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# Elena Subach

by Sarah Bolwell • 10.06.2022

When the Russian military moved tanks and troops into the Donbas region of Ukraine in February 2022, thousands of Ukrainians were forced to evacuate. The images that have since dominated Western newspaper headlines, social media feeds and television screens have recorded a nation in despair, its people devastated by warfare and yet also defiant. In periods of conflict, documentary photography takes on greater significance, and for many the medium is still primarily associated with the 'burden of proof'. Before the Russian invasion, photographs by the Ukrainian artist Elena Subach (b.1980) often involved post-production manipulation – a process that can be considered antithetical to the photograph as analytical document. However, the outbreak of war has forced Subach to rethink her practice: 'Before the war one of my favourite mottos was "if there is no magic in art, then it is just a medium". I was inspired by sacred art and sought depth and significance in everyday things. Now my approach to photography is resolutely documentary. I document the present, because history in its concentrated form is unfolding here and now'.<sup>1</sup>

Before this change, Subach's most recent work was a series of photographs of chairs titled *First Two Weeks of the War* (2022). It catalogues chairs that were used at an aid station in Ukraine where Subach volunteered. Some are covered with blankets, still warm from their recent occupants, whereas others are starkly adorned with red-painted crosses, or in use as makeshift dining tables **FIG.1**. Taken in Uzhhorod, a city in Western Ukraine on the Slovakian border, the photographs record intimate human moments through the omission of people, in many cases the final meals shared by families before making the trip across the border. 'I photographed the chairs with the objects left on them, because they seemed to me to be islands among waves of people, they were places where you could stop and rest for a while [. . .] and then all these people, like waves, disappeared over the horizon, the unknown waited for them, but I know for sure: they all dream of returning home'.<sup>2</sup> Subach's series distils the frenetic energy of the camp; she captures imprints of human experience – the emotional residue – while affording her subjects privacy through absence.

The chair images manifest as portraits or still lifes, filled with objects that suggest, rather than capture, periods of flux or transition. Ostensibly devoid of political content, they are also at odds with what we have come to expect from documentary images, certainly those which we have seen this year from Ukraine. Perhaps



the most striking image is of a foldable chair in front of a pile of chopped wood, covered in sheepskin and an emergency blanket; the crumpled gold and silver foil catches the light at multiple angles, looking incongruously precious amid the mundane surroundings **FIG.2**. These images simultaneously invoke and destabilise the notion of documentary photography. As such, they have become a marker of the major shift in Subach's practice moving forward.



**Fig.1** *Untitled* from the series *Chairs: First Two Weeks of the War*, by Elena Subach. 2022. Digital photograph (Courtesy the artist).

Born in Chervonograd, Ukraine, a small mining town in the Lviv region, Subach received a degree in economics from the Lesya

Ukrainka East European National University in 2002, before committing herself to photography full-time. Alongside her artistic practice, she is currently a senior researcher and curator at the Lviv National Gallery of Art. Before the war Subach organised exhibitions of work by contemporary Ukrainian artists and also helped to digitise the museums holdings. She has exhibited her work widely in Ukraine, in particular at the Naked Room, Kyiv, a gallery founded in 2018 by the prolific independent curators Lizaveta German and Maria Lanko, who also curated the Ukrainian pavilion at the 2022 Venice Biennale. More recently, Subach has exhibited internationally as part of group shows: at Galeria Labirynt, Lublin [FIG.3](#), at the Art Centre Silkeborg Bad in Denmark, Czwartek Gallery, Warsaw, and the Gallery at Dobbin Mews, New York.

A deep awareness of the history of her country and its people permeates Subach's work. It is not so much an idealisation of the nation state, but a connection of the people to the land and their culture. She also draws inspiration from the little-known group of avant-garde creatives who came together during the interwar period in Lviv under the name ARTES. The group was co-founded in 1929 by several artists, including Jerzy Yanish (1901–62), Alexander Kshivoblotsky (1901–79), Roman Selski (1903–90) and Margit Reich-Selska (1900–80). The Ukrainians were joined by artists from many different communities of Lviv and ARTES's work readily engaged with activities in Western art world centres, especially Paris, as many of its members spent time there.<sup>3</sup>

ARTES's collaborative mentality is reflected in the celebration of women in Subach's 2021 series *Grandmothers on the Edge of Heaven* [FIG.4](#). The series profiles a generation of women who hold firmly onto their post-war views, who believe in God and the Kingdom of Heaven that awaits them. 'Our grandmothers and ourselves are separated not by two generations, but by an abyss', Subach says, 'they do not always know what the internet is and what the value of information is in the modern world'.<sup>4</sup> In 1998 the historian Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak wrote that 'Ukraine has never produced an indigenous ideology, and its non-Communist ideological movements have played more of a ritual than a political or organizational role'.<sup>5</sup> After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 communities came together through shared practical goals, delivering educational and support services. Bohachevsky-Chomiak argues that this social work, with its focus on equal opportunity and self-definition, is inherently feminist.





**Fig. 2** *Untitled* from the series *Chairs: First Two Weeks of the War*, by Elena Subach. 2022. Digital photograph. (Courtesy the artist).

Providing vital societal sustenance in the absence of state provisions, the women depicted in Subach's photographs have traditionally been pillars of the Ukrainian community. Armed with handbags and helmeted with colourful headscarves, these women communicate reliability and strength. A fully laid table displays a number of traditional Ukrainian dishes, shredded vegetables, plates of olives and sliced meat **Fig. 5**. However, this is a far cry from Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* (1979), in which pioneering women are deified. '[The grandmothers] are so full of memories of the past that nothing of the present can fit into this fullness', Subach says. 'They are among us now, but not really, because their

consciousness is already awaiting the approaching moment to step outside the bounds of life and find themselves at the gates of heaven'.<sup>6</sup> Subach questions the relevancy of their outlook in a world where the present is primary.

In another image in the series a woman with a blue headscarf looks away from the camera, out of frame **FIG.6**. The bright blue dominates the composition, recalling Virgin Mary's cloak in lapis lazuli in early Christian religious depictions. Behind her, through an arched white window, is a shoreline with an incongruently sized apple nestled in the sand. The juxtaposition of Christian symbolism and Subach's process of photographic surrealist collage creates an uncanny effect. The artist gravitated towards collage intuitively as a technique for this series, finding the effect of 'cutting out' women's figures therapeutic, after suffering a bereavement.<sup>7</sup> The effect of moving these grandmothers into imaginary, digital landscapes subverts their technical shortcomings and their blinkered devotion to the next life. The use of flash in this series is particularly notable, flattening the image and evaporating any depth. By such means Subach draws our attention to the physicality of the photograph and its artifice.

Subach's work incorporates narratives that are both private and public, which derive from her own family experiences and relationships but also relate to wider cultures and politics. Her photographs often foster a sensation of inclusion and belonging, which accrues over time through sustained periods of looking. In a photograph from the series *Meteorite Berdychiv* **FIG.7** two young boys sit atop a climbing frame in the middle of a housing estate. The series was inspired by the work of a local astronomer, who named meteorites after towns and villages in the region. The rocket shape of the climbing frame speaks to the hope and dream of another world, while the angle of the slide, coupled with the exposed steel frame, visually aligns the structure with Vladimir Tatlin's Constructivist tower. Intended as an icon of Soviet technological, economic and industrial strength, *Monument to the Third International* (1919–20) was, however, never realised. Of the series Subach says 'my story is about agitation of the apocalypse, a common mood of people living in cities like mine. About endless expectation of whatever is coming – a God, a Hero, a Saviour, or an impending meteorite'.<sup>8</sup> It is hard to read these words, or indeed the series, as either wholly optimistic or pessimistic, but there is a constant political underpinning. 'A person who separates themselves from politics just wants to close their eyes to reality', Subach says. 'It is one type of escapism, at best – a manifestation of childhood [. . .] a lack of conscience'.<sup>9</sup>



**Fig. 3** Installation view of *Somewhere Now* at Galeria Labirynt, Lublin, 2019, showing the series *Inny Obcy Swoi*, by Elena Subach. 2019. Installation, overall dimensions variable. (Courtesy the artist).

Over the last decade Subach has worked closely with other artists. In 2014, for example, she worked with collective The Group, a 'situational gathering of people without permanent membership' that was born from an 'ironic proposal to go on picnics and call it art'.<sup>10</sup> Subach participated in the project *Strolls With Pleasure And Not Without Morality*, in which the group wandered around Galicia, Western Ukraine, tasting local food and following a route known only to the collective's founder and single permanent member, Konstantyn Smolyanyanov. The photographs resemble amateur, tourist snapshots, rather than the reportage of professional artists. A number of these images were exhibited at YA Gallery, Dnipro, in central Ukraine, in 2016. More recently, Subach has collaborated with her husband, the photographer Viacheslav Polyakov, for example, on the composite photographs, *Girl in a Tower* series **FIG.8** and *City of Gardens* (2019). A sense of play permeates the images, but Subach continues to mine history in order to force a deeper connection with Ukraine, as evidenced through signifiers and juxtapositions, such as the use of religious imagery; the recurring motif of blue fabric, as seen in *Triptych* **FIG.9**; and the interplay of humour and sympathy, as in her photograph of an older couple asleep in their car **FIG.10**.





Fig. 4 *Untitled* from the series *Grandmothers on the Edge of Heaven*, by Elena Subach. 2019. Digital image. (Courtesy the artist).

One might see Subach's images as belonging to the photographic, rather than existing as photographs in the traditional sense. The opening and closing of the camera shutter does not produce a work of art, but rather, marks a point in Subach's process. While the manipulation of images can be traced to the very beginnings of photography, the digital age fosters greater and greater opportunity for the dissolution of disciplinary boundaries. It is particularly worth noting, therefore, Subach's renewed investment in the evidentiary. Speaking in relation to her photographs of chairs, the artist states that she no longer wants to record the residue of human suffering: 'as citizens we tell stories, but we fix

them with photographs. After all, photography is true. It is a document that translates what you have seen. The transformation of the missing into the present'.<sup>11</sup> Her photographs at once rely on artifice and truth. For the present moment, however – as 'art is about time, and solely about the present, not the past or the future' – Subach's work is concerned only with the latter.<sup>12</sup> She has recently begun working on a project to document the stories of people who have been forced to leave their homes. In the creation of such a record, interweaving text and image, 'the fixation of facts' occurs, ensuring that these personal tragedies are preserved.<sup>13</sup>



Fig. 5 *Untitled* from the series *Grandmothers on the Edge of Heaven*, by Elena Subach. 2019. Digital image. (Courtesy the artist).

*This is the second in a series of profiles of contemporary Ukrainian artists.*





**Fig. 6** *Untitled* from the series *Grandmothers on the Edge of Heaven*, by Elena Subach. 2019. Digital image. (Courtesy the artist).





**Fig. 7** *Untitled* from the series *Meteorite Berdychiv*, by Elena Subach. 2018. Digital photograph. (Courtesy the artist).



**Fig. 8** Composite of 9 photographs from the series *Girl in a Tower*, by Elena Subach in collaboration with Viacheslav Polaikov. 2019. Digital image. (Courtesy the artist).





**Fig. 9** *Triptych* from the series *City of Gardens*, by Elena Subach in collaboration with Viacheslav Polaikov. 2019. Digital image. (Courtesy the artist).



**Fig. 10** *Untitled* from the series *Meteorite Berdychiv*, by Elena Subach. 2018. Digital image. (Courtesy the artist).

## Footnotes

- 1** Email correspondence between Elena Subach and the present author, 5th June 2022.
- 2** E. Subach on the Instagram page of MNRT, a photobook project founded in response to the migration crisis in Ukraine. It is published by the Academy of Fine Arts, Krakow, and the Foundation for Visual Arts, Poland. See [www.instagram.com/thisismnrt](https://www.instagram.com/thisismnrt), accessed 10th June 2022.
- 3** Subach, *op. cit.* (note 1).
- 4** E. Subach: 'Babusi', available at [elenasubach.com/babusi](https://elenasubach.com/babusi), accessed 10<sup>th</sup> June 2022.



- 5** M. Bohachevsky-Chomiak: 'Women in Ukraine: the political potential of community organisations', *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 22 (1998), pp.29–47, at p.29.
- 6** Subach, *op. cit.* (note 4).
- 7** Subach, *op. cit.* (note 1).
- 8** E. Subach: 'Meteorite Berdychiv', available at [elenasubach.com/berdychiv](https://elenasubach.com/berdychiv), accessed 10<sup>th</sup> June 2022.
- 9** Subach, *op. cit.* (note 1).
- 10** Gallery text for *Strolls With Pleasure And Not Without Morality* (8<sup>th</sup> September–4<sup>th</sup> November 2016), available at [yagallery.com/en/exhibitions/progulyanki-iz-zadovolenn-yam-i-ne-bez-morali](https://yagallery.com/en/exhibitions/progulyanki-iz-zadovolenn-yam-i-ne-bez-morali), accessed 10<sup>th</sup> June 2022.
- 11** Subach, *op. cit.* (note 1).
- 12** *Ibid.*
- 13** *Ibid.*

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