

Visual Arts

Artist Nadia Kaabi-Linke on recovering Ukrainian stories suppressed by Russia

The damage inflicted on works during the Soviet era is at the heart of the Tunisian-Ukrainian's 'Blindstrom' project

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The peasant stands in front of his hut as the Russian soldier takes aim. Painted in 1927, “Shooting at Mezhyhirya” by Ukrainian artist Vasily Sedlyar depicts the murder of Ukrainian peasants by Russian imperial forces during the civil war of 1917-21. Although this painting critiques the Soviet army’s enemies, its author was still executed by the regime in 1937 and the painting hidden in the stores of National Art Museum of Ukraine (NAMU) in Kyiv, where its condition severely deteriorated. Only after the cold war was it shown again.

This sort of suppression was not rare. Before Vladimir Putin’s invasion in February, Ukrainian scholars were challenging the concept of the “Russian avant-garde” because the movement included many Ukrainian painters, such as Kyiv-born Kazimir Malevich. Like Sedlyar, they suffered during Stalin’s rule and, even when rehabilitated, their Ukrainian origins remained invisible.

These are exactly the sort of histories that contemporary artist Nadia Kaabi-Linke, who has a Ukrainian mother and a Tunisian father, was excavating long before Putin’s tanks rolled in. “Shooting in Mezhyhirya” is one of a clutch of paintings in “Blindstrom”, an installation in Kaabi-Linke’s exhibition of the same name, which was due to open on March 4 this year at NAMU.



'Shooting at Mezhyhira' (1927) by Ukrainian artist Vasily Sedlyar. The painting became severely damaged during its decades in storage © Timo Kaabi-Linke

Inevitably, *Blindstrom* was postponed. Yet Kaabi-Linke believes it will go ahead. “I am sure we will win,” she says over Zoom from Berlin, where she is based with her husband and artistic collaborator Timo Kaabi-Linke, and their two sons. “We are defending our land. Our right for existence. The Russian [soldiers] don’t even know why they are there!”

The seeds of *Blindstrom* were sown when Kaabi-Linke met Oksana Barshynova, chief curator at the NAMU, who told her about the *spetsfund* of suppressed paintings. When Kaabi-Linke realised how much Ukrainian art had been hidden by the Soviets and how many artists had been “assassinated, erased from history or forced into exile”, she felt “a sense of rage . . . But it was good rage. The kind that makes things happen.”

With significant shows behind her, including at London's Mosaic Rooms and Bonn's Kunstmuseum, and work in Paris's Pompidou Centre and New York's Guggenheim, Kaabi-Linke's thoughtful multimedia practice has often considered "traces left on the skin or surface" of objects and people by violent events. For *Blindstrom*, she "decided to consider each painting as a human being" and read their damage as maps of their histories.

Kaabi-Linke was aided by research from Kyiv-based historian Taras Samchuk. "Taras studied the work's destiny rather than its meaning: which were stolen by Nazis, which were hidden, which were used as propaganda, which were damaged, which restored. I learnt the history of my country, my roots." She pauses, moved, before saying: "This is not how museography usually works."



Artist Nadia Kaabi-Linke felt ‘a sense of rage’ at the extent of Ukrainian art suppressed under Soviet rule. The paintings tended to be censored either because they were too “formalist” (ie, abstract), which defied the dictates of Soviet socialist realism, or because their authors “defended Ukraine’s national interests” or were “supporters of Ukrainian political leaders seen as threatening by Stalin”, says Kaabi-Linke.

Her discoveries in the *spetsfund* emphasised the subversive power of art in times of tyranny. The Nazis, for example, stole works not “because they were precious but because they thought they would give them insights into their enemy”. One Soviet official wrote on the back of a canvas: “The proletariat will never accept this.”

I don't agree with a general boycott — but it's fitting to boycott those aligned with Putin's regime'

Nadia Kaabi-Linke

Crucial to *Blindstrom* are its guides, all of whom are visually impaired. When I ask Kaabi-Linke if she risks fetishising disability, she counters: “The question itself means you are discriminating by seeing people as separate” — adding that she designed the show in collaboration with the Ukrainian Union for the Disabled. “Usually, visually impaired people are ignored in the

art world. Museums might give them one little sculpture to touch. Here, we created the whole show around the mediators.”

Her plan is to install the original paintings with “tactile black surfaces” beneath them that replicate the damage — scuffs, scrapes, scratches, erasures — that scar the originals. These copies are designed to be touched by guide and audience alike. “When you feel the damage under your fingers, you get a sense of the trauma that was suffered,” says Kaabi-Linke.



Isaac Brodsky's 1929 portrait of Oleksey Rykov

When *Blindstrom* does open, Putin's aggression will have further scarred Ukraine. Although museum staff have made valiant efforts to safeguard treasures, it is thought that Russian troops have looted more than 2,000 artworks and damaged 250 institutions. A curator in Melitopol, Galina Andriivna Kucher, has been abducted. Yet against all odds, some museums in Kyiv have reopened, including the Mystetskyi Arsenal whose new show, *An Exhibition about our Feelings*, reflects Ukraine's trauma and courage since the invasion.

Kaabi-Linke copes, she says, by "doing something useful". At first, she felt "complete disorientation. I didn't know left from right. Should I sit or stand? I felt [the invasion] on my body."

Within days, however, she headed down to the railway station to help refugees. Here she witnessed the double standards that have tainted efforts made to welcome fleeing Ukrainians and triggered anger among diaspora communities in the art world and beyond. As Kaabi-Linke watched, a Moroccan man was turned away by another volunteer. "He said: 'Go away. This support is only for Ukrainians.'"

It turned out that the Moroccan was also from Ukraine. "Why don't [Europeans] realise the world is so much larger?" she asks. "People are suffering in Yemen, Palestine, Kashmir . . . These conflicts are overlooked by western media."



Efim Cheptsov's 1937 painting known variously as 'Inspecting the Harvest' or just 'Harvesting'

Kaabi-Linke's empathy is intensified by her origins. After growing up in Kyiv, Tunis and Dubai, she says she has two hearts: one Ukrainian and one "vibrant, beating, Arabic".

Asked for her views on sanctions on Russian culture and philanthropy, she replies: “I don’t agree with a general boycott,” adding that what is required instead is a “critical approach to Russian culture with its imperial heritage”. Nevertheless, she does believe it’s “fitting to boycott those clearly aligned with Putin’s regime”. Every artist has a “responsibility to take a position against regimes and their war crimes. Art is not separate from politics because no art is outside society. Silence, looking away — this is also taking a position.”

There are reasons for hope. *Blindstrom* will be the subject of a conference at the Albertinum Museum in Dresden on June 8, and she has projects at the Lyon Biennale this September and in November at the 32 bis art space in Tunis.

She and her husband have also bought a house in Kyiv and will move there when the war ends. “It reminds us of Berlin 20 years ago,” she says. “There’s a dynamism, a positivity. They’ve had to fight for their democracy. There’s also a vibrant art scene.”

She sounds so upbeat that it’s impossible not to share her faith that this time Russia won’t succeed in driving Ukraine’s culture underground.

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