**Sharon Lubkemann Allen**

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**Double Exposure: Aspirations/Apparitions from Another Decisive Time**

**Drawings & Documentary Photographs from Ukraine, 1991-1992**

**An Exhibit in Support of Humanitarian Aid to Ukraine**

**Hart 27 Gallery**

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**9 – 30 April 2022**

**Opening: Second Saturday, 9 April 2022, 5-8 p.m.**

**Hours: Thursdays 2-6 p.m.,**

**Fridays & Saturdays 2:30-6:30 p.m.,**

**Sundays 1-4 p.m.**

**Reading of Ukrainian poetry and prose in English translation, with selected poems also read in Ukrainian and Russian, Friday, 22 April 2022, 5:30-7:30 p.m.**

**All profits from the sale of any art works donated by the artist to humanitarian aid efforts for Ukraine and Ukrainian refugees.**

**Concurrently with the exhibit, the artist is also organizing a fundraiser *Art Acts - Humanitarian Aid for Ukraine*, supporting the extraordinary and effective efforts of ROC Maidan**, the charitable branch of the Ukrainian Cultural Center of Rochester, to provide essential medical equipment and supplies, humanitarian aid and supports for injured and displaced Ukrainians**. <https://givebutter.com/ArtActs-HumanitarianAidUkraine>**

*Double Exposure* brings together drawings and prints documenting everyday lives during the months encompassing Ukraine’s declaration and realization of independence from the crumbling Soviet Union, August-December 1991.

In 1991, Sharon Lubkemann Allen received a Henry Hart Rice Fellowship to spend five months on the road and another five in the studio working on independent research, documentary work, and drawing related to Ukraine and Russia, after graduating from Yale University (BA 1991, in Soviet and East European Studies with concentrations in comparative literature and fine arts). Her Ukrainian pencil drawings were first exhibited at Yale in May 1992. *Double Exposure* includes original drawings remaining within the artist’s collection as well as prints of a few within others’ collections. Some of these prints are embedded within new sculptural frameworks, images reimagined and reframed through a transhistorical and transcultural imaginary. The documentary photographs were never printed or exhibited, partly because many of the negatives were ruined in circuitous transit from Ukraine and Russia during a rather volatile time. Over the past few weeks, the artist salvaged, scanned, printed and framed the black and white photographs included in this exhibit. These are presented as first takes and doubletakes. A SUNY Professor of Comparative Literature and interdisciplinary artist whose scholarly and creative work contends with traces and trajectories of cultural memory in transcultural consciousness, Lubkemann Allen engages Slavic, Lusophone, and European texts and cultural contexts linked with her own complex migrations and cultural imaginary. This exhibit recovers and reframes her memory of Ukraine, with images that have surfaced in the context of the current war as apparitions, invoking the aspirations of a young artist and nation, then just tasting freedom and now committed to its defense and development.

Artist Statement:

These drawings and prints depict a decisive crossroads, reviewed from another, three decades on. They reflect an emergent consciousness and conscience, personal and political. Having just turned twenty-one when I first struck out, in some sense I gained my own independence along with and within Ukraine and the Ukrainian people, though the people I knew there and I have taken disparate circuitous routes towards realizing freedom. Having had the extraordinary luck of landing a Rice fellowship for independent international inquiry and work in the arts after graduating from Yale, where I’d completed surely the most belated course of study in Soviet and East European Studies (at least as far as the Soviet part is concerned). Though my focus was then and later on literature, I also studied fine arts, most drawn to and recipient of various awards in drawing and documentary photography. I hit the road with a backpack, a used Nikon FE and twenty or so rolls of Kodak Tri-X film, my sketchbooks and pencils of choice (still Staedtler HB, 2B, 4B, 6B), on which I stocked up when I detoured through Lisbon, where I grew up, the Canadian-born daughter of a Brazilian-American son of American-German immigrants to Brazil and an American daughter of Lithuanian immigrants. I mention this only to foreground how peripatetic my life had been, anticipating my continued wanderings.

When I landed in Moscow, my point of departure based on past study abroad, I found things there even more chaotic during the summer of 1991 than they had been in 1990, when I’d marched in protests and stood in lines as much as attended classes at the Steel and Alloy Institute, a seemingly strange site to study Russian language and literature, yet auspicious for someone who would eventually become a sculptor casting in bronze, welding metal, scavenging old cast iron scraps. In 1990, I’d also spent a couple weeks studying in a newly independent Lithuania, whence my great-grandparents emigrated. For this independent foray in 1991, I had no university structure, bare bones funding I mostly spent on supplies and transport, and scant connections, so I relied largely on the hospitality of friends of friends of acquaintances and rather random contacts. Given the extraordinary volatility in Moscow during the August coup, I soon headed to Rivne, Ukraine, where I’d been offered a place to stay for a couple months in exchange for translation work. I arrived just before Ukraine’s parliament passed the *Act of Declaration of the Independence of Ukraine*, “indivisible and inviolable,” on August 24, 1991. And this turned out to be the most extraordinary time to first explore Ukraine beyond the bounds of the stories and histories I’d studied, seeing the landscape, listening and learning in the context of openly contested past and present. Everything and everyone was marked by concomitantly doubled and divided consciousness, double exposures. Beyond the renamed landscape and reoriented lives, Ukrainians spoke (and speak) multiple languages and have complex intercultural filters and frameworks for knowing. Ukraine has long had its own traditions, forged in a crucible of continually contested territory, claimed and reclaimed over centuries. I spoke scant Ukrainian and admittedly scrappy academic Russian. I have always been a better reader and listener. I translated manuals for newly donated printing equipment, from English and French into Russian, in exchange for room and board. I tutored kids, who mostly tutored me. I dug potatoes and harvested cabbages. Yet I was essentially dependent on the kindness and generosity of strangers who became friends during those months I remained in Ukraine, mostly in Rivne, with a stretch in Kyiv, and brief stays in a couple small villages that had weathered collectivization, through mid-December.

I photographed and sketched in parks and at protests, street soccer games and church services, dinner gatherings that stretched late into the night, on farms, at funerals, wherever anyone let me tag along and didn’t mind my camera lens or artist’s studying gaze. As the drawings show, I mostly drew children and old women, who had time to sit and tell me stories. My photographs offer a few more glimpses of my peers and these kids’ parents, in transit to and from work and in those breaks from the everyday, at weddings and funerals. Many early mornings I sat at whatever table I had for that stretch and worked my sketches and photos into drawings. December 1, by overwhelming referendum, Ukrainians voted to become an independent nation. Ukrainian independence and territorial integrity was recognized by Russia and the Baltic states within the next couple days, eventually by the world. A couple weeks later, my visa invalid, and with an offer of a room for a few weeks, I took a train back to Moscow. The Soviet Union dissolved. Gorbachev resigned December 25. The status of foreigners contested, and my own circumstances especially contingent, around the new year I returned to the US, where I spent the next few months developing the negatives that weren’t entirely ruined in transit, making a few poor prints to use as references for sketches, and mostly drawing and framing, reframing and thinking.

As I worked towards an exhibit of Ukrainian drawings, in the midst of that political whirlwind, in which those so called “winds of change” gusted in every direction, I wanted to bear witness to people’s everyday lives, to the personal stories unfolding within these uncertain pages of history, with all the always complicated, critical, complicit, creative cycles of life compounded by crisis. Three decades on, I still mostly care about history through story and storied images, the interplay of form and feeling, ethics inherent in aesthetics, even while my stories and forms and aesthetics have evolved. I teach a course on Slavic literature titled Wit and Witness, another on Women and Memoir: Reconfigurations of Cultural Memory which includes Ukrainian, Polish, Russian women writers recasting and relocating story and history; other courses include Writing in Exile, as well as Immigration in World Fiction, Film, and Art: Migrating Images/Imaginaries, all in some way stemming from or winding through that youthful first attempt looking at life through art. I think back to the somewhat sentimental, intertextual title of my first exhibition, “Comfort my People, Drawings from Rivne, Ukraine, 1991-1992,” and I ask myself, who am I to call any people, let alone these people I drew, often without even knowing them well and now no longer even recalling some of their names, “my people”, or to offer or appeal for comfort. Notwithstanding my skepticism and hermeticism, on account of which I’ve rarely exhibited any art and expect few readers for my scholarly inquiries, as a professor of the humanities and just as a human being, I come back to the fact that all people are in some sense my people if I can begin to see and understand them, and if we can engage in dialogue. As a scholar, I’m committed to cultivating interdisciplinary and intercultural dialogues. As an artist, I am just committed, because I cannot not be. Honestly, I just draw, paint, sculpt as a way to survive. I am not Ukrainian, and these works are not informed by any serious study of Ukrainian art, like my paintings and sculpture related to Portugal. These drawings and prints don’t claim to speak for another perspective, only recall my own in an encounter with Ukraine and Ukrainian people that was formative and meaningful for me.

I haven’t returned to Ukraine. I have studied some Ukrainian writers. I returned to Russia in 1998 for graduate research at the University of St. Petersburg, in literary archives, the National Library, art collections and the Dostoevsky Museum. I’ve written books and articles about Gogol, Dostoevsky, Bely, Babel, Bulgakov, Lotman, Petrushevskaya, Ulitskaya’s damning history of Russian occupation in Crimea in *Medea and her Children*. I am a comparatist who teaches Slavic, Lusophone, French, and diasporic literature and cultural semiotics. I’ve spent more than half my life engaged in the study of East European and Slavic literatures, alongside Portuguese and Brazilian, French, more recently also Luso-Angolan, Franco-Algerian, and transnational literature and art.

One of the reasons I was drawn to study Russian at Yale and felt a kinship with many Slavic writers and at home in late Soviet Russia and Ukraine, on the verge of freedom, was that I grew up in Lisbon, in a similarly ex-centric, eccentric space on the obverse edge of Europe. I was formed by the 1974 revolution that ended perhaps the most ruthless, regressive, and recalcitrant European colonial regime, during which I recall shouting marching and shouting slogans (to my parents’ chagrin, given their purported neutrality as foreigners and phones tapped by the PIDE, Portugal’s secret police). During my childhood, every wall was a political palimpsest of graffiti and posters, I walked everyday through the shacks of a marginalized Roma community and shanty towns of refugees (one million of whom landed in a country of ten million in 1975), and there were constant strikes, protests, bombed water lines, bathtubs filled with water, electricity outages, lines for milk, an economy of lack. There was also an extraordinary and contested intercultural heritage. Also, as a perennial migrant, daughter of generations of immigrants who crossed back and forth across five continents over the past century and a half, carrying two passports under two different legal names, neither of which coincide with what I call myself or where I call home, I don’t have any single ethnic or “nationalist” sense of what a “people” is, but a sense of who people are and what they may be in a nation of free citizens, bound by civic commitment to human rights. So then and now, however differently the lines, colors, media, drawing was and is a way to see, to try to understand person and place, Ukrainian or Russian or Portuguese or Angolan or Brazilian or American or transnational or in transit. At the same time, I am under no illusion that any drawing or shot, photographic or otherwise, is innocent. All story and history is framed. But the frame may be humane or inhumane, capacious or constrictive, conducive to freedom or censoring.

The Ukrainian born Brazilian essayist and novelist Clarice Lispector describes writing as casting a line, baited with words, seeking meaning between and beyond the lines. The lines we write or draw, the sentence or sculpture, the literary framework or framing of the image may be lovely or awkward or incomplete (and like Lispector, I think they are often all these things at once), but art’s worth for me depends on meaning taking the bait, being reeled in through form, to feed mind, body, soul. (My series of works related to Portuguese, Brazilian, Luso-African literature and art is entirely lined to the sea, navigating treacherous tides of cultural memory, mapping, *Pescadores/Pecadores*, fishermen or fishers of men/sinners). Lispector also writes about writing as artifice, but lies to lies to lies that arrive at brutal truths. Writing about mirrors in the art of Vera Mindlin published within a book of poems by modern Brazilian writers, Lispector speaks of the way in which reflection is boundless, the shard as capacious as the whole, the reflection between two shards an infinity. That is also a double exposure.

I’ve titled this work *Double Exposure*, an obvious, overused term on account of its photographic, literal and literary, material and metaphorical implications. I wanted a term as commonplace and accessible as the everyday life depicted in these images. I wanted to recognize the ghostliness of all images, drawn and printed, haunted by other images, both fixing and unfixing their subjects, in time and space. As far as doubles, there are the drawings and prints, images and cultural imaginary, past and present, there and here and everywhere that constitutes the frames through which see these images, and the list goes on. I think of this work, like everything I do, as part of an infinite exposure. Ideally, lit by continually elucidating critical and creative attentiveness. As much as I turn to art as a means of surviving, even burrow into art as the only space that is safe, its integrity inviolable, even when it’s entirely private rather than publicly shown, it’s an attempt to figure out my response and responsibility vis à vis others. It’s an attempt to address the sentences of others and write my own sentence, pushing against its limits. When I do show my art, it’s an attempt to expose myself and expose others in the most humane light I can, which is sometimes also brutally glaring. When I made these works, in an uncertain time in Ukraine, my gaze and those of almost everyone I drew and photographed was full of hope. This is a hope I want still realized for Ukraine, for Lithuania, for Russia also (for the Russian people I have known), for Angola, for Brazil, for Mozambique, for Portugal, for Algeria, for France, for places I don’t know so well. Insofar as this improvised exhibit is seen by others, I hope it will serve the same ends, as a means of seeing, understanding, invoking creative attentiveness and response, particularly with respect to Ukraine.

On process & prospects: I gradually dug out these drawings during the years of conflict since Russia’s occupation of Crimea and contestation of Ukraine’s eastern borders. I have referenced them on occasion as contexts for texts considered with students. I’ve considered them on my own, trying to retrace my own trajectory as an artist and thinker, while working on current, quite different, sketches and sculpture, mostly connected with Portugal. I hadn’t considered that I might ever again do something with them, let alone with decades-old negatives. Yet pacing restlessly around my place during those first days after Russia’s February 24th invasion of Ukraine, staring at a couple of the old drawings I had sitting on a shelf, I was struck by the thought that the kid still clearing the street for a soccer game on my mantle now may well be a soldier manning a checkpoint on that same street where I sketched him sweeping and chasing his ball. Kolya, Lyuda, Ira’s children may be the ones staring back at me through a train window on the front page of the New York Times. Alla, across from whom I sat sipping tea and dipping black bread into blackberry jam may now look, like me, not so unlike the older women I drew then, leaning in and talking lines across a table. It took some digging to find what was left of my negatives. But beyond the barrage of desperate news and besides the conversations I was having with other Slavic scholars and my students to determine ways to respond, I wanted to look again at the faces of friends and familiar strangers who had survived a century of revolution, civil war, collectivization, famine, repression, more wars and surveillance and everyday suffering, and of children and young adults, who like me, grew up freed and have taken a circuitous route towards real freedom. Then as now, the old were the ones who remained behind. I thought, why not give them an afterlife in another context, in another country and language, according to another code of conscience (to loosely quote Brodsky recalling his parents in his essay, “In a Room and a Half”). It may sound strange to evoke a Russian writer, even a dissident and exile, in an exhibit devoted to supporting Ukraine in the context of devastating Russian aggression, but I do so also to honor my Russian colleagues and friends who protest this war against Ukraine, sometimes at immense, though not commensurate cost, as well as to recall my sense of people worldwide committed to freedom. Brodsky opens “The Condition We Call Exile” by denoting the privilege and interrogating the authority of authors in exile, declaiming a long list of forcibly displaced peoples in 1988 that might be read, with only slight changes today – along with Ukrainians, refugees crossing borders include Afghans, Syrians, Ethiopians, Eritreans and countless others displaced by war, violence, and violations of basic human rights. Why write, why talk, what can we possibly say of any significance? How might speech constitute a meaningful act? “Yet talk we must” Brodsky argues, “and not only because literature, like poverty, is known for taking care of its own kind, but more because of the ancient and perhaps as yet unfounded belief that should the masters of this world be better read, the mismanagement and grief that make millions take to the road could be somewhat reduced.” Brodsky goes on to cast literature as moral insurance, “antidote to the dog-eat-dog principle” and “argument against any sort of bulldozer-type mass solution – if only because diversity is literature’s lock and stock, as well as its raison d’être.” While literature is not alone in its humane capacities, and both works of literature and literary canons have their own immoral history, not least in their particular exclusions and lack of diversity, the general imperatives to speak rather than remain silent may apply. Brodsky concludes his talk with the following observation about writers in exile, which I take as a compelling argument against peace at whatever cost, against my own quiet or quietude or comfort, or even against just keeping on with the art and scholarly projects I was recounting “telling about oppression”: “All I am trying to say is that, given an opportunity, in the great causal chain of things, we may as well stop being just its rattling effects and try to play at causes. [… ] perhaps our greater value and greater function lie in our being unwitting embodiments of the disheartening idea that a freed man is not a free man, that liberation is just the means of attaining freedom and is not synonymous with it. […] if we want to play a bigger role, the role of a free man [or woman or person or people], then we should be capable of accepting – or at least imitating – the manner in which a free man fails. A free man, when he fails, blames nobody.” These images bear witness to a past moment in which Ukraine was freed, in a present moment when Ukraine has proved itself free. I do not know if Ukraine’s fight in defense for freedom will succeed or fail, though I hope for the former with whatever aid the free world may muster, but I know that Ukraine is demonstrating unequivocally its free response and responsibility. On an infinitely smaller scale, I do not know whether this exhibit will succeed or fail, but I know that I want to respond freely, at least try.

Another apparition, another double exposure, ever another writer and artist: Lispector writes, facing the painting *Paysages aux oiseaux jaunes* by Paul Klee, looking through the bars at the birds, “The prison offers protection, the bars supports for my hands. Then I recognize freedom […] my courage [to cross through the bars], altogether possible, terrifies me. For I know that courage is possible. […] At least I am calculating what freedom might be. And it is this which makes the protection of the bars intolerable; the comfort of the prison strikes me in the face. All that I have endured – simply in order not to be free.” Courage and freedom, another double exposure. An aspiration.