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## Article

# A Dancing Russian Bear

*Olga Gershenson*

### ABSTRACT

Here, I take as a starting point a work of art, “Ukrainian Folk Dancing,” by the Kiev-born Israeli artist Zoya Cherkassky. Set in a Soviet cultural center, the work reminds me of my own childhood, evoking ambivalent feelings of nostalgia and anti-nostalgia. Then, I describe the artist’s solo exhibition “Pravda” at the Israel Museum, the most prestigious art venue in the country. In a series of large-scale oil paintings, the artist reflects on the Russian *aliyah*, looking at both Russians and Israelis with love and scorn, exposing both their mutual stereotypes and perceptions of self. With great sophistication, the artist moves freely between allusions to the Old Masters and post-modern pastiche and irony. However, the museum’s texts and audio guide contextualize the exhibition only within the most basic information about the mass immigration from the former Soviet Union and the artist’s own immigration. There is no engagement with the aesthetic aspects of the art. Cherkassky’s works are interpreted only as far as their subject matter; her identity is treated only as far as her origin is concerned. In other words, she is treated like a dancing Russian bear. This pattern is familiar to me from my research on Gesher, a bilingual theater founded in 1990s Israel by Russian theater professionals. I show how the same reductive dynamic that was operational in the reception of Gesher nearly thirty years ago is still evident in the museum’s presentation of Cherkassky’s exhibition. I conclude with a meditation on the meanings of this dynamic for the broader Israeli culture.

*Keywords:* immigration, Israel, art, Soviet, Russia, Ukraine, Cherkassky

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A work of art hangs on the wall of my New York apartment. On a background of intense red, a group of teenagers in Ukrainian folk costume dance to the accompaniment of an accordionist on the stage of a Soviet cultural center. The audience frames the work from below. A severe-looking Taras Shevchenko, the Ukrainian national writer, peers down on the scene from an embroidered white banner above the stage. Nobody looks happy. Drawn with the exaggeration of a caricature, the picture is both funny and sad. This was the first real work of art that I bought for myself; what's more, I bought it simply because I liked it, not for any practical reason. In other words, it was a very nonimmigrant thing to do. But on that balmy summer night, when I walked into the art opening at the Rosenfeld Gallery in Tel Aviv and saw this "Ukrainian Folk Dancing" (fig. 1), I fell in love. The work was by Zoya Cherkassky, a Kiev-born Israeli artist. It was a part of a series set in Soviet schools, kitchens, and courtyards that called to mind my own Soviet childhood. The effect of the series was dazzling; it felt nostalgic and anti-nostalgic at the same time. I was moved by seeing a part of my story represented and proud that the artist was a member of my cultural community. I met Zoya at the opening, got her catalogs, went to her studio to see her work in progress, and remained a devoted fan (and Facebook friend).

## THE TRUTH OF "PRAVDA"

When I heard the news of Zoya Cherkassky's upcoming solo exhibition at the Israel Museum, I couldn't wait to see it. It's one thing to view an artist's work in the gallery that represents her, another to view it in the main art venue in the country among major world artists like Ai Weiwei, whose retrospective shared the floor with Cherkassky's. Her exhibition is called "Pravda," a Russian word for truth, but also the name of a notoriously propagandistic Soviet newspaper.<sup>1</sup> The title purports to reveal the unadorned truth about Russian immigration to Israel, yet it also alludes to the ideological brainwashing, both Soviet and Zionist, to which immigrants were subjected. The exhibition sprawls over several rooms and consists mainly of large-scale paintings. One room charting Zoya's



**Figure 1.** Zoya Cherkassky, “Ukrainian Folk Dancing,” 2015, markers on paper, 15 × 24.5 cm. Courtesy of the artist and the Rosenfeld Gallery, Tel Aviv.

development as an artist features earlier sketches, drawings, and her letters to friends and family. There is also a looped video interview with her.

“Pravda” engages with the subject of *aliyah*—the Zionist ideological lingo for immigration—showing immigrants’ experiences from the old country to arrival in Israel to so-called absorption. The paintings satirize in equal measure the immigrants and the hosts.

The key work here is the diptych “1991 in Ukraine” (oil on linen, 2015) and “Friday in the Neighborhood” (oil on linen, 2015). The first painting presents a snapshot of the brutal reality in early post-Soviet Ukraine. Seen from a long shot against a white snowy background, the action unfolds in several scenes scattered over a decrepit construction site. Both the composition and the color palette evoke Bruegel’s winter landscapes depicting the reveling of peasants. In the bottom left, three men assault another man with two-by-fours. To the right, a pervert exposes himself to two little girls. Behind them is a fence decorated with expletives and antisemitic slurs. Further in on the right, a rape is in progress; and to the other side, a drunken party is taking place, with one of the revelers doubled over vomiting. In the background, in front of nondescript Soviet apartment blocks,

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are mirror images of two demonstrations—one with a red Communist flag, another with a blue-and-yellow Ukrainian nationalist flag.

In contrast to the white snow in “1991 in Ukraine,” “Friday in the Neighborhood” is dominated by yellow sand. While the scenes in this painting, set in a remote town in southern Israel, are different, the sense of desperation and physical violence remains the same. In the foreground, an elderly man rummages in a dumpster. Further in, drug addicts shoot up at the entrance to a depressing block building, the paradigmatic style of Israeli housing projects. The same Russian expletives decorate the walls, but now instead of antisemitic slurs, Hebrew graffiti proclaims, “Russians, go back!” On the other side of the building, a brawl unfolds between pale Russian immigrants and swarthy locals, blood dripping from a knife wound. Behind the brawl, a car is approaching between the identical block buildings, a hand in the window brandishing a pistol. Near the horizon, a pair of sad palm trees and a camel situate the landscape in the Middle East, and serve as a single focal point of perspective. Over this wretched neighborhood, a missile descends from the dirty-gray sky, about to blow up the whole thing, referencing the Gulf War of 1990–91, which coincided with a giant immigration wave from the former Soviet Union.

These paintings and other works included in the exhibition portray both people and landscapes in a crude, caricatured style; the faces are not individualized, the figures are disproportionate or distorted. Yet they capture the atmosphere and the emotional tone of the scene, as well as the dynamic movement of the characters. This primitivist style calls to mind the conventions of folk art, with its vernacular aesthetics, like in Mexican *exvotos*, Ukrainian folk paintings, or African signage imagery. The mixture of caricature, art-historical and non-art resources, and irreverent content also echoes the “Bad” painting style. This approach is both an artistic statement and a harsh social commentary. It is also a perfect way to convey the point of view of an outsider, looking at everything anew like a child. Here, Cherkassky uses a method of targeted regression. “Friday in the Neighborhood” is painted from a single-point perspective like a beginner art student; “1991 in Ukraine” shows a childlike pre-occupation with bodily fluids and sex. Her paintings balance dramatic

contrasts between their grand scale and their lowly subjects, between the medium of oil painting and broad caricature, between the references to art canon and folk art, and between nostalgia and anti-nostalgia—the very thing that drew me to “Ukrainian Folk Dancing.”

What Cherkassky accomplishes in the diptych is something that I would call a double vision—a simultaneous exposure of “before” and “after,” an equal-opportunity satire of both immigrant nostalgia and of the rosy promises of a bright Israeli future. In a second diptych included in the exhibition, the parallel between “before” and “after” is even more explicit. In both paintings, titled identically, “School Mobbing” (oil on linen, 2014), bullies taunt a skinny kid clutching a violin. In one painting the bullies are blond, pasty-pale, and are dressed in Soviet school uniforms. In the other, the bullies are swarthy with dark, curly hair and T-shirts boasting the logo of their school. The *mise-en-scène* is the same in both paintings, including the body language of the characters and the way music sheets are strewn on the ground. In each one, a bully pees on the sheets, a stream of urine hitting the one titled “Mozart.” Aside from some differences in the setting, the only perceptible change is that the violinist in the Israeli painting looks more shocked than terrorized, as if he can’t believe this is happening again. The point is that very little changes; the promise of immigration doesn’t deliver, yet there is nothing to look back at either. There is no paradise and no paradise lost.

Along with the “before” and “after,” Cherkassky deals with the exploration of stereotypes, simultaneously displaying and deconstructing them. This is evident already in her early drawings, some of which can also be seen in tandem. One sketch is a frontal portrait of an upright young Russian immigrant in formal dress, violin in hand, a halo above his head. A parallel sketch depicts a tanned man in a colorful shirt with a mop of unruly dark hair. Arched over his head is the word *Sabra*. He seems so comfortable in his skin that he is picking his nose with one hand, while holding falafel in another. The two portraits show the mutual stereotypes—the Russian immigrant, fashioning himself as an intellectual who is seen by Israelis as uptight and self-righteous. A *sabra* character, presenting himself as laid back and fun, is perceived by newcomers as lacking in

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manners and culture. What emerges in these portraits is a remarkable stereoscopic vision, exposing in the same image the ways in which Russian immigrants and Israelis see each other, and their perceptions of self. The effect is both humorous and profound.

#### OLD WINE IN NEW BOTTLES?

Cherkassky's double vision reminded me of my earlier theorizing of relationships between Israelis and Russian immigrants. Writing about Gesher Theater, a company founded by Russian newcomers in the early 1990s, I observed how its reception in Israel was a reflection of ambivalent and power-laden relationships between immigrants and locals. To describe this relationship I drew a model of Mutual and Internal Colonization, which, in the most basic terms, depicted how in the cultural encounter both Israelis and Russian immigrants look down on each other and aggrandize the self. Simultaneously, however, they also look up to each other and scorn themselves.<sup>2</sup> The dynamic that I noticed years ago in the media reception of Gesher Theater is sensitively captured in Cherkassky's artistic output. No wonder she has been accused of racism and antisemitism by Israelis, and of self-hatred by her fellow "Russians."

However, these complexities in the artist's work are not apparent in the museum's explanatory wall labels nor in the audio guide. All the commentary relates either to specific biographical details of the artist's and her family's immigration or to basic information about the Russian *aliyah*. Amazingly, there is no engagement whatsoever with the aesthetic aspects of the art, and very little with Cherkassky's trajectory as an artist. She is an artist of great sophistication and hybrid background, working in a variety of media and on a range of subjects, synthesizing classical craft with contemporary approaches, moving freely between allusions to the Old Masters and the vernacular tools of an untrained outsider. Her artistic approach is crucial for understanding her work. But in the museum's presentation, she appears not so much as an artist, but rather as a Russian immigrant ("Russian" being an umbrella term for anyone from the former republics of the Soviet Union), and that is the only thing that is interesting about her. In other words, she is treated like a dancing Russian bear.

This dynamic is familiar to me, although it was surprising to encounter it in 2018, nearly thirty years since the start of the mass immigration from the former Soviet Union to Israel. Back in the early 1990s when Gesher was established as a bilingual theater, performing the same plays in Russian or in Hebrew on alternate nights, the response of the Israeli critics was exactly the same. Gesher had a unique, innovative artistic approach and a talented cast (today some Gesher stars of that era, like Evgenia Dodina, are among Israeli A-list actors). But in its early days, the facts that Gesher was a theater and that its productions were works of art were consistently ignored by Israeli media. Instead, the critics and the journalists fixated on the fact that the theater was founded by Russian immigrants who barely spoke Hebrew and were new to Israel. The Russian origins of the actors and their status as recent immigrants served as the only interpretive lens on Gesher's productions. Regardless of the play, dramaturgy, and directorial style, all the critics harped on was the fact that the actors actually performed in Hebrew, or that they had an accent, or that their theater training was from Russia. Even when critics praised the theater, it was for its "Russian" craft. Such constant fixation on Otherness isolates or even infantilizes the artists and enforces the boundaries of the majority. This reception caused me to write my first book and to continue thinking seriously about the intersection of identity politics and arts and culture.

This is why when I recognized a familiar pattern in the framing of "Pravda," I wondered, what does it mean, how do the artist and the curators see it, how does it affect the exhibition? For Cherkassky herself, her framing as a "Russian" was "sort of unavoidable considering the subject of the show." Moreover, she explained to me, "Throughout my career in Israel . . . I was totally embraced and accepted by the Israeli art scene. Thus I don't have a problem with and even wish to be Russian (or rather Soviet) this time."<sup>3</sup> For the artist, self-fashioning as a Russian/Soviet immigrant in this case was a choice, a part, as it were, of her artistic statement. Then what am I complaining about?

To answer that question, let me consider the curatorial position. Amitai Mendelsohn, the curator of the exhibition—and the museum's

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senior curator—did not make himself available for comment, but comparing a catalog of “Pravda” with the exhibition’s presentation of the artist hints at some answers. The difference is staggering.

Perusing Mendelsohn’s detailed and sensitive catalog essay, we learn about Cherkassky’s international art career—spanning countries and styles. We also gain a deeper understanding of the multitudes of influences on Cherkassky as an artist, some of it connected to her own cultural background: from Japanese aesthetics to the French Barbizon School, German Expressionism, American Scene Art, Russian realism of the nineteenth century, Constructivism and Suprematism of the twentieth century, as well as the Soviet school of illustration and caricature. Her art also draws, provocatively, on both traditional Jewish symbolism and antisemitic imagery. Following Cherkassky’s mentor and colleague Avdey Ter-Oganyan, Mendelsohn grounds Cherkassky’s social satire in the school of Socialist Realism, dismissing its simple definition as propaganda.<sup>4</sup> Importantly, what the essay shows is how Cherkassky negotiates all these influences, which do not predetermine her as an artist but rather give her more tools with which to interpret and engage with her materials. Another senior curator at the museum, Mira Lapidot, provides a close reading of selected works, mostly focusing on cultural contexts, but also reaching beyond her self-proclaimed anthropological reading to point out an allusion to an important work of art or a particularly challenging technique.<sup>5</sup>

The problem is that these ideas appear only in the catalog that not everyone will buy, and even fewer people will read. (It doesn’t help that the catalog was published half a year after the opening of the exhibition.) What every visitor to the museum does see, though, is the exhibition itself with its wall labels and audio guide. In my few hours there, aside from many individual visitors, I saw hordes of Israeli groups coming through—high- and middle schoolers with their constantly shushing teachers, soldiers in uniforms on their cultural activities duty, a flock of retirees on a tour from Social Services. For all these people, Cherkassky’s exhibition is just one of the exhibitions they see at the museum, accompanied by a quick round up from their guide or audio guide. And all they learn is that the artist is “Russian.” It is as if the intellectual discourse has

already moved on, but the moment we deal with the popular discourse, there is a regression, and we are back to square one.

So much has changed in thirty years. “Russians” are no longer fresh-off-the-boat immigrants; they are just one of the larger Israeli ethnic groups. New generations of Israelis have been raised in a country where Russian is spoken by at least a sixth of the population, where the Russian accent is ubiquitous and unremarkable, and where an artist—at least an internationally acclaimed one—may choose to underscore her Russianness if her project calls for it. At the same time, entirely new categories of Others have appeared since—first, migrant workers, and, more recently, African refugees, bringing with them a new scope of issues and challenging the limits of national identity and Israeli democracy. With the promise of a peace process coming and then going, the Palestinian question has intensified, as the actual Palestinians have drifted further out of sight and awareness of the Israeli public, which has reached new levels of intolerance and chauvinism. In this context, the fact that the museum’s framing of Cherkassky’s work fails to engage with the aesthetic aspects of her art might appear utterly insignificant. And yet, it seems to me to be a symptom of the larger issues—the boundaries between “us” and “them,” the sense of who is entitled to what and by whom—the same issues that underlie both public and state violence against Others. And so, every time I look at the bright red painting in my living room, as much as I love it, my heart grows a little heavier.

## NOTES

I’d like to thank my friends and colleagues, Tal Ben Zvi and Maya Benton, who generously shared with me their expertise as art historians. A shout-out also to my parents who helped me to get hold of the exhibition catalog, and to Aaron Ring for editing.

1. For more information about the exhibition, see, “Zoya Cherkassky: Pravda.” Installation views are available at “Pravda: Zoya Cherkassky.”
2. See Gershenson, *Gesher: Russian Theatre in Israel*, 13–21.

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3. Zoya Cherkassky, email message to author, August 7, 2018.
4. Amitai Mendelsohn, "Zoya Cherkassky," 159–65.
5. Mira Lapidot, "About Selected Works," 149–58.

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## CONTRIBUTOR

**Olga Gershenson** is professor of Judaic and Near Eastern Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where she is also on the Film Studies faculty. Gershenson is a multidisciplinary scholar with interests at the intersection of culture, history, and film. She is the author of *Gesher: Russian Theater in Israel; A Study of Cultural Colonization* (International Academic Publishers, 2005) and *The Phantom Holocaust: Soviet Cinema and Jewish Catastrophe* (Rutgers University Press, 2013). She edited the collection *Ladies and Gents: Public Toilets and Gender* (Temple University Press, 2009) and a special issue of *East European Jewish Affairs* about new Jewish museums in postcommunist Europe. Gershenson's current research deals with emerging genres in Israeli cinema. Along with her academic work, she curates film series, consults for festivals, and has a lively lecture schedule at universities, conferences, and museums around the world.