

FORT GANSEVOORT



When anti-Semitism is art

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41

Does Rachel Weisz get to live forever?
— Page 45



Zoya Cherkassky's paintings use horrifying images to show how Jew-hatred permeates our self image. By Angela Levine

When antisemitism is art

Zoya Cherkassky is currently a hot property in the Israeli art world. Seven years out of art school, and her paintings are selling for \$8,000 a piece.

Collectio Judaica, Cherkassky's first solo show held in 2000 at the Rosenfeld Gallery, Tel Aviv, attracted an unusual amount of attention. The two-floor installation, incorporating paintings, sculpture, furniture and woven objects, dwelt on an intriguing subject: how antisemitic propaganda permeates the self-image of Jews.

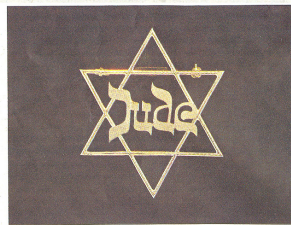
Introducing this theme was a window display of three gold brooches in the shape of a Star of David, with the word *Jude* incorporated into their design. As might be expected, the transformation of this image, with its tragic associations, into a piece of jewellery elicited hostile reactions from some sections of the community. But art critics loved this show.

Among the works featured was the *Wandering Jew*, a plaster sculpture of a man seated on a suitcase. Cherkassky drew many of the details incorporated into this tableau from antisemitic propaganda — such as the paintings of Chasidic Jews whose bodies resembled those of black crows. However, a cushion embroidered with a grotesque representation of a Jew is actually based on a painting by Chagall.

Also displayed were a number of Mizrah plaques, the signs denoting the direction of Jerusalem, which are often decorated with drawings of fantastic beasts. But Cherkassky's makeover, inspired by a collection of 19th-century antisemitic postcards known as the *Jewish Zoo*, animals were given "Jewish" faces.

From 2004 on, Cherkassky began to challenge the establishment. For her witty exhibition *La Bal des Victimes* — named after the balls that took place in France following the Revolution — she produced a set of painted metal figures (each 50cm high) purporting to represent individuals who have suffered at the hands of government officials. Among them were the *Victim of Education*, with a pencil stuck up her bottom; and the *Victim of Science*, with three faces and a permanent blood transfusion.

Violence always simmers below the surface in Cherkassky's art, although tempered by fantasy and wit. But it erupts with force in her new painting series now showing in Tel Aviv. This time, around her victims are the art establishment itself, and the museums whose authority



she challenges by instigating acts of vandalism and slaughter within their walls.

On display are 11 large paintings. Developed from sketches, they were processed in a computer, printed onto large canvases and then completely repainted. Each picture shows the interior of a museum with works by famous modern and contemporary artists in situ. In all but one picture, doll-like figures represent typical museum-goers. If normality had reigned, these people would probably be looking at the artworks.

But here, the order and sanctity of this institution are shattered by terrifying, larger-than-life apparitions. In one picture, a bare-breasted woman wields a power saw; in another, a red tongue snakes out from the mouth of a blue-headed woman is closing in on a victim. Some of the visitors are already dead, others dismembered, their bodies sprawled on the floor. The walls are blood-splattered and art works have



Clockwise from top: *Blue Face*, (2006); *Illustration from the Aachen Passover Haggadah* (2002); Cherkassky with *The Victim of Science* (2002); *Cushion from the Wandering Jew* tableau (2002); *Jude* brooch (2002)

of the people in the picture is looking at this exhibit. Eyes raised, they appear to be waiting for further falls of paint.

Art historians writing about Cherkassky's work seek to assess her sources of inspiration. Given that her childhood was spent in the former Soviet Union, they point to Russian conceptual art and that country's traditions in poster and book illustration, characterised by dramatic content, clear outlines and strong colours.

Undoubtedly, science fiction and cinematic imagery have also entered her artistic lexicon. In an erudite text for the catalogue of this exhibition, Ginton refers specifically to the 1989 film *Batman*, in which a gang goes on an iconoclastic rampage in a museum.

Cherkassky is currently living in Berlin, attending the prestigious International Artists in Residence programme at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien Art Centre. This is not her first time in Germany. In 2001, living in Aachen, she began penning and illustrating a Haggadah.

The original is now in the Israel Museum's collection, but there are 50 serigraphed copies produced by the Rosenfeld Gallery. It is a creation of stunning originality.

Cherkassky is not observant, but it seems she underwent a profound religious experience during this project. Executed in black, white, red and gold, God is represented by the early 20th-century Russian artist Malevich, whose suprematist paintings were devoid of references to the visual world.

Cherkassky has produced art which stands out for its originality and quality but also for its audacious content. Consequently, it is open to both praise and controversy.