

VLADA RALKO
ON SOVIET POWER, MORAL JUSTICE
(English version of the material for HVG)

"My friends are calm, they don't use the phrase after the war, they use the phrase after the victory," said Ukrainian painter Vlada Ralko, whose first public appearance at the downtown Kahán Art Space since the Russian invasion began, at the opening.

no kere nor the theme of idyll

The two parts of the room are connected by an arched passageway, on one side of which is a painting entitled "Only man can stop the aggressor..." and on the other, as a continuation, "...because Soviet people cannot have their own words". An eloquent caption, but why use the Soviet adjective?

Many people believe that Soviet rule is over, the word is no longer used. But this is only true in form. The Russia of today continues the colonialist policy of the Soviets, it represents that perception. It is a world brilliantly described by George Orwell in his book 1984, published in the final days of the Soviet Union, and available to all. Anyone who reads it will immediately understand what I mean - for example, the nature of Russian propaganda today. Even the heroes of Orwell's novel have been deprived of their own language, their language distorted, just like their compatriots today.

You have spent most of your career in the shadow of war. It began with the Majdan Square protests.

Majdan Square protests, then the annexation of Crimea, the fighting in eastern Ukraine, and now you are producing a documentary series of artworks about the Russian invasion. Was there a more peaceful, idyllic period in your painting?

I am not looking for idyll, I want to show moral truths in times of war. In Majdan Square, in the evening twilight, I saw a man dressed as a giant eye in the unruly crowd, and that's when I decided to make a drawing that would document the events as a diary. The wars in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine are also presented from a subjective and personal perspective. I can also feel in my Mos- tan works that I cannot breathe.

You have previously said that "there is no blood in my paintings, only red paint on paper". Isn't that a little bit of a shame?

Everyone is free to interpret works of art. Art does not represent in a direct, simplistic way, ISTVÁN FAZEKAS

if it did, it would be mere propaganda. When I studied art as a young man, I was told that red was the colour of glorious Soviet power. I wanted to get rid of this youthful pressure, which is why I said it was just one of the colours.

In wartime, there is a great temptation to simplify artworks into pro-paganda, for example, the recurring figure in your paintings, the two-headed eagle, is clearly a symbol of Russia. Aren't you afraid of that?

I can't judge, but for me the only language now is drawing, it's how I express what I want to say, it's my weapon, it's what keeps me alive. I am sure that the responsibility and solidarity of artists is becoming more and more important.

You have signed a call to boycott artists in Russia, which says that as much as art is used for propaganda, it becomes toxic. What kind of poisoning can it cause?

Russian artists used to be the image-bearers of democratic aspirations. Russian culture was represented by artists in Europe and the West judged the country through them. No one

could have imagined that they would suddenly become the pro-Pagandists of a cold-blooded aggressor. We thought that we hoped that Russia had culturally advanced, outstanding artists who could be reasoned with. But they have turned against democratic tradition, there is an artistic community that is explicitly pro-Putin.

Have you not received sympathetic, supportive gestures from your Russian colleagues? The St. Petersburg artists' group Sto gyelaty, led by Dmitry Vilensky, has been supportive of me, and some Russian artists have suggested that we hold a joint exhibition, but we have no contacts with any Russian institutions or leaders. The majority of Russian artists are not concerned with the suffering of the Ukrainian people, on the contrary, they portray the Russian people as suffering. Artistically, they do not oppose what Putin's troops are doing in Ukraine. At most, they are being cowardly, not acknowledging their own guilt.

In his current exhibition, he has only five original drawings, the rest digital giclée prints, which he has signed, i.e. acknowledged his authorship. Are your paintings safe? Will they survive the war?

My newer paintings are kept in the museum in Lviv, except for those that were bought and the only language for me now is drawing, this stack of weapons.

I donated the purchase price to help the fighting. I have my drawings from Berlin with me, but many of my drawings remain in Kiev, and I am concerned about their fate. The drawings now on show in Budapest are also for sale, and I will donate the money to Ukrainian volunteers who are clearing the land of mines left behind by the Russian aggressors.

Four years ago, in Odessa, he presented mono-mental tableaux. His exhibition Anatomy was praised at the time as the beginning of a new era for the local Museum of Fine Arts. Have you finally turned your back on these and are you sticking to graphics and series of drawings?

My first series was the Chinese Erotic Diary in 2000, which was also exhibited in Moscow in 2004. This was followed by the Kiev Diary. I am in a race against time, chasing events from one place to another, and this is the best way to do it. We are living in a time when we need to express what we think out loud, but briefly and concisely. I'm very strongly influenced and I'm not sure I could finish a large painting. I don't have the energy, but I can't concentrate on producing large, original forms.

Some works by Ukrainian artists, including your Lviv diary, were selected for this year's Venice Biennale. How did you manage to pull this off?

Posters were made of the pictures of artists who had worked during the war, and these were used to put together an open-air exhibition. But I also understand very well those who are not able to create now. What do you imagine post-war Ukraine will look like? Do you plan to return home?

I am sure that there will be no return to pre-war Ukraine, the past will not welcome you in Kiev. But I will go home as soon as possible. Most of my friends are defending their country, they were involved in the war. I consider it my duty to support them. It hurts me not to be able to fight physically. ZOLTÁN FARKAS

Spirit Animal elements

"The position of the outsider cannot be taken seriously", said aesthete Péter György at the opening of the exhibition, describing Vlada Ralko's paintings. Ukraine's ambassador to Hungary depicted the devastation with two photos. The first showed children playing on a playground built with Hungarian support, while the second showed the oppressive sight of the ruins after the bombing. In this way, Ljubov Nepop showed that the only way out of war

is in words, but that reality shines through. The internationally renowned and acclaimed Ralko came to Budapest from Berlin. From Kiev, she and her painter husband first fled the bombing to Lviv, where they were waiting for a residence permit. She has been to the Hungarian capital before, in 2018 she visited the Ludwig Museum Permanens Revolution, which presented "a vibrant art scene in a country full of tensions". Critics have hailed the 53-year-old Ralko as one of the most famous expressionist artists of independent Ukraine, citing the influence of one of the most famous painters of the last century, the British painter Francis Bacon, particularly in his earlier paintings. "I often mix human and animal features on a single canvas. This is not a forced analogy: I have encountered these 'animal' elements in real life. For example, I have repeatedly drawn a man dressed as a bear hanging out in Majdan Square, which he did not leave even in the most dangerous moments. My figures were really there in the square," he said, drawing a parallel between reality and art. He began his Kiev Diary series in the days of the uprising. It was followed up by The Lviv Diary, which also attracted the attention of the organisers of the exhibition Ukraine at the Venice Biennale.

12 May 2022 45