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Zoya Cherkassky's 'Lost Time' – Memories and Daydreams amid Disaster

Channeling Czapski and Proust, the artist seeks solace in cultural subconscious



Zoya Cherkassky, "Black Chuppah," 2020, ink, markers, watercolor, and gouache on paper, 10.25 x 6.75 in.

(Courtesy: the artist and Fort Gansevoort)

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In “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” (1908), Freud theorizes the creative impulse as memory triggered by recent incidents and distilled through fantasy. It is a quick jump back to classical explanations vis-à-vis Mnemosyne, goddess of Memory, and mother of the muses. This thesis generally holds well at a fundamental level with visual art, where the work represents the condensed remains of this mental process

Certainly so with a series of nineteen works that Zoya Cherkassky, Kiev born artist who now lives in Tel-Aviv, produced in nineteen days since wide public knowledge of COVID-19.

In no prescribed order, the individual works flesh out a parallel between the total disruption of normalcy wrought by the pandemic and Eastern European Jewish life before World War II. The subjects and scenarios presented appear to be ordinary within the society they depict, though perhaps exotic to outsiders. They have a cartoony style that, first of all, jolts when in tandem with any invocation of a Holocaust theme. Such juxtapositions of tragedy and disaster, infiltrating our news at the moment, often imply equivalencies that are incongruous and misleading. At the same time, when it comes to artistic authenticity, self-censorship is a cop-out; and mining the pre-conscious, in this case in a collective way, also an impulsive, uncalculated risk.

A curious facet of the series is its declarative Jewish presence—itsself from the perspective of “identity art,” exemplified in work such as “A Jewish Family.”



Zoya Cherkassky, “A Jewish Family,” 2020, ink, watercolor, markers, and wax crayons on paper, 7 x 11 in. (Courtesy: the artist and Fort Gansevoort)

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In this vein, a scene of boys in a makeshift schoolroom titled “Ofyn Pripetshik,” after a popular children’s song about a rabbi teaching the alphabet, recalled an influential 1990s series by Deborah Kass. This series is based on the Barbra Streisand-created movie character, Yentl, in turn, culled from Isaac Bashevis Singer’s short story about a gender-changed yeshiva devotee.

(See an example from the series in the collection of The Jewish Museum, New York). Despite that Cherkassky’s generation, circumstances, and sensibility are entirely different from Kass’s, her series may be also recognized as “Jewish” and thus politically charged a priori, beyond the fraught invocation of the Holocaust.

Despite the illustrative quality of these works, they are not reflective of direct familial experience for the artist, who had a mostly secular upbringing in the former USSR. Rather, the convergence of COVID-19 and the Passover holiday tapped a shared cultural memory, which, re-imagined as a collective document, reveals considerable psychological examination of Ashkenazi Jewry at its core. Namely, these are close family units and scripture-based order—cast in the sharp light of the current chaotic times.

It is insightful to detour for a moment from this featured exhibit to the artist’s file on the gallery menu and browse some paintings based on more prescient memories of her real childhood in a solidified realist style. These began shortly after the birth of her child, which has continued to influence her artistic choices and direction. Although the scenes do not form a linear story, the narrative vibe is furthered by musings of the curator, Alison Gingeras, which is included in the presentation. The array of cultural touchstones is rich for artist and viewer, conjuring old photographs, the folkloric tales of Sholem Aleichem, and related ubiquitous 1960s Broadway musical, Fiddler on the Roof.



Zoya Cherkassky, “Shabes Goy,” 2020, ink, watercolor, markers, gouache, and wax crayons on paper, 9.25 x 12.25 in. (Courtesy: the artist and Fort Gansevoort)

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A few suggestively dark images include “Black Chuppah,” (in several variations), which depicts rituals associated with marriages arranged in times of plague. The most provocative in terms of discomforting humor based on twisted stereotypes is “Shabes Goy”, which centralizes a blond, blue-eyed Adonis lending a hand with forbidden chores of the Sabbath.

A deceptively naïve image of a baby goat identified by the title text, “Chad Gadya,” (“One Kid”) in Hebrew, denotes a Passover song of earthly and divine slaughter. Finally, several images of Anne Frank, which reinforce the childhood perspective and also heighten the ethical stakes of Holocaust remembrance via appropriation. From this group, “A Girl at the Window” brings hauntingly full-circle both the real feel and the relatively benign reality of our current shelter-in-place isolation.



Zoya Cherkassky, “A Girl at the Window,” 2020, ink, gouache, watercolors, and wax crayons on paper, 11 x 8 in. (Courtesy: the artist and Fort Gansevoort)