

WHEN THE SKY FALLS Exhibition

Maryna Kaminska's series of paintings examine the profound traumatic effects of war on the body and the human psyche. These artistic works, depicting the earth and sky, express the horror, fragility, heightened awareness of existence, and the value of every waking moment

By Ayah Victoria McKhail

On March 23, 2024, Toronto's Shevchenko Museum held an opening reception showcasing artistic works by Maryna Kaminska. Born and raised in the village of Horenychi, on the outskirts of Kyiv, Ukraine, she fled her home westward on the fateful day of Russia's invasion: February 24, 2022. She found herself in Buchach, Ternopil, where she sought shelter for three months amid the ensuring pandemonium. Her journey would take her beyond the borders of her homeland, to Gars am Kamp, Austria, where she pursued an artist residency. That summer, she received an arts grant from Artists at Risk, a Finland-based organization. Since then, she has been living, working, and studying as a guest student at the University of Arts in Brunswick, Germany.

At the exhibition, in a tribute to the country where her heart lives, patrons were welcomed with beautiful renditions of *The song will be among us*, by Volodymyr Ivasiuk, a cherished Ukrainian composer. Performed in Ukrainian and in English by Valentyna Zavhorodnia, the exhibition manager and Nikki Bura, an actress, the poignant lyrics set the tone for an intense exploration into the artist's deep inner world and its striking manifestations.

As Zavhorodnia led patrons on a tour of the artistic works on display, Helen Slobodian found herself moved by the blue palette paintings in Kaminska's *'My Ukraine'*

series. Created amid her forced migration as a result of the war, they demonstrate the ferocity of the war's destructive force and how it decimates the lives of people, both physically and psychologically.



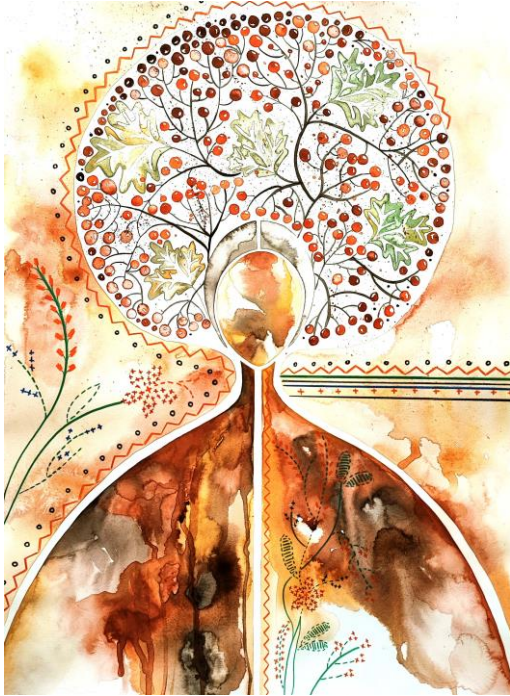
Maryna Kaminska **Unidentified**, 2022, 21x30 cm, watercolour, paper



Maryna Kaminska **Birds**, 2022, 21x30 cm, watercolour, paper

Referring to the watercolour on paper painting, **Unidentified**, which depicts casualties splattered with red blood, she had tears in her eyes as she revisited painful memories of how deeply affected, she has been by the war. “It’s a harrowing reminder of the scores of Ukrainians who have been killed,” she shared, noting she was born in Lviv, Ukraine, and that she remains inextricably linked to her homeland.

Birds also touched her on a visceral level. The watercolour on paper painting shows birds mottled with blood competing with war planes and missiles in the sky. “This is a stark reminder of the debilitating effect war has on nature,” she added.



Maryna Kaminska **Kalyna-Malyna**, 2022, 43x61 cm, watercolour, paper



Maryna Kaminska **Forced Migration**, 2024, 30x40 cm, watercolour, paper

Juxtaposed with the blue palette paintings in the series are ones, which are predominantly yellow. They reflect the richness of Ukrainian culture, its symbols of strength and light. Earth tones are also utilized. Chris Connolly found himself drawn to **Kalyna-Malyna**. Elaborately designed, the watercolour on paper painting features the outline of a woman with hair split in the middle. Atop her head lies a panoply of viburnum. “Heaven and earth are construed in this painting by its dream-like quality. The blooming of the viburnum symbolizes resilience and possibility.”

Bob Oleksiw, chair president of the Niagara Folk Arts Multicultural Centre and his wife, Tina Truszyk, an avid supporter of Ukrainian culture and arts, could relate to **Forced Migration**. The watercolour on paper painting is of an ornately decorated bird. Beneath its feet, roots or branches are evoked. The fragility of flight and of establishing a

family in a land far away from home are themes, which resonate with the couple, who embodies a beautiful and serendipitous love story.

“My father was born in Posukhiv, Ternopil and Tina’s father was born in Barysh, Ternopil. They ended up in the same displacement camp for Ukrainians in Italy following World War II before immigrating to Canada. Whether they knew, or ever met each other is unknown. However, they were both in England before immigrating to Canada. Years later, Tina and I would meet,” explained Oleksiw. Remarking on the symbolism embedded in *Forced Migration*, Truszyk added, “This painting really resonates with us, so we’ve bought it and it’ll be proudly displayed in our home.”



Maryna Kaminska **Listen to the Rain**, 2023, 120x80 cm, acrylic, canvas

Halyna Hradowy was captivated when her eyes fell on **Listen to the Rain**. The acrylic on canvas painting is stunning in both composition and colour, as a cascade of clouds unleashes a torrent of rain. “As I absorb the magnitude of this painting and what’s portrayed, I feel emotionally connected to it. The mood conjures up the opening lines of the book, *Fata Morgana*, which was written by the renowned Ukrainian author, Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky.”

Lyudmyla Pogoryelova, director of the Shevchenko Museum, is heartened by how the exhibition has been resonating with so many people. “By using art as a language, Maryna has chronicled the pain and fear she has been feeling throughout the war, which so many people can relate to. She also manages to capture beauty. What emerges throughout many of her paintings is a poignant and inspiring message about hope, love and ultimately, the triumph of the human spirit.”



Maryna Kaminska **The Jug of Care**, 2023, 80x80 cm, acrylic, canvas

Pogoryelova pointed to the acrylic on canvas painting, **The Jug of Care** as an example. Depicting two figures on the floor, they’re intertwined with one another. The jug is a replication of a hand-painted one, which was given to Kaminska by a family friend who visited her in Germany. Made in the Kyiv region, it’s something she treasures, as it’s symbolic of her roots.

Following the exhibition, Kaminska was beaming at accomplishing what initially felt like an impossible feat – her first solo show in North America, which she credits her

beloved friend, Zavhorodnia, for spearheading. “This has been an incredible experience and I’m very grateful for this opportunity. I’m tired, but I’m very happy,” she admitted with a smile.

Kaminska also collaborated on two events in conjunction with the Shevchenko Museum. The first one was a meditative painting workshop. She taught attendees to create a mandala, which is an illuminating glimpse into one’s internal universe. The second one entailed an evening of Ukrainian lullabies by candlelight, where she and Zavhorodnia sang.

A graduate of the National Academy of Fine Arts and Culture in Kyiv, Kaminska also holds a master’s degree from the University of Physical Education and Sports of Ukraine, where she explored hatha yoga. A branch of yoga, which uses physical techniques to try to preserve and channel vital force or energy, this practice is evident in the creation of her artistic works. To her, art plays a cathartic role in her life. “Painting allows me to express my feelings and to better understand myself; it’s art therapy. In psychotherapy, it’s important to express difficult emotions, and to acknowledge them in order to fully understand them.”

These words resonated with Zavhorodnia. “While trauma is something we all experience, these scars on our hearts are a symbol of our strength.” Nima McElhinney, an arts enthusiast, agreed. “This exhibition is a powerful expression of resilience. Every single painting is spectacular and reveals an important narrative.”

The **When the Sky Falls** exhibition will continue until April 19, 2024 at the Shevchenko Museum, 1604 Bloor Street West, Toronto, Ontario 416-534-8662 www.shevchenko.ca

To learn more about Maryna Kaminska, please visit:

Website: <https://www.artkaminska.com/>

Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/calm.maryna/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/calm.marina>

To inquire about purchasing a painting, please feel free to contact Maryna Kaminska via email at: artkaminska@gmail.com, or Valentyna Zavhorodnia at: + 1 289-968-8603



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.