

Manitoba

'Kind of a small miracle': Winnipeg-born actor at the helm of charity art auction for Ukraine



Organizers sourced 130 pieces of original art from roughly 40 artists across Ukraine

[Brittany Hobson](#) · The Canadian Press · Posted: Aug 21, 2022 4:51 PM CT | Last Updated: August 22



Winnipeg-born Michael Rubinfeld, right, and California native James Arellano work with FestivALT, a Krakow-based Jewish Arts and Activism organization. The organization is overseeing a global art auction to raise funds for groups helping with war efforts in Ukraine. Artwork included in the auction comes from prominent Ukrainian artists. (The Canadian Press)

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Olena Kayinska was forced to put down her paintbrush at the end of February.

The Ukrainian artist was in the middle of a project when Russian troops invaded her country, prompting her to leave her studio and stay with her mother.

Thoughts of returning to art seemed like a luxury amid all the death and destruction, but the events also provided material for the project she had to unexpectedly abandon six months ago.

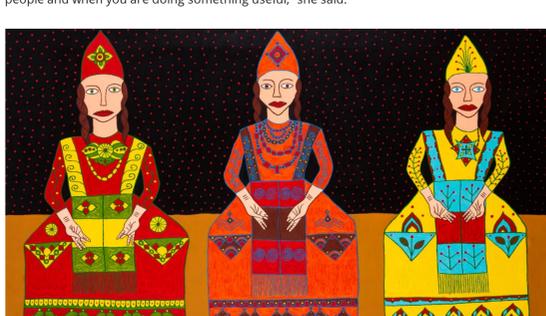
Now, some of her pieces are among those featured in a global online auction co-organized by a former Winnipegger.

"In a mystical way, it's very connected to the war," Kayinska said in a phone interview from Lviv, Ukraine. The project titled *Trauma* explores the theme of recovery.

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With her career in limbo, Kayinska knew she needed to do something that would not only occupy her time, but give her the ability to help her people. So she joined Doctors Without Borders as an interpreter and project manager with the humanitarian organization.

"Psychologically, it's easier to overcome this fear and loss of war when you're surrounded with people and when you are doing something useful," she said.



Olena Kayinska is an artist based in Lviv and has submitted eight pieces to be included in the Fight With Art global art auction including this piece from 2020 called Desert Sand Witches. (The Canadian Press)

Another calling, this time more in line with Kayinska's roots, came in spring when members of FestivALT, a Krakow-based Jewish arts and activism organization, reached out on social media to see if she wanted to be part of global art auction called [Fight with Art](#).

Winnipeg-born actor and playwright Michael Rubinfeld, who now lives in Krakow, Poland, is co-director of the auction along with James Arellano, who is from California.

Rubinfeld got a close-up view of the war's frightening effects as many fleeing western Ukraine crossed over the border to seek refuge in Poland. He and his wife took in a Ukrainian woman and her mother soon after the invasion. Their home quickly filled with tourniquets, bandages and other supplies as the woman led efforts to collect supplies to distribute to the Ukrainian army.

It was clear the war's effects didn't end at the border and the art collective needed to pivot, said Rubinfeld.

"There was just so much news and so much noise about the war that we wanted to ensure that there was also a contribution of the human element, the cultural element to also keep people rooted in the fact that we're dealing with humans," he said.

'Small miracle' transporting art amid war

The team came up with the idea to host an online global art auction to showcase and support Ukrainian artists whose careers had been halted, as well as financially support charities assisting with war relief.

They were able to source more than 130 pieces of original artwork from roughly 40 artists across Ukraine.

It was no small feat.

The team had to figure out how to get art out of a country at war.

They built a network of people to help. Their goal was to get everything to Lviv in western Ukraine, where they had two storehouses. The art was then transported by truck to Krakow. It took about two months to collect everything.

"It was kind of a small miracle that we managed to get it all here," said Rubinfeld. "When the final truck came, we were just so overjoyed that it arrived because you never know with a country at war."

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The collection includes pieces done before and after the war started.

Artists are fighting to preserve their culture and people against genocide, and the auction is a way to show the world what Ukraine is through art, said Rubinfeld.

"The exchange is not that you bought a piece of art, it's that that you've actually contributed to a people who are trying to preserve their country and culture."

Works reflect artists' resolve

For Nata Levitasova, practising art has become a form of therapy.

"Art has helped me feel a little less pain and now it [takes] my attention from war to art," she said by phone from the Carpathian Mountains in Ukraine.

The artist, whose style reflects neocubism and geometric simplification, submitted 10 paintings to the auction. All pieces were created before the invasion, but she has since created a series called "PAINted," which reflects themes of war.

The auction goes until Sept. 4.

Back in Lviv, Kayinska says Russian attacks have diminished. She has been able to develop four pieces about the war for her "Trauma" project. While the future remains uncertain, she hopes to one day exhibit the project internationally.

Artwork coming out of Ukraine is showing the true spirit, strength and resistance of artists, she says.

"The art shows things that we just now are starting to reveal in ourselves."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Brittany Hobson is a reporter with The Canadian Press. A graduate from Red River College's creative communications program, her work has been published by CBC, the Winnipeg Free Press and the Community News Commons.

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