

Songs and Flowers for Ukraine

Oksana Briukhovetska

Bachelor, National Academy of Visual Arts and Architecture, Kyiv, Ukraine, 2003.

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

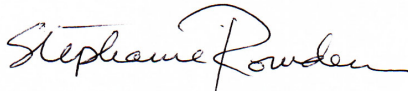
Penny W. Stamps School of Art and Design

University of Michigan

Ann Arbor, Michigan

April 21, 2023

Approved by:



Stephanie Rowden, Graduate Committee Chair



Marianetta Porter, Graduate Committee Member



Sara Adlerstein-Gonzalez, Graduate Committee Member



David Chung, Director MFA Graduate Program

Date Degree Conferred: April 27, 2023



UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Songs and Flowers for Ukraine

Thesis Paper

Oksana Briukhovetska

Penny W. Stamps School of Art and Design
University of Michigan

Introduction:

As a Ukrainian artist who stayed in the United States during the time when Russia started the full-scale aggression in my home country, I chose to address the topic of war because I felt it was my responsibility. Watching from a distance as people in my country are being killed and cities and villages are being destroyed has been heartbreaking. As a response, I created a series of textile collages *Songs and Flowers for Ukraine* during 2022-23, as the Russian full-scale invasion on Ukraine began and continued to escalate. Each of the pieces in this series of textile collage tapestries focuses on a specific narrative and references to Ukrainian history and folklore, induced by current war.

Visiting Ukraine in the summer of 2022 helped me to feel my attachment to Ukraine while experiencing a part of what my fellow citizens, family and friends were going through. What I observed in my native city of Kyiv were anti-tank barricades and military block-post on the streets, late evening curfews and constant air alarms during the day. But what I also observed was a deep connection between people, even between casual passers-by. The phenomenon of the Ukrainian struggle is that Ukrainians feel very close to each other, they feel as a family. If during times of peace people used to identify with different groups and ideologies, dividing themselves from their fellow citizens, in today's

Ukraine people stay as one entity against the aggressor. This is because they were not hired for the war by their government against their will, but they have their own will to fight for their freedom. The same thing happened abroad - members of the Ukrainian community of Ann Arbor, as well as of many places of the world found each other and joined their forces in support of Ukraine.

I have friends, and artists among them, who joined the Armed Forces of Ukraine to fight for the best future for their children. I have my best female friends who fled to Europe with their small kids. I have friends who are now in Russian captivity, and those who were killed at such a young age while fighting for their country. I am proud of the people of my country who are fighting for our freedom, surprising the whole world with their courage. And I shed tears for my fellow citizens who are losing their lives every day. The question that I asked myself is how art can help in the situation of war, knowing that real military weapons are the only solution to defeat the aggressor? As Lucy R. Lippard mentioned in her article about art and activism, "The power of art is subversive rather than authoritarian, lying in its connection of the ability to make with the ability to see – and then in its power to make others see that they too can make something of what they see..."¹ My work has become an attempt to make people feel what I feel. It has become a form of mourning for those who were killed, and at the same time, a ritual of celebration of Ukrainian identity and culture.

I chose a handmade work with fabrics as medium because the manual labor of textiles connects me to memories of my grandmother's generation and their craft-making practices. I learned my textile skills from my grandmother Valia as a child. The characteristic of "women's labor" carries the message itself, which is reflected in the Marshall McLuhan concept of "the medium is the message."² I am interested in the medium of textile as a feminist practice in contemporary art because the medium undermines the hierarchy of other media. The appreciation of textile forms in art came during the rise of the feminist movement and women's struggle for equal access to the previously male dominated art world. Textile works possessed a symbolic meaning about women's agency, and still references the semiotics of craft and therefore still questions the hierarchy.

Another aspect that I incorporated in my work I borrowed from Chilean *Arpilleras*: the possibility of that textile collage can carry a political message. *Arpilleras*, which are textile collages made by Chilean women during the Pinochet dictatorship, became a testimony of the abuse of power in their country as well as an expression of the

¹ Lippard Lucy R. Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power. In Wallis, Brian. "Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation." Book. Documentary Sources in Contemporary Art; v. 1. New York: Boston: New Museum of Contemporary Art; D.R. Godine, 1984. P. 345.

² McLuhan, Marshall. "The Medium Is The Message." Routledge, n.d. doi:10.4324/9781315080918-31.

challenges of their daily life, such as labor and unemployment, poverty and protests. In a 2019 publication about Arpilleras by Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Santiago, authors state that “This textile art built a wide social portrait of the period and became a survival tool, a means of communication to express what has been lived and a contribution to the livelihood of the home of many families that lived through the economic precariousness of the dictatorship.”³

Also, the sewing and fabric collaging practice has a therapeutic effect for me. The necessity of being focused on an elaborate performance of my fingers, the slowing down of time, and the impossibility of doing this work in a rush creates an atmosphere of calming and healing. It helped me to find a sense of purpose through art making during the time of tragic events that don't make sense in respect to human's life. Sewing pieces of fabric together became like trying to sew up wounds.

It is hard to depict war visually because no image can convey the real horror of the war experienced by people in real time. Knowing these limitations of art representations, I wasn't sure how I could approach the topic of war. But beauty might have a purpose in the symbolic opposition to the ugliness of the war. Hatred lies at the core of war, so love, as well as beauty, can be used as a tool of resistance.

The aim of the Russian aggression is to eradicate Ukrainian identity and culture, to conquer Ukrainian territory and to assimilate Ukrainians into Putin's “historically” imagined Russian empire. The Ukrainian government and people demonstrate incredible resistance and keep fighting for their freedom which became a surprise to the outside world that watches the war in everyday news. When Russia attacked Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the goal of the aggressor was to conquer the capital in three days. Some western experts perceived it as a realistic scenario. When it didn't happen, commentators from around the world provided their opinions on Ukrainian bravery and persistent willingness to resist. There were many arguments among experts, historians and intellectuals on why Ukrainians didn't want to surrender. It came as a surprise to parts of the Western academy that they were misguided in their habit of calling the whole of Soviet and Post-Soviet territory “Russia.”

One of the ideas that resonated with Ukrainians was from Slovenian philosopher and intellectual, Slavoj Žižek, who admitted that when it became clear that Ukraine “resisted when it was not expected to resist,”⁴ it was a shock for the West. He described the fight of Ukrainian people with *love as a necessity*, which is a radical choice to fight because

³ Arpilleras. Colección del Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos. Ocholibros, Santiago, Chile, 2019.

⁴ ‘What is Freedom Today? On War in Ukraine’ by Slavoj Žižek. 52:33. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Y7OaRntN1E

they couldn't do it any other way. In his speech, "What is Freedom Today? On War in Ukraine", he discusses concepts of *freedom and love*, and how in the Ukrainian action they overlap. For Žižek, the simple freedom of choice such as when "you go to a sweets store, should I get a strawberry cake or a chocolate cake"⁵ is not a true freedom. The true freedom is "much more than the freedom of choice."⁶ To explain this he uses the example of love. He suggests that if for example you think about someone, "that this lady or man has nice legs, nice eyes, talks nicely and so on, and you make a choice – it's not love."⁷ He says, that on the contrary, love manifests itself as a fateful power, to which one can't resist and even can't rationalize:

Is there a free choice of a loved object? You can not order somebody to fall in love. But once you are in love, you experience love as your fate, you don't have a choice. The idea is you never fall in love in the present, all of a sudden you discover you already are in love. That's why you never know the reason why you fall in love.⁸

He uses this idea to provide an understanding of how love is "a free choice but at the same time is a deepest necessity."⁹ And then he appeals to Ukrainian people, saying that their struggle has the same principle. Žižek pointed out that, of course, formally Ukrainians have a choice to fight or not. But if they choose to fight it is because they know they cannot do otherwise:

It is a radical choice, when you realize that I would not be able to live with myself without doing it. I think that today this is what we all in Europe should learn from you: it's not just this superficial freedom of choices, not just that you click "like it" or "don't like it"; it is the choice when you are freely doing what you have to do.¹⁰

Slavoj Žižek's examination could be applied also to explain why many Ukrainian artists including myself are creating works responding to the war. I didn't choose to work on the topic of the war; this is just my way to fight. The Ukrainian documentary filmmaker and my friend, Nadia Parfan made a film for The New Yorker about her experience of the first month of war in Ukraine called "I Did Not Want to Make a War Film." If I am making a work about Ukraine, it is because love is already there. I do it because my love for my homeland, for my family and my people is a deep necessity for me as a person. Even being separated from my home by geographical distance during the war time, I am connected to Ukraine not only as a place of my origin and where I have spent most of

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid

my life, but as a place which is in danger now and where people are suffering and dying, which creates a huge necessity for action from my side.

The history of my family also played a role in reflecting on the current war and in my creative process. The Ukrainian memory of the Second World War that the generation of my grandparents went through became a historical background on which a devastation of the current Russian war in Ukraine unfolds. I used family photographs taken after World War II that I sourced from my grandmother's archive and printed them on fabric. These photographs are collaged together with other symbols as artifacts of my personal family story which is an integral part of a bigger national and historical narrative.

My research inquiries raised in the process of making were shaped by the necessity of finding a way to create a multilayered reflection on the war that includes pain, grief, mourning, as well as an exploration of my roots and culture, which is under threat. How can I express these multiple concerns through making tapestries? And because I also want to create empathy for Ukraine, I also ask how can I use imagery recognizable for Ukrainians but foreign to American audiences to evoke an emotional response?

I'm also attempting to expand the potential of the textile medium itself, and in doing so, I address the questions: how can tapestry be influenced by poster design, family albums, and songs, as well as media that are considered legitimate fine art, such as painting and sculpture?

Each section of my Thesis paper is structured with several chapters. The Contextual review includes chapters Grief, History, Folklore, Flowers, and Politics of Textile. The first four frame chapters will cover four pieces from my series, *Why War?*, *My Ukraine in Flames*, *Family Altar*, and *Bouquets*. The Politics of Textile provides references to works of artists that influenced my creative practice in terms of my intention to address the war. The Methodology section then covers my Use of fabrics and Use of symbols to tell stories. In the Creative work section I provide the description of my works in gallery space and how they work together, and then I conclude with my reflections.

Contextual Review

Grief

The first impulse that drove my work was a feeling of grief starting from the beginning of the full-scale war in Ukraine on February 24, 2022, while watching the number of victims of the war growing. The scale of mass murder became evident at the point when we could no longer read the names of individual victims, but instead we read numbers. The calculation of numbers of victims of the war is not finished, as the war in Ukraine is ongoing. Mass graves were discovered in the Ukrainian territories that have been liberated from Russian occupation. These fresh graves emerged in the backyards of residential buildings, on public playgrounds, in private gardens. Dug up quickly, sometimes under shelling, and minimalistically arranged, the endless cemeteries filled up huge parts of Ukrainian land. The colors of these cemeteries are gray, the color of dried soil; the wooden crosses have been hastily put together. These graves look different from the decorated burials arranged for the dead during a peaceful time, when family members express their attention and care to the last refuges of their loved ones.

Ірпін, похорон у дворі житлового будинку.
Фото — Sergey Kucherenko



Figure 1. Burial in the backyard of a residential building in Irpin, Ukraine. March 2022. Photo by Sergey Kucherenko. Source: Facebook.



Figure 2. The headstone on the grave of my grandfather, Ivan Kysil. Installed in the 1990s. Volyn region, Ukraine.

Usually cemeteries are colorful in Ukraine. These photographs show the burials in the backyard of a residential building in Irpin, Ukraine in March 2022 (Figure 1), and a photo of the tomb my grandfather Ivan, arranged in the early 1990s which is at the cemetery in the Volyn region in Ukraine (Figure 2). Comparing these two images makes it easy to see the difference between the arrangements for death in peaceful time and during the time of war.

The Ukrainian documentary filmmaker, media artist, and performer Oksana Kazmina found herself in the United States the same as me when the war in Ukraine started. Her response as an artist to the war was a performance called *Digging* that took place in May 2022 in Syracuse. She dug a grave in a playground in Syracuse and put a note on the cross that she installed: “In Ukrainian city of Mariupol, a lot of graves are on playgrounds. It is happening in 2022” (Figure 3). In her artist statement she describes her experience:

Digging, digging, digging – graves, trenches, shelters. The graves are part of our new landscapes in Ukraine, which, as of now, I have only seen in photos. I tried to dig a grave big enough for my own body. I tried to dig as fast as possible, imagining that it was the only time I had to bury a loved one before the next shelling.¹¹

¹¹ Kazmina, Oksana. *Digging*. From the artist's text presented at the exhibition “I have a crisis for you...Women Artists of Ukraine Respond to War ” curated by Grace Mahoney and Jessica Zychowicz.

Kazmina's performance was an effort to put herself into an imaginary situation which, for many of our fellow Ukrainian citizens, is real. When they suddenly discover a fresh grave on their playground, American citizens are then asked to imagine, at least for a moment, the mass killings as real. The artist is impressing upon viewers that the casualties of the war are real beyond the place where the war is present. She also shares her reflections on this "reality":

A new reality in which human bodies (not all, but those that the entire civilized world has agreed are an acceptable price for peace and security) lose value, cease to be something worth saving at all costs, and, in fact, cease to be human bodies, turn into material.¹²

She goes on to discuss how these bodies exist in the realm of the unreal: "There is nothing logical in graves on children's playgrounds, or, rather, the bodies in these memorials have their own sick logic."¹³ Her phrase "sick logic" alludes to a way of "rationalizing" the senseless death of a certain people that is also a tool to dehumanize them. When this logic comes into play, the criteria of value of people's life shifts in a way so that these people stop mattering to the rest of humanity. The mass graves function as an abstraction.



Figure 3. *Digging*, performance by Oksana Kazmina. May 2022, Syracuse, USA.

Judith Butler in her essay "The Powers of Mourning and Violence" questions this uncanny reality:

What is real? Whose lives are real? How might reality be remade? Those who are unreal have, in a sense, already suffered the violence of derealisation. What, then, is the relation between violence and those lives considered as "Unreal"?

Weiser Hall Gallery, University of Michigan.

<https://sites.google.com/umich.edu/i-have-a-crisis-for-you/artists/oksana-kazmina?authuser=0>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

Does violence effect that unreality? Does violence take place on the condition of that unreality?¹⁴

Talking about the physical violence (which is at the core of the logic of the war), Butler then reflects on how this violence exists as a continuation of the frame of a particular kind of thinking. She argues that dehumanization occurs first at the level of discourse, in which “certain lives are not considered lives at all,”¹⁵ and then the physical violence “delivers the message of dehumanization that is already at work in the culture.”¹⁶ This mechanism was clearly visible in the Russian invasion in Ukraine. The day before the invasion, the Russian president Vladimir Putin delivered a speech about how Ukraine is not a “real” state and nation, opening the door for considering Ukrainian people as being “unreal” and therefore they can be exterminated unless they identify themselves as Russians.

Watching the news from Ukraine and the initial shock it caused, I also observed the distance formed in people’s minds to what was described in the news. I felt that distance between people who don’t experience war and don’t have a connection to Ukraine, and myself. I was thinking about how to overcome that gap, which small talk does with little success. Could I make a piece of art which would constantly speak to people about grief, the longing, and the mourning that I felt, alongside the endless anger caused by the war? And could that art piece also play the role of a personal memorial, as I am not able to bring flowers to the real graves and kneel down in front of them. I wondered if the idea of death and loss that human beings encounter could be triggered to evoke sympathy for Ukrainian people under attack. Judith Butler provides the idea of universality of grief and in this regard the potential of connecting humans with each other through mourning:

Despite our differences in location and history, my guess is that it is possible to appeal to a “we”, for all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody. Loss has made a tenuous “we” of us all. And if we have lost, then it follows that we have had, that we have desired and loved, that we have struggled to find the conditions for our desire.¹⁷

She argues that “each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies,”¹⁸ and that our knowledge about loss and our own vulnerability is a way in which we are attached to others and exist as social bodies. In my work I wanted to call each viewer’s attention to the sense of their own social

¹⁴ Butler, Judith. “Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence.” Book. London ; New York: Verso, 2004. P. 33.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid. P.34.

¹⁷ Butler, Judith. “Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence.” Book. London ; New York: Verso, 2004. P. 20.

¹⁸ Ibid

vulnerability as well as the vulnerability of their loved ones' bodies that could be imagined as being exposed to violence in certain political circumstances. Perhaps in this way, the war and the people affected by it, could be made more real.

Textile occurred to me to be an ideal medium for such a message. In the artworks of French-American artist Louis Bourgeois, the vulnerability of the body is communicated through sculptures made from textile material. Subversive in their investigations of the corporal, the domestic, the sexual and the unconscious, her sculptures were also unusual in technique. It took time for the art world to recognize the significance of Bourgeois's works; she only became an acknowledged artist late in her life. In 2022, 12 years after her death, a grand retrospective of her textile sculptures and installations were presented by the Hayward Gallery in London in the exhibition called *The Woven Child*. The curator of the show, Katie Guggenheim, talks about the power of textile as a material in Louis Bourgeois' works: "The fabrics she used – old clothes, domestic towels and bed linens – are the kinds of fabrics that are in close proximity to our bodies and so they have sensory associations that are linked to deep-seated emotions and memories."¹⁹

Along with the complex meanings added by the materials, Bourgeois also used the process of sewing in a way that resonates with the topics of trauma. Bourgeois described her choice of this particular way of creating sculpture, making statements such as: "I have always had a fascination with the magic power of the needle. . ." and "The needle is used to repair the damage. It's a claim to forgiveness. . ." and "The sewing is my attempt to keep things together and make things whole."²⁰

I felt similar to Bourgeois while I was doing my work. Sewing pieces of fabric together helps symbolically perform the actions of connecting, restoring things using images during a time when things are broken not only physically but also in people's minds. I also learned how to combine a process of grieving and healing using sewing technique, which is distanced from the digital media world - the primary source of the news from Ukraine. While researching textile practices as a form of processing trauma I have learned that it was widely used by women artists and therapists working with women who experienced different kinds of traumas - from domestic violence to displacement.²¹ Beverly Ayling-Smith explained this therapeutic quality of textile:

¹⁹ Alexander, Martha. Trauma and Textiles: Inside London's New Louise Bourgeois Exhibition. AnOther. February 9, 2022.

<https://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/13872/trauma-in-textiles-inside-london-louise-bourgeois-exhibition-hayward-gallery>

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ For example, Common Threads Project. <https://commonthreadsproject.org/>

The use of textiles in artworks in response to trauma has great significance. Our familiarity with cloth in everyday life means that we have a vocabulary not only of words but also of experience in the sensation of seeing, touching, handling and encountering it. We can draw upon this vocabulary to think about its involvement in containing and processing thoughts and emotions.²²

Ayling-Smith believes that this special quality of textile which is recognized by viewers due to their already existing corporal familiarity with it allows them to have “immediate and intimate connection to be made with their emotions.”²³

The sculptural composition of Louis Bourgeois’s *Seven in Bed* (Figure 4) could be interpreted from multiple perspectives. From the context of war, the “bed” could be transformed into the idea of the last refuge, and numerous bodies could be read as bodies in the mass grave, or the bodies that were sent to their deaths in mass scale.



Figure 4. Louis Bourgeois. *Seven in Bed*. 2001. Source: CULTURIEUSE.

The use of textile to address mass deaths also occurred during the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. Creating a quilt, as well as displaying it for people can be a process of commemoration and mourning, which played a remarkable role in creation of the AIDS Memorial Quilt in the United States in the 1980s. John Cunningham, National AIDS Memorial CEO also highlighted the aspect of healing in this process:

During the darkest days of the AIDS crisis, the Quilt was a source of immense comfort, inspiration and used as a tool for social activism to open the eyes of the nation to injustice and to help survivors grieve and heal.²⁴

²² Ayling-Smith, Beverly. “Introduction: Textiles and Trauma.” *Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture*. Routledge, n.d. doi:10.1080/14759756.2022.2065825.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ The history of the Quilt. National AIDS Memorial. <https://www.aidsmemorial.org/quilt-history>

The size of each separate piece of AIDS Quilt corresponded to the size of the human body and grave. The pieces were later connected into a huge installation. The AIDS quilt is typically exhibited outside and horizontally on the ground in order to reference a sense of a cemetery to the people walking inside the installation (Figure 5).



Figure 5. People embrace on June 11, 2022 near the panels of the AIDS Memorial Quilt in Robin Williams Meadow in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park. Photo: Justin Sullivan / Getty Images²⁵

These works illustrate how grief can be memorialized in textile. In considering this possibility, I created one of my tapestries that features the image of a symbolic cemetery (Figure 6). Multiple white crosses cover the floral background and colorful flowers adorn the top. The question "Why War?" hovers over the graves. That question arose from my own suffering mind, and later I realized that the same question was posed in the correspondence of prominent minds of 20th century Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud in their 1931-32 discussion on how humanity could resolve the threat of war.²⁶ Throughout human history, this question has not been resolved. This is why I wanted viewers to find themselves in front of a created memorial that appeared to be out of place, in the same way as Kazmina's grave. The viewers are exposed to the memorial tapestries in the gallery that are both current and timeless, and they are invited into the ritual of mourning.

²⁵ Bravo, Tony. The AIDS Memorial Quilt remains a shattering work of grief and activism 35 years on. Datebook. June 18, 2022.

<https://datebook.sfchronicle.com/art-exhibits/the-aids-memorial-quilt-remains-a-shattering-work-of-grief-and-activism-35-years-on>

²⁶ "By the time the exchange between Einstein and Freud was published in 1933, under the title Why War?, Hitler, who was to drive both men into exile, was already in power, and the letters never achieved the wide circulation intended for them. Indeed, the first German edition of the pamphlet is reported to have been limited to only 2,000 copies, as was also the original English edition." Quoted from: The Einstein-Freud Correspondence (1931-1932)

<https://www.public.asu.edu/~jmlynch/273/documents/FreudEinstein.pdf>



Figure 6. Oksana Briukhovetska. *Why War?* Tapestry from the *Songs and Flowers of Ukraine* series. Textile collage. 2022.

History

Understanding history is crucial for contextualizing and comprehending current events. The Russian war in Ukraine exacerbated the question of what Ukrainian identity is, and the need for understanding Ukrainian history and culture. After the Russian full scale invasion in Ukraine started, the current war was often compared to the Ukrainian experience of the Second World War. The New York Post even published a photography collection called “How Russia’s invasion of Ukraine compares to scenes from World War II.”²⁷

In 2022, during the first weeks and months of the war there were plenty of images circulated online that made parallels with the current war in Ukraine and World War 2. In one of them the Kyiv Opera Theater photographed in 2022 from the same point as in 1941, and two pictures are placed next to each other (Figure 7). The similarity of the images is striking: the anti-tank barricades are situated at the same place in the front of the building that survived the Nazi’s occupation of Kyiv. This image says to us that history repeats itself unfortunately in the worst of ways. The only thing different here is the date and the presence of color in the contemporary photo. In my work I also use a color as a marker of the current moment in contrast to the black and white photographs from past wars.



Figure 7. Kyiv Opera Theater in 1941 and 2022. Source: Facebook.

²⁷ Photos: How Russia’s invasion of Ukraine compares to scenes from World War II. New York Post. March 9, 2022.

<https://nypost.com/2022/03/09/photos-how-russias-invasion-of-ukraine-compares-to-world-war-ii/#1>

On the 1st of March, 2022, the Russian missile strike that aimed to target the Kyiv TV tower reached the site of the Holocaust mass murdering in Kyiv in the Babyn Yar ravine. That day Ukrainian artist Nikita Kadan posted a black and white photograph from Wikipedia's article in which the people are covering a mass grave after the massacre in the Babyn Yar in October 1941 (Figure 8). On the top of the image is a note posted on March 1, 2022, "Russia bombed Babyn Yar today." What happened that day - "today" - was not only an absurd repetition of the bombing the city of Kyiv, but the sacrilege of targeting those who already are victims a second time.

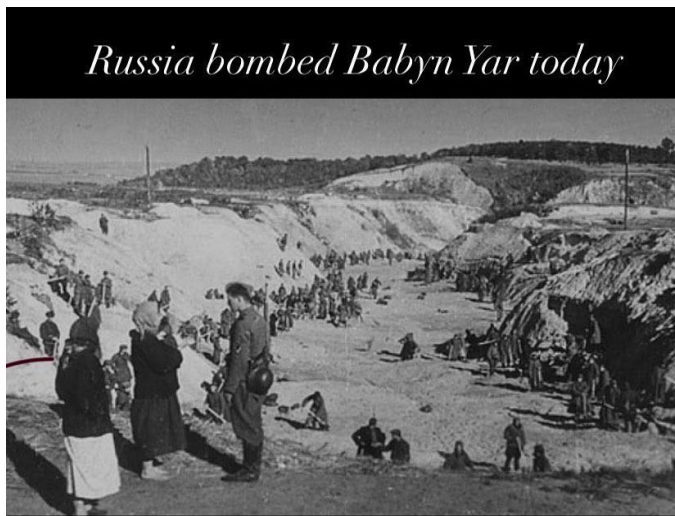


Figure 8. *Russia bombed Babyn Yar today*. Source: Facebook.

The precedent of attacking the mass grave of the Holocaust was one of the shocking war and historical crimes of Russia and became a topic for the research project *Russian Strike on the Kyiv TV Tower* by Forensic Architecture, a research agency that investigates human rights violations including violence committed by states, police forces, militaries, and corporations.²⁸ Their project was shown at the 12th Berlin Biennale in 2022 under the title *Airstrike on Babyn Yar*²⁹. In the text that follows from the project as detailed on their website, the authors describe the bitter consequences that occur when history is manipulated by Russian propaganda:

Historical references, particularly ones related to the Second World War and the Holocaust, have been continuously weaponised as part of Russia's propaganda machine. Given their claims about the 'de-Nazification' of Ukraine,

²⁸ Forensic Architecture is based at Goldsmiths, University of London.

²⁹ Forensic Architecture & Centre for Spatial Technologies in cooperation with Inferstudio/Nathan Su, *Airstrike on Babyn Yar*, 2022. <https://www.berlinbiennale.de/en/personen/3046/forensic-architecture>

the damaging of one of the Holocaust's most significant symbolic sites is particularly ironic.³⁰

This irony reveals not only the falsehood of Russian propaganda, but provides a direct comparison between the Russian state's crimes with Nazis' crimes because of how Russia is targeting the victims of the Holocaust. In fact, some veterans of World War 2, with some Holocaust survivors among them, still were living in Ukraine when the Russian invasion started. For them, the most shocking aspect of the war was the fact that their former allies in the fight against Nazis in 1941-45 attacked Ukraine the same way as the Nazis did. In one photo that circulated on social media an elderly woman holds up a note that says the following, "My name is Iryna. I am 98 years old. I survived Holodomor, Hitler and the Germans. And I will survive the midget Putin with his locust. Glory to Ukraine!" (Figure 9).

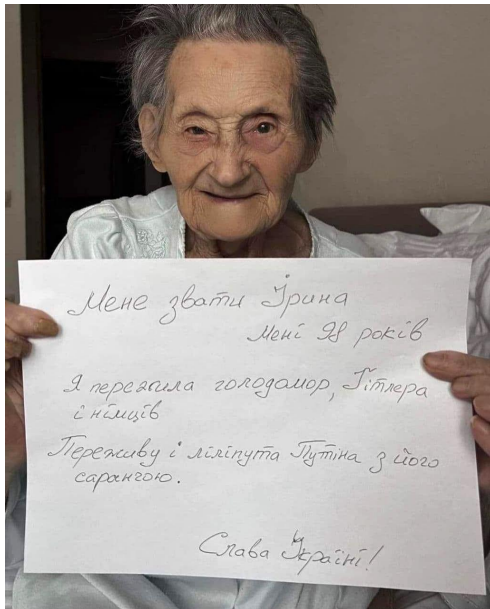


Figure 9. Photo, source: Facebook.

The meaning of this photograph is twofold: the number of disasters that lay on the shoulders of this woman during her single life is incredible. But her image also brings optimism and represents Ukrainian resistance. If previous images build connections of past and present through sites and places, she carries this connection in her body, as a human being holding multiple experiences of traumas and survival.

³⁰ Russian Strike on the Kyiv TV Tower. Forensic Architecture.
<https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/russian-strike-on-kyiv-tv-tower>

I connect the experiences of the generation of my grandparents to the present day fellow citizens in my tapestry which displays burning buildings rupturing landscape, with colors that reference the Ukrainian flag in the blue sky and yellow sunflower fields. The words in Ukrainian “Моя Україна в огні” - “My Ukraine in Flames” - are written across the tapestry at the bottom, and at the top I display the date – 2022 (Figure 10), which references that this is today’s war even though the current war started in the Eastern part of Ukraine in 2014, and war has been an ongoing part of Ukraine’s history.



Figure 10. Oksana Briukhovetska. *My Ukraine in Flame?* Tapestry from the *Songs and Flowers of Ukraine* series. Textile collage. 2022.

The words on this tapestry also refer to the title of the novel "Ukraine in Flames," (Україна в огні) which was written in 1943 by a prominent Ukrainian filmmaker and writer Oleksandr Dovzhenko. In this book, he portrays the Ukrainian experience of World War 2 under the Nazi occupation. The word "My" that I added at the beginning aims to highlight my personal perspective, my family story, and my belonging to Ukraine.

Wars always are historical events that build on the individual traumas of many people. The newest scholarly approaches in the field of historical research include precise attention to personal stories and testimonies. I wanted to apply this methodology in visual language. So in addition to looking at past and current images of war, I researched my family lineage to reveal what traumas my relatives were holding through generations already, and how the current war is retraumatizing people because of old wounds.

My grandmother Halia Kysil survived an artificially inflicted famine in Ukraine known as Holodomor in 1933 at the age of ten, and the occupation of her village by the Nazis in 1941 during the Second World War. Just after she was married, she gave birth to her first child under occupation. After the war finished, she took part in rebuilding a burned village school where she taught children for the rest of her life. Listening to her stories growing up, I was sure that the horror of war would never happen to us again. I was wrong.

My other grandmother, Valia Briukhovetska, fled the war with her small son. After they came back to the city of Cherkasy when the war was over, her nine-year-old son died after being blown up by a mine that had remained in the ground since the war time.

Both of my grandfathers were fighting as soldiers in the Soviet Army during the war, and both were wounded – grandfather Ivan in the hand, and grandfather Stepan in the head. Both survived, but they never talked about the war.

Drawing on the photo archive of my grandmother Halia that I discovered a few years ago, many years after her death, I chose some photographs and printed them on fabric to incorporate them into my tapestries, collaging them with the flowers cut from other fabrics. The photographs represent my grandmother's family as well as the group photos from the village school where she taught (Figure 11). These photographs were taken right after the end of the Second World War, at the end of 1940s through the beginning of 1950s.



Figure 11. Elements of the tapestry, photographs printed on fabrics.

These photographs represent both trauma and hope for me as they show people who survived the war as well as a time when the war came to an end. Addressing the post-war images from my grandmother's archive I can also connect to them through the warm memories that I have about grandma Halia as a child. I am currently in need of the inspiration and strength that she gave me as this helps me to dream about a post-war time in today's Ukraine.

Folklore

Ukrainian folklore has a rich history and contains many traditions. It is preserved in museums, but at the same time it is alive and is transforming through time and historical conditions. The researcher Katya Zabelski released an article last year "How Ukrainian Folk Art Became a Tool of Resistance Against Russia". She states, "When I was writing my dissertation on the history of Ukrainian folk, my research found a repeated pattern:

Despite long histories of suppression, erasure, and destruction, Ukrainian people often used folk art as a tool of resistance and a symbol of hope and preservation.”³¹

She mentions how during the Soviet times Ukrainian artists “found sly ways to incorporate folk art into their work, despite the possibility of serious consequences.”³² During Stalin’s era, any expressions of national identity that differed from official representation were claimed as bourgeois nationalism and could result in imprisonment and deprivation of any possibility for artists’ careers. A shift occurred in the 1960s after Stalin’s death, when after decades of an authoritarian regime that forced artists to only express themselves through socialist realism and to accept any rules of power, artists finally discovered some freedom of expression. In the 1960s some professional artists started to step back from the official painting style, and many of them started seeking inspiration while going on expeditions to Ukrainian villages that had always been places of preservation of Ukrainian culture where they familiarized themselves with folklore traditions and changed their painting style. This shift happened as a revolutionary gesture of resistance to the power, and it became a search for freedom in art by allowing artists to look into their own culture that had been marginalized.

A good example of such a shift of artistic inquiry is the career of Tetiana Yablonska, an established Soviet Ukrainian artist known for her paintings in the style of realism. In the 1960s her art became heavily influenced by Ukrainian folk imagery. In her painting “Wedding” of 1963 (Figure 12), she is an observer of a traditional wedding ritual in a Ukrainian village; she looks at it from the outside, excited and inspired (the painting was censored and later remade). Three years later, in her painting “Swans” (Figure 13) as well as in others like this work, she incorporated a “naive” style of folk art into her painting. The tapestry with the swans that hangs in the background behind a young woman plays a huge role in the composition of the image, but it also refers directly to folk art and the crafts of women. For me, trained as an artist in a realistic manner, seeing an example of an artist’s embrace of the style of folk painting to investigate one’s own roots and the different possibilities of freedom in art helped to reflect on how I could use folk imagery in my art as well.

³¹ Zabelski Katya. How Ukrainian Folk Art Became a Tool of Resistance Against Russia. Hyperallergic. June 6, 2022.

<https://hyperallergic.com/738513/how-ukrainian-folk-art-became-a-tool-of-resistance-against-russia/>

³² Ibid.



Figure 12. Tetiana Yablonska. *Wedding*. 1963.



Figure 13. Tetiana Yablonska. *Swans*. 1966.

As a child I often spent my school vacations in the house of my grandmother Valia who lived in the city of Cherkasy in central Ukraine, beautifully decorated with her crafts. I remember her passion in creating all kinds of handmade textiles - sewing, knitting, making clothes for us kids, as she had several grand-children. Her largest project in this realm was producing embroidered colorful wall carpets. They decorated her own house, in every room a different one. Some of them also became the carpets for the homes of her children - my father and my aunt. All my childhood nights I slept with her carpet on the wall, and I remember looking closely at its ornaments before falling asleep. Her biggest carpets featured wreaths of roses, symbols of beauty and celebration for her (Figure 14). By making them for us she intended to fill our lives with the feeling of comfort.



Figure 14. Embroidered wall carpet by my grandma Valentyna Briukhovetska. Cherkasy, Ukraine, 1980s.

During the Soviet times women of my grandmother's generation had limited resources for their craft-making practices that were also practices of care. My grandmother often produced knitted clothing and embroidered tapestries using recycled threads. She used to untangle old sweaters or hats to extract threads from them, and it is there that she found the elements for her colorful textile palette. In her house in Cherkasy, she kept sacks with balls of threads of multiple colors. For large scale carpets my grandma used big skeins of industrial threads of many colors that she obtained somehow from the synthetic fiber factory where she worked for a period of time before retirement. She embroidered her biggest carpets over a year or more, and I remember her immersed in this process between other housework in the meditative atmosphere of calmness and warmth. She taught me to knit and to embroider. I remember my joy when I first knitted a small yellow scarf for my favorite toy, a small yellow dog. Later I made many clothes for my doll Natalia. My grandmother's carpets do not represent traditional Ukrainian embroidery, however. They are examples of urban folk culture of the late Soviet times. That said, their value for me was not so much in their canon or style as the manual labor and time put into their creation, and my grandma's ideas of beauty and her passion while performing this work.

Textiles are a huge part of Ukrainian traditions and are used to decorate interiors of the houses, as well as Orthodox Christian churches (Figure 15). Besides the carpets and rugs, one important object of the interiors that has a sacred function is a Ukrainian embroidered towel, which is used to cover in a decorative manner both Christian icons and portraits of family members displayed on the walls (Figure 16).



Figure 15. Embroidered towels in Orthodox Christian church. Source: Internet.



Figure 16. Embroidered towels in the traditional Ukrainian interior of a village house. Source: ETHOXATA.

The tradition of Ukrainian embroidery is very rich and its ornaments differ depending on the region in Ukraine, and also of historical periods. Katya Zabelski also discusses how, during the Maidan revolution of 2013-14, traditional Ukrainian embroidered shirts called *vyshyvankas* “became extremely popular and are now a part of daily fashion, despite the garment’s history of marginalization.”³³ In Ukraine the Vyshyvanka Day was established in May. On that day people wear traditional shirts to express their belonging to Ukraine, and this gesture became even more politicized during the time of war. The elements of patterns of Ukrainian embroidery have become symbolic and are still being referenced today in many anti-war posters and internet memes.

Ukrainian folk art is rich in symbolism. Flowers, birds, and certain plants, such as the *Viburnum opulus* (*kalyna*), appear in a wide range of folk artifacts from songs and tales to embroidery and paintings. There are discussions among specialists and traditional embroidery lovers about which styles and patterns are more authentic and genuine, and which have changed due to influences and modifications back to the time of the Russian empire and Soviet era. Despite these modifications, each embroidery style represents its time and subculture. For example, during the last century, the embroidery

³³ Zabelski Katya. How Ukrainian Folk Art Became a Tool of Resistance Against Russia. Hyperallergic. June 6, 2022. <https://hyperallergic.com/738513/how-ukrainian-folk-art-became-a-tool-of-resistance-against-russia/>

performed in the villages and in the cities differed. Those of the urban culture were often influenced by women's magazines that printed samples of patterns.

The central piece of my series of tapestries is built like a family altar and contains an “embroidered towel”. The towel frames old photographs from the archive of my grandmother Halia (Figure 17). When I “embroidered” my towel using cut elements from other fabrics and attaching them in an ornamental way to the white background of fabric, I diverged in terms of technique from tradition which presumes the technique of embroidery, while still embracing this tradition from the past by using symbolism.

When I created the ornaments for my “embroidered towel” I was reflecting on the Ukrainian landscape, in which plants and graves are as interconnected as life and death. The row of crosses on each part of the towel is a continuation of the cemetery image at the “Why War?” tapestry. Red roses representing blood and grief are present throughout the whole series. Then, under the lines of crosses there are the rows of plants and flowers. Both functions of the soil as a site of burial and of always emerging new life are connected in symbolic symbiosis.



Figure 17. Oksana Briukhovetska. *Family Altar* Tapestry from the *Songs and Flowers of Ukraine* series. Textile collage. 2023.

The similarity and differences between my towel and traditional ones evoked the insights of Walter Benjamin in his encounter with Folk art. He compares folk art to a kind of *deja vu*:

The *deja vu* is changed from the pathological exception that it is in civilized life to a magical ability at whose disposal folk art (and kitsch no less so) places itself. It can do so because the *deja vu* really is quite different from the intellectual recognition that the new situation is the same as the old one. It would be more accurate to say: is *fundamentally* the old one. But even this is mistaken. For the situation is not experienced as if by someone standing outside it: it has pulled itself over us; we have encased ourselves within it.³⁴

What Benjamin says reveals the truth of our existence in relation to “traditional” forms of art. We always understand traditional objects as old, as something delivered from the past, and in this regard, as representatives of the contemporary, we can imagine ourselves as those “standing outside” of those traditions. But when we experience tradition, use it, incorporate and change it, it begins to reveal its “magic,” and it incorporates us in return. Then we find ourselves inside a moment from the past that demonstrates itself as a vivid present. We feel what William Faulkner said in his famous phrase, “The past is never dead. It’s not even past.”³⁵

My reflection on tradition also led me to the choice of an intense blue color of the walls of my exhibition. Blue is the color of a sky, of a heaven, and it appears in Ukrainian folk tradition of decorating the exterior walls of the houses or window frames. It is not a typical color of houses, usually they are white. But in the villages, if the house is painted blue it is considered as a gesture of paying tribute to beauty. It testifies to the bold taste of the people who made such a radical choice of color for their houses (Figure 18).



³⁴ Benjamin, Walter, Jennings, Michael William, Doherty, Brigid, Levin, Thomas Y., and Jephcott, E. F. N. “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media.” P. 255.

³⁵ Faulkner, William. *Requiem for a Nun*. New York: Random House, 1951.

Figure 18. Kyiv. Pyrogiv. Museum of Folk Architecture and Everyday Life. House of 1892, village of Kadiivtsi, Kamianets-Podilsky district, Khmelnytskyi region.³⁶

This blue background can also be seen behind the young couple in the painting by Tetiana Yablonska of 1964 (Figure 19). This inspired me to also choose a similar blue color to be a background for my tapestries at the gallery.



Figure 19. Tetiana Yablonska. *Young couple*. 1964.

Flowers

In 2022 someone said that Ukrainians need to look at the flowers in the breaks between consuming the news from Ukraine, because flowers can heal. When the war in Ukraine was unfolding in spring of 2022, photographs of a burned Russian tank invaded by a mass of flowers were among the many other empowering images that circulated online. In this photograph the flowers are blue and yellow, like the colors of the Ukrainian flag (Figure 21).

³⁶ Source: <http://ua.trip-impressions.com/2018/05/pyrohiv-haty.html>



Figure 21. Source: UAInfo³⁷

But floral motifs have always found a rich expression in traditional Ukrainian embroidery and also in decorative painting. The known flower motif painting style *Petrykivka* is named after the village in which it originated around the 18th century in the Dnipro region of Ukraine. The rural amateur artists decorated the walls of the village houses with floral ornamentation, household items like boxes in which people stored their goods, and even icons. The significant feature of such paintings alongside the richness and beauty of floral images is its special brush technique. Later in the 19th century *Petrykivka* style was transferred also to paper. In the 20th century this style became popular in mass souvenir production and has undergone some standardization, and artists' individual styles became less distinctive, as items of mass production were decorated in one standard manner. But at the same time, there were artists in the region whose individuality reveals itself in their particular works. They established their own schools and taught *Petrykivka* painting to the younger generation. Tetiana Pata is remembered as a strong artist and founder of the *Petrykivka* school of painting, but she developed her own original style using the knowledge of painting traditions of her grandmother. In her work *Two peacocks*, birds and flowers merge into one visual harmonious symphony (Figure 20).

³⁷ Знищена російська техніка в Україні заросла синьо-жовтими квітами. UAInfo.
<https://uainfo.org/blognews/1654775328-znishchena-rosiyska-tehnika-v-ukrayini-zarosla-sino-zhovtimi.html>



Figure 20. Tetiana Pata. *Two peacocks*. Painting on paper. 1949³⁸

Looking at these paintings one could think that the life of Ukrainians was happy and carefree. This could be assumed because of the sincerity in the admiration of the beauty, sophisticated aesthetics, exquisite technique that can be seen in these works, which are all performed by inhabitants of the villages who worked hard in the land, went through difficulties and challenges such as authoritarian purges, mass starvation, poverty, and the Second World War. Considering these historical circumstances, it becomes clear that this art played a huge spiritual role for the community. Creating the depictions of beautiful flowers, artists healed themselves and brought healing to their community.

In her research on artists who use textile and embroidery to address the subject of the Holocaust, Mor Presiado talks about the *Holocaust Series* by Rachel Roggel. One of the works was inspired by the poem “Back to Auschwitz” by Israeli poet Avner Treinin. In this poem the author described his observation of the flowers growing on the railroad tracks that earlier transported trains with people to extermination. This resonated with the family story of Rachel Roggel. She dedicated her tapestry to her mother-in-law Rivka Tauber Weiss, and she added her story to the description of the work:

In 1944, on her 16th birthday, Rivka was transported from Kluj, Hungary to the infamous Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp in Poland. At the gate, her parents were immediately sent to their deaths. She then was left with nothing but the

³⁸ Глухенька Н. Пата Тетяна: Альбом. Київ: Мистецтво, 1973. 93 с.

dress she was wearing and HOPE. On May 9, 1945 she was released and lived to see the railway to the camp covered with weeds and flowers.³⁹

In her hand-quilted tapestry, Rachel Roggel creates a multilayered symbolic image that includes a mapping of the camp territory, the silhouette of Rivka's dress and the railroad tracks. On the top of railroad tracks she sewed hundreds of flower-shaped buttons (Figure 22).



Figure 22. Rachel Roggel. *Hope Dies Last*. Fragment. From the Holocaust Series. 2005.

Presiado defines the symbolism of flowers in this context: “The flowers, just like in Treinin’s poem, symbolize the regenerative force of nature and the power of life in the face of death and destruction – a force oblivious of human fate.”⁴⁰

³⁹ Roggel, Rachel. *Hope Dies Last*. <http://www.roggel.com/Holocaust/hdl.html>

⁴⁰ Presiado, Mor. “These Threads Capture Shadows” *Sewing and Embroidery in Holocaust Art Works of Contemporary Jewish Women Artists*. Ars Judaica, 2012.



Figure 23. Embroidered wall carpet by my grandma Valentyna Briukhovetska. Detail. Cherkasy, Ukraine, 1980s.

Embroidered or collaged flowers can therefore be seen as an attempt to heal the maker and to provide this opportunity for those who would look on the works. In making my own work, I also was thinking about my grandmother's embroidery, especially one that focused on roses. I remember how she performed every stitch that formed the Bulgarian cross, which is made with four crossed stitches instead of two, and how she selected the shades of colors for her flowers (Figure 23). I can presume that my grandmother healed herself while meditating on the creation of roses and other flowers. The brightness of their colors represent an optimistic attitude. This inspired me to make tapestries that included separate *Bouquets* series (Figure 24) in addition to many images of flowers that are included in each tapestry and become an overarching motif. When I was making these works, I was thinking of particular types of flowers that grow widely in Ukraine, such as field poppies or peonies. Red roses also can be seen as a universal symbol of blood and beauty. And bouquets represent the idea of gathering—when different flowers are collected together, their power is stronger; the same way people resist more effectively when they do it collectively.



Figure 24. Oksana Briukhovetska. *Bouquets* from the *Songs and Flowers of Ukraine* series. Textile collage. 2022.

Politics of Textile

In 2017 I curated an exhibition at the Visual Culture Research Center in Kyiv called “TEXTUS. Textile, Embroidery, Feminism.”⁴¹ At the time I reflected on the question often mentioned when textiles became part of contemporary art, questions that prompt conversations about how textile techniques throughout the history of art were feminized and because of this underestimated. Using the Latin word *textus* as a title for the show, I

⁴¹ Briukhovetska, Oksana. TEXTUS. Textile, Embroidery, Feminism. <https://www.briukhovetska.art/textus-embroidery-textile-feminism/>

pointed out that words *text* and *textile* came from the common origin meaning “fabric,” “connection,” and “interwoven.” In contemporary art, textile goes beyond its decorative function and can be used for storytelling, playing a role similar to text. And being a text, they also have the power to become political speech.

Textile and sewing techniques were used by feminist artists to undermine the status quo in the hierarchies of the art world the same way as feminism itself undermines the oppression of women. *The Dinner Party* by Judy Chicago (1974-79) is often considered among such works as Chicago used applied arts techniques, such as embroidery and ceramic, that were not considered “high art” in opposite to the painting and sculpture to tell the stories of important female figures.

Many other feminist artists of the 1970s embraced textile techniques that have a strong reference to the woman’s domestic labor and private life reinforcing the idea of the personal being political. Alexandra Kokoli connects the rise of the interest in textile techniques in art with feminist political movements: “Considering the centrality of the art/craft/anti-art debates in feminist cultural politics, it is unsurprising that a critical attention to textiles featured prominently in foundational moments of feminist art history.”⁴² The potential of resistance in textile lies within its long marginalized status among fine arts and which women artists compared to an overall marginalized status of women in art.

The hand making that is often highlighted in textile techniques works in opposition to alienated labor in capitalist society. Faith Gillespie mentions that after the industrialisation and technological breakthroughs in mass production, when female craft work was replaced by machines, the artists’ working in old crafts obtained a new meaning of reclamation and reparation in the capitalist system:

The system needs us to do the maintenance jobs and to run the machines that produce the so-called “goods”, to *be* machines in the consumer societies which consume and consume and are empty. Our turning to craftwork is a refusal. We may not all see ourselves in this way, but we are working from the position of dissent. And that is a political position.⁴³

One of the historical examples of such an incorporation of this textual function into a textile piece is related to the suffragist movement and closely associated with feminist struggles. In March 1912 in London women activists for voting rights were arrested for a

⁴²Kokoli Alexandra. Creative Tensions. Making (It), Unmaking, and Making Do in Textiles Informen by Feminism. In Harris, Jennifer, ed. “A Companion to Textile Culture.” Book. Wiley-Blackwell Companions to Art History. Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell, 2020. P. 227.

⁴³ Gillespie, Faith. 1987. “The Masterless Way: Weaving an active resistance”. In *Women and Craft*, edited by Gillian Elinor, Su Richardson, Sue Scott, Angharad Thomas, and Kate Walker, 175-82. London: Virago Press. P. 178.

window-smashing action. In the Holloway Prison, they went on hunger strikes. Instead of using pen or paper, which were prohibited to prisoners, to express their resistance using needles and threads. Women were able to claim their agency while imprisoned, embroidering the linen handkerchief with their 67 signatures in different colors. Another embroidered handkerchief made in the same prison was attributed to one of the suffragettes, Janie Terrero (Figure 25). On the top of the handkerchief Terrero embroidered WSPU, the abbreviation of Women's Social and Political Union, the group to which she belonged. The symbolic colors of this organization - purple, white and green - are colors of a ribbon that Terrero used as a frame. In the lower part she attached the photo of two founding members of the group - the mother and daughter Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst.⁴⁴ Natasha Hughes characterizes what makes this textile work political - not only the context and content, but also the material medium:

Superficially decorative and yet political, floral yet fiery, Janie Terrero's handkerchief exemplifies the ingenuity of female authorship, which "often uses unexpected materials and unorthodox technologies,"⁴⁵ when denied the convenience of that masculine implement; the pen.⁴⁶



Figure 25. Handkerchief made by Janie Terrero in the Holloway Prison. 1912.

⁴⁴ Harris, Jennifer. *A Companion to Textile Culture*. John Wiley & Sons, 2020. P.207.

⁴⁵ Lyons, Martyn. *New Directions in Book History, Approaches to the History of Written Culture, A World Inscribed*. Palgrave Macmillan. 2017.

⁴⁶ Hughes, Natasha. *Stitching Solidarity: Janie Terrero and the Political Power of the Needle*. *Decorating Dissence*. June 12, 2020. <https://decoratingdissidence.com/2020/06/12/janie-terrero-holloway/>

The idea of a symbolic frame in Janie Terrero's handkerchief resonated with my work in which I use two symbolic frames - the "bloody" red frame and the blue and yellow frame that refers to the colors of the Ukrainian flag.

In some traditions of textile making the limitations and modesty of materials determined by the conditions of creation communicate a political message about social conditions, history, resistance, and practices of care. During the current year, while I am writing my thesis, the National Gallery of Art features the exhibition "Called to Create: Black Artists of the American South." The description of the show reminds us that historically Black quilts were made from recycled materials and also served as acts of political resistance:

The women of Gee's Bend, Alabama, made dazzling quilts from well-worn clothing or leftover scraps of fabric. Despite racism and other forms of discrimination, all of these artists drew on deep cultural and spiritual traditions to create some of the finest art of our time.⁴⁷

The women of Gee's Bend, the remote village near Alabama River, have passed their mastery down through generations developing their unique vernacular techniques. The art of African-American quilt-making originated from the conditions of extreme poverty. Quilts had the practical function of serving as warming blankets for the family members as well as embedded aesthetical ideas of beauty and are now considered as significant examples of abstract art (Figure 26). Vanessa Kraemer Sohan provides insights on the "language" of the Gee's Bend quilts: "Quilts serve as more as a metaphor for the imbrication of subject, object, and text - they also provide insight into their creators' everyday discursive practices."⁴⁸ The quilt by Missouri Pettway from 1971, *Path through the Woods*, resonates with African-American tradition of encrypted messages that provided information about locality to be used for escape from slavery. Instead of using words, the visual image appropriated language for delivering messages. It looks abstract but has meaning which is practical for survival, as a quilt is itself. Considering the lack of literacy inflicted on enslaved people, their inventiveness in visual language is a powerful example of resistance and creating their own cultural code. Such works are subtly making political commentary on the history of racism and resistance to it.

⁴⁷ Called to Create: Black Artists of the American South. National Gallery of Art. <https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2022/called-to-create.html>

⁴⁸ Sohan, Vanessa Kraemer. "But a quilt is more": Recontextualizing the Discourse(s) of the Gee's Bend Quilts. *College English*, Vol. 77, No. 4 (March 2015), pp. 294-316



Figure 26. Missouri Pettway, 1900 – 1981, *Path through the Woods*, 1971, polyester knit, National Gallery of Art, Washington

American artist Faith Ringgold is known for making quilts combined with painting techniques. She painted on top of her quilts as well as enriched them with text (Figure 27). Using quilt as a vernacular African-American craft she addressed issues of Black history and power alongside the history of American racism. Her works are a combination of visuality and storytelling and they elevate quilts beyond the decorative craft form at the same time perpetuating it as Black cultural tradition. She was also an active participant of the feminist movement in the 1970s, protesting against racism and sexism in the art world and demanding access to the galleries and museums for Black women artists. Her art was tied with political struggle.



Figure 27. Faith Ringgold, *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* 1983, acrylic on canvas, dyed, painted and pieced fabric. Source: Faith Ringgold.

Craft as a dissenting political position of resistance is also a key feature of Chilean Arpilleras. During the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile in 1970-80s textile collages called Arpilleras became a tool of storytelling about brutality of military regime in the country (Figure 28).



Figure 28. Arpillera. Santiago, Museum of Memory and Human Rights.

It was not possible to do so using words as censorship led to fear and silence. In these conditions women began telling their testimonies through textiles. While making collages from the scraps of fabrics they documented the stories of their family members being detained, tortured and disappeared (Figure 29, 30) and of their lives spent in poverty and uncertainty.



Figure 29. Arpillera, 1977. Santiago, Museum of Memory and Human Rights.



Figure 30. Arpillera, Detail. Santiago, Museum of Memory and Human Rights.

They worked on their Arpilleras collectively in their secret gatherings in the Catholic churches and while feeling the support of each other, they were also processing their traumas. One of the arpilleristas, Violeta Morales describes their goals:

We didn't want to make something that would function as a decoration. We wanted to design a homemade product that would denounce what we and our country were living. We wanted to tell people about our personal experiences through pieces of our own clothing. We wanted to embroider our story, the harsh and sad story of our ruined country.⁴⁹

Arpilleras became a tool of expression for women as they didn't have any other possibilities for expression due to the patriarchal system and exclusion. Through textile as a collective practice women started to be politically engaged in their country. Also, Arpilleras were sent and sold abroad which helped women to sustain their families. After many years, their efforts, which also included political protests and demonstrations, helped to lead the country to democratic change.

In the summer of 2022 I went to Chile to learn about Arpilleras and I visited a large collection of Arpilleras from the time of dictatorship of the 1970-80s in the Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Santiago. These works showed accumulated pain and hope, and they testify all this not only with their images, but with materials as well. I experienced the tactility of this medium, as I was allowed to touch them with my hands, to examine how pieces of fabric were stitched, and to look on their back side, which

⁴⁹ Agosín, Marjorie. *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008. P. 88.

sometimes, but not always were signed by the woman who made it (Figure 31). All this communicated their vulnerability as well as their democratic spirit.



Figure 31. The backside of Arpillera, 1977. Santiago, Museum of Memory and Human Rights.

I wanted my textile collages to be like Arpilleras - to be bright and beautiful but at the same time carry a message about horror and pain.

In contemporary art centers and exhibitions textile artworks also find their place beside the most technologically advanced art. After several decades when images became widely digitalised in our culture, some artists use technologies that allow processes in the opposite direction - making an analog object from the digital source. American artist Noel W Anderson addresses police brutality and racism in particular towards Black men by manipulating and distorting original documentary images, which he then transforms into tapestries (Figure 32).



Figure 32. Noel W Anderson, *Line Up* (2016-2020) Distressed, stretched cotton tapestry. The 12th Berlin Biennale. Photo by Ben Davis. Source: artnet news.

Digital photographs translated into textile medium are examples of such symbiosis of two mediums - one, photograph, extracts image from the material reality, and another, textile, returns it to materiality. The tactility of a textile medium provides it with analog characteristics which allows for possibility for the viewer to experience the image and its political message in a more tactile way.

Methodology

My interaction with textile is long and complex. It is a lifelong engagement starting from childhood that includes obsessions, repression, forgettings, rediscovering. I first encountered textile hand making as a child and went on to produce many clothes throughout my younger life. There was a time when most of my wardrobe was created by myself. Later with the coming of a digital era of personal computers and the Internet, there was no more room in my life for sewing and knitting. I was thinking these practices were gone forever, but I came back to them occasionally and not surprisingly after I gave birth to my daughter in order to make some clothes for her and her dolls as well as a few toys. When she became older, textile again was consigned to oblivion. And only a decade later I started to apply it in artmaking. I became particularly interested in its new dimension - *textile collage* that involves considerations of fabric, construction, as well as symbolic meaning and storytelling.

The use of fabric

Fabrics have different structures, colors and patterns, and in most cases are industrially manufactured. It means that their printed patterns are usually endlessly repeated. We are used to this, but there is an interesting idea here that can be considered in more detail. Modern fabrics represent one of the techniques of mass production, which was reflected by Walter Benjamin in his essay of 1935 "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Comparing original works of art to a product of massive production, Benjamin pointed out what art loses, and that is its aura. He states, "The authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin

on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it.”⁵⁰ He also states, “*It might be stated as a general formula that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence.*”⁵¹

To consider the tradition of textile in relation to its aura, one can imagine hand-embroidered flowers on the cloth of fabric, maybe beautifully framed by ribbons. And although ornaments in traditional embroidery and weaving were repeated, and therefore reproduced, the logic of their replication was justified by sizes of real objects which they aimed to decorate - whether it was a shirt which size is adjusted to the human body, or a carpet that adjusted to the size of a wall in a house. Industrial fabrics possess patterns that are repeated endlessly, and to restrict this reproduction, fabric must be cut. To sew clothes or make blankets we cut fabrics, but still their pattern differs from decoration of Ukrainian traditional shirts, in which ornaments are installed in special places - on the sleeve and around the neck. The cloth made from industrial patterned fabric always demonstrates the endless repetition of its pattern, only restrained by the size of the cloth. So modern fabric represents a “beautiful thing” with no aura.

What happens in textile collage is that fabrics can be cut in a way that their patterns in some cases lose the character of their mechanical reproduction. As Benjamin states, “The authenticity of a thing is the quintessence of all that is transmissible in it from its origin on, ranging from its physical duration to the historical testimony relating to it.”⁵² When a single flower is cut out from the endless floral fabric, and then stitched into another piece of fabric, this flower regains its uniqueness back (Figure 34).

⁵⁰ Benjamin, Walter, Jennings, Michael William, Doherty, Brigid, Levin, Thomas Y., and Jephcott, E. F. N. “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media.” Book. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008. P. 22.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Benjamin, Walter, Jennings, Michael William, Doherty, Brigid, Levin, Thomas Y., and Jephcott, E. F. N. “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media.” Book. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008. P. 22.

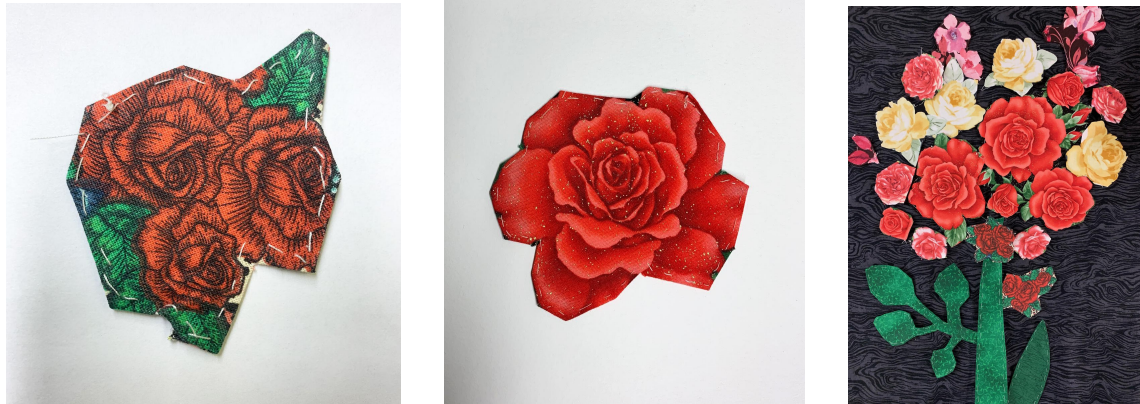


Figure 34. The single elements of my colleges.

Also, the patterns of fabrics can change their meanings. This is very visible in the examples of Chilean Arpilleras. For example, in contemporary Arpilleras, made by women of Santiago that I have met, pieces of fabric with black and white “leopard” or “zebra” patterns often are used to depict mountains with snow (Figure 35). Using a small piece limits the pattern and changes its ability to be recognized, or rather, something new can be recognized in it.

When different pieces of fabric are stitched together in a solely unique manner, what we have in the end is an original work of art that appropriated mechanically reproduced materials; but because of the uniqueness of the fragments of these materials, the new whole restores their aura within the thing. So textile collages such as Arpilleras demonstrate a loop of transformation of elements of visual image - from losing its uniqueness to obtaining it back within a new whole and a new meaning.



Figure 35. Clementina Gonzales is holding her Arpillera “Maternidad Salvador”. Photo mine, Santiago, 2022.

The significant feature that manifests itself in such appropriation of patterns and transformation of their meaning can be explained using Victor Shklovsky’s term of *defamiliarization*. He explains how we typically fall into an automatic perception of things while we encounter them many times: “Habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war”⁵³. The purpose of art and imagery is to “transfer the usual perception of an object into the sphere of new perception - that is, to make a unique semantic modification.”⁵⁴ According to Shklovsky, “art removes objects from the automatism of perception,”⁵⁵ and “the technique of art is to make objects “unfamiliar.”⁵⁶ He explains it in the following way:

I personally feel that defamiliarization is found almost everywhere form is found... An image is not a permanent referent for those mutable complexities of life which are revealed through it, its purpose is not to make us perceive meaning, but to create a special perception of the object - it creates a vision of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it...⁵⁷

Two contemporary Arpilleras by Ruth Melipan from Santiago exemplify this. We see how the zebra motif and the tiger motif of fabrics are transformed here into a mountain motif. And the flowers cut out from the fabric with floral patterns find a new meaning as tree crowns (Figure 37).



Figure 37. Ruth Melipan. Arpilleras made during Covid-19 pandemic. Santiago, 2020-2021.

⁵³ Shklovskii, Viktor. “Art as Technique” in Masing-Delic, I. “From Symbolism to Socialist Realism a Reader.” Book. Edited by Masing-Delic, Irene. Cultural Syllabus. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

This defamiliarization of fabric patterns plays an important role in my collages as well. By cutting the same motif for different purposes, I change the context and meaning of the pattern in my tapestries. What in one image appears as an explosion, in another appears to be a bird's wings and tail. In the third version I use the same element for the stems of flowers (Figure 38).



Figure 38. Fragments of my three different collages that use the same element for different functional meanings.

I cut fabric into small elements and then I create my image from them like a mosaic (Figure 39). They contribute their colors and patterns into new images. Also, fabrics possess patterns, which provide a possibility of communication with each other. Combining them I put them into the conversations with each other that reminds me of playing music or singing together. If one imagines each pattern as a separate voice, their gathering brings to life a chorus of voices.



Figure 39. Cutting elements from fabrics.

My tapestries also include collage in text and printed photographs, which also makes them look like posters. They hold multiple references - to books, songs, intellectual questions. Such compositions also are reminiscent of hand-made albums I created as a child. I wrote the texts of my favorite songs into albums and decorated pages with my own drawings as well as with glued images cut from postcards or magazines. During that era postcards with images of flowers were very popular, people would buy them in post-offices and send them via mail for birthdays or other holidays. As a result people usually received many such postcards in their homes that could be recycled for other creative purposes. I cut flowers in a similar way from fabrics. Extracted from an endless repetitive design, they became a reminiscence of nostalgic postcards from the time of my childhood.

Use of symbols to tell stories

In textile collage a new whole of quilted composition is created from different pieces of fabric, as well as sometimes of additional elements - ribbons, lace, etc.- and can be complemented with embroidery. But although I call my works collages, they are not collages in a modernist sense, where the medium becomes an arbitrary mixture of elements expanding its sensibility from surrealism to abstraction. In my work, collage serves a story which is being told, a visual narration that is coherent, even when it's symbolic. In this regard it evokes naive art with its sincerity while still telling a sophisticated story. I want my work to be sincere, maybe even didactic at some points, but also symbolic and lyrical. Patterns of fabrics and their combinations speak their

language, but the compositions also include words and phrases. These words are not descriptive, but provide a reference around which visual image is structured: words from songs; an appropriated title from a novel; date; a question about why war is possible spread over a cemetery (Figure 33).



Figure 33. Text in Ukrainian on the tapestry which is the first line of the song. From the *Songs and Flowers for Ukraine* series. Detail. 2023.

It is interesting that traditional Arpilleras in Chile were exclusively embroidered. It is during the Pinochet regime, when they were politicized, that women began to use fabric scraps. These leftovers afforded a new emphasis to image as a testimonial storytelling, because stories always consist of scraps of memories about events.

Though I use materials from a commercial fabric store, and these are American fabrics, I am making work about Ukraine. It may sound contradictory, and one may think, can American fabrics be used to represent Ukraine? Especially considering that I refer to Ukrainian folklore. There are so many traditional textile and embroidery techniques in Ukrainian folk art, as I mentioned, and a certain logic would suggest that I should imitate them or use them directly to evoke the subject of my reference. But I am not interested in exactly replicating the past or the techniques. I don't consider myself as a folk reproducer within a canon.

I am a Ukrainian in the US. I spent most of my life in Ukraine and now I find myself in a foreign environment. Many things are different here, and fabrics are different as well. Since I am not at home, I have access to my home through my memory, which always works through images and associations. I use a combination of fabrics which does not reproduce the Ukrainian imagery directly, but after the process of collaging they start to resemble it.

Documentation is the method that is usually associated with telling about the war. That's why journalism and reporting are so important during wars. War is a crime, and the evidence and testimonies are needed for a process of reparation and justice in the future. The role of an artist also is important in collecting testimony, but the form of artistic expression lies in another space. The amount of the war images, especially photographs, that we consume from the screens leads to the situation in which viewers become desensitized. Matthew Biro, in his research of visual representations of the Holocaust memory, writes that although the documentary photographs of the traumatic events "can seemingly represent (them) in a truthful way,"⁵⁸ they also after being reproduced many times can distort the perception of the events:

The photograph... through its realism—also produces a feeling in the spectator that he or she has understood the past. In this way, the photograph can promote a sense that this traumatic moment of human history has been "mastered" and that it no longer needs to be confronted.⁵⁹

I don't use documentary photographs of the current war in Ukraine in my collages, but create symbolic images, so that we are not spectators as much as we are emotionally responding. However, I also looked at the documentary photos of the current war online before I came up with the ideas for my images. To create an image of burning buildings I searched images of real burning and destroyed buildings in Ukraine. I didn't copy a particular one, but created a generalized image of how a city looks at war. I contextualize it by inserting burning buildings between a blue sky and a yellow field, the colors of the Ukrainian flag, symbolizing the Ukrainian landscape. The image of a cemetery from the other tapestry is also universal and recognizable through Christian symbols of crosses. I recall trauma through visual language in order for it to be processed and healed. And the trauma is still unfolding every day, since the war is not over.

In some of the tapestries I use 3D elements to heighten the experience. For the tapestry in the form of a window I created three-dimensional curtains and a bird to make them look "real". The window, which illustrates the song about cuckoo-mother, could be read also as the symbol of envisioning the world. During the war-time air alarms to be near the window is particularly dangerous, as in a case of explosion people could be wounded with the broken glass. A bird that represents the soul of the mother looks like a materialized object, like a wounded body. Not only live bodies, but even dead souls could be wounded, like in the case of the missile strike on Babyn Yar. Death materializes in the flying missiles that cause destruction. People in Ukraine speak about

⁵⁸ Biro, Matthew. Representation and Event: Anselm Kiefer, Joseph Beuys, and the Memory of the Holocaust. *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, volume 16, number 1 (2003).

⁵⁹ Ibid.

missile attacks using war-time jargon: they would say, “it flew to this street.” These multiple meanings of flying resonate with the uncertainty and anxiety of the war time, when to admire the view from the window could provoke a death.



Figure 41. *The Cuckoo Flew Through My House*. Detail. 2022.

Also there is folk superstition that the bird that flew inside the house brings woe. In my image the bird seems to be still outside, but its blood already flows inside of the house. The sky is made of a fabric adorned with gray roses that represent smoke, and the land made from similar fabric but with red roses, which symbolizes a land soaked with blood (Figure 41). By this I create an image of peoples' sorrow. In my next tapestry, the red juice of a viburnum from another song turned into blood. Because viburnum represents Ukraine, its bleeding is also the symbol of peoples' suffering. On the “embroidered towel” the images of graves as well as plants and flowers are also repeated. The death here became the repeated pattern of everyday life, as the graves that emerge in residential areas.

To understand the suffering of others it is important to reveal the agency of those who suffer. For this purpose I work with different symbols that represent Ukraine, war, death, grief and resistance. There are cultural representations of Ukrainian culture revealed particularly in visual symbols. I work with these symbols as an artist. Despite the fact that these symbols belong to collective identity, they can hold very personal meanings, or be intertwined with—personal memory and history. This is similar to the way the oral history of the songs passes through generations in Ukrainian culture: a mother would sing those songs to a child, so it became a person's very intimate experience. My grandmother Halia taught me a song about the cuckoo, and only later I discovered this song being circulated in a wider cultural space. When I became aware of this, the song

was already recognizable to me, so it was something that I already knew from my very personal family context. This preservation of oral folklore tradition through the repetition of performance and through publishing and adding to school books anchors it to the symbolic order of language. I transformed it into a visual language which expresses my personal experience alongside national and political struggles.

The aim of my art is to create images that interpret Ukrainian folklore traditions and symbols such as red viburnum berries or embroidered towels, or sunflower fields through my personal lens, and it is informed by my current location as well. I believe that that is the mission of every folk artist - to refer to traditional canons and patterns while creating one's own, particular world. I have access to local American textile materials in the same way as I have access to local food. And still I can cook a Ukrainian dish using American products. I want it to be evident in my work that I am speaking from a distance and that my nostalgia is visible and included into my work while I speak through the foreign materials. I am thinking about the possibility that whenever I am in this world, wherever materials I have access to, I will always be able to recreate an image of my home from them. I can combine and collage them in a way that my home will emerge from them, and will become recognizable (Figure 40). I think it's a magic element of art - transforming materials to something unpredictable and unprescribed.

I think each of my tapestries resemble a polyphonic song. And then, in the same manner as the chorus would perform songs one by one, the collection of my tapestries represents a visual concert. I want them to sound and ring out to the audience, and two of them are dedicated to Ukrainian songs in particular.



Figure 40. Combining materials and finding composition.

Creative work



Figure 42. Oksana Briukhovetska. *Songs and Flowers for Ukraine*. 2022-23. Stamps Gallery, Ann Arbor, MI.

The *Songs and Flowers for Ukraine* consists of a series of five large tapestries exhibited on one wall, a small series of *Bouquets* tapestries exhibited alongside the wall text, and two additional family photo tapestries (Figure 42). The tapestries of the main wall installation are organized around the central piece which takes the form of a family altar. On the left side and right side of the altar hang two tapestries. There are different possibilities of how to read the whole row of the tapestries. It could be read from the left to the right or opposite, but because of its central place the whole five together obtain the quality of the altar and the story they tell is not linear (Figure 45). The dark blue wall on which tapestries found their place reminded me of the blue color that sometimes was used to paint the exterior of houses or window's frames in Ukrainian villages. It could also be interpreted as a transcendence of a blue sky, or the part of the Ukrainian flag.

The altar tapestry presents a collection of family photographs framed together. It is possible to find such framed installations of portraits of loved ones in old Ukrainian houses where people put the images of their relatives on the wall under glass and frame

them to express their memory, love and respect. I reconstructed such an altar using a textile medium. The background for the photographs makes use of a floral fabric that could be associated with wall paper, but the flowers from it invade the photo images (Figure 43).



Figure 43. Family Altar, from *Songs and Flowers for Ukraine*. Detail.

This central framed composition on the wall is covered in the traditional manner by an “embroidered towel” which is a ritual object, usually smaller in size. But I enlarged mine to the size so that its edges reach the floor and extend on the floor. By this exaggeration I created a symbolic focus on a towel as an exaggerated invitation to embrace the altar. Because the towel goes to the floor, it can be interpreted as covering a door - an imagined symbolic portal to my family history. The towel is the only piece from the whole series in which elements cut from fabric are organized in an ornamental and repetitive way (Figure 44). In other tapestries the organization of elements serves the composition’s narrative or central theme.



Figure 44. Embroidered towel from *Songs and Flowers for Ukraine*. Detail.

Four tapestries have frames made from fabric. Frames play an important role, as the four of them have a red bright color of a fresh blood, and they are “bleeding” with fabric that suggests streams of blood flowing on the floor.



Figure 45. *Songs and Flowers for Ukraine*. 2022-23. Stamps Gallery, Ann Arbor, MI.

I use a bloody frame to enhance the urgency and necessity of my images to be confronted (Figure 46). By letting the blood spill onto the floor I emphasize the state of many bodies in Ukraine which are on the front lines and the blood symbolizes how Ukraine is bleeding and calling for help and support. The tapestry "My Ukraine in Flames" forms a puddle of blood on the floor; the blood from the cemetery on "Why War?" trickles to the floor; the blood from the injured body of a mother-cuckoo flows through the window to the imagined interiors - maybe the interiors of our minds; and the juice of the red viburnum berries, the symbol of Ukraine, turns into blood and spills on the floor as well.



Figure 46. *Songs and Flowers for Ukraine. Blood. Detail.*

All four tapestries are bleeding except the central one, which refers to the past. But still, the color of its frame reminds us of a dark color of dried blood. Between the bloody frames and the images, there is another thin frame made from blue and yellow ribbons which are the colors of the Ukrainian flag.

Two tapestries which are on the right side from the central one are both drawn upon Ukrainian songs. *A cuckoo flew through my house* is a Ukrainian folk song about a young woman who found herself in a difficult situation. She imagines her mother as a cuckoo that would fly to her with help bringing a piece of bread and a bit of salt that resonate with Ukrainian historical memory of famine and poverty. The mother is embedded as the only figure that cares for her and even with few resources for help, which is depicted as a piece of bread and a pinch of salt, the daughter is longing for this care. It can be also understood symbolically as if a small bit of attention from a mother would bring a daughter relief. The unavailability of the mother finds its embodiment in her being depicted as a bird, which may be a representation of her (mother's) soul:

*A cuckoo flew through my house
And it's not a cuckoo, it's my mother
If she knew about my sorrow
She would pass a piece of bread by a sparrow
A piece of bread by a sparrow
A bit of salt by a tit
Oh mom, oh mom, how hard is my fate*



Figure 47. *A cuckoo flew through my house* from *Songs and Flowers for Ukraine*.

I used the symbol of a bird-mother as a representation of a motherland. In my image, she is suffering and bleeding from being injured while flying through the window. (Figure 47). The entity which always helps, now needs help, and needs to be rescued. The red frame displays the first line of the song in Ukrainian, “Летіла зозуля через мою хату.”

The tapestry with the “bleeding” red viburnum berries shows a natural landscape ruptured by an explosion. It symbolically refers to a tortured land invaded by the destruction of Russian missiles (Figure 48). The landscape pictures green leaves and red berries of the red viburnum, a plant that symbolizes Ukraine. In the song about the red viburnum that bends down in the meadow, Ukraine is described as grieving. On the top of the tapestry there are words of the first line of the song in Ukrainian, “Ой у лузі червона калина похилилася.”

*Oh, in the meadow the red viburnum bent down
Our glorious Ukraine is grieving
But we will raise that red viburnum
And we will cheer up our glorious Ukraine!*



Figure 48. *Oh, in the meadow the red viburnum bent down* from *Songs and Flowers for Ukraine*.

This song emerged a century ago through the struggle of Ukrainians for their freedom. It has become symbolic during this war as well, and many singers and ordinary people have performed it and put it on youtube. It makes us believe today that Ukraine will win, and that red viburnum will thrive again as a symbol of life, beauty and love.

The descriptive wall text at the exhibition provides a general context in which the work was created. A supplemental text printed on paper gives more information for a deeper understanding of each piece. In this text I introduce the viewers to a history of my grandmother Halia and children depicted in the photographs. I also provide translations and explanations of both songs.

The four pieces of the *Bouquets* series are displayed near the wall text (Figure 49). The space between them forms the cross, and is also reminiscent of a window. Each tapestry represents a bouquet of flowers that are typical in Ukraine. They aim to glorify and celebrate Ukraine as well as grieve as the flowers could be bouquets that people bring to the graves of those killed, but they could also be bouquets to bring to Ukrainian soldiers who are liberating Ukrainian cities and villages from Russian invasion.



Figure 49. The wall text and *Bouquets* series. *Songs and Flowers for Ukraine*. Stamps Gallery.

The two tapestries with enlarged documentary photographs from my grandmother's archive is another part of the installation. As opposed to the bleeding series, these two collaged photographs, as well as *Bouquets* are unframed. The frame of the original photograph is slightly recognizable, but the colorful fabric intervention washes it away. Images without frames are not captured; they seem to have more freedom to situate themselves. I imagine the two large family photos as extracted from the central altar

piece and offering greater focus on the characters of history. And then, in turn, the bouquets of flowers that my grandmother and children hold are extracted from family photos and enlarged too, forming a separate bouquet series.

For these works, I printed photographs in a large scale format and collaged them, forming an additional group of works within the series. When the surface of the black and white photos is complemented with colorful fabric interventions, this gesture symbolizes the connection of the past to the current moment. In this way I reanimate these photos. In a piece that contains a portrait of my young grandma Halia (on the left) and her sister (probably) beside her (Figure 50), the intervention touches the background, but not the figures, for they will stay monochrome, referencing the monochrome appearance of monuments. Ordinary people are rarely presented in monuments, and I wanted to transform a photograph which is an intimate object of a modest size by enlarging it to create “monuments” of my dead relatives and in this way to inscribe them into history.



Figure 50. *Grandma Halia with her sister. Songs and Flowers for Ukraine.*

Another enlarged photograph contains a group school photo. My grandma Halia is in the center of it surrounded by school children in the year 1948. (Figure 51). Each of the people in the photograph holds a bouquet of flowers, and I collaged their bouquets, as well as a dress of my grandma with colorful floral fabrics. My grandmother is young and not smiling in these photos. She and the children around her who survived the war don't

smile. But they are holding flowers. They are witnessing trauma outside and inside themselves. The year 1948 suggests that their war was in the past already.

The flowers here, as well as in the other tapestries are symbols of mourning, and I imagine my ancestors are silently mourning not only victims of their time but those of the next generations, who are dying today on Ukrainian land which is soaked in blood. At the same time flowers symbolize renewal, because despite the devastation, next year flowers will grow again, and nature will stay fertile.



Figure 50. *Grandma Halia with school children in 1948. Songs and Flowers for Ukraine.*

Conclusions

While making my work I explored and exercised the ability of an artist to respond to urgent events that were occurring in the world, specifically a war, which is traumatic and unavoidable. War is a collective experience, no one can experience war in isolation,

unless that war is metaphorical. My work responds to a real war, in which I was not physically involved, but am involved mentally as an individual and a member of Ukrainian society. I wanted my work to be an expression of collective experience, which means that key ideas and references as well as visual language would be recognizable for the Ukrainian community. In the process of working current events and their emotional outcome in Ukrainian social media influenced my choices. Since I was not in Ukraine when the war started, I didn't have the agency to describe the visceral physical experience of the war, like many of my fellow citizens did. I reflected on how my response to the war could be, and found that it could emerge from empathy and exploring meaningful symbols that are presented in a way that is accessible, immediate. Intuitively I also incorporated my family history as a way to consider the current war in a historical context. This involved research on how intellectuals and artists responded and discussed the topic of the war in different historical periods (mostly during the 20th century), including a contemporary Ukrainian artists' response to the war.

While finding myself in the situation in which I was not able to work with any other topic but war in my country, I chose a textile medium to express my traumatic feelings, and process them while making my work. Through the textile medium I found a language to communicate about Ukrainian agency. The form of collage allowed me to combine things with different meanings - references, symbols, family photos. Extending the collage medium with sculptural elements such as a three-dimensional bird and curtains, and streams of blood that go beyond the frame and flow to the floor allowed me more tools for expression and created greater impact, while also adding novelty to the textile medium.

Textile form, being appreciated in many folk cultures, was suitable for me to appropriate Ukrainian folk traditions, which contain a richness and uniqueness of Ukrainian culture. In this way I familiarized viewers with Ukrainian imagery such as an embroidered towel, family altar, Ukrainian flag. Combining these multiple elements I enhanced their visual power using intensity of colors in a way painting does, as well as universally recognizable images of grief such as cemetery, flowers, and blood. Using them, I evoked emotional responses from foreign audience to which my work was presented. Each image was designed using additional elements such as text or printed photographs.

Also, the three pieces from my series were exhibited at the University of Michigan during the 2022 fall semester and 2023 winter semester at the exhibition "I have a crisis for you...Women Artists of Ukraine Respond to War" curated by Grace Mahoney and Jessica Zychowicz. The collaborative discussions within my school, the inspiration I took from the reflections and advice of my professors and peers, as well as responses of the exhibition viewers were very helpful in continuing making the whole series. I was

able to understand people's perception, reactions and ideas while they encountered my work. This was helpful in understanding how to make a work accessible for any audience. In my work I also incorporated such recognizable elements as a window, or family photo album to evoke responses based on familiar things that are essential to every human being. I've observed that when people find such connections with their own lives they are more likely to respond emotionally to the notion of destruction and erasure that happens during the war. They may intuitively feel how something human is threatened in them. And this connection may be more effective than simply showing images that outrage. In one of my critiques, a guest visitor confessed that while encountering my work, his first emotions were very physical. These visceral reactions, like when someone suddenly feels tears in their eyes, serves as a sign that my work achieved its goal.

At the beginning I didn't envision how the finished work might appear. Since the making of the work lasted for about a year, I learned about what process means - not only the process of embodiment of the formulated idea, but the process of developing a series of ideas strung upon each other, developed from one another and complemented by each other. Each piece was made as a collage, but while making them one by one, I've learned how to collage a whole series as a polyphonic visual body.

In the process of making I also learned as an artist how textile arts can heal. Work that demands concentration allowed me to meditate on my past and my culture, literally recreating them from materials at hand. This is a creation of "mental garments," protection the same way as clothes offer protection to the body. The embodiment of mental energy in symbolic material things is essential in particular in the Orthodox Christian tradition, in which such artifacts as icons play a huge role. The idea that a thing created with the help of human hands can heal and transform can be found in other cultures too. But after this experience I can say for myself that it transforms a creator, and in this sense art plays not only a therapeutic but kind of "magical" role.

Starting from the theme of war as a global menace to human lives and to the human qualities in people, particularly the war in Ukraine, my inquiry led me to the necessity to meditate on the most vulnerable and most precious and essential things that construct human lives. What I found matters most is connections with loved ones within family and community, home, homeland, and the opportunity to be alive. I hope my work is advocating for such things, and is an urgent call because what is bleeding needs repair. The flow of the blood should be stopped. Though I know our wounds will be bleeding for generations.

Bibliography:

1. Lippard Lucy R. Trojan Horses: Activist Art and Power. In Wallis, Brian. "Art after Modernism: Rethinking Representation." Book. Documentary Sources in Contemporary Art; v. 1. New York: Boston: New Museum of Contemporary Art; D.R. Godine, 1984. P. 345.
2. Arpilleras.Colección del Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos. Ocholibros, Santiago, Chile, 2019.
3. 'What is Freedom Today? On War in Ukraine' by Slavoj Žižek. 52:33.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Y7OaRntN1E
4. Kazmina, Oksana. Digging. From "I have a crisis for you...Women Artists of Ukraine Respond to War " curated by Grace Mahoney and Jessica Zychowicz. Weiser Hall Gallery, University of Michigan.
<https://sites.google.com/umich.edu/i-have-a-crisis-for-you/artists/oksanakazmina?authuser=0>
5. Butler, Judith. "Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence." Book. London; New York: Verso, 2004. P. 33.
6. Alexander, Martha. Trauma and Textiles: Inside London's New Louise Bourgeois Exhibition. AnOther. February 9, 2022.
<https://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/13872/trauma-in-textiles-inside-london-louise-bourgeois-exhibition-hayward-gallery>
7. Common Threads Project. <https://commonthreadsproject.org/>
8. Ayling-Smith, Beverly. "Introduction: Textiles and Trauma." Textile: The Journal of Cloth and Culture. Routledge, n.d. doi:10.1080/14759756.2022.2065825.
9. The history of the Quilt. National AIDS Memorial.
<https://www.aidsmemorial.org/quilt-history>
10. Bravo, Tony. The AIDS Memorial Quilt remains a shattering work of grief and activism 35 years on. Datebook. June 18, 2022.
<https://datebook.sfchronicle.com/art-exhibits/the-aids-memorial-quilt-remains-a-shattering-work-of-grief-and-activism-35-years-on>
11. The Einstein-Freud Correspondence (1931-1932)
<https://www.public.asu.edu/~jmlynch/273/documents/FreudEinstein.pdf>
12. Photos: How Russia's invasion of Ukraine compares to scenes from World War II. New York Post. March 9, 2022.
<https://nypost.com/2022/03/09/photos-how-russias-invasion-of-ukraine-compares-to-world-war-ii/#1>
13. Forensic Architecture & Centre for Spatial Technologies in cooperation with Inferstudio/Nathan Su, Airstrike on Babyn Yar, 2022.
<https://www.berlinbiennale.de/en/personen/3046/forensic-architecture>

14. Russian Strike on the Kyiv TV Tower. Forensic Architecture.
<https://forensic-architecture.org/investigation/russian-strike-on-kyiv-tv-tower>
15. Zabelski Katya. How Ukrainian Folk Art Became a Tool of Resistance Against Russia. Hyperallergic. June 6, 2022.
<https://hyperallergic.com/738513/how-ukrainian-folk-art-became-a-tool-of-resistance-against-russia/>
16. Benjamin, Walter, Jennings, Michael William, Doherty, Brigid, Levin, Thomas Y., and Jephcott, E. F. N. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media." Book. Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008. P. 22. P. 255.
17. Faulkner, William. Requiem for a Nun. New York: Random House, 1951.
18. Глухенька Н. Пата Тетяна: Альбом. Київ: Мистецтво, 1973. 93 с.
19. Знищена російська техніка в Україні заросла синьо-жовтими квітами. UAinfo.
<https://uainfo.org/blognews/1654775328-znishchena-rosiyska-tehnika-v-ukrayini-zarosla-sino-zhovtimi.html>
20. Roggel, Rachel. Hope Dies Last. <http://www.roggel.com/Holocaust/hdl.html>
21. Presiado, Mor. "These Threads Capture Shadows" Sewing and Embroidery in Holocaust Art Works of Contemporary Jewish Women Artists. *Ars Judaica*, 2012.
22. Briukhovetska, Oksana. TEXTUS. Textile, Embroidery, Feminism.
<https://www.briukhovetska.art/textus-embroidery-textile-feminism/>
23. Harris, Jennifer. *A Companion to Textile Culture*. John Wiley & Sons, 2020. P.207.
24. Lyons, Martyn. *New Directions in Book History, Approaches to the History of Written Culture, A World Inscribed*. Palgrave Macmillan. 2017.
25. Hughes, Natasha. *Stitching Solidarity: Janie Terrero and the Political Power of the Needle*. *Decorating Dissence*. June 12, 2020.
<https://decoratingdissidence.com/2020/06/12/janie-terrero-holloway/>
26. *Called to Create: Black Artists of the American South*. National Gallery of Art.
<https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2022/called-to-create.html>
27. Sohan, Vanessa Kraemer. "But a quilt is more": Recontextualizing the Discourse(s) of the Gee's Bend Quilts. *College English*, Vol. 77, No. 4 (March 2015), pp. 294-316
28. Kokoli Alexandra. *Creative Tensions. Making (It), Unmaking, and Making Do in Textiles Informen by Feminism*. In Harris, Jennifer, ed. "A Companion to Textile Culture." Book. Wiley-Blackwell Companions to Art History. Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell, 2020. P. 227.
29. Gillespie, Faith. 1987. "The Masterless Way: Weaving an active resistance". In *Women and Craft*, edited by Gillian Elinor, Su Richardson, Sue Scott, Angharad Thomas, and Kate Walker, 175-82. London: Virago Press. P. 178.

30. Agosin, Marjorie. *Tapestries of Hope, Threads of Love: The Arpillera Movement in Chile*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008. P. 88.
31. Shklovskii, Viktor. "Art as Technique" in Masing-Delic, I. "From Symbolism to Socialist Realism a Reader." Book. Edited by Masing-Delic, Irene. *Cultural Syllabus*. Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2012.
32. Biro, Matthew. Representation and Event: Anselm Kiefer, Joseph Beuys, and the Memory of the Holocaust *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, volume 16, number 1 (2003).