

FORT GANSEVOORT

The New York Times

Art & Design
April 7, 2020
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Lessons From the Plagues, Painted for Passover
The artist Zoya Cherkassky evokes Jewish life in the shtetl in her new virtual exhibition.



Zoya Cherkassky's "An Open Air Minyan" (2020), depicting men gathered for prayer with the requisite social distancing, is in a virtual exhibition at fortgansevoort.com. Credit...Zoya Cherkassky and Fort Gansevoort

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In quarantine at her home in Tel Aviv last month, the artist Zoya Cherkassky came across a YouTube video of a wedding ceremony held in a Jewish cemetery just outside the city during the early days of the coronavirus outbreak. She learned that such “plague weddings” had evolved in the 19th century across Eastern Europe as a ritual to ward off cholera epidemics.

The artist drew “Black Chuppah” in response, a quick work on paper in ink of a sweetly somber bride and groom in black, holding hands under the Jewish wedding canopy erected amid tombstones.

Every day since, Ms. Cherkassky has completed another melancholic vignette evoking pre-World War II Jewish life. But the past feels simultaneously contemporary in these intimate paintings on paper. A man carries provisions through a burning shtetl. A family is cloistered together at home in tight quarters. A young girl peers longingly through a curtained window.

Now, the gallery Fort Gansevoort is showing her new series virtually, in the online exhibition “Lost Time,” engagingly drawn in a style that evokes both Marc Chagall and Edward Gorey. For instance, “An Open Air Minyan,” darkly humorous, shows 10 religious men gathered in a field to pray — and spaced with the requisite social distancing.



Zoya Cherkassky near her house in Ramat Gan, part of the Tel Aviv metropolitan area. Credit...Uriel Sinai for The New York Times

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“There is no mysticism in my work usually,” Ms. Cherkassky said in a conference call together with the Brooklyn-based curator Alison Gingeras, both isolating in their homes with young children. “I’m not a religious person. But I’ve also never experienced such a situation.”

The series is a stark departure for the artist, who was born in Kyiv in 1976 and immigrated to Israel in 1991, just before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Well known in Israel, where she was given a midcareer survey in 2018 at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, Ms. Cherkassky had her U.S. debut last year in New York at Fort Gansevoort. The vibrantly colored paintings of her Soviet-era childhood, rendered in an appealing combination of social realism and cartooning, were a “knockout,” Roberta Smith wrote in *The New York Times*.

The new virtual show reflects the interplay between the artist and curator, who over the last month have been exchanging daily images and writings through text and Zoom. Ms. Cherkassky’s images, drawing on cultural and collective memory, anchor personal and historical ruminations by Ms. Gingeras, who contributed observations about the life of New Yorkers during the crisis.

In one exhibition entry, the curator writes: “Zoya’s Jewish family offers us an allegorical portrait of this moment: an imposed ritual of sitting at home, with our thoughts toggling back and forth between memories of things past and anxious projections of an undefined future.”

Following are excerpts from the recent conference call with the artist and the curator.



Zoya Cherkassky’s sweetly somber “Black Chuppah”(2020).Credit...Zoya Cherkassky and Fort Gansevoort

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Does “Black Chuppah” have an element of hope in its bleakness?

ZOYA CHERKASSKY It’s a ritual performed in order to avoid disaster. They hope for something. For me, it was scary to see. Like the epidemic, it does not seem to belong to nowadays. It belongs to old times. You suddenly don’t understand what is happening with time. It gave me a push to do this type of shtetl and Holocaust drawing.

ALISON GINGERAS I first saw “Black Chuppah” one morning on Instagram. Somebody had reposted Zoya’s image. The Gothic sensibility of it really stuck in my head. I walk my dog every morning, often past Brooklyn Hospital, and that same morning they first erected a corona tent in front of the hospital. The confluence of these two images struck me. Then I was approached later that day [by the gallery] about this project.

Is there a kind of diaristic quality about this project?

CHERKASSKY There is, but I think it’s rather about my subconscious. I really like how Alison is combining these imaginary images with her own real-life observations and what is going on in New York.



Shown as part of a diptych, Zoya Cherkassky’s “The Angel of Death” illustrates verses in the Passover song “Chad Gadya.”Credit...Zoya Cherkassky and Fort Gansevoort



Zoya Cherkassky’s “Stalin,” a reinterpretation of a verse in “Chad Gadya.” Credit...Zoya Cherkassky and Fort Gansevoort

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The show opens on Passover and some of the images specifically refer to the holiday. What kind of message do you see in the works?

CHERKASSKY In Israel everybody is very busy with Passover now because it's the biggest holiday. Also, it's a big fear because everybody is thinking about what will be after Passover. The story of Exodus, another story of danger, is very symbolic for this situation.

GINGERAS There's a lot of reflection about the question of sacrifice that obviously is a thread of this season, between Passover and Easter. Even the kind of pagan practices of the spring season often had to do with symbolic sacrifice. With the frame of all this symbolic celebration, the show does have a kind of heavier tenor.

The song “Chad Gadya,” sung at the end of the Passover Seder, seems to be an inspiration for you.

CHERKASSKY At least four drawings in the series are related to “Chad Gadya.” In the last two verses, the Angel of Death comes and kills the butcher, and then the God comes and kills the Angel of Death. I illustrated this like a diptych. One side has a skeleton that looks like a Nazi soldier. The second part of it is taken from the victory parade in Red Square [after the defeat of Nazi Germany] where Stalin is the God.

GINGERAS That image of Stalin does have a particular resonance right now. We're seeing authoritarian regimes that are basically extending their abuse of democratic rule of law through this crisis. Even in this country, there's a lot of anxiety about what's going to happen with the elections this year.



Zoya Cherkassky's "Girl at the Window" (2020). Credit... Zoya Cherkassky and Fort Gansevoort

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The isolated face peeking out in “Girl at the Window” seems to conflate past and present.

CHERKASSKY “Girl at the Window” is like Anne Frank. Of course there is a huge gap between the Holocaust and what is going on now. But everybody, especially in Israel, has grown up with these Holocaust stories. When something terrifying happens, this is immediately what you think about.

GINGERAS All the associations in these drawings go beyond the question of Jewish identity. Of course they have a very specific reference point to lost eras and historical traumas. But there is a common humanity that underlies all these images and that takes on a collective resonance for all of us as we experience this kind of Sabbath environment now every day across the world.