

MARCH 4, 2022

"TOTALLY DEVASTATED BY WHAT IS HAPPENING NOW IN UKRAINE"

Russia's unprovoked assault on Ukraine now enters its second week. More than one million refugees have fled its borders as civilian casualties intensify. In this country—which has the world's third largest Ukrainian population—the powerful work of Ukrainian Canadian artists urges us to stand in solidarity with those calling for our help.



Earlier this week my friend the artist Nataka Husar emailed me, "I wish I was just writing... they wanna go for a walk?...but am totally devastated over what is happening now in Ukraine." Nataka, whose family fled Ukraine in the aftermath of the catastrophes of the Second World War, continued, "You can imagine it is like a reenactment of the tragedy that shaped my life and fuelled my art. But this time—in real time with a new cast of characters." She added that while sanctions might lead to a judgement night for oligarchs, in the interim "the cost is so many lives, so much blood." Nataka asked, "Maybe you can help?"

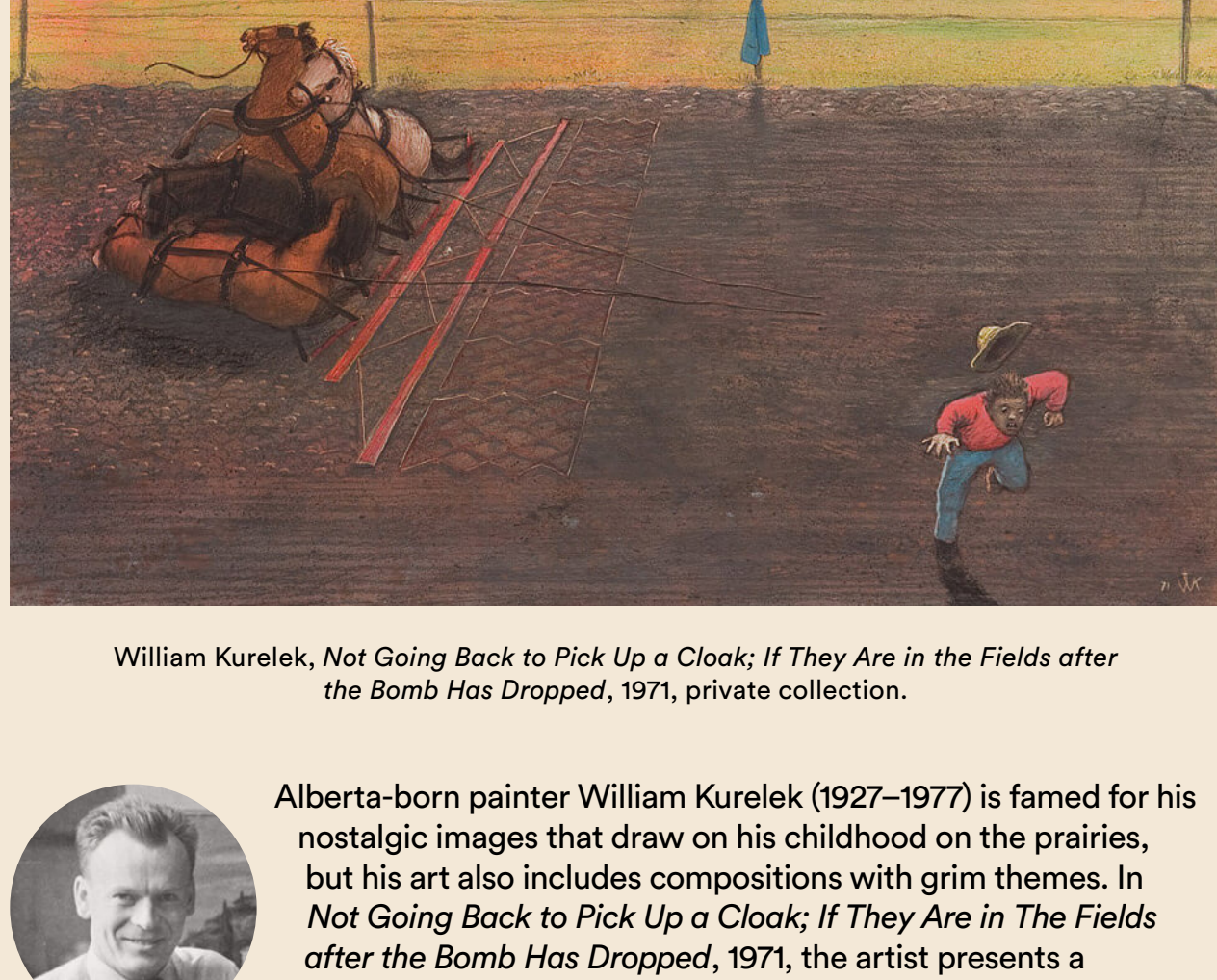
She then forwarded a statement from Olesya Ostrovska, director at the Mystetskyi Arsenal in Kyiv (Ukraine's largest artistic venue). Addressing all artists and art institutions in the West, Ostrovska asked that we promote peace and take a stance against Putin by drawing attention to the current situation via all forms of messaging and "by using the facades of your offices and other available spaces for artistic and symbolic actions showing the colours of [the] Ukrainian flag." With this call to action, we are looking at the work of some of this country's extraordinary Ukrainian Canadian artists who have shaped the fabric of our cultural landscape while maintaining indelible ties to their origins. We stand with them, honour their homeland, and pray for peace.

Sara Angel

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

WAR. 11 PORTRAITS

by Taras Polataiko



Taras Polataiko, Vasyly, 2014, from the series War. 11 Portraits, Courtesy of Barbara Edwards Contemporary, Calgary.

Taras Polataiko, Oleh, 2014, from the series War. 11 Portraits, Courtesy of Barbara Edwards Contemporary, Calgary.

In 2014, Ukrainian-born, Vancouver-based artist Taras Polataiko (b.1966) returned to his homeland with a creative project in mind. Once in Kyiv, he couldn't focus on anything other than the ongoing war, and so abandoned his original idea. Instead, he visited the Central Military Clinical Hospital and with eleven wounded soldiers created the series War. 11 Portraits. Each monumental black and white photograph features a combatant from the chest up who directly meets our gaze. The portraits are paired with interviews with the subjects guided by one question: "What is needed here?" Rather than avert our eyes from the horrors of conflict, Polataiko offered this poignant advice to viewers encountering his work: "You look him in the eye and you listen to what he has to say. Simple as that."

[Learn more about Taras Polataiko](#)
[Watch a CBC interview with the artist about his fundraising efforts for Ukrainian soldiers](#)

NOT GOING BACK TO PICK UP A CLOAK; IF THEY ARE IN THE FIELDS AFTER THE BOMB HAS DROPPED

by William Kurelek

William Kurelek, *Not Going Back to Pick Up a Cloak; If They Are in the Fields after the Bomb Has Dropped*, 1971, private collection.

Alberta-born painter William Kurelek (1927–1977) is famed for his nostalgic images that draw on his childhood on the prairies, but his art also includes compositions with grim themes. In *Not Going Back to Pick Up a Cloak; If They Are in the Fields after the Bomb Has Dropped*, 1971, the artist presents a terrifying vision of a nuclear attack in rural Canada, a setting likely inspired by the farms he knew in his youth. He had deep roots in the Ukrainian community in Western Canada: his maternal grandparents came to this country at the turn of the century, during the first wave of immigration from Ukraine, while his father immigrated in 1923, as part of a second major movement. As ACI author Andrew Kear notes, in his late career Kurelek was interested in both his heritage and in "the raw anxiety and apocalyptic foreboding" that many people felt during the Cold War, reflecting on where he had come from and what lay ahead—questions of terrible relevance in recent days.

Read more in ACI's

[William Kurelek: Life & Work](#) by Andrew Kear

ST. VLADIMIR'S CHURCH, VEGREVILLE

by Orest Semchishen

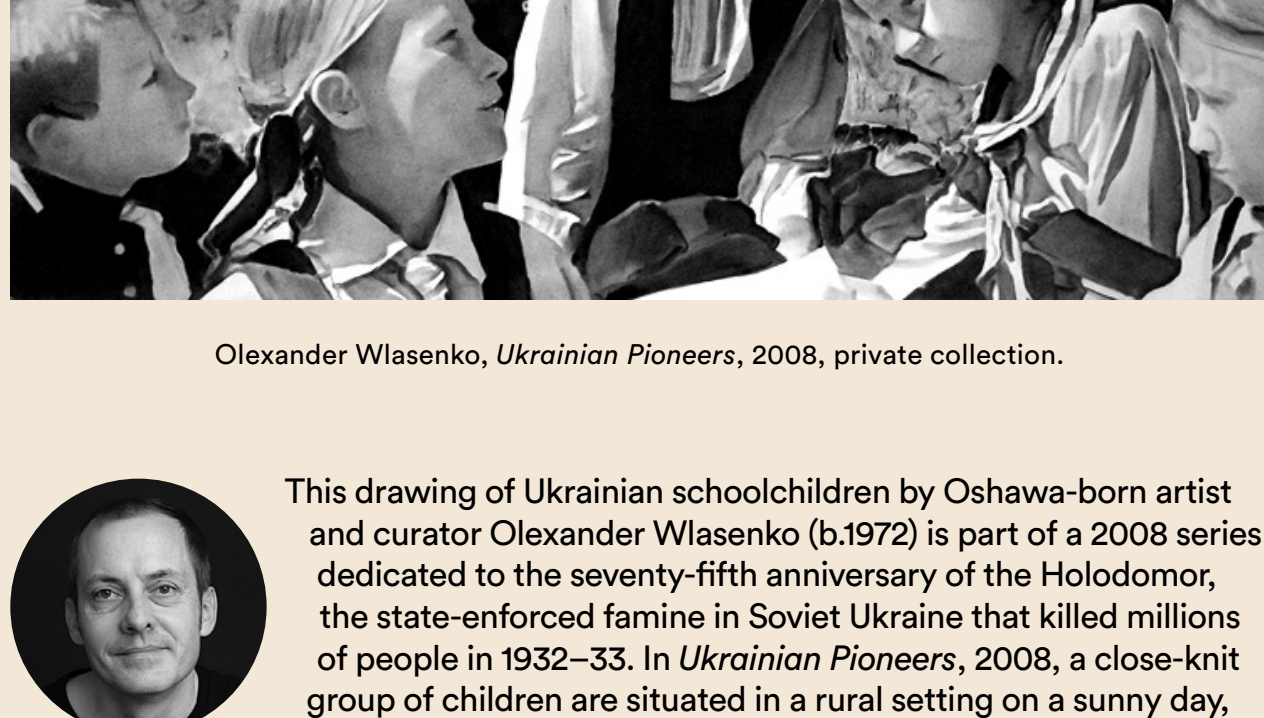
Orest Semchishen, *St. Vladimir's Church, Vegreville* (exterior), 1974, Alberta Foundation for the Arts, Edmonton.Orest Semchishen, *St. Vladimir's Church, Vegreville* (interior), 1974, Alberta Foundation for the Arts, Edmonton.

Edmonton-based photographer Orest Semchishen (b.1932) began his career as a radiologist before turning his lens on Byzantine churches and rural communities in Alberta. As a tribute to his Ukrainian heritage, Semchishen undertook a photographic survey of sites of worship, such as St. Vladimir's in Vegreville, capturing their distinctive architectural and decorative elements in his crisp documentary style. Built in 1934, St. Vladimir's Ukrainian Greek Orthodox Church features a large dome with a beautifully designed interior. Semchishen's photographs highlight the church's symmetrical facade and the interior's roundel of an angel on an intricately painted pendentive. As a whole, the textured details featured in his oeuvre come together to commemorate the manifold contributions of Ukrainian immigrants to the life and cultural landscape of Alberta.

[Learn more about Orest Semchishen](#)

PIONEER FAMILY AND TARAS SCHEVCHENKO

by Leo Mol

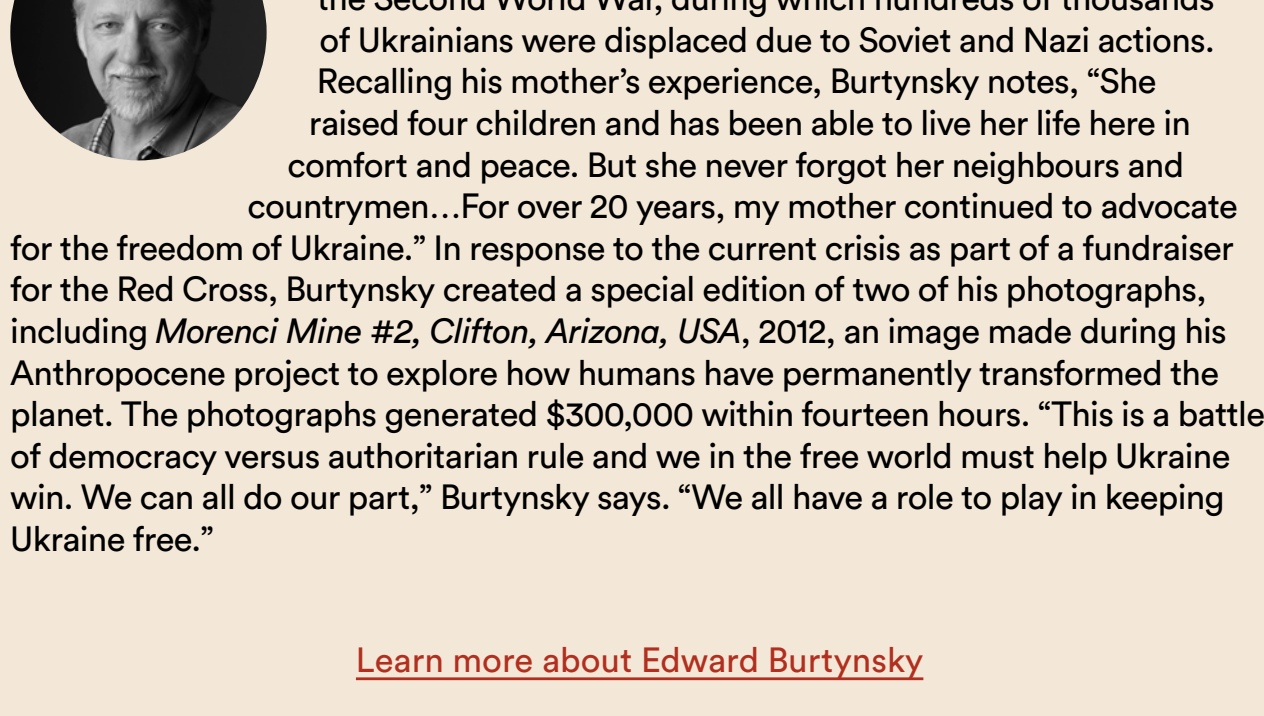
Leo Mol, *Pioneer Family*, 1979, Courtesy of Loch Gallery, Calgary.Leo Mol, *Taras Schevchenko*, n.d., Courtesy of Loch Gallery, Calgary.

The renowned sculptor Leo Mol (1915–2009) was born in Ukraine as Leonid Molodoshanin. In 1948, after studying in Russia and the Netherlands, he and his wife immigrated to Winnipeg. Mol was widely sought after for his accomplished sculpted portraits and over the course of his career was commissioned to create representations of people as famous as Queen Elizabeth II and Dwight D. Eisenhower. As well, Mol celebrated his Ukrainian heritage in sculpture, painting, and stained glass. These two small bronze maquettes are models for monumental sculptures that commemorate Ukrainian immigration to Canada (*Pioneer Family*) and the great Ukrainian poet Taras Schevchenko. Winnipeg's Leo Mol Sculpture Garden has more than 300 examples of the artist's work.

[Learn more about Leo Mol](#)

WHY THEY BEHAVE LIKE RUSSIANS

by Nataka Husar

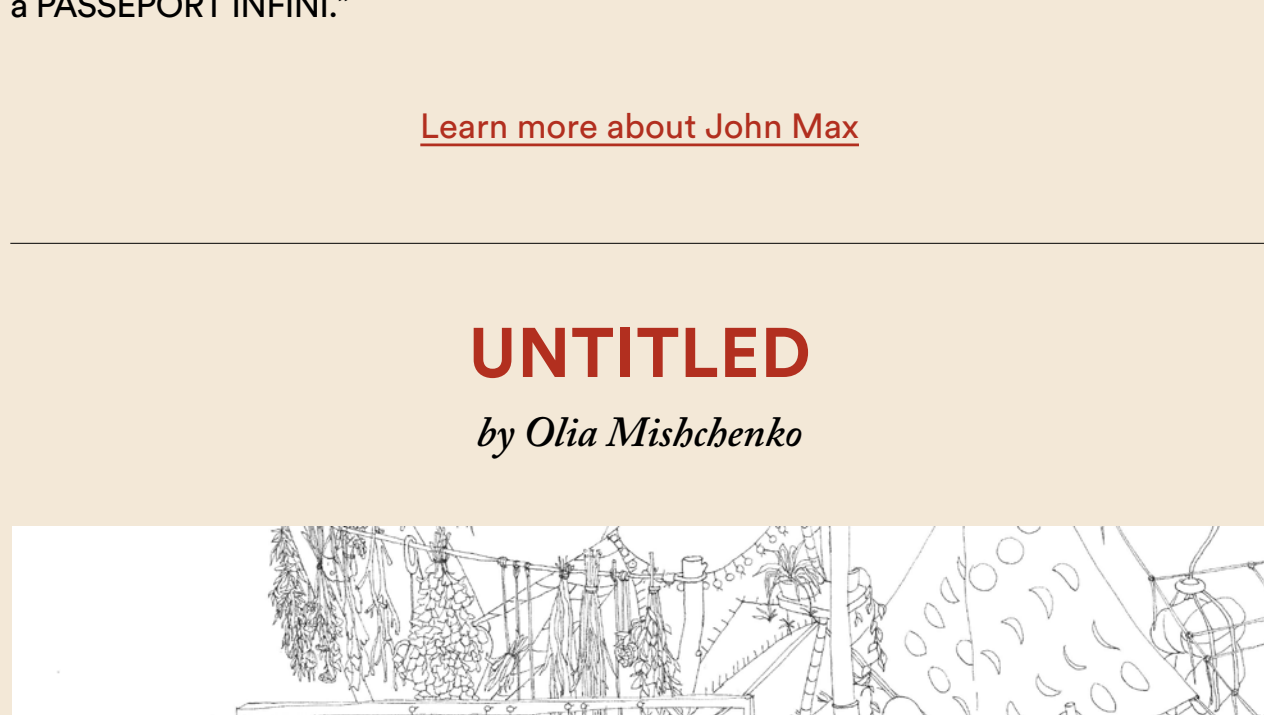
Nataka Husar, *Why They Behave Like Russians*, 2005, Courtesy of the artist.

Born in New Jersey to Ukrainian immigrant parents, Toronto-based artist Nataka Husar (b.1950) has dedicated her forty-five-year career to examining her Ukrainian heritage. In this work, Husar painted a group of shifty-eyed figures in suits and leather jackets onto the cover of the book *Why They Behave Like Russians* (1947) by John Fischer. Husar's fictional characters reflect a real trend in post-Soviet Ukraine in which men style themselves like Russian mobsters as a means of intimidation and survival. *Why They Behave Like Russians*, 2005, is one of nine paintings on book covers by Husar that "represent an urban nightmare of gangsters, glaring lights and dead-end lives." With this series, the artist offers social commentary on the detrimental effects of Soviet rule on the psyche and culture of Ukrainians. Husar's work *Torn Heart*, 1994, is currently on view at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

[Learn more about Nataka Husar](#)
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UKRAINIAN PIONEERS

by Olexander Wlasenko

Olexander Wlasenko, *Ukrainian Pioneers*, 2008, private collection.

This drawing of Ukrainian schoolchildren by Oshawa-born artist and curator Olexander Wlasenko (b.1972) is part of a 2008 series dedicated to the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Holodomor, the state-enforced famine in Soviet Ukraine that killed millions of people in 1932–33. In *Ukrainian Pioneers*, 2008, a close-knit group of children are situated in a rural setting on a sunny day, their facial expressions ranging from mid-speech to mid-smile. Wlasenko created this intimate depiction of an everyday moment using pigment on paper—a form he is drawn to for its immediacy, and which in many ways recalls the stark aesthetics of social realism.

[Learn more about Olexander Wlasenko](#)

MORENCI MINE #2, CLIFTON, ARIZONA, USA

by Edward Burtynsky

Edward Burtynsky, *Morenci Mine #2, Clifton, Arizona, USA*, 2012, Courtesy of Edward Burtynsky/Metivier Gallery, Toronto.

Celebrated Toronto photographer Edward Burtynsky (b.1955) is the son of Ukrainian immigrants who came to Canada after the Second World War, during which hundreds of thousands of Ukrainians were displaced due to Soviet and Nazi actions. Recalling his mother's experience, Burtynsky notes, "She raised four children and has been able to live her life here in comfort and peace. But she never forgot her neighbours and countrymen...For over 20 years, my mother continued to advocate for the freedom of Ukraine." In response to the current crisis as part of a fundraiser for the Red Cross, Burtynsky created a special edition of two of his photographs, including *Morenci Mine #2, Clifton, Arizona, USA*, 2012, an image made during his Anthropocene project to explore how humans have permanently transformed the planet. The photographs generated \$300,000 within fourteen hours. "This is a battle of democracy versus authoritarian rule and we in the free world must help Ukraine win. We can all do our part," Burtynsky says. "We all have a role to play in keeping Ukraine free."

[Learn more about Edward Burtynsky](#)

Read Edward Burtynsky's Maclean's article

["What It Takes to Truly Fight for Freedom in Ukraine"](#)

UNTITLED (SACRED HEART GRAVE MARKER IN UKRAINIAN CEMETERY, ALBERTA)

by John Max

John Max, *Untitled (Sacred Heart grave marker in Ukrainian cemetery, Alberta)*, summer 1969. Courtesy Stephen Bulger Gallery. © John Max.

Shot by Montreal-born photographer John Max (1936–2011), this Sacred Heart grave marker, installed in a Ukrainian cemetery in Alberta, appears as a towering monument against the summer sky. The photograph alludes to the significant Ukrainian Canadian community in Alberta, and to the artist's own cultural heritage and to his parents, who immigrated to Canada from Ukraine in the 1920s. Max's photograph is part of his series *Open Passport – Passeport Infini*, 1965–72, consisting of 160 black and white images that together form a visual diary of his life. Revealing his intentions behind *Open Passport*, Max wrote: "I love and more, I am becoming aware of the relationship between actions and the attainment of personal liberation. This is what I am concerned with—the liberation of man, an OPEN PASSPORT, a PASSEPORT INFINI."

[Learn more about John Max](#)

UNTITLED

by Olia Mishchenko

Olia Mishchenko, *Untitled* (detail), 2013, from the series *Calendar*, Courtesy of Olia Mishchenko and Paul Petro Contemporary Art, Toronto.

In her intricately detailed pen and ink drawings, Kyiv-born, Toronto-based artist Olia Mishchenko (b.1980) renders imaginary spaces that are often informed by her Ukrainian heritage. This depiction of a bustling commune during the harvest period is part of Mishchenko's *Calendar* series dedicated to the changing of the seasons. In the detail image shown here, various figures can be seen making preserves, cooking, and hanging herbs to dry, while others take a pause from their duties to rest in the company of docile animals. The various activities portrayed reference traditional practices and values that exist in Ukrainian and other cultures that emphasize cooperation, knowledge sharing, and the interdependence between humans and nature. Through her richly detailed drawings, Mishchenko reveals how our environments are shaped by historical, social, and political forces.

[Learn more about Olia Mishchenko](#)

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