

# FORT GANSEVOORT



## North Fork Contemporary: Elevating Art in Troubling Times

Beth Young – August 11, 2025



Left to Right: Barbara Horowitz, Zoya Cherkassky-Nnadi, James Snyder, Emilia Kabakov and Andrea Grover at the July 26 discussion.

There are many constant forces tugging the art world in different directions — the tug between commercial work and pure artistic expression is often at the forefront — but the arts also have a great role to play in exploring our collective humanity during times when suffering and political turmoil surround us.

It was fitting that North Fork Contemporary was able to bring together two artists from the former Soviet Union, a generation apart but shaped by their formative understanding of autocratic regimes, for their second in an ongoing salon series at the Jamesport Meeting House July 26.

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The conversation, titled “A Look into Creative Leadership,” was initially a discussion between leaders of two major arts organizations — Andrea Grover of Guild Hall and James Snyder of The Jewish Museum in New York City, and Mattituck-based artist and curator Emilia Kabakov, originally from a portion of the Soviet Union that is now Ukraine. Ms. Kabakov emigrated to the United States, along with her late husband, renowned conceptual artist Ilya Kabakov, in the late 1980s.

Mr. Snyder urged the organizers at North Fork Contemporary to bring a special guest, Zoya Cherkassky-Nnadi, an insightful Ukrainian-Israeli artist who recently relocated to Greenport, into the discussion. “What are the odds that we have two distinguished artists, originally from Ukraine, who have made a life on the North Fork?” asked North Fork Contemporary Co-Director Barbara Horowitz, who conceived and moderates the series, as she introduced the panel.



Zoya Cherkassky-Nnadi and James Snyder

“Serendipity plays a big part in all of our lives, all the time,” said Mr. Snyder. “If you wanted to pick a Soviet émigré artist from the 20th Century and one from the 21st Century, these are the two most astonishing. To have two figures like these, who learned to paint when they were young in the Soviet Union and came out into the rest of the world and have a certain dry humor about making art — that gives us a different perspective on that whole side of the world. This is like a moment in history.”

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Ms. Horowitz centered the discussion by describing how each of the panelists had devoted their lives “to inclusivity and the enduring challenge of pursuing humanism in the face of hate.”

The artists shared a touchpoint in Ilya Kabakov’s installation, “Labyrinth (My Mother’s Album),” a story of his mother’s life told on the walls of a narrow hallway. It’s a work that Ms. Cherkassky-Nnadi said was “deeply personal, but able to touch other people because it’s telling the story of so many Soviet women.”

“The life of this woman was the life of so many women in this world — the suffering, the desire for love, rejection and the desire for the best but to not know how to do it,” agreed Ms. Kabakov. “It’s very personal for women, and for human beings.”

One of the Kabakov’s most controversial installations, “The Toilet,” is set up as an apartment inside a public toilet of a type everyone who spent time in the Soviet Union seems to remember.

Ms. Cherkassky-Nnadi first saw the installation after she moved to Israel as a teenager, where she was first exposed to contemporary art after a lifetime of Soviet art education.

“For me, it was such a strong image — Things like that are possible?” she said. “I could relate so much, because I came from the Soviet Union myself.”

A maquette of that installation is in the Kabakovs’ studio in Mattituck — Emilia Kabakov said she’s in the process of reacquiring the full-size version after Poland and Belgium never fulfilled their contract to display it.

“It’s a metaphor of life,” said Ms. Kabakov, wryly. “You can always say, ‘our country is a toilet,’ and there’s always somebody who will understand.”

Ms. Cherkassky-Nnadi’s work, which she shares extensively on social media, also had a wry humor about it, until she began a series of drawings depicting families’ reactions to the Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023.

“Even with sad moments, there’s something funny,” she said of her previous work. “Laughter is my way of communicating and engaging with my audience by bringing in more harsh subjects. But there was nothing funny about the seventh of October. It’s quite exceptional in my body of work.”

Mr. Snyder, who had been Executive Director of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, took the helm at The Jewish Museum in New York just three weeks after Oct. 7. One of his first exhibitions at the New York museum just weeks later was of Ms. Cherkassky-Nnadi’s post- Oct. 7 work.

“There was nothing funny in the Oct. 7 drawings, and that is where the power was — because in all of Zoya’s work before was this dry humor.”

“She drew from artists in the Renaissance — the massacre of innocents, depicting today what we have known from biblical times,” he said of Ms. Cherkassky-Nnadi’s work, which depicts the history of

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violence in interpersonal terms — not based on political perspective, but on how violence affects all the parties to its perpetration.

The ephemeral nature of memory and perception is a subject the panelists all approach with curiosity. “Memory can’t be accurate — it’s always been digested by someone,” said Ms. Cherkassky-Nnadi, adding that she often crowd-sources her audience’s memories of cultural touchpoints to test her own recollections. “Of course it’s distorted.”

“There’s also such thing as genetic memory,” added Ms. Kabakov. “When work is based on universal cultural memory, social memory and political memory, if you are able to put everything together in a great work of art — you are a great artist.”

“Everything is subjective, and that’s what makes art so rich,” said Mr. Snyder, recounting a recent visit to an ophthalmologist who performed a procedure that changed his perception of color.

“He said ‘everyone sees color differently,’ and I said ‘Matisse blue is Matisse blue,’” he said. “And he said, ‘no, it isn’t. Everybody sees Matisse blue differently.’ That’s what is so amazing about art, and about making art in these times.”

All four panelists shared both frustration and hope regarding the potential for new artistic movements. Ms. Kabakov was most cynical.

“Today there is no movement, practically,” she said. “Why? Because galleries go and pick up students when they’re 16, 17 or 18 years old, and they offer them the world. Artists fall for it. Everybody wants to be rich and famous, especially when they are young.”

Mr. Snyder put some stock in the “notion that troubling times produce new artistic vocabularies.”

“It’s central to what’s happened since the beginning of the 20th Century,” he said. “World War I produced Dada and surrealism. World War II produced abstraction, color field minimalism and beyond.” Ms. Grover said a key is to make artists relevant in every realm of life.

“They should be represented in business, government and everything,” she said. “I think that role has been slipping. John F. Kennedy was a huge advocate of artists — he said they represented the soul of a nation. We couldn’t be farther from that now. At that time, artists were everywhere — Dali appeared on game shows. Warhol was on ‘The Love Boat.’ Today, artists have been demonized in a lot of ways. But everyone should be able to experience art. Artists should not be relegated to a lesser role in society.”

Mr. Snyder added that, in the time between the World Wars, artists were very involved in commercial work — becoming art directors, designing posters and working in ad agencies, where their work was seen by people who might never have set foot in a museum.

“We are in troubling times today,” he said, adding that, in a discussion with Ms. Cherkassky-Nnadi at the Jewish museum, the artist said you have to wait 10 years for those movements to coalesce. But he wasn’t sure she hadn’t already disproven her own theory.

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“Within a year, Zoya moved to a new home here, and started producing these incredible watercolors and paintings of the landscape and the waterscape and the moonscape of the North Fork,” he said. “I said ‘you are producing a new artistic vocabulary.’”

Ms. Grover said she is always looking to encourage signs of new artistic movements.

“When you have artists working together, collectively, and also manifestos of some sort — writings that explain something is in transition — those are some hallmarks” of movements, she said. “A lot of artists work independently now, which is problematic, because cities can’t really hold space for artists anymore.”

“I do feel like the commercial art market has dominated far too much of the art world,” she added. “What I’m doing at Guild Hall is reverse engineering it back to the grassroots, bringing it back to an alternative space that is really for artists — for artists to make mistakes and do something messy or embarrassing.”

She added that Guild Hall’s original charter was as an educational institution with a civic mission — “to create a finer type of citizenship.”

“It’s in our DNA,” she said. “If we give artists as much latitude as possible, but still be responsible, institutions will evolve and be ahead of the curve. That’s our way of operating — loosening the institutional necktie. It’s good that we’re a small to medium-sized institution, because we can take more risks.”

Mr. Snyder said that, while government-sponsored institutions like the Smithsonian Museums in the United States are likely to suffer due to federal budget cutbacks, many arts institutions here are privately funded, leaving them in a better position than similar institutions in Europe.

“Two weeks ago, I was at a conference of European museums and they are really in trouble because nearly all of them just have state funding, and as those countries, one by one, are taken over by autocratic leaders, they’re cutting budgets left and right and putting in political appointees,” he said. “It’s a real disaster across the continent. Here, we’re blessed because most of the museums in America are private. Maybe we’ve lost money from the NEA but it’s not all of who we are and what we do.”

“Artists have to practice activism through their art,” he added. “It’s not about politics — we have to radiate a message. Politics is a dark path, and we have moments in history where politics wants to be a tidal wave overwhelming everything. Museums and artists need to telegraph another message and document the continued unfolding of humanism... Cultural diplomacy just spreads across the creative world. That’s our job — we need to remind all of us. We need to use our collections and exhibitions for teaching and learning, a counterpoint to the xenophobia and ignorance that is taking over the world.”