

FORT GANSEVOORT



ZOYA CHERKASSKY

The Arrival of Foreign Professionals

Fort Gansevoort, 5 Ninth Avenue, New York, NY

Opening: Thursday, April 6, 2023, 6-8 PM

On View: April 7, 2023 – June 3, 2023

New York... Beginning April 6, 2023, Fort Gansevoort will present *The Arrival of Foreign Professionals*, a solo exhibition of new paintings by Ukrainian-born, Israel-based artist Zoya Cherkassky. In her latest works, Cherkassky offers up vibrant figurative compositions to depict scenes of African diasporic communities in Europe, Israel, and the USSR from the 1930s to the present day. Based upon historical research and the artist's own memories, these paintings examine cross cultural encounters from disparate times and locations. Cherkassky's personal experiences as the wife of a Nigerian emigrant and mother of a mixed-race child simultaneously inform her perspective and complicate her relationship to the subjects she portrays. Aware of the challenges that come with presenting these works in America—a nation whose own history of African enslavement and white supremacy remains entrenched—Cherkassky aims to engage viewers in open conversation about the aftermath of failed colonial projects.

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In the new painting *Arrival of Foreign Professionals (after Abram Cherkassky)*, Cherkassky replicates the composition of a Socialist-realist style canvas of a similar title made by her great-granduncle Abram Cherkassky in 1932. Zoya Cherkassky only became aware of her famous relative's original painting upon seeing it in an exhibition in Kyiv shortly before the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Initially unfamiliar with the narrative portrayed in the 90-year-old work, Zoya was inspired to research this historical moment of the 1930s Soviet Union, a period when the country was rapidly industrializing. As America was simultaneously in the throes of the Great Depression, some poor and jobless Black Americans were enticed to move to the USSR with the promise of dignified factory work. Conforming to the Soviet party agenda of depicting racial equality in art and media, the tone of Abram Cherkassky's original is welcoming and uplifting: his painting shows a comforting domestic scene of a white Soviet family and a Black couple enjoying each other's company. Yet, when viewed through the lens of American visual culture and its entrenched stereotypical imagery, Abram Cherkassky's Black figures appear as caricatures, complicating his message.

Intentional or not, Abram's painting reveals the inherent racism that pervaded Soviet society. In Zoya's reinterpretation of his composition, the subjects are painted in a much more naturalistic style. As she has stated, "My great-granduncle's painting was a trigger. It seemed right at the center of my interest in cultural clashes." Serving as a catalyst for other related works, this first painting launched Cherkassky's continued exploration of subtle racial tensions—or "culture clashes"—in a variety of contexts.

In the painting *Working immigrants are illegally crossing the Israeli-Egyptian Border*, pastel-colored mountains awash in delicate sunlight provide a majestic backdrop against which a group of workers, huddled in the back of a Toyota pick-up truck, head toward the Israeli border. Though diverse in background, hailing from various African and Eastern bloc countries, these individuals share the common goal of employment and an improved quality of life. Before a fence was constructed between Israel and Egypt, it was common for Bedouin smugglers to drive willing groups to the border, where those transported would cross on foot to be collected by Israeli soldiers and granted asylum. As Cherkassky explains, this painting illustrates the method by which her husband came from Nigeria to Israel 15 years ago to "start a new life." Filled with sideways glances, her arresting group portrait captures the anticipation, hope, and fear of people on the precipice of change.

Drawing from Cherkassky's personal observations, the vibrant hues and dynamically layered composition of *Simone*, depicts one of the many Afro-Belgian hair and nail salons found in the Matonge neighborhood in Brussels. More than simply places of business, such shops are essential gathering spaces for African immigrants from various countries to commune around rituals of self-care and beautification. Saturated with text and images within images, *Simone* epitomizes Cherkassky's masterful articulation of space and attention to optics, in both the visual and political sense. Within the scene, she includes subtle allusions to Belgium's brutal colonial past: In the top right-hand corner of the composition, an "I love Belgium" poster features the image of a statue of King Leopold II, under whose violent rule of the Congo from 1885 to 1908, 10 million Africans were massacred. Leopold II's gruesome tactics included cutting off hands, genital mutilation, and the burning of entire villages. By inserting his likeness into a contemporary Black cultural space, Cherkassky acknowledges the racial tensions that persist in the wake of colonial rule. Recently, public discussions have ignited around the monument of King Leopold II that still stands in Brussels, Belgium. As a participant in this dialog, the artist reflects, "I had a discussion with my Belgian friend about what should be done with this kind of statue. Should they be left or taken down? I had an idea about this particular one: the statue should be left as it is, only the hands of the king should be cut off."

In spite of the delicate and difficult subject matter she portrays, Cherkassky does not shy away from humor and awkwardness. Rather than being polemical, her paintings capture slices of life that embrace the unresolved, the transitional, and the complexities that characterize our shared humanity. The works on view at Fort Gansevoort continue her ongoing artistic project: excavating personal feelings about identity, nationalism, and belonging in relationship to her mixed-race family and to similarly positioned communities all over the world.

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About the artist

Zoya Cherkassky was born in Kiev, Ukraine in 1976. In 1991, she immigrated to Israel. She attended HaMidrasha School of Art at Bier Berl College. Her work has been shown internationally at institutions including The Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv, Israel; Rosenfeld Gallery, Tel Aviv, Israel; Henrich Böll Foundation Gallery, Tel Aviv, Israel; Circle1 Gallery, Berlin, Germany; Kuenstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin, Germany; and Guelman Gallery, Moscow, Russia. In 2018, the Israel Museum in Jerusalem held a mid-career survey of her work. Cherkassky's work is included in the permanent collections of Alfond Collection of Contemporary Art, Rollins Museum of Art, Winter Park, FL ; The Doron Sebbag Art Collection, ORS Ltd., Tel Aviv, Israel; El Espacio 23, Miami, FL; The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel; The Jewish Museum, New York, New York; Jewish Museum, Berlin, Germany; Jewish Museum, Vienna, Austria; Museum of Sex, New York, New York; Tel Aviv Museum of Art, Tel Aviv, Israel; and Weisman Art Museum, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Cherkassky currently lives and works in Tel Aviv, Israel.

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Caption and courtesy information:

Zoya Cherkassky

Party at the Dorms

2022

Oil on linen

57 x 71 inches

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