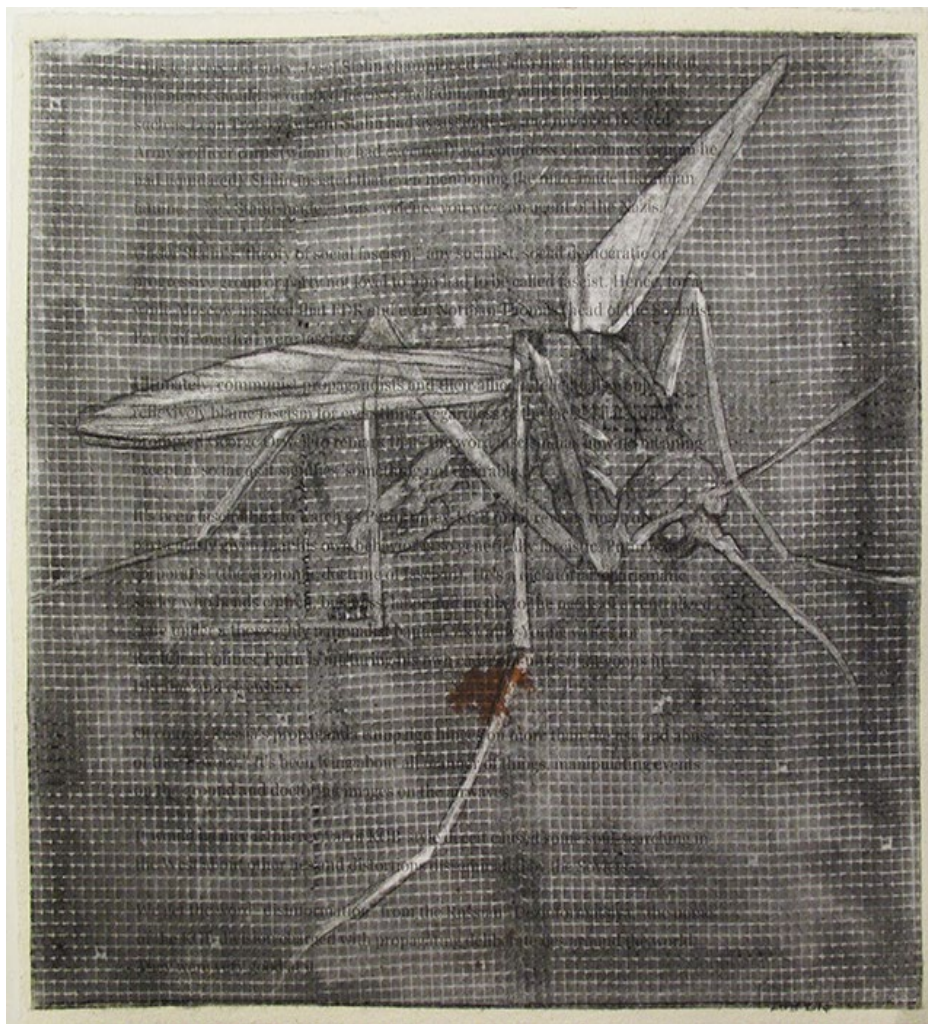


If You Had Only Known (2014, embroidery, metal leaf, acrylic, oil and wax on wood panel, 67 1/2" x 62 1/2"). This piece is based on a poem by Ivan Franko which states in its first stanza, “If you had only known, the might and weight of words... You’d surely not confront despair and pain with silence.” To read the entire translation of the poem [click here](#).

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 you 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.



It Sucks! (2015, text, collage, and charcoal on paper, 9" x 9"). This creature draws blood, spreads disease, and drones incessantly, like the spread of propaganda it feeds on.

As a displaced witness of the fragmentation of her familial home, it is natural that Bodnar-Balahutrak's work focuses on the current circumstances in Ukraine; however, her metaphorical language lays bare inherent human flaws, strengths, and emotions that we can all relate to. "That is what I can talk about," she states in reference to Ukraine, "that is my story. It also hopefully translates into conditions that are more universal. But I can only talk about what I know." Fundamentally, her work calls for consciousness, as both artist and viewer navigate the layers of meaning gathered in each piece.

Written by Julie Keselman and Laura Rossi.