

DEFIANCE Exhibition

Poignant stories brimming with allegory defined Lana Matskiv’s artistic works, which depicted moments of transition in people’s lives, captured largely through the lens of folklore, poetry and the performing arts

By Ayah Victoria McKhail



Lana Matskiv, RED BIRD (Portrait of Halyna Urchenko), 2021-2022, oil on canvas, 40”x 30”

From December 4, 2022 to February 3, 2023, visitors to Toronto’s Taras Shevchenko Museum were captivated by a spellbinding display of symbolist, figurative oil paintings, academic drawings and drawings based collages by the internationally award-winning Ukrainian Canadian artist, Lana Matskiv.

Powerfully titled ‘Defiance’, it encapsulated the theme of the exhibition and embodied the spirit of the artist herself. “Once a storyteller, always a storyteller. When I was a journalist in Ukraine, people often asked me if I wanted to write fiction. No, of course not; I loved to meet real people and tell real stories. So, I knew why I wanted to draw and paint: to tell stories I overheard in my lifetime; stories told by people or inanimate objects with a soul and history,” she shared.

The keynote speaker at the exhibition, Lorette Luzajic, artist, writer and editor of *The Ekphrastic Review*, an online journal of literature inspired by visual art, implored visitors to consider an essential element embedded in Matskiv’s artistic works when reflecting on the overwhelming magnitude. “Despite immediate impressions of exquisite colourship, of impossible precision, flawless perspective, and mastery of composition – the artist as storyteller is how you must approach her art.”



Lana Matskiv, FOR THE SAKE OF HER CHILDREN, 2022, oil on canvas, 60” x 48”

Matskiv’s stunning oil painting, *For the Sake of her Children*, which was one of three paintings generously donated to the museum, illustrated Luzajic’s point. Conceived as part of Matskiv’s *Immigration Series*, which is a work in progress that includes *Long Road Ahead*, it exemplifies the painful reality scores of Ukrainian families were confronted with when Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022. “When the war started, men were not allowed to leave the country and women fled saving their children. What the woman on the canvas is taking with her are two kids and two storks – the national bird of Ukraine; a symbol of love, family and marital bliss. The roots of the floating island indicate the characters are uprooted with no certainty where they would land; there are bullet holes in the torn head scarf of the woman’s traditional Ukrainian folk costume,” she explained.

According to Lyudmyla Pogoryelova, the museum's director, who curated the exhibition, what's most compelling about Matskiv's artistic works is her dedication to capturing the important, but often harrowing experiences of women, along with their inherent sense of resilience. "What strikes me the most about Lana's art is her stories of women who go out of their way to defend themselves and their families in times of crisis. We see the strength, endurance and even defiance of these women in Lana's works. This is the artist's way to recognize women's commitment to stand for their families and national values under any circumstances."



Lana Matskiv, LONG ROAD AHEAD, Immigration Series (2019 - 2022), oil on canvas, 60" x 38", Homage to Mikhail Vrubel's *The Fortune Teller* (1895)

The painting touches people on a visceral level and although women who have had to make similar sacrifices can identify with its salient themes, as Luzajic elucidated, there's an intensely personal undercurrent that colours Matskiv's artistic works. "No matter what Lana's paintings show on their surface, they are her story, told through the story of others. Whether a portrait, or an homage to a cultural treasure, or a scene from folklore or ballet, Lana paints about wandering, about movement, about migration."

Such themes are emblematic of the life Matskiv has led. Born in Poltava, Ukraine, she attended the Kharkiv Art School for Youth, where her chosen medium was textiles. Subsequently, she began improving her skills through private instruction in Odesa. The scenic port city on the Black Sea is where she also attended literary gatherings and artists' exhibitions in clandestine studios. At the time, repression was widespread; consequently, many artists were routinely jailed, exiled, forbidden to paint, or show their work.

Matskiv's life was indelibly shaped by history and politics, so she seamlessly merged her interest in those subjects with her passion for literature and writing to pursue journalism. Working as a special staff correspondent for the Ukrainian regional newspaper, *Chornomorski novyny*, she delighted in opportunities to travel and learn about the fascinating customs, traditions and crafts of the people she encountered.

As the Soviet Union was collapsing, Matskiv's greatest leap of faith occurred when she fled to Canada in the summer of 1991. Like many refugees and immigrants, she embarked on an entirely new career path, in the legal profession.



Lana Matskiv, GUARDIANS OF THE SUN, 2020, graphite on paper, 18" x 24"
Homage to *Profile of a Warrior in Helmet* by Leonardo Da Vinci (1472)

A passionate artist and an avid art collector, she has also had an unrelenting resolve to bring the stories she has amassed over the years to light through her creative vision, so over time, she began to immerse herself in the study of contemporary realism. An artistic movement, which emerged in the late 20th and early 21st century, it places a substantial emphasis on skill and beauty, combining elements of

19th century neoclassicism and realism. In order to advance her artistic aims, it would allow freedom of expression and control over any style of rendering.

Her initial training was in the Russian Academy method, which is centred on structural drawing and anatomical studies. She also undertook studies at the Toronto School of Art with renowned instructors, Tom Campbell and Thomas Hendry and later at George Brown College, where she completed a certificate program in fine art foundations.

Today, she continues to hone the mastery of her craft through the French Atelier method, as taught by the internationally-acclaimed instructor, Fernando Freitas, of the Toronto Academy of Realist Art, where the skills for classical drawing and painting are taught, in order to create realistic fine art.

Matskiv's favourite contemporary realist painters are Roberto Ferri from Italy and Teresa Oaxaca from the United States. As well, she's constantly feeding her imagination, educating herself on art history and following the progress of contemporary figurative painters. She readily admitted, "This journey is never done: in the ocean of figurative art, there are always magical masters, such as Rembrandt, Caravaggio and Kiprensky who set unattainable standards, yet by trying to get closer in technique and philosophy of work, you become a better person and hopefully, a better painter and drawer. There's no limit to perfection when it comes to figurative art."



Lana Matskiv, **CONTRA SPEM SPERO**
(Hope Against Hope), 2021, oil on canvas, 53" x 36"

Other artists whom Matskiv wholeheartedly admires include the celebrated Ukrainian folk artist, Kateryna Bilokur, who painted ethereal scenes of nature; and two American artists: Andrea Kowch, renowned for her magical realism paintings of the Midwest; and Will Wilson, famous for his portrait paintings, illustrations and trompe-l'oeil artistic works.

One characteristic she finds particularly outstanding about each artist includes the following: “With Bilokur, it’s the opulence of nature rendered in such a masterful, yet humble and unassuming way. With Kowch, it’s her amazing command of the medium that allows her to tell stories of personal gains and losses through symbols and unexpected, combustible combinations of objects, colours and characters. And with Wilson, it’s his ability to make the craft of old masters relevant today, and the many layers of meanings and references in his paintings.”

The same can be said about Matskiv’s breathtakingly beautiful artistic works. According to Dr. Halyna Kostiuk, an art critic who attended the exhibition, there was a lot to marvel at. “Her bold colours; deep and saturated, immediately attract attention. The people she depicts and even the objects are lively and animated; creating an impression of movement in the paintings.”

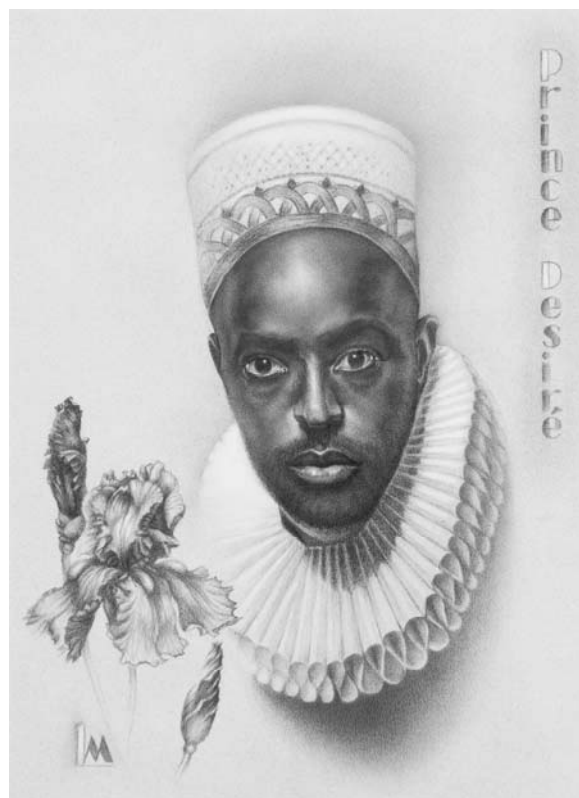
The two other oil paintings Matskiv donated to the museum form a diptych: *Contra Spem Spero (I Hope Against Hope)* and *Birth of Lily*. As Pogoryelova indicated, “They’re inspired by the poetry of Lesia Ukrainka, who wrote *Contra Spem Spero (I Hope Against Hope)* in 1890 and Taras Shevchenko, who penned *The Lily* in 1846.”



Lana Matskiv, BIRTH OF LILY, 2023, oil on canvas, 53”x 36”

Thematically, the paintings are linked by hardship, devastation and ultimately, the triumph of the human spirit. As Matskiv explained, “If the poem *Contra Spem Spero (I Hope Against Hope)* is a hymn to the unconquered spirit, than *The Lily* is a testament to Shevchenko’s incredible insight into the souls of all women mistreated, deceived and used for sexual exploitation in his time. Today, the burning reality of the brutal war in Ukraine puts these issues on the agenda with immense urgency: It’s a well-documented fact that Russian aggressors use the rape of women and children as a weapon of war.” Referring to *Birth of Lily*, she added, “Who knows how many white lilies would come out of the fire and sorrow inflicted by the occupiers in Ukraine today? I dedicate my painting to them, and I hope to show their innocence, pain and stoicism in my work.”

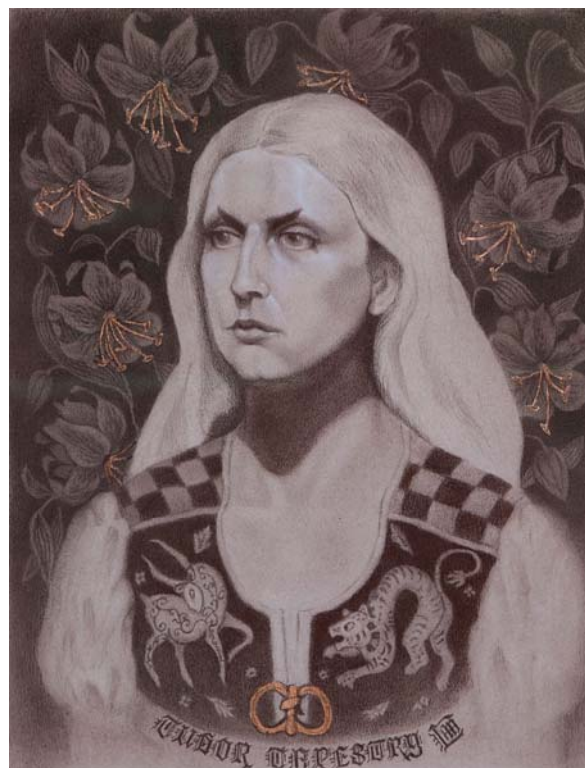
According to Dr. Kostiuk, such paintings are particularly profound. “Lana dips into Ukrainian tradition, but puts her own spin on well-known symbols and recognizable images. Her depiction of women in folk-inspired Ukrainian attire defines her determination to bring old customs to contemporary life and the result is stunning. Also, the overarching mood of her paintings is impactful; evoking strong emotions.”



Lana Matskiv, PRINCE DÉSIÉ, 2022, carbon on cotton paper, 24”x 18”

Maria Antoniv, an artist, graphic designer and president of the Literary and Artistic Association Canada Branch (LATCA), which is a collective of artists, musicians and writers who collaborate on opportunities to present their work, while undertaking philanthropic endeavours to support Ukraine, also spoke at the exhibition. She offered a unique perspective on the significance of Matskiv’s artistic works and how her love for her homeland spills out. “Her patriotic, adventurous and inquisitive nature manifests itself through mysteriously interesting art work. It’s a testament to her passionate love for her Ukrainian roots, culture and the principles of dignity and humanity.”

Antoniv also pointed to three of Matskiv’s drawings, *Prince Désiré* (Carbon on handmade cotton paper), which was accepted for inclusion at the Society of Canadian Artists 2023 Open International Online Juried Exhibition; *Tudor Tapestry* (Sepia and bronze leaf on handmade cotton paper); and *Queen of the Mist* (Sepia on handmade cotton paper), as excellent examples of Matskiv’s deftness and scrupulous attention to detail. “Her training with prominent artists shows through the quality of line, composition and complexity of her work. All items are interwoven into a single storyline that you’ll enjoy looking at, to make your own interpretation.”



Lana Matskiv, TUDOR TAPESTRY, 2022, sepia and bronze leaf on handmade cotton paper, 24” x 18”

To Matskiv, the resounding success of her exhibition was a significant achievement for numerous reasons. “The museum has become a hub of cultural activity not only for my generation of Ukrainian immigrants, but for every new wave of Ukrainians who land in Toronto.”

She also credited Pogoryelova for reimagining what the museum could be and elevating it to new heights by embarking on exciting initiatives and innovative programming. “To a great degree, it’s due to Lyudmyla’s enormous organizational talent and energy. But she’s backed by the warm presence of Taras Shevchenko, who’s there with his poetry, vision, passion and wisdom; for rare geniuses like him are immortal. You feel his welcoming presence and you appreciate the grandeur of Ukrainian heritage and intellectual thought he forged and left as an incredible, yet obliging wealth. You want to live up to his level and exhibiting in his museum was an incredible honour.”

Recently, another momentous experience for Matskiv was having a successful exhibition at the HMVC Gallery New York, which is a contemporary online art gallery. Moving forward, Matskiv, who’s a member of the Ukrainian Association of Visual Artists of Canada and the Women’s Art Association of Canada and whose artistic works are in the permanent collection of the Ukrainian Canadian Art Foundation and in private collections in Canada, the USA and Ukraine, plans to build on the momentum.



Lana Matskiv, QUEEN OF THE MIST, 2022, sepia on handmade cotton paper, 30" x 20"

Always seeking to evolve, she remains committed to perfecting her already exemplary skills at the Toronto Academy of Realist Art. “I go to the Academy to practice life figure drawing, portrait painting and to work with live models. I come to the studio and I’m a student of human nature, like everyone else in the class. I have to work with lines; tonal values; colour mixes; see big forms; and small shapes. It’s challenging, but enormously satisfying.” She also works with her mentor, Alexandra Manukyan, an Armenian American realist artist whom she holds in high esteem and whose influence is evident in her artistic works.

As for the future, the indomitable Matskiv knows exactly what she’d like to accomplish. “More paintings, telling more stories that are more beautiful and masterful than the ones I presented at this show. I feel I want to spend whatever years I have remaining as an exhibiting artist, for stories are many and time is short.”



About Ayah Victoria McKhail

Ayah Victoria McKhail is a Toronto-based journalist who is passionate about arts and culture reporting. Her writing has appeared in numerous publications, such as the *Literary Review of Canada*, the *WholeNote*, and newspapers affiliated with the East Coast’s SaltWire Network.