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How Israel's artists have responded to the trauma of October 7

The Hamas attacks prompted an outpouring of creativity in Israel from painters and illustrators, professional and amateur alike

By Elisa Bray – November 23, 2023



'The Terrorist Attack at Nova Music Festival' by Zoya Cherkassky, October 2023.

Since October 7, new works of art have emerged in Israel in response to the horrors. Some are the reactions of professional artists using their talents as an outlet for their trauma, some are amateur but poignant expressions of grief, and many want to document the atrocities for the world to see. And this new collection of the art of war is growing.

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Craig Dershowitz, CEO of Artists 4 Israel, says that since the organisation was set up 13 years ago, it has seen more and more people using art to battle antisemitism and anti-Israel forces. "And we've never seen it as potent and as elaborate as what we're seeing during this war.

"This is a time that we're getting requests from a lot of organisations to support their efforts in using art, we're seeing artists take steps forward, we're seeing collectives of artists come out. It's really incredible."

Among the many new projects to have emerged are street theatre, graffiti, street art, and tattooing.

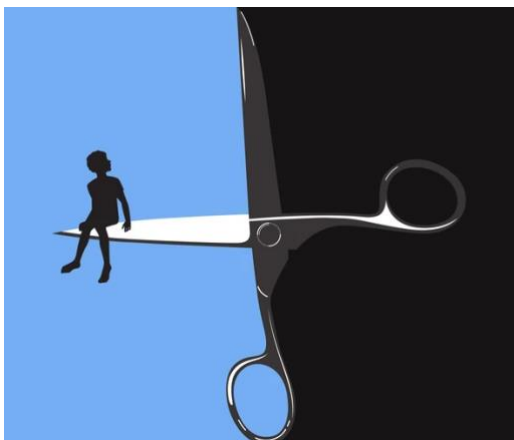


Victims Running by Rotem Codish (Photo: Rotem Codish)

"It's a rallying cry for those who are seeing it," says Craig, pointing to a "massive" Israeli mural bearing the message: "bring them home now". "It was a great way to let the citizens of Israel know that there are people involved and fighting for them.

"To know that there's a cultural fight being waged on your behalf gives you a sense of comfort and of hope."

Israeli artist Marian Boo says that while artists and entertainers are typically the first to find themselves "out of the loop and surplus to requirements" at times of war, this time artists are voicing what has happened.



Or Yaakov by Anna Xenz (Photo: Getty)

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“And it seems to be getting a lot of attention,” she says. “I also think people are a bit tired of seeing videos of horror. Maybe a painting is something that people will identify with.”

Zoya Cherkassky

Soon after October 7, Ukrainian-Israeli artist Zoya Cherkassky fled her home in Israel with her eight-year-old daughter to stay with friends in Berlin.

And on October 17, she posted her latest picture to her Instagram account: an Israeli family hiding, in terrified silence, beneath a lamp - inspired by Pablo Picasso's Guernica. You can see it on the cover of this week's JC2 cover.



Zoya Cherkassky's work inspired by Pablo Picasso's Guernica (Photo: Zoya Cherkassky)

The Spanish artist's 1937 portrayal of the Nazis' bombing of the Basque town during the Spanish Civil War was the first image that came to mind when she learnt of the massacre.

“I never believed that I would use art as therapy because I'm a professional artist,” says Cherkassky.

“It came as a surprise that this was my immediate reaction to the tragic events, that somehow drawing is the way to keep myself sane in these situations. And since this was the only thing I was thinking of, this is what I drew.”

In her drawings, Cherkassky found herself adopting a different style: the modernist style prevalent during the Second World War.

“The question is, how do you depict massacre? How do you depict suffering? It's not a simple question. My usual work is happy,” she says.

“It was important for me to keep uploading on Instagram because I've seen a lot of reaction from people. My followers are from everywhere. So it was important for me to explain to people from outside of Israel and the non-Jewish community what had happened through my art.”

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[instagram.com/cherkassky/](https://www.instagram.com/cherkassky/)

Let My Children Go

To draw attention to the child hostages and help to bring them home, Davida Klein set up the campaigning website Let My Children Go.

She invited “everybody everywhere” to create art inspired by each child hostage and upload it for the world to see. On the website there are photographs of all the child hostages with a written profile detailing their hobbies and favourite foods, and with artworks created just for them.



Let My Children Go artwork by Safira Klein (Photo: Safira Klein)

“We want people everywhere to see who these kids are and how much they mean to us,” says Davida, who manages a family art studio near Jerusalem. “Children like Naveh Shoham, a second grader who loves Harry Potter, his grandmother’s schnitzels and building Lego.

“These are the details about who these kids are that are so important for people to know.

“Hamas is about death and destruction, about the dark. The love and light of art feels like an appropriate way to be fighting this darkness, to focus on these kids and their childhood, to keep up awareness of their situation and

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bringing them home.

"It is a way of ensuring they are at the front of people's minds."

letmychildrengo.info

Marian Boo

Posted on Instagram a fortnight after October 7, a painting by Israeli artist Marian Boo transformed Henri Matisse's famed *The Dance* into something shocking.

The women of *The Last Dance* are not rapt in free-spirited joy as they twirl hand in hand. They are blood-soaked, dancing on a pool of blood.



The Last Dance by Marian Boo (Photo: Marian Boo)

Boo had the image in her head from the day of the atrocities. "The original painting is sometimes translated to *The Dance of Life*, it's a very optimistic drawing. But here I saw only the last dance," she says. "It was really symmetrical."

For Boo now 40, who has been going to raves for most of her life, the massacre at the Nova festival "hit as close to home as is possible".

In her version of Matisse's painting, she included a girl she had seen in a Hamas video whose brightly coloured trousers were "full of blood", a festival-goer whose body was identified two weeks after the attack, and the pregnant woman whose baby was cut out of her. "As a woman that has been haunting me since the beginning."

The artist uploaded her painting to an illustration group, her personal profile on Facebook and also Instagram, and had hundreds of likes within half an hour.

"Apparently this is the way people want to be communicated with," she says. "I always try to use humour in my art."

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"This is the first time that I have created something that's really serious and dark, and it catches fire."

Boo has long been filling a sketchbook with observational drawings, but after the massacre she waited for a week before uploading the sketches that capture her day-to-day response to the war.

[instagram.com/marian_boo/](https://www.instagram.com/marian_boo/)

Chani Judowitz

Chani Judowitz is known as the illustrator of a weekly comic in the weekly charedi publication Mishpacha Magazine, and has also illustrated many children's books while teaching courses on art. But she also paints.

In a LinkedIn post she described herself as "pretty social media shy." She also shares little of her artwork. Until now.



Chani Judowitz's Am Echad (Photo: Chani Judowitz)

"I don't have to explain the shock, grief, and utter devastation that so many of us have been experiencing since October 7. And the helplessness."

Her painting Am Echad (One People) was inspired by a clip that went viral, of an Israeli soldier hugging a charedi man serving food to soldiers. "The moment was so poignant, I couldn't resist replaying it.

"We wear different uniforms, practise varied traditions, but we are brothers with one heart. The video inspired me to paint this moment and I am so grateful that thousands of people were inspired by this piece and I really hope it will be a catalyst to help so many of our brothers."

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Judowitz posted the painting and within a few hours it went viral. She received messages from all over the world telling her how much the artwork meant to them, how it made them cry and feel love for one another.

And she received so many requests for prints that she launched a website, with all proceeds going to help families affected by the war.

"Art is an emotional expression always," says Judowitz who lived in Jerusalem for many years.

"So while the situation in Israel was very traumatic for all of us, the painting was inspired by a message and feeling of hope.

"People can sense that in the painting, and perhaps that's why so many people connected to it."