



The Memory On Her Face A Pop Up Exhibition In Miami. 2022

# PUSHING

# FORWARD

## **Glass Man speaks with Max and Julia Voloyshn, the founders of Kyiv-based contemporary gallery Voloshyn gallery and one of their represented artists Lesia Khomenko, to discuss how they continue to thrive and survive in desperate times**

Writer CHARLIE NEWMAN

When Russia invaded Ukraine on the 24th of February earlier this year, Ukraine's bright, young art scene was under threat.

When Max and Julia Voloshyn left their native Kyiv for Mexico in 2021 to follow their art projects at Tiro Al Blanco gallery, the Dallas Art fair and an opening in Miami, little did they know that they would not return home for over a year. Shortly after the show in Miami, the Voloshyn's caught Covid19. Two weeks later, Russia invaded Ukraine on the 24th of February. "It was a shock for us, because now after a year of travelling between art fairs and projects and exhibitions, and moving from apartment to apartment. It's really difficult" says Julia.

At once tired, determined and hopeful, the Voloshyn's beam down through the Zoom screen at me whilst their

daughter playfully dons her mothers high heeled shoes in the background. With their family, friends, business, safety and security at risk, the Voloshyn's are surrounded by insurmountable fear, and yet they push forward. Julia explains "We have a responsibility to our daughter, and also to our artists and gallery. We want to keep moving..... With all of the stress, it almost becomes easier to come together, with the shared knowledge that we have to do this and get through it".

Defying all of the odds, Voloshyn gallery has presented at art fairs in Mexico, New York, Switzerland, Copenhagen, Vienna, Athens and Cologne this year and will show in Miami in December. When the war initially broke out, Max and Julia evacuated several pieces to Europe to show at art fairs, "But for us it is really expensive because we don't have many sales and now we have even more expenses

than before" admits Julia. Max adds, "Right now to transport a piece from Ukraine to Europe is very expensive, it is not like shipping from London to New York. That is much simpler, but to get something from Ukraine is so difficult". On the ground, the Voloshyn's remain extremely grateful for their studio manager, Anna Kopylova, for her tireless efforts in keeping the gallery alive. Previously a bomb shelter during the Second World War, Anna and the Voloshyn team offered the gallery as a place of refuge earlier this year. Safe, warm and comfortable with a toilet, electricity and a basement, the gallery soon became home for Anna and her family for two months and later for other artists too. That's not to say they were completely devoid of danger though. On the 10th of October, over 80 Russian missiles were launched, tragically destroying a children's playground, Kyiv's National Gallery, the Khanenko Museum, the Taras Shevchenko Park and its university, all just a stones throw distance away from the gallery.

The gallery may be closed, (with hopes of re-opening soon) but Anna is operating the gallery online. Being female, she is allowed to travel and promote the gallery abroad. It's not easy though, Anna's travelling routes are restricted to trains and buses, taking endless hours to arrive anywhere. Meanwhile some of their represented male artists have received commissions outside of Ukraine so have been able to travel for up to a month maximum, only to return to fight for Ukraine.

In desperate times art might appear to be frivolous, and yet the Voloshyn's are proving this not to be the case. Julia believes that "History should be re-written because they changed our history. What they say about Ukraine is not true. The artists play a major role in telling that story". And whilst the current war focussed art might be difficult to look at and not one to hang on the walls at home, "it is institutional and it is important to show the message." Max explains how the Voloshyn gallery is continuing "to support artists and the art scene now, it is not about the commercial side, it is not about sales. We want to promote our programme and support new artists because there are so many in Ukraine".

One of which is the multi disciplinary artist Lesia Khomenko. With a Soviet painter grandfather and an artist/photographer father, art is in Khomoneko's blood. Early in her artistic journey, Khomenko "was trying to be complicated, layering a lot of different meaning in one work. Now I'm trying to be completely clear, to go direct. It's challenging me and I think it's very interesting, not to simplify myself, not to make posters". Now her mission as an artist is more focussed and feels more urgent, "I think that artists are very important figures because now we are living in a situation of a cyber war...there is a huge amount of fakes. Of course we have tools to get some real footage, to get some real documentary about what's going on but it's never clear what is truth and what is fake". As a result the artist holds an extremely key position, unlike politicians, activists or the military. "They have clear tasks, clear strategies, they should win...but artists always construct from the reality around them". It is art that rebuilds the "critical thinking" that cyber war and propaganda "destroy".



We will see the XX century 2. Nikita Kadan



The reality for Khomenko is that she receives weekly calls from her husband on the frontline. He refuses to video call his wife in case it is intercepted but does however send Khomenko imagery of his comrades, only once they have left that location in order to obtain safety. Khomenko thinks “every situation is interesting” for an artist and so has used her husbands imagery in her recent work Max Is In The Army series where she deconstructs the trauma of war. Here we find normal looking men wearing puffer jackets, fleeces, cardigans or anoraks paired with brightly coloured trainers or sensible work shoes. They might appear normal when in fact these everyday looking men are Ukrainian soldiers saluting, or holding weapons, their identity and location blurred for safety purposes. The sheer monumental scale, heavy paint work and Khomenko’s dramatic dripping of paint, combine to project an alarmingly powerful and jarring message.

Khomenko’s husband is fighting alongside philosophers, professors, writers and poets, men she hears laughing and joking together in the background of their precious calls with each other. “It’s not like militarisation of society, but it’s something new. I call it bureaucratic anarchy”. It is her work that not only keeps Khomenko connected with her husband but with herself too. When Khomenko found herself too busy to paint whilst applying for a visa, travelling to New York where she joined a panel of speakers at MoMa and is working on a show for the Fridman gallery in June 2023, Khomenko felt “not so good because of the distance from painting...I’m a painter and painting is a very introvert kind of practice. Now it helps me to survive mentally in the war times”.

Whilst she needs no motivation to work, Khomenko does of course feel an immense strain on her mental health when researching the war for up to five hours a day. “It’s difficult. Sometimes I’m really tired, sometimes I’m really disappointed”. She’s also experiencing the frenetic anxiety that comes with her degree of separation. “People who are in a safe place are experiencing everything through the news, they are more stressed than the guys who are on the front line”. Her husband even told her to “take it easy”. On top of this, Khomenko is increasingly aware of the “huge adrenaline addiction” both fighters and civilians are feeling, “I think it’s important to talk about it as a way of explaining things outside of one dimension. It maybe makes life easier”.



Max and Julia Voloshyn



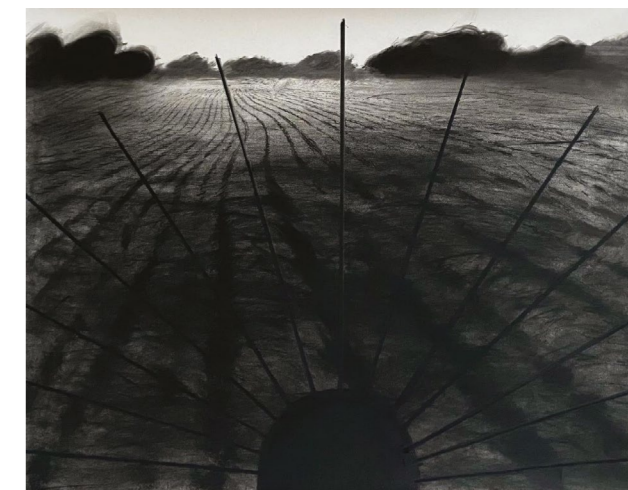
Artist Know Better, Exhibition in Dallas



From The Series Perspektivna Acrylic On Canvas, 2018 260x150



Artist Know Better, Exhibition in Dallas  
Courtesy of the artist and Voloshyn Gallery



Charcoal On Paper\_120x150x6 cm. Nikita Kadanthesun 2022

At the core of Khomenko’s work is her innate quest to help and support others. Six years prior to the war breaking out Khomenko was “very involved in the educational process in Kyiv, investing in my younger generation of artists”. Within days of the war breaking out, Khomenko was meeting with local people and institutions to propose an organisation for artists who had fled the war. “For me it was important to build strong connections between local art institutions and artists, to keep these institutions visible and to help them survive and be active”. She particularly enjoys how these artists can have full autonomy rather than working through her directly or through a curator. These artists are not bound by previous industry rules, trends or expectations.

The worlds attention may be fixed on Ukrainian artists as a result of the war, but Khomenko believes the roles will soon be reversed. “I think Ukrainian artists will become more international from this point. Of course I don’t believe that all of us will immigrate outside of Ukraine forever because Ukraine is so fruitful, it’s so interesting. I think after the win it will be the place with the most potential in the world”. Already we can see this potential crossing borders with Ukrainian and Iranian protestors joining forces in Berlin, “I’m so happy with these alliances, nations who are under the pressure of military dictatorship...[for] the best way to involve people is to make them one body”.

Before we click off and say our goodbyes Khomenko leaves us with her lasting humanist principle, “Peace is impossible without justice...It’s not only about Ukrainian and Iranian territories it’s about the idea of the free world, of humanity, it’s so important now. We need to finish with Putin. I’m so happy for the Iranian women and the Iranian protest”.

[voloshyngallery.art](http://voloshyngallery.art)  
[@lesia\\_khomenko](https://www.instagram.com/lesia_khomenko)  
[fridmangallery.com](http://fridmangallery.com)  
[reconstruct.in.ua/](http://reconstruct.in.ua/)  
[workingroom.space/en/home.html](http://workingroom.space/en/home.html)