

Ihor Bereza, **Excavations**, chamotte, h 67 cm

Ihor Bereza

# Ukrainian Ceramists

Marc Leuthold

Ten Ukrainian ceramists are members of the International Academy of Ceramics. Nine of them responded to queries for pictures and thoughts about the situation they face during an invasion of their country.

They are accomplished artists. All are prominent in Ukraine and many have exhibited in international biennales in Mino, Korea, Faenza, and Blanc de Chine. Many have created art in international residencies like the International Clay Studio in Keskemet, the Clayarch Gimhae Museum in Korea, and the Ukrainian Pavilion of the FULE Museum Complex in Fuping, China. Most are academically trained and one of them earned a doctorate. Ukraine has a vital contemporary ceramic art movement.

Each artist has discovered and embraced their own recognizable style, the sign of mature art-making. Many of the artists are fairly young. Generally the work does not "confront". It is more subtle and much of it has a resonant, transcendent meditative quality. Some of the art is abstract, some is figurative, and some of the works are non-objective. Most of these artists create objects, but Natiliya Zuban also creates site-spe-

cific installation work. Colours tend to be rich but subdued with the exception of Hanna Drul and Lesia Padun, who both embrace bright saturated colour. The majority of the artists abstract representational forms in a highly creative and individualized expressive manner. High levels of craftsmanship are the norm. This is powerful, inventive and engaging artwork of a people who ponder, reflect, and create.

While the War may have already started in 2014, it has been a grinding daily reality for many years. Each artist has responded uniquely to this situation.

Andrii Kyrychenko, whose family is from the East, has had to grapple with the War since 2015. He observes that this tragedy has affected him for a long time, "but now it has affected everyone, because currently there is no safe place in Ukraine".

Some artists have fled; others have stayed put. The emotional toll on all the artists is enormous, and many have stopped working; however, some of them citing art-making as part of the war effort, have persevered.

Hanna Drul observed, "I could not pick up the clay for a month. But at some point, I realized that my work could be a

Hanna Drul, **Architecture of relationship**, 2019

Hanna Drul





Volodymyr Khyzhynskyi, **The Cossack Mamai**  
58 x 44 x 25 cm, medium chamotte, engobe, glaze, 2017



Volodymyr Khyzhynskyi



Lelizaveta Portnova, **n.t.**



Lelizaveta Portnova

Natiliya Zuban site specific installation



Natiliya Zuban



Yuriy Musatov, **Explosion**, 2015, 80 x 35 x 30 cm



Yuriy Musatov in studio

weapon. I decided to kill evil like this with all my energy. I feel like I'm performing a magic ritual."

Yuriy Musatov who lives in Kiev was initially "paralyzed and drained" of all creative energy. But recently he resumed work in his studio creating a series titled "Frozen" – creating during frequent air-raid warning alarms.

Ihor Bereza comments, "At the beginning of the War, there was a kind of shock and it seemed that all creativity had lost its meaning, but gradually a feeling came that art and culture are one of the means of combatting injustice – our most powerful weapon to fight for peace."

Lelizaveta Portnova, who fled for Paris at the beginning of the War, is "safe and receives every support". She is invited to exhibit her artwork and to residencies. Understandably, she worries constantly about her loved ones and family and says, "Now ceramics for me is the only opportunity to help loved ones who stayed in Ukraine."

Yet despite despair, there is a palpable sense of determination among the artists. Volodymyr Khyzhynsky, a ceramics professor at Kiev State Academy of Arts and Design is in constant contact with his students, provid-

ing support. The day after the invasion began, Nataliya Zuban volunteered for the war effort. Andrii Kyrychenko since the second day of the War has transported refugees to the Polish border and daily delivers food and medicine where it is needed. Andrii states that everything other than family safety and the resistance is a lower priority.

Ironically, Oleksandr Miroshnychenko, who describes himself as "outside politics" before the war may have been the most palpably impacted. For forty days he and his wife and two small daughters sheltered in their basement in the midst of shelling. All the windows were shattered at his parents' nearby house. Finally, his luck turned and some acquaintances gave his family a house they could live in. He observes that "constant psychological stress and emotions do not allow thinking about creativity". He further observes that "art is what makes us human". It helps us "understand life, ask questions and think".

He has learned that "everything can be destroyed very quickly and ruthlessly". As a result of war and the kindness he has received, he feels "a growing disillusionment with humanity that goes hand in hand with a growing

Oleksandr Miroshnychenko, **Head**



Oleksandr Miroshnychenko in studio





Lesia Padun, n.t., 2019



Lesia Padun, Ode to Nature, 2017

faith in individual people". After World War I, artists invented Dada. One wonders what artists like Miroshnychenko, who makes haunting figural work, will create afterwards.

A few of the artists – but thankfully not all, have not resumed making art and they feel the loss intensely. Andrii writes, "The main loss with the advent of war is the loss of faith in the power of art."

In the many electronic exchanges with the nine Ukrainian artists, there are some commonalities. After the shock of what

happened, in all the messages there is a palpable, iron-like unity and determination to prevail. Drul comments, "The first feeling was fear. My whole life changed in one moment." And there is a characteristically dark optimism about the end result. Hanna Drul summarizes: "I'm not afraid anymore. I'm just terribly angry." These artists make it clear that in times of unimaginable crisis, creativity and art can be both a paralysing symbol of loss and grief and an enduring well of solace and hope.

The nine artists will be grateful if you can help them in any way:

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**MARC LEUTHOLD**

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*Artist Ilona Romule was instrumental in enabling Leuthold to contact the Ukrainian artists.*

Andrii Kyrychenko, n.t.



Andrii Kyrychenko

