

## **COLOUR ANXIETY IN MARIA ZENKOVA'S ART: WITH LOVE FROM KYIV**

**Mg.art. Iveta Feldmane**

*Art academy of Latvia*

### **Abstract**

The war in Ukraine has dramatically altered the fate of many people, forcing them to make difficult decisions or even leaving them down a blind alley. The only choice for Ukrainian artist Maria Zenkova (1992) to escape the war was to leave her home, her job and sane environment in Kiev. Now Maria is a refugee and her new home is in Riga. The aim of the article is to find out how the anxiety of war affects the artist's life. How does disturbing news from her homeland affect her art? The representation of traumatic and affective experience in artwork is an issue where Affect theory can be used as a theoretical tool. The author interprets Maria Zenkova's artistic practice, highlighting some of the recent artworks. The interpretation of the artworks, along with the artist's own commentary, is based on the Affect theory, where an affect is viewed as an intense force that affects the body at the biological and emotional level. The article concludes that, despite the apparent denial, the theme of war appears in Maria Zenkova's art in the form of affective figures. The artist's active involvement in practices of collective support shows that in crisis situations such actions are even more important than the exhibition as an art event.

**Keywords:** *Affect theory, trauma, painting, Maria Zenkova.*

In the spring of 2022, hundreds and thousands of Ukrainian refugees began to flow to Riga and other Latvian cities. Among them were Ukrainian artists fleeing the war. Also, Maria Zenkova. Clothes in a sports bag and a cat in a container: that was all of Maria's capital. But it turns out that artists and other representatives of creative industries tend to act as a "rapid response unit" in crisis situations. Arriving in Latvia, Maria immediately began to look for opportunities to paint, made contacts, got involved in the art environment, sought cooperation with other Ukrainian artists living in Latvia. Just a month later, the first group show, *War and Peace*, curated by Maria, took place, in which dozens of Ukrainian and Latvian artists participated. Soon after, the *Ukrainian album* exhibition followed, in the Academic library of the University of Latvia, and in September, Maria Zenkova opened a solo show in the European Union House, *With love from Kyiv*. The purpose of this article is to examine whether the theory of affect and some aspects of trauma studies can be useful in the analysis of an artwork, choosing the series of works by Ukrainian artist Maria Zenkova (1992) *With love from Kyiv* as an object of theoretical reflection. The research question is whether the Ukrainian war is represented as affect in the works of an artist who fled the war, or whether it remains outside the artworks. In addition to the theory of affect as a tool for interpreting art, the article also uses the methods of formal and iconographic analysis of the artwork, with four artworks as case studies. The first part of the article deals with the portraits painted by Maria Zenkova, which are interpreted within the framework of affect theory as materialized affects and in the context of trauma studies as icons of memory. In the second part, the representation of anxiety caused by the war in Zenkova's paintings is read as an ironic and conceptual message. Conclusions are drawn at the end of the article.

### **Representation of the theme of war in the portraits**

Maria Zenkova's story resonates to a large extent with the fate of many Ukrainian refugees who, due to the war started by Russia, were forced to leave their homeland in order to look for opportunities not only to survive, but also to continue their professional activity. Maria Zenkova is a professional artist, painter, who was a teacher and doctoral student at the Kyiv Academy of Decorative Arts and Design until the beginning of the war. Looking at Maria Zenkova's works made during the last year, one can ask – what does the anxiety caused by the war mean in the artist's life, what impression does the disturbing news from her homeland leave on her art? The concepts of colour and anxiety mentioned in the title of the article show the possible coexistence of these concepts in cases where the interpretation of a visual artwork takes into account the perceptual component of the artwork and its ability to cause affective reactions in the observer. Along

with the formal analysis of painting, which investigates such form parameters as composition, colour, rhythm, texture and others in painting, the reading of the meaning and content is undeniably important. An artwork cannot be isolated from the environment and circumstances in which it is created. From the point of view of sociological art history, every artistic or creative activity is always rooted in a historically defined social and political situation. An artist's creative freedom and ideas cannot be completely detached from institutional influence, even when the artist seemingly chooses to do so [Wolff 1984]. What kind of art is created under the conditions of war and what is the relationship of the artist with the reality of war? On the one hand, as art and media theorist Boris Groys (1947) looking back at the classical period in art points out, "*The artist needed the warrior as a topic for art (...) The contemporary warrior no longer needs an artist to acquire fame and inscribe his feats into the universal memory. For this purpose the contemporary warrior has all the contemporary media at his immediate disposal*" [Groys 2008: 120]. And indeed, in the recent creative practice of Maria Zenkova, including the series of paintings, *With love from Kyiv*, the theme of war inevitably enters, although the artist herself denies it in words and says: "*Let journalists talk about war. I paint for a living.*"<sup>1</sup> In Maria's interpretation, the theme of war is not revealed directly or in the descriptive way, but rather is present in an anxious, expressive artistic expression, when colour, line and vibrating stroke "speak".

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century art there are no strict boundaries between genres. The portrait has also undergone changes, not only due to the entry of new media into art. Using painting as a traditional medium, contemporary artists create conceptual ideas, speak in the language of symbols, solve identity problems and express bodily experiences. The artist's self-reflection, capturing his external features on the canvas, is not an end in itself, but a means to discover other symbolic levels and meanings. Maria Zenkova generalizes the self-portrait and suggests it as a symbolic portrait, as a symbolic portrait of youth (Figure 1).

The title of the painting also confirms this. Analysing this work from a formal point of view, it is possible to distinguish individual elements, where their evaluation and interrelationships only partially express the meaning of the work. At the same time, one can observe and evaluate the manner and technique of painting, which reveals something more than the artist's temperament, taste and aesthetic priorities.

The self-portrait has been painted expressively, with free, wide strokes. Although the overall atmosphere of the work is seemingly optimistic, the figure conveys determination as it is rendered in motion, as if in leap or even flight, with its gaze

---

<sup>1</sup> Author's interview with Maria Zenkova on 11.10.22.



Figure 1. M. Zenkova "Youth" 2022, o/c, 85 × 60 cm  
(personal archive of M. Zenkova).

directed upwards. However, there are a number of elements that spoil this "joy". The young woman's naked half-figure seems torn from a finished composition, it is tense and fragmentary. Of course, such conditionality of the figure is completely possible in realistic, figurative painting as well, but in this case one should think about deliberate incompleteness and the gesture of the artist permeated with anxiety. The tension in the body is underscored by the cool pink strokes of paint on the bare chest, which resemble scratches or bleeding wounds. There is an obvious reference here to the protest action held in March 2022 in Riga in front of the Embassy of the Russian Federation, where young half-naked women symbolically smeared themselves with blood, expressing their attitude towards the atrocities committed by the Russian military and in solidarity with the humiliated and raped Ukrainian women.<sup>1</sup> The interpretation of Zenkova's art is also possible using one of the angles of the theory of affect, which basically does not cancel the formal analysis presented above, but gives it additional grounding and a dimension of thought that recognizes the ability of matter to be affective, or in other words – to be an intense force. In recent decades, affect theory has taken an important place among other critical discourses. Affect is conceptualized as an *intense force* in the humanities and philosophy [Ott 2017]. The main theorists of the concept of affect as an *intense force* are Gilles Deleuze (1925–1995), Felix Guattari (1939–1992) actualized the influence of affect, calling it

---

<sup>1</sup> About 200 woman protest against sexual violence in war. Available: <https://eng.lsm.lv/article/society/society/latvian-women-protest-against-sexual-violence-in-war.a453144/> (viewed 24.04.2022.)

“affectation”, which is the collision and interaction of two or more bodies (organic or inorganic), while “affect” is the product or result of this affectation [Colman 2010: 12]. The theoretical aspect of affect as an *intense force* is applicable in the interpretation of an artwork and in the creation of a philosophical concept. For example, Deleuze uses the scope of the Theory of Affect as a method in the interpretation of an artwork, analysing bodies painted by the British artist Francis Bacon (1909–1992). Reflecting on Bacon's works, Deleuze emphasizes the importance of area, texture, and especially colour in the plane of the painting and calls Bacon a great colourist, highlighting his ability to paint the texture of the body (flesh) and monochrome areas of colour in a nuanced way and with different intensity [Deleuze 2003]. Matter is given expression by affect “*It should be said of all art that, in relation to the precepts or visions they give us, artists are presenters of affects, the inventors and creators of affects. They not only create them in their work, they give them to us and make us become with them, they draw us into the compound*” [Deleuze, Guattari 1994: 175].

The study of affect is closely related to trauma studies. An art theorist who studies the representation of trauma in art, Jill Bennett refers to Deleuze, who “*subverts the opposition between thought and sensation, arguing that whereas philosophers think in concepts, artists think in terms of sensations. Sensation is generated through the artist's engagement with the medium, through color and line in the case of the painter (...) so sensation is what is being painted*” [Bennett 2005: 37]. Trauma studies in art focuses on the study of trauma experienced individually or collectively by an individual or a group of society and its representation in an artwork. Until now, one of the most prominent researchers in this field, the British art scholar Griselda Pollock, pointed out five characteristics of trauma, including the most controversial aspect in the discourse on trauma, which is that trauma is considered “unrepresentable”, that is, something that resists representation. She suggests that: “*we should not perceive trauma as an “event” that we can never know, but think about trauma through “the traces of encounter” with the event. Therefore, the encounter with trauma presents a kind of “afterwardness”, which can be extended in meaning*” [Pollock 2013: 4]. The representation of trauma and the problems associated with it raise a series of questions to which a formal analysis of the artwork cannot provide comprehensive answers. Jill Bennett takes a multifaceted view of the echoes of trauma, violence, and oppression in art as a result of socio-political collisions. Trauma, as a unique phenomenon, can be encoded or hidden in an artwork in a variety of ways and its recognition can be difficult. Bennett argues that “*The trauma, it often seemed, was not evidenced in the narrative component*” [Bennett 2005: 1].

The task of a visual art researcher is to find exactly those means of artistic expression that make us talk about the trauma aspect in art. Feeling the boundaries between the “outside” or form (or sign) and “inside” or content meaning of an

artwork is crucial in the context of trauma. Formal analysis tools, such as stylistic, iconographic, compositional, colour, rhythmic, texture, etc. analysis in fine arts has not been cancelled. However, contemporary art forms, which often use non-traditional media, do not always lend themselves to this form analysis.

In one of the artworks of the collection, Maria Zenkova paints a head expressively (Figure 2).



Figure 2. M. Zenkova "The War. Start" 2022,  
o/c, 80 × 60 cm (personal archive of M. Zenkova).

The exposed shoulder and neck fragments are the only details that can be read in the composition as parts of the human figure. The rest is an explosion of colour on a burning red background, panic of disturbed birds and falling fragments. The words mentioned in the name of the painting – *The War. Start* clearly asserts the theme. Words, which are the verbalization of thought, create a narrative and record memories as a "story", but the vision, the visual image, is recorded by the "eye memory". By creating an artwork that contains a reference to a traumatic experience, the artist has inevitably stimulated the memory, re-actualizing those visual signs (visions) in which this traumatic experience was registered. A visual sign always has a relationship with the body and thinking. Arts and visual culture researcher Jill Bennett argues for the ability of a visual sign or memory icon to affect, citing medieval images of religious content that were meant to inspire piety as an example. A memory icon can function as a stimulus for affect. She writes: "*The conveyance of suffering through imagery in this context is possible only insofar as images have the capacity to address the spectator's own bodily memory; to touch the viewer who feels rather than simply sees the event*" [Bennett

2005: 36]. The narrative framework is not the most essential, it is not a mandatory component in the reading of this painting, but rather an icon of memory – a wound, a fragment that tends to injure the neck. The skin will be split open, the flesh will be wounded. Thus, bodily response comes before narrative, morality, emotion, or empathy. The search for affect is essentially a journey into “darker waters”, where the unconscious, the enigmatic and the inevitable always lurk.

### An ironic and conceptual representation

Along with decorative depictions of blooming chestnuts, chrysanthemums, sunflowers, seagulls and Riga cats, a series of symbolic works appear within the series, in which the message to be read resonates with the artist's confusion and fear. Many of Maria Zenkova's artworks in this series are more ironic than critical. They are like fairy-tale motifs painted by a child, reminiscent of scenes from naive horror films. For example, in the work *Situation*, what can be read as a direct reference to the well-known fairy tale of the Brothers Grimm *Red Riding Hood and the Wolf*. Trauma defies representation. It hides. Instead, “*Falling Bombs*” become *soap bubbles* because “*everything will burst like a soap bubble and disappear*,” Maria says.<sup>1</sup> In words she does not hide that she does not want to talk about war in art, however, the fear caused by the war, insecurity about the future, no matter how she tries to avoid directly representing these feelings, emotions in art, or constructing a specific narrative, is still present. Such concealment or denial can take the form of naïve or openly ironic expressions.

*Who's coming?* is one of the most elaborate works in this collection. A group of men moves towards the viewer (Figure 3).



Figure 3. M. Zenkova “Who's coming?” 2022, o/c, 60 × 80 cm  
(personal archive of M. Zenkova).

<sup>1</sup> Author's interview with Maria Zenkova on 24.10.22.

In words Maria Zenkova describes it like “evil face of any aggression”<sup>1</sup>. The figures depicted in black suits could be mythological characters who decide what is good and what is bad. There is a question in the title of the painting, which leaves the choice up to the viewer. The artist emphasizes her ignorance, does not hide the fact that the division of roles into “victims” and “villains” is problematic, in her opinion. Trauma studies raise the issue of how the roles of victim and villain manifest in art. If the artist, experiencing a traumatic reality, was himself in the role of a victim, then his narration in art will most likely be directly from his own position – the victim’s. Then an artwork can become a kind of testimony, a “view from the inside”, a story of an eyewitness, which the viewer can perceive as a documentary. Video and photography are undeniably the most effective art media that can convey such a message. Also, an installation that uses real artifacts, as well as a performance that allows you to experience the message and live with it at the moment of its creation. However, Maria Zenkova’s medium is painting, in which she incorporates different forms of message. In the painting titled *Do not touch!* (Не чипай) (Figure 4),



Figure 4. M. Zenkova “Не чипай!” 2022, o/c,  
140 × 110 cm (personal archive of M. Zenkova).

Maria Zenkova provokes the viewer by turning the weapon into an art object. She uses the technique of conceptual art, assigning the status of an artwork to an object – “just a thing”, which in this case is “just a weapon”. At the same time, Maria uses the aesthetics of a poster, where the image is complemented with text. One word – don’t touch – sounds like a warning whose meaning is unmistakably clear. However, the meaning of the artwork lies rather in the seemingly insignificant text

---

<sup>1</sup> Author’s interview with Maria Zenkova on 25.10.22.

added as an instruction or explanation in the “small print” describing this weapon. The dangerous anti-personnel, nicknamed *бабочка*, does indeed visually really resemble a butterfly (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Landmine ПМФ-1 “Лепесток”  
(photo by Maria Zenkova).

The purpose of this mine is to blow up a person's limbs when stepped on. The Russian army widely uses this weapon on the territory of Ukraine, creating minefields. Mines are distributed by remotely launching a reactive charge. One such projectile sent from a long distance is capable of covering about 150 hectares of land with butterflies. Each rocket contains 312 mines. In order for the mine to work, it is enough to press it with a 5 kg weight. This *babochka* often attracts the interest of children, as it resembles a bright green plastic toy. A land mine suitable for children... The artist shows the subject in the most naked way. Nothing explains it better than the very purpose this object serves.

### Conclusion

The Affect theory, known as the “anxiety-era theory”, is useful in art analysis, because it looks at the artwork not as finished, enclosed, but as an open and dynamic process that still questions the limits of the interpretation of reality. It can be concluded that it is still not possible to completely avoid the representation of war experiences in art. As we can see in Maria Zenkova's paintings, her palette of colours is bright and vibrant. It can be read as a joyful way of looking at the world. Despite this, the pasty brushstrokes and the dynamism of the colourful figures evoke a sense of anxiety. Ghosts of memories loom in her imagery. They do funny things and make the viewer smile. Several Maria Zenkova's artwork reveal childish imaginary. Hiding

from the subject results in a naive or ironic expression. There is no denying that each individual reacts differently to a crisis. As the example of Maria Zenkova shows, it is extremely important for artists to keep creating. The artist's active involvement in practices of collective support and solidarity shows that in crisis situations such actions are even more significant than the exhibition as an art event. Maria Zenkova is a professional artist who paints to survive, literally. To make a living for herself and her family. Also, to support her brother who is fighting at the front for the freedom of Ukraine.

### **Sources**

- Bennett, J. (2005). *Empathic Vision: affect, trauma, and contemporary art*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Deleuze, G., Guattari, F. (1994). *What Is philosophy?* NY: Columbia University Press, p. 175.
- Deleuze, G. (2003). *Francis Bacon: the logic of sensation*. London, NY: Continuum.
- Groys, B. (2008). *Art power*. London: The MIT Press, p. 120.
- Pollock, G. (2013). *After-affects/After-images: Trauma and aesthetic transformation in the virtual feminism museum*. Manchester: Manchester, UP, pp. 4–5.
- Ott, B. (2017). *Affect in Critical Studies*. Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication, pp. 1–26. (<https://oxfordre.com/communication/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-56> (viewed 22.03.2021)

The article presents the research carried out within the ESF project “Development of academic staff – approbation of doctoral grant approach and attraction of foreign academic staff at the Latvian Academy of Culture, the Art Academy of Latvia and Jāzeps Vītols Latvian Academy of Music” (No. 8.2.2.0/20/I/002).