

## Make Painting Radical Again: Zoya Cherkassky

### Joshua Simon

Roberta Smith described her recent U.S. debut exhibition in the *New York Times* as a “knockout,” but long before her successful Fort Gansevoort show, Zoya Cherkassky was known for not pulling any punches.<sup>1</sup> We started out together two decades ago when we were still teenagers. I wrote the text for her first gallery show and then her first museum show. Cherkassky’s current project, *Soviet Childhood* (2019), is timely in that it offers a remedy to what the writer-musician Ian Svenonius calls “post-Soviet depression,” a malaise we all suffer from.<sup>2</sup> Educated first in Kiev, her birthplace, Cherkassky then studied art in Tel Aviv, where her family moved in the 1990s. Bringing into her painting a variety of sources and techniques, and then making the painting perform, is what makes Cherkassky’s work so compelling. The ability to make painting radical again is one of her great achievements.

JOSHUA SIMON

From Honoré Daumier to Aleksandr Deyneka, from Ilya Kabakov to the satirical magazine of late Soviet times *Krokodil*, your influences combine realism and cartoon, Socialist Realism and vignettes, caricature and illustration. What can you tell me about your attitude toward painting?

ZOYA CHERKASSKY

The history of Soviet art when I was growing up was mainly that of painting and sculpture. And my generation was brought up with a sentiment of dismissal toward Socialist Realism. The West imagines Soviet art as basically seventy years of portraits of Stalin, which is of course not the case, and today younger artists are finding a lot of interesting things in the past. Deyneka, for example, is now gaining recognition outside of Russia. I feel compelled to give tribute to this great painter that was also not critical toward the Soviet government.

In addition, I can say that in a way I grew up on caricatures. The Danish caricature artist Herluf Bidstrup was very popular in the U.S.S.R. Several volumes of his work were available when I was young. You can feel the presence of caricatures in my work, and sometimes in order to insult my work, people say it looks like caricature, but for me this is far from an insult. I agree with Pablo Picasso’s saying that any great portrait is also a caricature. *Krokodil* was my favorite magazine growing up. Especially its Ukrainian version, *Peretz*, meaning “pepper” in Ukrainian. I really liked the caricatures of everyday life, like someone stealing from the factory. It was more topical than political. Both *Krokodil* and *Peretz* expressed a kind of criticism toward the youth of today for following Western degenerate fashion and music trends.

JS

In 2005, together with Natalia Zourabova, Asya Lukin, Anna Lukashevsky, and Olga Kundina, you formed New Barbizon, an all-female group of painters who were born and raised in the Soviet Union. While the paintings were made in open air and done from observation, the group was posting them online, like reports on places and people you saw and met.

ZC

Early modern painting like Henri Matisse had a great influence on Russian art of the same time. In the West this resulted in a tendency toward abstraction, but in the

U.S.S.R. it became this kind of realism with painterly qualities—realism that is not competing with photography. New Barbizon came from this tradition as much as from collective work, which is of course a socialist way of working. It requires a release of intellectual property, if you will, as we might make variations on each other’s work.

In the U.S.S.R., members of the artists’ associations could document the great moments in the life of the nation, like the building of a dam. We wanted to do the same, to document the construction of the Tel Aviv underground metro system. But it was impossible under capitalism. Nevertheless, we were still able to work in a kibbutz or other places that invited us. As Ekaterina Degot describes it, while in Socialist Realism painting is supposed to show how reality should be, with us it is more good old realism, reacting to what we see. I am specifically interested in the social. For instance when I paint on the street, I pick up markers of the time and cultural significance.

JS

There is a painterly pendulum to *Soviet Childhood*—it is full of sentiment and utterly rejects sentiment at the same time. A gesture of inseparable love and disdain. This kind of earnest parody, *stiob*, as it’s called in Russian, comes from the late Soviet era. Do you see it in your own work?

ZC

In the late Soviet times, *stiob* was ironic, ridiculing Soviet aesthetics with all its empty slogans. Anyone who was a little bit reflective, like Sots Art, shared this sentiment. But this is a postmodern gesture that I find myself moving away from. For me, it is less about irony and more about humor and satire. Irony is indirect, unlike satire. I try to be less distant and more direct.

1 Roberta Smith, “Pointed Painted Valentines to the Soviet Era,” *New York Times*, June 20, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/20/arts/design/zoya-cherkassky-soviet-childhood-review.html>.

2 Ian Svenonius, *The Psychic Soviet* (Chicago: Drag City, 2006)



135 Zoya Cherkassky, *Mama*, 2019. Courtesy: the artist and Fort Gansevoort, New York

136 Zoya Cherkassky, *Maverick*, 2019. Courtesy: the artist and Rosenfeld Gallery, Tel-Aviv

137 Zoya Cherkassky, *November Holidays*, 2019. Courtesy: the artist and Rosenfeld Gallery, Tel-Aviv

