

"ANTROPOPHAGUS"

painting, installation and video

YONA TUKUSER

CONCEPT

Yona Tukuser was born in 1986 in the village of Glavan, Odessa region, which is 70 km away from the Danube Delta in Ukraine. She is a descendant of Bulgarians who migrated from the village of Glavan, near the town of Stara Zagora, Bulgaria in 1832. She was a foreigner in her homeland, which consciously and subconsciously stimulated her to direct her creative focus towards the most dramatic experiences of her people, who left their land in search of a better life and encountered a series of traumatic events.

In 2009, Yona Tukuser began researching historical data and documentary archives on the three famines in Ukraine (1921-1923, 1932-1933 and 1946-1947), as the events in the areas populated by ethnic Bulgarians are the focal point. The following year she began to paint on the theme of "Famine". She showed her works in the exhibition hall of the Red House, Sofia in March 2011. Eleven years later, she presented a solo exhibition "Hunger" at the National Gallery (Kvadrat 500), that included works created between 2010 and 2022. Each of them is based on a photograph, article, archival document or narrative.

The current project "Anthropophagus" aims to unite the tragic events of the past with the current war caused by the invasion of Ukraine by the Russian Federation, including:

- paintings based on eyewitness accounts of the 1946-1947 famine;
- an installation of authentic burnt grain, the result of a Russian missile attack on a grain storage facility at a Danube river port in 2023, along with a fragment of the Russian Caliber missile that burnt this grain;
- the documentary "Anthropophagus", in which we meet survivors of the humanitarian catastrophe caused by the Soviet government in 1946-1947, which led to the starvation of more than 100,000 Bulgarians in the Bessarabia region.

An overall scenographic concept for the exhibition space will be developed to create an atmosphere that enhances the impact of the three main components - the paintings, the installation and the film. The room will be completely darkened, the lighting will be spot-lit, with the paintings and the grain pile additionally illuminated by floor-mounted led lamps.

Yona Tukuser's highly expressive, multi-layered paintings have a shocking impact, turning man-eating stories into dramatic requiems. The installation is the link between the famine, when grain was requisitioned on the orders of Soviet governments, and the current war, in which grain is scorched by Russian missile and drone attacks. Through interviews conducted by Yona in Bulgarian villages in Ukraine in 2018, the film reveals harrowing recollections of people who witnessed the effects of the brutal famine, recounting one of its sinister end phases - anthropophagy (cannibalism).

Through the combination of painting, conceptual installation and documentary cinema, medias that resonate at different levels in the human psyche, perception, and touch, the artist achieves a shattering impact, proving that unconsidered historical phenomena have a tendency to re-emerge. Man is accustomed to divisions along many lines - religion, nationality, ethnicity, social status ... whether the hostility to *otherness* arises from there or whether the root cause lies in the loss of moral orientations that can even lead to anthropophagy or simply generate endless aggression towards *the other*, and even more insidiously - to create an ideological doctrine that recognizes *the foreigner* as one's own and subjects him to extermination because he does not renounce his national belonging.

These are some of the burning questions that arise when coming into contact with the work of Yona Tukuser.

Elitsa Terzieva, Krassimir Iliev

Curators



1. "The Raven Pecks Out His Eyes", oil on canvas, 220 x 160 cm

Dimitar Chilibiisky (b. 1928) from the village of Banovka (Odessa region) remembers:

"In 1947, when I was already in the collective farm, I worked in the fields all day. When I would come home in the evening, I would see here and there a dead man lying on the road... and the crows were pecking out their eyes."

Mitev P., Chervenkov N. "Bessarabian Bulgarians for themselves". Sofia, 1996, p. 346.



2. "Six Peas and a Shoe for Dinner", oil on canvas, 220 x 160 cm

On May 18, 2018, in the village of Golitsa (Odessa region), Yona spoke with Tatiana Stoyanova (b. 1971). The granddaughter of a famine victim said:

"My father says that during the great famine he was 6 years old and went to the field where they were collecting grain. The foremen would let him take peas he found among the grain. My father spent the whole day sorting the piles of grain and brought six peas home. His mother made soup with those six grains and grass for dinner."



3. "He saw his mother kill his brother", oil on canvas, 220 x 480 cm

On April 29, 2018, in the village of Glavan (Odessa region), Yona spoke with Vasilisa Ivanovna Tutova (b. 1925).

The famine victim said:

"I know of a woman named Ivantsa who ate her child. She started to eat and the older son saw her. She immediately ran away from home and was speechless from terror and fear. His mother went mad from starvation and died."



4. "Two sisters killed the husband of the one and ate him", oil on canvas, 220 x 160 cm

On May 20, 2018, in the village of Sambatar (Odessa region), Yona spoke with Mikhail Petrovich Ganchev (b. 1929). The famine victim said:

"Our village of Sambatar is very poor because the land here is very bad. About 600 people have died of starvation in the village.

During the famine of 1946, people died in our village. They went and took the wheat from the people by force. We had three big wicker baskets filled with corn cobs, each containing two or three kernels. A man from the town hall came with a cart and three others and took the corn cobs from us and said, "Die!" Do you hear what he says to us? "To die"?! This man is from Sambatar.

In the famine they were selling jelly, but where did they get this pig from? It was human flesh. Jelly made of human flesh. In one cemetery, there was an open common grave where every day they threw 10-15 people who died of starvation. There were people who used to go there and cut human flesh from the dead and make jelly and sell it in the village market. Great starvation, people bought and ate. The man doesn't know what it is, it looks like jelly. And that's how we lived. There are people left alive, as you see me.

There was a house in the next street where two sisters lived and they killed the husband of the one and ate him. Then they died.

It was very difficult then, but I mean Stalin didn't go to the barns, to the people, but in our country these people were tax collectors. Even today there are those who hate, they say they were communists; he doesn't know what communism is. Do you know what communism is?"



5. "People ate the bark of trees", oil on canvas, 220 x 160 cm

"Ukraine was the main supplier of grain to Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) and vegetables to Moscow. In 1946-1947 trains of bread were sent to Germany under the slogan: 'To the German people from the Ukrainian people!'. Meanwhile, the situation in the Bulgarian villages was dire. Bulgarians were digging frozen potatoes and beetroot, leftovers from the collective farm fields after the harvest, out of the snow. They resorted to eating tree bark, mice and dogs. Diseases such as dystrophy, various forms of poisoning and parasitic typhus spread among the starving due to exhaustion. Many corpses littered the fields as people wandered from village to village in search of sustenance, often perishing along the way. The starving peasants were not allowed to leave Ukraine, nor were they issued passports."

Tatarko Inna. The Famine of 1946-1947 in the Bulgarian Villages of the Izmail Oblast of the USSR. III Danube Scientific Readings. Izmail. 2017, p. 256.



6. "To save the elder daughter from starvation, the mother slaughtered the younger", oil on canvas, 220 x 160 cm

Buziyan Elena Grigorievna (b. 1938) in the village of Ostrivne (Odessa region) recalls:

"I remember my father's story that in one of the nearby villages, in order to save her older daughter from starvation, a woman slaughtered and cooked her younger daughter. The eldest daughter saw this, was frightened and ran away and never returned to her mother."

Pelivan, K. "The Famine of 1946–1947 in Southern Bessarabia: Artsiz District of Odesa Oblast." Page 125. Artsiz, 2008



7. "My aunt slaughtered her two daughters and ate them", oil on canvas, 220 x 160 cm

On May 21, 2018, in the village of Golitsa (Odessa region), Yona spoke with Zagorskaya Stefanida Stepanovna (b. 1939). She said:

"In 1946-47 it was very scary. Hunger. Death. We had nothing to eat. During the war they took what they could. Then in our village there were tax collectors who took the people's stored grain. My father died of hunger in 1947. Our family was overwhelmed by hunger. My aunt, Belioglo, faced this unimaginable ordeal when her husband starved to death, leaving her without food. She slaughtered her two daughters, who were 8 and 4 years old, and ate their meat. She would even come to our house and knock on the windows, but we dared not open the door for her as we were afraid she might eat my mother or me. Then the neighbors would say, "It's a good thing your door was locked, or she would have eaten you!" My mother replies to them, "I'm old, she'd better eat me, at least she won't touch my child!" She wandered the streets looking for open homes to enter, hoping to find someone to stab and eat. Eventually she died."



8. "The Mother Baked and Ate Her Daughter", oil on canvas, 220 x 480 cm

On May 12, 2018, in the village of Orekhovka (Odessa region), Yona spoke with Maria Vasilievna Stoyanova (b. 1941). She said:

"I remember the time of the great famine. My neighbor had two daughters. Unfortunately one of them died and she took her to the cemetery. After a few days this woman returned to the cemetery, took her daughter out of the grave and brought her back to her home. We children looked out the window, curious as to what would follow. To our horror, we witnessed the mother light a fire in the stove and roast her daughter, then eat her. I saw with my own eyes how she put her child in the oven to roast!"



9. "Gnawing and Eating", oil on canvas, 220 x 160 cm

On April 22, 2018, in the village of Kamenka (Odessa region), Yona spoke with Lefterova Maria (b. 1924). She said: "We were starving. I was hungry as a child, then I got married and again a big famine started. Here in the village people were dying in the streets like dogs. Wherever one fell and died, they left him there... it was very scary during the famine.

The man was hungry! What can he do? There is nothing to eat! Except to gnaw and eat. People were terribly weak.

The man was dead! They are gnawing him! They eat him!

-Child?

-They ate his child too.



10. “A mother cut meat from her leg to feed her children”, oil on canvas, 220 x 140 cm

In August 2023, in the village of Glavan (Odessa Oblast), Nastradin Valeriya Valeriyevna (born 2002) shared the following story with Yona:

"My mother used to tell me that during the 1946-47 famine in our region, a woman cut a piece of meat from her own leg with a knife to feed her children who were starving to death. "