

FRIDMAN GALLERY

For immediate release – June 13, 2022



Dana Kavelina, *A Letter to a Turtledove* (a film still), 2020

Women at War

curated by Monika Fabijanska

Yevgenia Belorusets	Dana Kavelina
Oksana Chepelyk	Lesia Khomenko
Olia Fedorova	Vlada Ralko
Alena Grom	Anna Scherbyna
Zhanna Kadyrova	Kateryna Yermolaeva
Alevtina Kakhidze	and Alla Horska (1929–70)

Fridman Gallery (NYC) and Voloshyn Gallery (Kyiv, Ukraine) are honored to present *Women at War*, curated by Monika Fabijanska.

- The exhibition takes place at Fridman Gallery's Manhattan location, 169 Bowery, from July 6 through August 26, with the public opening on Wednesday, July 6, 5-8pm. The opening will include a performance by [Ukrainian Village Voices](#), a New York City-based collective whose mission is to preserve and revive the polyphonic singing style of Ukraine's villages.
- On Wednesday, July 6, from 1-5 pm, we are hosting a press preview day, when the curator Monika Fabijanska and artist Lesia Khomenko will be available to answer questions.
- On Thursday, July 7 at 6 pm, we will host a curatorial walkthrough of the exhibition, free and open to the public.
- On Wednesday, July 13 at 1 pm, we will host a virtual conversation with the artists Alevtina Kakhidze and Dana Kavelina. [Zoom Link](#).
- On Wednesday, July 20 at 8 pm, we will host a screening of *Zemlya* (1930) - the masterpiece silent film by Ukrainian director Alexander Dovzhenko, with a soundtrack by [DakhaBrakha](#), a world-music quartet from Kyiv.
- On Wednesday, July 27 at 1 pm, we will host a virtual conversation with the artists Lesia Khomenko, Anna Scherbyna, and Ksenia Nouril (Print Center, Philadelphia). [Zoom Link](#).
- General exhibition viewing hours are Monday – Friday, 11am-6pm, and by appointment.
- A curatorial essay and additional programming, including more curatorial walkthroughs and online conversations with participating artists, will be announced soon.
- Following the presentation at Fridman Gallery, *Women at War* will next travel to the art gallery at Eastern Connecticut State University, Willimantic, CT, where it will be on view September 12 – October 14, 2022.

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Women at War features works by a selection of the leading contemporary women artists working in Ukraine, and provides context for the current war, as represented in art across media. Several works in the exhibition were made after February 24, 2022, when Russia began full-scale invasion; others date from the eight years of war following the annexation of Crimea and the creation of separatist “republics” in Donbas in 2014.

War is central to history. History has been written (and painted) by men. This exhibition provides a platform for female narrators of history and examines the perception of war as gendered. Women are generally absent from the historical accounts of war, but violating a woman is seen as a violation of land and nation. Media images reinforce the perception of gender divide. But is war indeed gendered? Women comprise c. 25% of Ukrainian armed forces. Russian soldiers rape Ukrainian civilians of all genders, including adult men. Many artists in this exhibition struggle with the notion of victimhood and pose the question in what way women have agency during war.

The exhibition also serves as a gateway to Ukrainian and other Eastern European feminisms, which are significantly different from the Western mold. Finally, *Women at War* will contribute to a conversation about how national identity is tied to the perception of women’s role in society. There are parallels between the fight for Ukraine’s independence and the fight for its women’s equality. They stem from the paradoxes of the Soviet Union, where early modernist, anti-nationalist, and feminist promises remained but a fig leaf of propaganda in the brutal and misogynist patriarchal empire it became.

Ukrainian art of the 2010s was largely focused on the discussion of whether Ukrainian identity should draw directly upon the short period of pre-Soviet independence or include the legacy of the Ukrainian SSR. This, in the country burdened with its colonial past, the unimaginable wounds of the 20th century (Holodomor, two world wars, the Holocaust), and the reality of a crisis, led to a national fixation on history. The young generation of artists focused their attention on historiography – how history is written, who writes it, who and what remains invisible. Soviet painting, especially the interpretations of WWII, came into focus of many artists. Others organized around the critique of decommunization – the destruction of Soviet monuments and mosaics in Donbas spearheaded by the post-Maidan government – and turned towards the forgotten pages of history.

Dana Kavelina (b. 1995 in Melitopol) focuses on the perception of war outside the mainstream narratives. *Letter to a Turtledove* (2020) is an experimental anti-war film-poem about women in the Donbas conflict zone, which invites us “to think of a victim as a certain subjective agency who is not involved in the reproduction of violence yet absorbs it. This is her strength.” The subjectivity of the victim and gender roles of women during war are also explored by **Alena Grom** (b. 1976

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in Donetsk) in the *Womb* series (photography, 2018), inspired by the stories of women who gave birth while living in the war zone in Donbas; **Oksana Chepelyk's** (b. 1961 in Kyiv) *Letter from Ukraine* (video, 2014), which abstracts the war role of a mother into a choreography; and a drawing diary of everyday horrors of the war by **Vlada Ralko** (b. 1969 in Kyiv), published daily on Instagram (2022), which follows her famous *Kyiv Diary* (2013-2015).

A vivid discussion about historiography among Ukrainian artists concerns historical painting. This critique is central to art practices of conceptual painters **Lesia Khomenko** (b. 1980 in Kyiv), whose *Max in the Army* – a monumental full-figure portrait of Khomenko's partner, an artist himself, joining Territorial Defense of Ukraine – was painted in March of 2022, and **Anna Scherbyna** (b. 1988 in Zaporizhia), whose *Some landscapes of the left-bank Ukraine* (watercolors, 2016-19) subvert the historical genre of painted ruins, depicting the ruins of Donbas as miniature watercolor landscapes.

Another artist investigating the role of art in historiography, **Yevgenia Belorusets** (b. 1980 in Kyiv), focuses on the connections between authenticity and responsibility in documentary art forms, and chooses Ukraine's invisible groups as her subjects. *Victories of the Defeated* (2014-2017) is a cycle of more than 150 photographs and texts devoted to post-industrial Ukraine, coal miners on the edge of the war zone, and contemporary forms of labor.

Alevtina Kakhidze's (b. 1973 in Zhdanivka, Donetsk oblast) piercing series of drawings, *Strawberry Andreevna* (2014-2019), covers four years of telephone conversations with her mother who stayed in the occupied territories in the Donetsk region. It ends in January 2019, when Ms. Andreevna died of a cardiac arrest while crossing the demarcation line between the self-proclaimed "Donetsk People's Republic" and Ukraine to receive her pension.

Zhanna Kadyrova (b. 1981 in Brovary, Kyiv oblast) created *Palianytsia* (2022) in a village in Western Ukraine, where she evacuated from Kyiv. Large stones smoothed in local rivers reminded her of the typical Ukrainian bread, *palianytsia*. Because Russian occupiers cannot pronounce it properly, the word is now used to distinguish friend from enemy.

A consequence of the political situation of Ukraine is a mental health crisis, about which women artists speak openly. In the words of Dana Kavelina, "depression is the only adequate strategy in a situation where it is impossible to influence real political processes." **Kateryna Yermolaeva** (b. 1985 in Donetsk), cut-off from her family and home in Donbas, suffered an identity crisis. It led the artist to dress up as non-binary characters, and experiment with the idea of self as composed of multiple personalities (*Photos*, 2016-). In **Olia Fedorova's** (b. 1994 in Kharkiv) poetic take on Land Art titled *Defense* (2017), anti-tank hedgehogs are made of paper to symbolize the futility of the mind's attempt to escape the reality of war. During recent Russian

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shelling of Kharkiv, in an underground bomb shelter, she created poems-prayers written on bed linen. *Tablets of Rage* (2022) echo the history of women's work with textiles, not only as a form of creative expression but as an important healing and meditative practice.

The exhibition features a drawing by **Alla Horska** (1929-70), on loan from the Ukrainian Museum in New York, situating this contemporary art exhibition within the context of Ukrainian feminist legacy. Both Horska – an artist and dissident – and poet Ivan Svitlichny (1929-92) whom she portrayed, fought to preserve Ukraine's culture and language under the communist regime. In 1970, at the age of 41, Horska was murdered by the KGB. Her name was adopted as a *nom de guerre* by one of the Guerrilla Girls.

This exhibition is a collaboration among Voloshyn Gallery, www.voloshyngallery.art, a prominent art gallery in Kyiv, currently operating from Miami, FL; Fridman Gallery in NYC; and curator Monika Fabijanska. During the last three months, we have been working together to bring to New York the art of these outstanding artists, many of whom stayed in Ukraine, while some found temporary refuge in the West. Several of the works presented in *Women at War* were featured in museum exhibitions and biennials internationally.

About the Curator: Monika Fabijanska is an independent art historian and curator who specializes in women's and feminist art. She curated critically acclaimed exhibitions *The Un-Heroic Act: Representations of Rape in Contemporary Women's Art in the U.S.* (John Jay College, 2018), *ecofeminism(s)* (Thomas Erben Gallery, 2020), and *Betsy Damon. Passages: Rites and Rituals* (La MaMa Galleria, 2021), mentioned among *The New York Times* best shows of 2021. Fabijanska initiated the idea and provided curatorial consulting for The Museum of Modern Art's acquisition and retrospective exhibition of Alina Szapocznikow (2012).

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