

Through the Lens of (Ukrainian) Belonging

Intertwined by memory, identity and culture, Olga Polstvin's artistic works juxtapose beauty and sorrow, manifesting resilience in the face of change

By Ayah Victoria McKhail



Olga Polstvin, *MORNING POLTAVA*, 2024, watercolour on paper, 9" x 7"

On September 26, 2025, just days into the official start of autumn, the Shevchenko Museum unveiled its latest art exhibition by Olga Polstvin. A Ukrainian-Canadian artist and Master of Arts Leadership candidate at Queen's University in Kingston, Ont., her favourite season happens to be autumn. "Autumn has always been special to me for its richness, balance of beauty, and impermanence. From Kyiv's golden parks to Canada's glowing escarpment, the season reminds me that transition can also be full of colour and strength."

Polstvin's 27 watercolour and acrylic paintings are also emblematic of the colour and strength that can flourish during times of transition. The entire collection on display, which is

primarily centered on flowers, was created during an intense period of upheaval for her. In recent years, while the war in Ukraine was underway, she lost her mother, Irina Polstvin, and her maternal grandmother, Lidia Suslova. “Perhaps, what makes it more complex, is it happened one after another; becoming a multilayered source of grief. As a woman, I relied so much on them; on their strength, guidance, and wisdom. Suddenly, it all disappeared.”

Although Polstvin felt inclined to paint in dark colours, she chose to do the very opposite, and her palette became awash with bright colours. “As Ukrainians, we know that every individual carries light within them. I sought to manifest that in an act of resilience. I hope my art will inspire people to create.”



Olga Polstvin, LES CYCLAMENS, 2022, watercolour on paper, 35" x 28"

Born in Kyiv, Ukraine, Polstvin’s love for art began in her formative years. Her artistic parents encouraged her to discover her innate sense of creativity, so she attended the Svitlo art school, led by Svitlana Borysivna Nedaiborsch. “Even during the challenges of *perestroika*¹, art became my refuge and discipline, shaped by Kyiv’s botanical garden and summers in Poltava.”

¹ Perestroika refers to the policy or practice of restructuring or reforming the economic and political system in the former Soviet Union.

Intrigued by the ephemeral beauty of flowers, and their propensity to express human emotion, she completed a certified program of floral design. “I love all flowers, but lily of the valley has always stayed with me. Delicate, yet resilient, it returns every spring, a quiet reminder that renewal follows even the harshest winters.”

Inspired by the Ukrainian folk artist, Kateryna Bilokur for her devotion to nature, and to the French artist and founder of Impressionism, Claude Monet for transforming his garden into a living canvas, both legendary figures have had a profound impact on Polstvin’s development as an artist. “Their work reminds me that creativity can turn both place and memory into something enduring.”

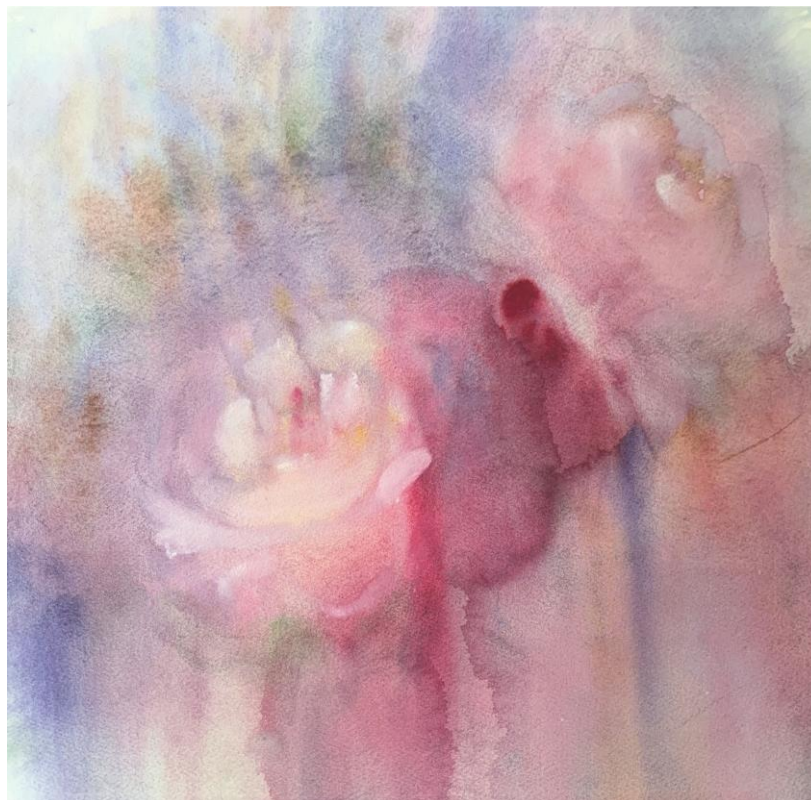
Polstvin would proceed to undertake studies in Renaissance art history and iconography in Florence, Italy. Enthralled by the magnificence in her midst, it was a momentous period of her life, marked by painting late into the night.



Olga Polstvin, GOLDEN, 2025, watercolour on paper, 9.5" x 7.5"

Over the years, Polstvin has continued to capture scenes of dazzling wonder in her paintings. In addition to being enchanted by the marvels she has encountered by travelling to various countries, she’s particularly inspired by the breathtakingly beautiful sights that can be found throughout Ukraine. As her paintings demonstrate, they’re lovingly rendered every single

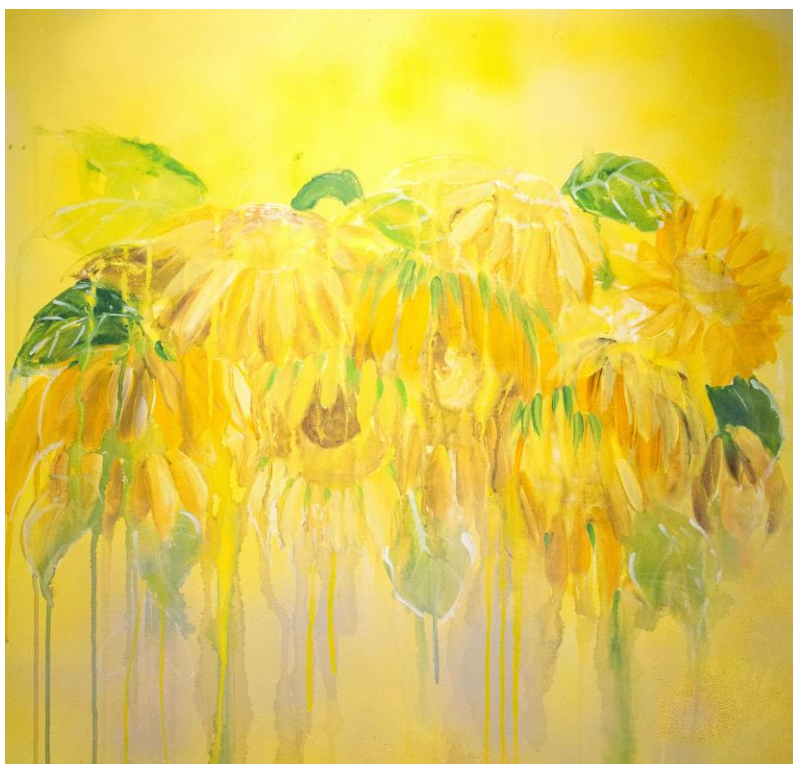
time. “Watercolour is central to my practice; a medium that demands both discipline and surrender. I often paint *alla prima* and *en plein air*, letting gardens and landscapes shape the rhythm of my brushstrokes.”



Olga Polstvin, BLOSSOM OF FAREWELL, 2025, watercolour on paper, 11”x 11”

At the opening reception, visitors to the museum marvelled at the vibrancy of Polstvin’s paintings, as well as the techniques she utilized to elicit an emotional response from viewers. Tetiana Protcheva, an artist, found herself drawn to ***Blossom of Farewell*** (watercolour on paper). Although it depicts two flowers that are fading, they’re still discernable. To her, this painting embodies the grief of losing loved ones. “Presence and absence are contrasted in this painting. Although a sense of sorrow is conveyed with how the watercolours have seeped into the paper, almost like weeping, a sense of everlasting love can be felt by the softness of the colours.”

Mariyan Boychev found himself reflecting on the symbolism imbued in ***Weeping Sunflowers***. (acrylic on canvas). Several sunflowers, most of which are wilted, appear. “As Ukraine’s national flower, the appearance of the sunflowers illustrates the pain felt by the Ukrainian people as the tragic war continues. This painting illuminates a sense of devastation, in addition to a sense of love for one’s homeland.”



Olga Polstvin, **WEeping SUNFLOWERS**, 2024, acrylic on canvas, 30"x 30"

Larysa Chorna found herself enamoured with *Les Cyclamens*. (watercolour on paper). Pink and purple-hued cyclamens, tinged with blue, burst forth. “The composition is beautiful, and the selection of colours is harmonious. This painting radiates light and hope.”

As for Polstvin, whose artistic journey is grounded in her Ukrainian roots, the symbolism of the tree of life carries tremendous meaning to her. As she reflects on the most significant aspect of her artistic career thus far, it’s apparent that her current exhibition is particularly special, and that it contains a cathartic element. “The most meaningful part has been realizing that art can carry grief and joy together, and that it can connect me with others across experiences.”

As Polstvin builds on the momentum of having exhibited in Ukraine, Italy, France, and across Canada, her solo exhibition at the Shevchenko Museum marks another significant milestone. “It’s an honour to exhibit here, both personally and culturally. The museum carries memory and tradition, and to present my work within this context feels like a homecoming.”

Emblematic of a full circle, Polstvin shares that her art unfolds in three phases: Remember: Beginning here in Toronto; Reconnect: Expanding to broader collaborations and

audiences; and Renew: Building international reach alongside projects like community gardens and children's art workshops. "This project isn't only an exhibition, but also a platform for wider impact. I hope to expand it through partnerships, media, and fundraising, especially to support children through art and community initiatives."

The "Through the Lens of (Ukrainian) Belonging" art exhibition and sale can be viewed at the
Taras Shevchenko Museum until **October 31, 2025**

Phone: 416-534-8662 Email: shevchenkomuseum@bellnet.ca

Gallery hours: Mon, Tues, Weds, Fri: 10 a.m.-4p.m., Thurs: 12-7 p.m.,
and weekends by appointment.



About Ayah Victoria McKhail

Ayah Victoria McKhail is the Shevchenko Museum's visual arts reporter. She's passionate about capturing stories about the artists who enrich the museum with their art exhibitions. In 2012, she travelled to Kyiv, Ukraine. Highlights include visiting the National Art Museum of Ukraine, Independence Square, and the Kyiv Monastery of the Caves.