

***Rupture and Call:
Famine Encounters from Contemporary Irish and Ukrainian Women in the Arts***

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Excerpted from p 90 - 93

Having engaged the topic of the Holodomor for most of her career from living in the Ukrainian-American community, Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak's own aesthetic orientation toward the subject has shifted over the course of her art-working. Much of her earlier work on the subject directly involves the human form, Ukrainian cultural symbols (such as embroidered garments), and religious iconography. In these works, the destruction of bodies in famine and genocide is linked to the desecration of Ukrainian culture. Over time, her practice has moved in the direction of painted collage, where the act of layering, uncovering, and recovering produces a dynamic space of encounter. Like the natural imagery and motifs we see in O'Kelly and McIntyre's works, one of Bodnar-Balahutrak's latest pieces, *Will the Grass Grow over It?* presents a close view of grass and ground as the dominant image.

Figure 4. Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak, *Will the Grass Grow over It?* Wax, oil, print matter collage / linen, 48 × 96 in., 2013; image permission of the artist.

Spanning the 96-inch painted collage is a passage from Vasili Grossman's 1963 novel, *Vse techet* (*Everything Flows*): "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 happened? That it will all be forgotten without even any words to commemorate it? That the grass will grow over it?"

30 The questions are asked by the character Anna, a former grain requisitions activist who is both perpetrator and victim. The passage testifies to her witness of the 1932-33 Famine (Holodomor) and ends with her anxiety over the forgetting and the lack of justice for the crime. The metaphor of growing grass that covers a truth buried by the state also relates to the effects of forgetting over the natural progression of time. By posing the question to the viewer, Bodnar-Balahutrak's piece complicates a fear of forgetting with the notion of healing that can be offered through the passing of time and regrowth.

30 "A gde zhe eta zhizn', gde strashnaia muka? Neuzheli nichego ne ostalos'? Neuzheli nikto ne otvetit za eto vse? Vot tak i zabudetsia bez sleda? Travka vyrosla" (Grossman). Bodnar-Balahutrak quotes the passage in its English translation from Conquest's 1986 *Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine*. In Conquest's book, the passage serves as an epigraph to chapter 18, "Responsibilities" (322). A more literal translation of the passage would be: "And where is that life, where is that horrible suffering? Is there really nothing left? Is it possible that no one will answer for all that? And that it will all be forgotten without a trace? The grass has grown over."

The artist sets this tension between memory and forgetting in the material of the piece, which creates a space for contemplating the subject's tenuous relationship with trauma. From a distance, the aesthetics of nature dominate, but upon closer inspection, the piece is revealed to be composed of media clippings from Western coverage of the Holodomor that are collaged and overlaid with paint. Documentary photos of emaciated famine victims and the language of reportage are piled and buried on the canvas as in the ground.

Figure 4a. Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak, Detail of *Will the Grass Grow over It?* Wax, oil, print matter collage / linen, 48 × 96 in., 2013; image permission of the artist.

In the process of making the piece, Bodnar-Balahutrak becomes a collector of voices, images, and the media lens on catastrophe. The “burial” of these images in the work mirrors the actual destruction of evidence by the Soviet authorities. Like in O’Kelly’s piece *Sanctuary/Wasteland*, a lyrical space is created where linear stories are fragmented by the process of collage and produce a mingling of voices and images that overlap, collide, rise, and fade. The artist is aware of her own outsider stance to the Holodomor, yet she demonstrates how we are all implicated as witnesses to traumas beyond direct experience through our consumption of not only historical, commemorative, and artistic media, but also, and more frequently, of information presented in the news and social media. *Will the Grass Grow over It?* is part of a triptych of collages that engage other traumas of our time: the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York City and the 2015 Russian annexation of Crimea. Bodnar-Balahutrak thus positions the Holodomor in a multidirectional memorial context, where the distanced trauma of the famine in Ukraine is linked with traumatic events in the artist’s lifetime.³¹ As Myroslava Mudrak observes, Bodnar-Balahutrak “pays homage to the universal tragedies that today befall many cultures, but identifies these poignant moments of human condition with tragedies that have been visited upon Ukraine in this century . . . [including] the artificial famine of 1933.” *Will the Grass Grow over It?* draws the audience (American or otherwise) in through a multidirectional context and implicates audience agency and responsibility. The question posed by the work and the accompanying quote, much like the fictional speaker of Grossman’s words, places the audience at the threshold of wit(h)ness: the grass grows but allows neither forgetting nor resolution, while nevertheless posing the question of what time and distance can offer a subjective position toward trauma.