

Former Winnipegger living in Poland involved in global online auction of more than 130 works by 40 Ukrainians

THE ART OF WAR

MELISSA MARTIN

THIS was what Olena Kayinska's life looked like, in the time before: art, and more art, and more. She started her days in her Lviv studio, painting glimpses of haunting and fantastical worlds. It was nights at galleries, where she soaked in the vibrancy of Ukraine's thriving contemporary art scene. It seems like another life already. It wasn't that long ago.

When the full-scale invasion began on Feb. 24, all that ended. Kayinska, 37, threw herself into helping. She started working for Doctors Without Borders and its humanitarian mission in Ukraine. She didn't have much time to paint. She gave up her studio space, so it could become a refuge for those fleeing the more brutalized eastern parts of the country.

In one way, she felt she had nothing to complain about: "I am at home, for now," she says, calling from an evening in Lviv. "I'm in my city, all my relatives I love, thank God." But she has extended family in Mariupol nobody has heard from, since Russian occupation forces blocked communication channels, so she worries about them, and about her future.

"I had the kind of plan for me as an artist, I had a plan of career development I was doing before the beginning of the war," she says. "I no longer know that my plans for the future are relevant. I feel that they take away the future from me. I don't know if this art project has as much immediate relevance in Ukraine now, as for example humanitarian projects."

The days walked on. Sirens, soldiers and, in Lviv, occasional bombs. Art slipped into the background. A Lviv gallery where she'd shown her art was transformed into a shelter for internally displaced people; one of her paintings hung over a row of sleeping bags on the floor. She put plans for what would've been her first single-theme exhibition on hold.

It's surreal to think about now, maybe a little too on-the-nose, but that project had been called, and was about, Trauma.

"Now, of course, the war is the trauma," she says.

But Kayinska still believes in the power of art to heal, to express, to transform. So earlier this year, when she was contacted by organizers of FestivAlt, a Kraków, Poland-based arts and activism collective, asking if she would be willing to donate her work to a new Fight With Art global fundraising auction, she was quick to contribute eight

of her favourite pieces.

The auction, which launched Tuesday night and runs to Sept. 4, marks one of the world's largest offerings of modern Ukrainian art. It features more than 130 works from 40 artists, including some world-renowned talents. The pieces run the gamut of styles, from abstract to illustrative, photography to textile.

"I'm really in very good company," Kayinska says. "I'm very proud that they asked me to join their company, that somehow they felt my work suited these amazing talented artists from Ukraine, and I was feeling very honoured to be a part... I hope they will be successfully sold, so we can make some money for the charitable aims of the auction."

The proceeds will go to four charities, including How Are UA, which provides medical supplies to paramedics at the front; the Active Rehabilitation Group, which supports displaced people who use wheelchairs; the Jewish Community Centre of Warsaw, which is supporting dozens of refugee families; and a group rescuing animals found suffering in Ukraine.

It's an effort that grew from the grassroots, as so many things around this war did. In the spring, FestivAlt, co-founded by Winnipeg-raised actor and theatre producer Michael Rubinfeld, had begun organizing five exhibitions of Ukrainian art in Kraków. (The *Free Press* met Rubinfeld in April, when we were in Poland to cover humanitarian efforts there.)

From those exhibitions came the seed of a much more ambitious idea: a global art auction, leaning on the connections that Rubinfeld and other FestivAlt members have in North America. By bringing all that art together, they could both share the talent of Ukraine's modern art scene, and also give those artists another channel to pitch in.

"That's really the ethos at the heart of this auction," Rubinfeld says. "We created it because we want to help artists fight with their art because they want to, and they need to. Artists are doing what they can to try to sell their paintings and raise money for helping... and the amount of collaboration and the amount of willingness has been astounding."

"Everyone just wants to do what they can, because it's so needed."

It wasn't easy to pull it all together. The artists were overwhelmingly willing to contribute, but just to get the pieces out of Ukraine took a massive volunteer effort, gathering pieces at drop-off points in Kyiv or Lviv and arranging drivers to take them to Po-

land. Truckloads of art filled a donated Kraków space: "It was completely wild," Rubinfeld says.

The stories of those journeys stuck with him. A street artist called to apologize that he'd been out of touch for a few days: he'd been shot. He still managed to deliver his art to the drop-off. One woman donated four pieces by her late husband, a famous artist, because Rubinfeld's collective had raised funds that paid for a drone for her son's frontline military unit.

Now, Rubinfeld hopes that North Americans will open their wallets to acquire some of the pieces — some of which will likely go at a bargain rate, compared to what their creators usually command.

Kayinska hopes that, through all these works and others, the world will see the strength of her people.

"We are all now in Ukraine seeing ourselves from a very different perspective," she says. "It was always the notion in the Soviet Union that we are like little sister of the big brother Russia, that we are small and they are big, that they are strong and we are weak... now, we show a very big level of resistance. This is a surprise for us, how strong we can be."

"I'm very proud of how we are, that we have this national spirit now awakened. But also, the price for it is very big."

Someday, Kayinska will finish that project she'd started, about trauma. It will be different than it was. It's expanded, from 10 large paintings to as many as 24, and so has her understanding of the word: "The war is making a lot of reflections and associations. There is a lot of things to speak about, there is a lot of things to paint about," she says.

She dreams that the war will end. When it does, she dreams of showing those new works, and not only inside Ukraine.

"Now we see that more people abroad are interested in Ukrainian modern art, because art gives that possibility to speak these unspeakable emotions," she says. "It's not only that you watch the news and know what is happening in Bucha, and Irpin and Mariupol. When you look at the art, you have an immediate repackaging of the whole set of emotions people have."

To learn more about the artists included in the Fight With Art global auction, you can visit its website at FightWithArt.com. Bidding opened late Tuesday night at <http://wfp.to/oQg>, or through OneBid's online app.

melissa.martin@freepress.mb.ca



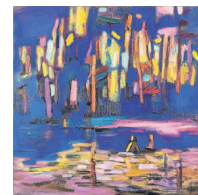
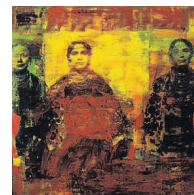
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Olena Kayinska, an artist from Lviv, is one of over 40 Ukrainian artists to contribute to Fight With Art, a global online auction to raise money for humanitarian relief.



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Desert Sand Witches by Olena Kayinska.



Far left: Reflections by Andrii Bludov. Left: When the Sun Sets by Olga Morozova.