Memory, Trauma, and the Maternal: Post-Apocalyptic View of the Chernobyl/Chornobyl/ Charnobyl Nuclear Disaster[1]

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Abstract: Chornobyl/Chernobyl/Charnobyl has a symbolic meaning for several generations of east Europeans. It is a city that experienced a disastrous nuclear explosion in 1986 that bequeathed a post-apocalyptic landscape and an eloquent demonstration of the Anthropocene. The epistemological crisis for humanity provoked by the Chornobyl nuclear disaster led to the emergence of post-Chornobyl art, an art of acceptance and denial, an art of physical and emotional trauma, an art that symbolized humanity's responsibility for the future.

This paper focuses on art works produced in the first two decades after the explosion at the Chornobyl nuclear plant. The range of art pieces examined in this paper is diverse, from representational art to conceptual installations. The article is an attempt to analyze the trend of post-Chornobyl art created by witnesses of the tragedy. They are Belarusian and Ukrainian artists for whom Chornobyl epitomizes the point of non-return, the overwhelming tragedy of their people, and the devastation of their land; and for whom Chornobyl is an inverted metaphor of the legitimacy of peaceful atom and the results of the Anthropocene. The paper employs Griselda Pollock's theoretical approach to trauma and focuses on the art of the maternal created by artists of both genders.

Keywords: Chornobyl (Chernobyl/Charnobyl), post-Chornobyl art, trauma, memory, history, the maternal, Anthropocene.

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[1] This research started to take shape after the annual Nobel Prize event, "Svetlana Alexievich: Nobel Winner in Literature," at the University of Alberta in March 2016. The paper was first presented internationally at the 105th annual CAA (College Art Association) conference in New York in 2017. I am grateful to Dr. Catherine Jovilette (Missouri State University) for organizing the panel and for commenting on my presentation. Special thanks go to Aleh Kurashou, curator of the Art Gallery of Hauryla Vashchanka (*Kartinnaia galereia G. Kh. Vashchenko*) in Homel (Belarus), Kanstantsin Vashchanka, the Art Gallery of Mikhail Savitski in Minsk (Belarus), Mikhail Sabaleuski and Tatiana Pavlova for their help with obtaining the permissions, and to Anna Korolevs'ka, Director of the National Museum "Chornobyl" (Kyiv, Ukraine) for helping find important artworks. I am grateful to Taras Polataiko and Christina Katrakis for permission to reproduce their works and to the two anonymous reviewers for their useful suggestions. I am also indebted to Dr. Olaf Ellefson for his ever-present help with copy-editing various versions of this paper.

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Chornobyl/Chernobyl/Charnobyl[2] has a symbolic meaning for several generations of east Europeans. It is both the place of the catastrophic nuclear explosion, a representation of a post-apocalyptic landscape, and an eloquent demonstration of the Anthropocene.[3] As a representation of human arrogance, Chornobyl continues to attract artists and explorers; its visitors, so-called "dark tourists," arrive with different goals—some to see and to contemplate the site of destruction, others to grasp the remnants of the Soviet Union's material culture infused with ideological dogma, or to meditate over the overwhelming presence of nature, including the awareness of invisible radiation.

Contemporary artists perceive Chornobyl on various levels. The mainstream of artistic investigation, which is well known in the West, is realized mostly in photography and film. The predominant practice of artists is to travel to the site and to document what they see, to grasp the meaning of this catastrophe and sometimes to assume the roles of prophets to warn humanity (see for example, Bloom, Decamous, Burkner, Dimitrakaki, Todkill, Dobraszczyk and others). Many of these artists envision Chornobyl within a discourse in which the "catastrophic and utopic promises of nuclear energy deployed the powerful visual stimulus of splitting atoms as metaphor" (Brown, "Marie Curie's Fingerprint" 37). Others document images of destruction—petrified ruins and abandonment, rare impoverished re-settlers—and expound the nature of Chornobyl as a counter-reality, creating possible alternatives to Chornobyl in their art. Their artworks regularly get attention from scholars and are discussed in many publications.

However, yet another category of artists aims to explore and to explain Chornobyl, not as observers but as witnesses, or even as participants of the tragedy. For them Chornobyl is a part of their being, their soul, and their blood. Similar to the interviewees of Svetlana Alexievich, the Belarusian writer and the Nobel Laureate in literature in 2015, who became the heroes of her heartbreaking *Voices from Chernobyl* (published in 1997), these artists

[2] In the English language, the term "Chernobyl nuclear disaster" has been used since 1986, when the Russian-language transliteration of all geographic locations in the USSR was commonly employed. However, since Ukraine is the geographical location of the catastrophe, and as EWJUS has a policy of transliterating Ukrainian geographic locations, I use the Ukrainian "Chornobyl" to refer to the nuclear disaster. The Belarusian-language transliteration, "Charnobyl," also appears in titles and descriptions where appropriate.

[3] The Anthropocene defines Earth's most recent geologic time period as being human-influenced, or anthropogenic, based on overwhelming global evidence that atmospheric, geologic, hydrologic, biospheric, and other earth system processes are now altered by humans. The word combines the root "anthropo," meaning "human" with "-cene," the standard suffix for "epoch" in geologic time ("Welcome to the Anthropocene").

think of the consequences of Chornobyl in terms of their personal emotional and physical experiences. They are not visitors to the scene, who come to feel a thrill from the abandoned town of Prypiat and its surroundings, they are Belarusian and Ukrainian artists for whom Chornobyl epitomizes the point of non-return, the overwhelming tragedy of their people and the devastation of their land; for whom Chornobyl is an inverted metaphor of the legitimacy of the peaceful atom and the results of the Anthropocene (see for example, Fjelland).

These artists are part of a large community of those affected by the Chornobyl disaster. After the catastrophe, people from the polluted territories were stigmatized and attained a common name of "*chernobyl'tsy"* (Rus.) / "*chornobyl'tsi*" (Ukr.) / "*charnobyl'tsy"* (Bel.). This term identifies people geographically affiliated with the disaster—especially those who developed health issues associated with Chornobyl and who were displaced from the contaminated territory. The traumatic experience resulted in the evacuation and mitigation of the plant and the adjacent areas conducted by civilians and military personnel, who were disinformed and absolutely unaware of the hazardous consequences of participating in the clean ups and decontaminations; in displacing the most severely affected towns and villages; and in the outburst of radiation-related diseases and deaths. For many of these Belarusians and Ukrainians, the memory of Chornobyl became associated with trauma. While the rest of the world has a tendency to forget about Chornobyl and other nuclear disasters such as Fukushima (2011) or Three Mile Island (1979), acknowledging them mostly as history,[4] for "*chornobyl'tsi*," Chornobyl became a realm of memory.

Scholars debating the connections between memory, trauma, and history have offered different approaches since the 1980s.[5] Pierre Nora, one of the first scholars to explain the difference between history and memory, elucidated that "history belongs to everyone and to no one and therefore has a universal vocation. Memory is rooted in the concrete: in space, gesture, image, and object. History dwells exclusively on temporal continuities, on changes in things and in the relations among things. Memory is absolute, while history is always relative" (3). However, many scholars warn that memory might not be reliable; it can be distorted or biased, or influenced by the cultural context, mental health issues, or illnesses. Memory, especially memory inflated with a certain traumatic experience, can be an episodic-autobiographical phenomenon accompanied by various psychological disorders or sometimes dissociative amnesia (Staniloiu and Markowitsch).

[4] In this context, the recent HBO series *Chernobyl* (2019) can be seen as an attempt to re-create history rather than to express memory.

[5] On the historiography of the development of the topic, and especially the debates about the tension between memory, trauma, and history, see Roth xiii-xxxv.

Indeed, psychological stress or trauma can be expressed through artistic manifestations, such as autobiographical writings or poems, paintings or works on paper, installations or performances. These creative pursuits can help individuals to physically and emotionally recuperate from a distressing experience, to combat trauma, and to recover. Creativity (and, as clinical practices show, art therapy) is one of the most powerful tools to deal with post-traumatic distress. While traumatic experiences and their consequences have been a scholarly focus for a long time, trauma studies as a specific interdisciplinary concern is a relatively new field. Although clinical and psychological scholarship refers to trauma as a marker of personal unsettling experience, "a critical approach attends to the ways that the category of 'trauma' reveals and unsettles social and cultural classification systems" and the manner in which trauma transforms the social order and infuses cultural communication and cultural production with new meanings (Casper and Wertheimer 4-6). Trauma studies treat the "real event" as a force that impacts art, literature, and film (Bennett 6). Contemporary scholars suggest that we live in an "age of trauma," and analyzing trauma helps human beings understand themselves and their actions in different social and cultural contexts (Casper and Wertheimer 4-6).

In the kaleidoscope of memories related to the Chornobyl catastrophe, everyone's memory is unique. At the same time, post-Chornobyl memory is a collective memory that several generations of Belarusians and Ukrainians share in common. In contrast to Nora, for whom the understanding of memory is often an exercise in nostalgia, for many Belarusians and Ukrainians, Chornobyl is equivalent to an unfathomable trauma that goes beyond simply being associated with the territory of the disaster and enters the existential spheres of human birth and death.

This paper analyzes post-Chornobyl art of trauma created by witnesses or "*chornobyl'tsi*"—the artists who associated themselves with the disaster on various levels—and traces the visual messages and meanings of trauma that recur in many art works. It focuses on late Soviet and post-Soviet art works produced within the three decades of the disaster. The range of art pieces examined in this paper is diverse, from representational art to conceptual installations. This essay employs Griselda Pollock's theoretical approach to trauma in relation to the maternal, and centres on images of mothers and motherhood as visual tropes of trauma created by artists of both genders.

According to Pollock, trauma has a specifically feminine association, in which the maternal-feminine is the sphere of the unthinkable, and womanhood and motherhood are not only connected with birth but also with death, an idea that is strongly embedded inside Freudian psychoanalysis and Lacanian theory ("Art/Trauma/Representation"). This concept is explored through the visual symbolism of Christianity with an

emphasis on the Marian cult, which regained its influence after Perestroika (1985-91) and was employed by many artists. As we will see, the same visual tropes appear and re-appear within the several decades after the catastrophe in order to produce the compelling visual symbolism, understood by many. It will be shown how the images of post-Chornobyl generalized mothers refer to Theotokos (*Bogomater'* or mother of God). The images of motherhood are explained through the concept of the maternal as a manifestation of fragility and uncertainty in front of the ambiguous future. Naming these images "madonnas" alluded to Renaissance art, which was more acceptable to the Soviet official art canon than traditional Orthodox icons. The paper also attends to the different modes in representation of trauma created by male and female artists.

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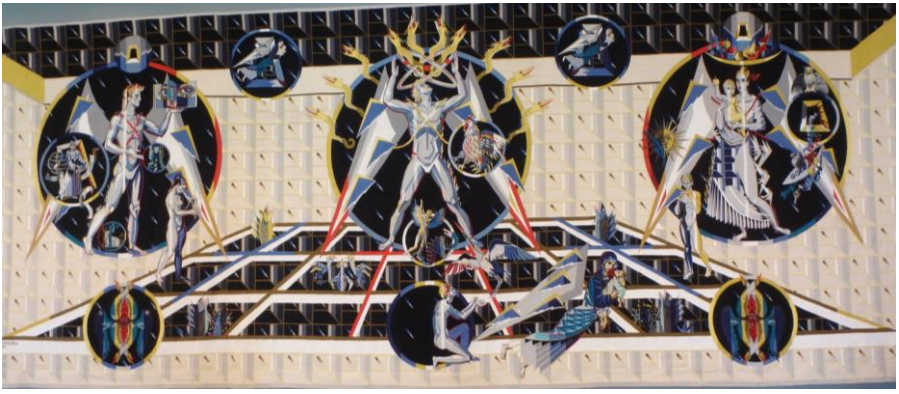
Often executed on a monumental scale, post-Chornobyl art typically represents symbolical narratives and tells the story of the disaster in visual metaphors referring to repentance, redemption, and the acceptance of one's fate. Usually paintings devoted to Chornobyl come in series (e.g., series by Mikhail Savitski, Hauryla Vashchanka, Les Breus, Christina Katrakis and others). Chornobyl's trauma is rarely executed in one piece of art, especially in the art of people who closely connect themselves with the disaster. Among the most exploited motifs are numerous allusions to Christian iconography, images of abandoned villages against dark skies or twilight, nature dying, stranded people who lost their land and homes, deserted objects associated with country life, post-apocalyptic landscapes lit by fire or bloody dusk, mourning people with candles or wearing masks, and the generalized images of motherhood. The images of motherhood are probably the most stark and evocative in terms of generating an impression of trauma. Emotionally connected to early childhood, vulnerability, and the centrality of motherly protection, the images reveal the importance of mothers in the artists' lives.

Finding the means of representation and the visual language to convey trauma caused by the invisible radiation was an uneasy task. The artists faced the dilemma in which the *invisibility* of the destruction and radioactive pollution clashed with the *visibility* and even *materiality* of personal trauma and anxiety that Chornobyl caused. Some artists believed that the Chornobyl tragedy was an act of revenge executed by the forces of nature; others considered it a result of human misconduct and improper government policies, and placed the responsibility on the Soviet Union's scientific backwardness and political deterioration. For the latter, Chornobyl becomes

an embodiment of the Soviet Union's collapse and the graveyard of the Soviet political ambition.

Although the first pieces appeared shortly after the disaster, it was only after the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991 that the subject of Chornobyl became officially open for discussion, and the importance of conducting public art projects appeared. The monumental tapestry *Chernobyl* was designed by Aliaksandr Kishchanka (1933-97) and woven in 1991 (Martseleu et al. 307-16; Finkel'shtein). It was created in Belarus and remains the most powerful and most monumental public art piece to allegorically express the disaster. This tapestry became an expression of gratitude from the newly independent state, the Republic of Belarus,[6] for the United Nations' resolution regarding the Chornobyl nuclear accident.[7] It is now on display in the United Nations' headquarters in New York (Figure 1).[8]

Figure 1. Aliaksandr Kishchanka, *Chernobyl*, 1991. Tapestry. Wool threads, 32'9″ × 13'2″. United Nations Headquarters, New York. My photograph.



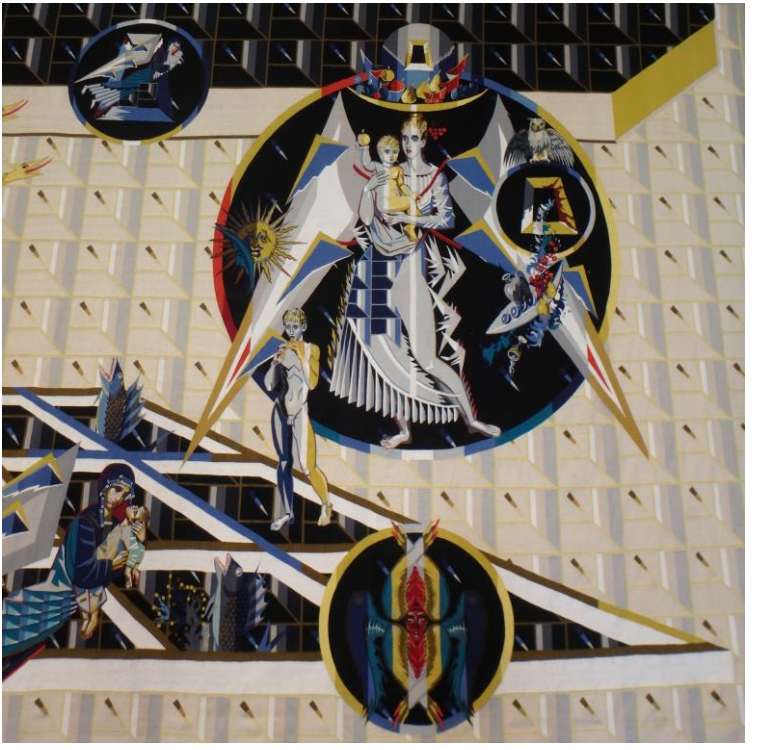
[6] See the UN resolution "45/190."

[7] After the disaster, most of Belarus experienced the highest level of radioactive pollution in the area surrounding the blasts. For more about the radiation and health effects in Belarus, see Kuchinskaya; Brown, "Blinkered Science." However, within next months after the donation, the UN cancelled an aid of $646 million to the affected countries because of lack of "proven" scientific data and little health effects of the nuclear explosion.

[8] Kishchanka produced only the design for the tapestry, while the actual weaving was completed by several female weavers at the Barysau Factory of Applied Art (*Barysauski kambinat prykladnoha mastatstva*).

This epic tapestry tells the story of the disaster in metaphorical images. Referencing Renaissance art, folk art, Greek mythology, and William Blake's illustrations to Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Kishchanka unfolds his allusion-laden narrative in three parts. The centre of the composition is a human, worshipping the sign of atomic energy, which spurts with dragons, epitomizing the disaster. The rooster represents a warning and refers to Slavic folklore. A symbol of self-assurance, the human figure resembles both the Blakeian fallen angel and the Greek Icarus—his wings are false and attached with strings. Below him is St. George killing the dragon, an image that symbolizes firefighters and those who contained the disaster. The same human on the left is holding a book with the image of Golgotha which forecasts future suffering.

Figure 1a. Aliaksandr Kishchanka, Detail of *Chernobyl*, 1991. Tapestry. Wool threads, 32'9″ × 13'2″. United Nations Headquarters, New York. My photograph.



On the right wing of the tapestry is a woman with a child. Surrounded with vegetables and fruits, she symbolizes Belarus. Iconographically, she refers to the Virgin (Rafael's *Sistine Madonna*, 1512, in particular),[9] but she is human and her wings are simulated. The child in her hands holds an apple, the forbidden fruit from the biblical Tree of Knowledge. The teenaged boy with the flute is probably a reference to future generations of Belarusians who are now affected by the disaster. The pictorial narrative of trauma is visually reinforced by the repetition of the same figure of a winged mother who is holding a dead or a sick baby. She resembles the Theotokos from the Orthodox icons and supports the message of inevitable tragedy. All three scenes are enclosed in circles that float above the abyss. But this abyss is not created by nature, it is a man-made chasm that is covered with perfectly rectangular grills. Birds and fish are trying to escape this technological trap in despair. Vibrant in its colour palette—based on yellows, blacks, and reds—the tapestry's dynamism is achieved by the inclusion of sharp corners and straight linearity, which creates a visual message of instability, emotional uncertainty, and immanent fragility.

Kishchanka was not the first or the only artist to refer to evangelical themes and iconography, employing the idea of motherhood in a reference to trauma. His contemporary, Mikhail Savitski (1922-2010), also a highly acclaimed Belarusian artist, used allusions to Mary and her child through his entire career, from paintings devoted to World War II—he was a survivor of the Nazi camps—to his last series dedicated to Chornobyl. His *Charnobyl'skaia madona* (*Madonna of Charnobyl*), painted in 1989 as a part of the series *Chornaia byl'* (*Black Truth*—in association with Chornobyl[10]), is an image of death (Figure 2) (Pugacheva).

Austere in its composition and artistic means, painted in dark, almost monochromatic colours, the painting depicts a mother and her dead child, who rests in the hands of two angels. In contrast to Savitski's earlier painting, *Madona Birkenau* (*The Madonna of Birkenau*, 1978), which refers to Salvador Dali's surrealist work *Christ of St. John of the Cross* (1951), Savitski's *Madonna of Charnobyl* is much closer to reality. The window and the curtain behind the group remind the viewer that the tragedy happened in real life. Savitski alludes to the traditional Christian iconographic motif ("*Bogomater' na prestole s predstoiashchimi angelami*") in which Theotokos is depicted sitting on a throne with the baby Jesus on her lap and two saints or angels at

[9] The visual reference to *Sistine Madonna* was employed several years prior to Kishchanka's tapestry in the monumental painting by another Belarusian artist, Mai Dantsih, *I pomnit mir spasennyi* (*And the Saved World Remembers,* 1985). It was painted in honour of the 40th anniversary of the end of World War II.

[10] The name of the town, Chornobyl (Ukr.), originally referred to the plant known as mugwort.

her sides. In Savitski's interpretation, the child is dead and the scene of celebration and glory is transformed into a scene of mourning, becoming a *pietà* (a representation of the dead Christ, attended by the Virgin Mary).[11]

Figure 2. Mikhail Savitski, *Charnobyl'skaia madona* (*The Madonna of Charnobyl*), from the series *Black Truth* (*Chornaia byl'*), 1989. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Art Gallery of Mikhail Savitski in Minsk (Belarus). The image was provided by the museum with the assistance of Mikhail Sabaleuski.

[11] Savitski's other works from this series also bear religious connotations: for example, his *Vidushchy* (*The One Whose Eyes Are Opened*) is a reference to an altarpiece from fourteenth-century Italian Renaissance art, with frontal monumental composition. Savitski's "angels" are people in white gowns, which represent the outfit of the Chornobyl mitigators, who were not provided with proper protective gear, and instead of the Virgin in front of the columns of men and women, the beholder sees a military official also dressed in a white gown, holding a dosimeter and intending to measure the level of radiation. The inscription from the Book of Revelation 6:11 reads: "*…I skazano im, chtoby oni uspokoilis'*" ("And they were told to rest a little while longer"), implying that there was no escape from the doom.

Viktar Barabantsau's (b. 1947) *Charnobyl'skaia madona* (*Madonna of Charnobyl,* 1989) is also a stark contribution to the evangelical theme. His Madonna, lit by the glowing fire of the Chornobyl reactor, wears a white mask and holds a baby who is also in a military gas mask. Barabantsau's university professor, Hauryla Vashchanka (1928-2014), belonged to the same generation as Kishchanka and Savitski. He was originally from the Homel area, and the village where he was born was located within the "exclusion zone" that was delimited after the Chornobyl disaster. Vashchanka's Chornobyl Theotokos appears on the top of a canvas titled *Charnobyl'ski rekviem* (*The Requiem of Charnobyl,* 1998) (Figure 3).

Referring to Orthodox icon painting and expressionist in colour, this image combines several symbolic motifs. The child sits on Mary's lap with outstretched hands in the traditional orans pose, which depicts praying or pleading. Both mother and child appear on the top of the cross, which divides the painting into four parts. The faces of people probably refer to innocent victims of Chornobyl departing to the stars.[12] The bottom of the painting is a generalized image of a village with a dead tree in the middle, which might refer to Jesus's death on the cross. The disposition of colours—reds, yellows, and browns—creates an inescapable illusion of fire. The fire was not associated with radioactive pollution—all the villages remained visually undamaged by radiation—but in the imagination of the generation of Belarusians who survived World War II, the disaster and devastation were often associated with fire. The village afire might refer to World War II, when many Belarusian villages, such as the well-known village of Khatyn, were burnt to ashes by the Nazis. This all-Belarusian tragedy was depicted by Ales' Adamovich, Ianka Bryl', and Uladzimir Kalesnik in their documentary novel *Ia z vohnennai veski* (*Out of the Fire*, 1977) and Adamovich's series of novels. These literary works became the foundation for Elem Klimov's 1985 film *Idi i smotri* (*Come and See*), which was based on the aforementioned novel and described the Nazi's genocide of people in the rural areas of Belarus during World War II (see, for example, Danks; Michaels; Youngblood).

[12] These faces might also refer to Rafael's *Sistine Madonna* (1512), already "quoted" by Kishchanka. Rafael's Madonna appears against a background of barely visible faces.

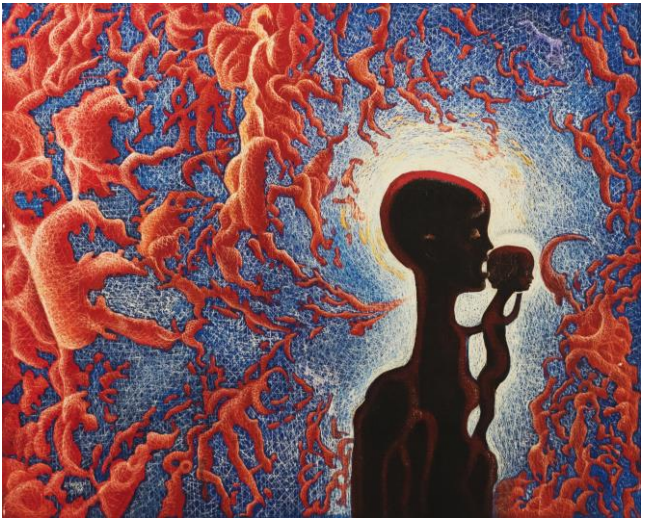
Figure 3. Hauryla Vashchanka, *Charnobyl'ski rekviem* (*The Requiem of Charnobyl*), 1998. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Vashchanka estate. The image was provided by Kanstantsin Vashchanka.

The sculpture of Mary and child depicted in the pose of orans also greets visitors to the Ukrainian National Chornobyl Museum in Kyiv, Ukraine. Created by Leonid Verstak (b. 1954), the sculpture is framed in the arches that resemble both the iconostasis and the entrance to an Orthodox church. The bells on the sides of the sculpture refer to the announcement of a tragedy and are also a symbol of mourning. This sculpture is a sober and minimalist reminder of the Chornobyl disaster which is a story told in the museum. However, one of the most striking Ukrainian contributions to the theme of the Chornobyl trauma is an image of Theotokos depicted against the scene of a nuclear explosion. This painting by Iurii Nikitin (b. 1958) openly refers to the Anthropocene (Figure 4). In *Vzryv* (*Explosion*, 1994), Nikitin's heroine is depicted in a canonical pose seen in the traditional Eleousa icons, in which child and mother express their tenderness to each other. In this painting, Mary's eyes are closed, while the child looks with his adult gaze directly at the viewer. Their bodies are in the process of decomposition and the beholder can see their half-exposed skeletons. The nature around them is an image of the Apocalypse and the clock refers to Dali's *Persistence of Memory* (1931). This clock is indeed an indication of time and memory stolen by the universal obliteration. The exposed skeletons of the animals and people evoke x-ray images. They are references to the invisible radiation that imperceptibly destroys flesh. Nikitin's work is undeniably the most "scientific" in terms of its depiction of the body's destruction by radiation, and its reference to x-rays is its vocal representation.

Nikitin's *Explosion* finds a mystical and surrealist continuation in Ivan Zhupan's (b. 1966) *Chornobyl's'ka madonna ("Apokalipsys")* (*Chornobyl Madonna* ["*Apocalypse*"], 1996) (Figure 5). Zhupan's mother and child resemble mutated aliens or humanoids distorted by genetic degeneration in science fiction cinema. They are the dystopian symbols of post-apocalyptic consequences of the Chornobyl cataclysm that the artist warns can provoke genetic mutations in future generations and lead to the degradation of humanity.

Figure 4. Iurii Nikitin, *Vzryv* (*Explosion*), 1998, 99 × 149 cv. Oil on canvas. The National Museum "Chornobyl," Kyiv. Courtesy of the National Museum "Chornobyl." The image was provided by Anna Korolevs'ka.

Figure 5. Ivan Zhupan, *Chornobyl's'ka madonna ("Apokalipsys")* (*Chornobyl Madonna* ["*Apocalypse*"]), 1996. 60 × 70 cm. The National Museum "Chornobyl," Kyiv. Courtesy of the National Museum "Chornobyl." The image was provided by Anna Korolevs'ka.



Expressing post-Chornobyl trauma, Soviet and early post-Soviet artists encountered problems in depicting the invisible radiation that imperceptibly destroys the human body and affects all forms of nature. To explore the *invisible* destruction, most artists tended to convey their ideas by employing representational art means and visual language. The strong tradition of non-representational and abstract art developed in late imperial Russia and later in the USSR using Modernist trends such as Cubo-Futurism, Rayonism, and Suprematism (see, for example, Bois) was interrupted in the 1930s and replaced by the officially prescribed ideology of Socialist Realism. The intermittent intellectual abstractionist practice never fully recovered, appearing only sporadically at small underground exhibits, held in private apartments during the Khrushchev's Thaw and the Brezhnev Era of Stagnation (see, for example, Slovaeva). All the major and minor art schools in the postwar Soviet Union eliminated the teaching of abstract art (which was considered anti-Soviet). Their curricula included only academic representational art that portrayed understandable, realistic, and visually comprehensible images. Several generations of Soviet artists (and viewers) grew up being deprived of the opportunity to see the contemporary art exhibited in the Western world, and therefore to understand the intellectual and creative pursuits of conceptual artists.

In pre-war and postwar decades, Western artists became increasingly interested in exploring the invisible, in creating art for the atomic age. After the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, some artists became entranced by visual portrayals of atomic power and its destructive potential. For example, Barnett Newman's, Jackson Pollock's, and Mark Rothko's abstractions were driven by themes associated with atomic energy and their spiritual self-examination. Their art in the first decade after World War II conveys the mystery and sombre tragedy of life in the atomic age. According to Lynn Gamwell, "Newman explained that the artists no longer shared ancient man's terror before unknown forces of nature because, after the bomb, the artists knew the forces. He declared further that the artists would create an art expressing modern tragedy—the human condition after the bomb—'the new sense of fate' appropriate to the atomic age" (270).

Confronting a similar intellectual dilemma—how to portray the invisible and incomprehensible—Soviet and post-Soviet artists turned to associations with "ancient terror" instead of using a means of abstraction. If they had chosen radical experimental abstractionism in the late 1980s, their art would never have been accepted by the officials or understood by the wide public who had been denied contact with abstractionist and expressionist art. The ban on nonconformist art was lifted in the 1990s, but attempts to create a nonfigurative representation of the Chornobyl trauma would remain an elitist expression, hardly understood by many, and the exhibition of such works would remain restricted at least until 1991.

Perhaps, one of the first images, in which an artist uttered the concerns about the environment and the nuclear threat so omnipresent during the Cold War, was Ievhenii Pavlov's photomontage. The *Al'ternatyva* (*Alternative*) appeared in 1985, one year prior to the Chornobyl catastrophe (Figure 6).[13] The Kharkiv nonconformist photographer and one of the founders of the art group *Vremia* (*Time*) employed the image of mother and child with an allusion to Theotokos as an eloquent expression of human choice. The mother, in the pose of orans, holds her child on her lap, appearing in the centre of the photomontage. Divided by an invisible line they represent two alternatives. The left half of the image is a post-apocalyptic landscape with fragmented faces of people and the remnants of ancient Greek and Roman sculptures that epitomize the ruinous consequences of nuclear war. Clashed together in apocalyptic agony, they form the tree of knowledge, which is dissolving into pieces in the polluted atmosphere. The mother is wearing a military mask and holding the child with her disembodied hand, while the body of the baby seems to be decaying. On the right half of the image, the same mother and child personify another choice, life in the normal world with a healthy environment. Their bodies are not distorted or damaged. The woman holds a sphere with two small figures that possibly serve as an allusion to Adam and Eve and express the message of procreation (Pavlova). The photograph was awarded silver medal at the Poznań International Salon of Art Photographers (*Kim jesteś młody człowieku?* IX Międzynarodowy Salon Fotografii Artystycznej) that took place in Poland in 1985 and was exhibited in Kharkiv (1987; 1988), Kyiv (1988; 1995), Moscow (1989) and abroad. In 1989, the *Alternative* appeared on the cover of no. 7 of *Sovetskoe foto: Zhurnal soiuza zhurnalistov SSSR* (*Soviet Photo. The Magazine of the Union of the Journalists of the USSR,* Moscow, 1926-97), the major specialist photography periodical published in the Soviet Union.

Pavlov's visual metaphor that paralleled the image of mother and the child with an environmental disaster appeared quite timely. On the one hand, it loudly reverberated with Mikhail Gorbachev's ambition to end the nuclear arms race. The agreement between the Soviet Union and the USA to eliminate the entire class of nuclear weapons was eventually signed in Washington, D.C. in 1987. On the other hand, during Perestroika, the message that "woman's main work is the work of motherhood" gained new power and became a political agenda. After the Soviet Union collapse in 1991, this message was adopted by the newly established independent

[13] I am grateful to Dr. Angelina Lucento (National Research University—Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia) for pointing out this important art work, and to Dr. Tatiana Pavlova (Kharkiv State Academy of Design and Arts, Ukraine) for providing information about this photograph.

countries, including Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine (Engel 253-56). Pavlov's montage eloquently combined the political agenda and the trope of motherhood resembling the 1941 poster *Rodina-mat' zovet!* (*The Motherland Calls*) by Iraklii Toidze.

Figure 6. Ievhenii Pavlov, *Al'ternatyva* (*The Alternative*), 1985. Photomontage. Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of Ievhenii Pavlov. The image was provided by Tatiana Pavlova.

The association of trauma with the maternal was exploited by artists long before the Chornobyl disaster, and such images of motherhood were often related to the trauma of war.[14] Moreover, this trope was already employed by Pavlov's contemporary Savitski in his already mentioned *Madonna Birkenau* (1978), *Partyzanskaia madona* (*The Partisan Madonna,* 1967) and *Partyzanskaia madona, Minskaia* (*The Partisan Madonna of Minsk,* 1978). When reflecting on anticipation of the disaster, Pavlov as well as other artists extracted from his memory those cultural archetypes that were traditionally associated with the idea of primordial female fertility and

[14] For example, Kuz'ma Petrov-Vodkin, *1918 god v Petrograde* or *Petrogradskaia madonna* (*1918 in Petrograd* or *Petrograd Madonna*), which was painted as a symbol of civil war, destruction, and famine, but later under Soviet rule it became interpreted as a symbol of proletarian revolution.

trauma. Like post-Chornobyl artworks, Pavlov's photomontage employed evangelical symbolism combined with an obvious trope of Mother Earth, often present in Slavic folklore and mythology. Later, in the folkloric imagination, Mother Earth would be paralleled to the image of Mary, but also would be closely associated with Paraskeva Piatnitsa, the second major female saint in the Orthodox Christian pantheon, whose roots were primarily folkloric, not evangelical (Hubbs).

In the Christian tradition, the theme of motherhood is closely connected to the image of Mary, the divine mother and the biblical metaphor of sacrifice. In the Chornobyl oeuvre, motherhood functions as a reference to inescapable doom and tragedy that have to be accepted with repentance. The switch by Soviet and post-Soviet artists to religious (and folkloric) symbolism in their reference to Chornobyl was not exceptional or unique. Although the use of evangelical themes as visual metaphors was completely unacceptable in the Socialist Realist discourse, beginning in the 1960s and corresponding chronologically with the Khrushchev Thaw, evangelical allusions gradually become visible in the works of many artists—the veterans of World War II, and also the painters of the so-called "severe style" ("*surovyi stil'*") (see, for example, Bobrikov), who aimed both to celebrate the fight against the Nazis and to express their individual post-war traumas. By using evangelical metaphors, they opposed Socialist Realism and created a different art trend that subtly and gradually became acceptable. Savitski's earlier paintings are an eloquent contribution to this art movement. Subsequently, the allegories of the Virgin and child penetrated post-Chornobyl art, establishing a thin but strong connection with pre-Soviet visual culture and cultural memory.

The exploration of evangelical symbolism and the use of Christian metaphors in art were significantly reinforced during and after Perestroika. They were underpinned by the growth of spirituality and a massive social turn toward the church, which was no longer prosecuted. The church was now associated with cultural customs and traditions that had to be restored in order to be passed to the new generations. By the 1990s, the increasing influence of Orthodoxy and the general rise of mysticism in post-Soviet countries, was largely encouraged by the dominance of the Moscow Patriarchy in Belarus and Ukraine. Vera Shevzov reports that Mary and her icons were "inseparable from Orthodox historical memory and collective hope during times of national crisis" (271). The collapse of the USSR and economic crisis only strengthened the influence of the church, which was becoming a new ideological outpost for many. In this context of bottomless crisis and post-Chornobyl doom and despair, the cult of Mary was galvanized by the collective memory, and her images, reinterpreted in this new socio-cultural environment, became a part of the new visual language entitled to express anxieties, traumas, and uncertainty and, on the other hand, to

disrupt Soviet aesthetics and artistic canons. In addition, as Elena Romashko explains, a new type of icon, post-Chornobyl icon painting, emerged. These new icons represent devotional images of Christ or the Virgin Mary, which were officially blessed by the Orthodox Church and given special liturgical veneration. These icons and memorial churches are often "claimed to be the result of a collective vision or an individual dream supported by a number of enthusiasts who eventually negotiated the formal blessing from the official church" (Romashko 195).

Not all of the post-Chornobyl art of trauma alludes to Theotokos or the Madonna, evoking religious symbolism. Many of the works refer to motherhood or offer a metaphor for suffering without turning to evangelical themes. Thus, Taras Polataiko's (b. 1966) conceptual installation *Cradle* (1995) was created to convey the Chornobyl trauma (Figure 7). *Cradle* is of a completely different mode, means of representation and artistic concept, and executed in a decidedly provocative way. After completing a BFA degree in a major Soviet art school—Stroganov Moscow State Academy of Industrial and Applied Arts—Polataiko immigrated to Canada in 1990, where he completely dissociated himself from Soviet and post-Soviet traditions of representational canon and became an abstract and conceptual artist. His installation *Cradle* is one of the strongest expressions of invisible radiation and physical and emotional trauma.

Polataiko does not belong to the "*chornobyl'tsi.*" In 1994, he travelled to Chornobyl and visited the "zone of exclusion," where he was exposed to radiation. After his return to Canada, he began drawing his blood regularly and placing it in a repository, which he preserved in a freezer. *Cradle* was created in 1995 and represented a nickel-plated polished bathtub suspended from the gallery ceiling by heavy industrial chains. The bathtub resembled a cradle found in traditional Ukrainian houses; it was surrounded with oval-framed *trompe l'oeil* "paintings" with damaged paper that referred to the wallpaper in the abandoned homes of Prypiat (Kostash). The tub contained a hermetically sealed five-litre sample of the artist's blood, the approximate amount of blood in the human cardiovascular system. The bathtub full of blood can also be seen as an image of death: "bathing in blood"—"*kupatysia v krovi*" in Ukrainian (*kupatstsa u kryvi,* Bel., and *kupat'sia v krovi*, Rus.)—means to be associated with the death of many innocent people. Polataiko explains the *Cradle* and radioactivity as a virus reflecting on its invisibility, "It's a latent agent and it's beyond narration or language. You can't see it, smell it or taste it. But when you become aware of its presence, you're not separated from it anymore, so it's impossible to be an observer, because you start to change" (qtd. in Osborne 64).

Figure 7. Taras Polataiko, *Cradle*, 1995. Installation. Courtesy of Taras Polataiko.

Reviewing Polataiko's exhibit, Mark Cheetham noted, "his installations and paintings demand both a cerebral and a visceral response; they work logically, but are produced through intuition . . . . He constantly uses his own life in his work, but it is an adopted, mirrored, contaminated 'half-life'" (94). The use of blood in creating an artwork is not new; contemporary artists have also employed urine or semen. In Polataiko's provocative installation, blood symbolizes both the artist's body and his spirit. Blood, as a substance from the body, represents the physical trauma of being exposed to hazardous radiation. According to many religions, beginning with paganism, blood is the spiritual essence of a human. The blood in *Cradle* denotes a spiritual attachment to the land of Polataiko's ancestors that is destroyed by ecological catastrophe. Polataiko's *Cradle*, with its eloquent message of the physical consequences of Chornobyl via his exposure to radiation and the use of a corporeal substance from his own body, allows the artist to step closer to the emotional edge, provoking dismay during the exploration of its material reality and invisibility of radiation. The message of trauma explored through the maternal is indirectly present in his work. This message is

delivered very subtly, almost at a subconscious level, but it is still evocative in the *Cradle*—the symbolic mother and child abandoned the contaminated homeland and they are never coming back.

Death and trauma were expressed by many artists, film makers, and writers through the images of motherhood. In a powerful lecture delivered to the three-day colloquium *Mapping the Maternal: Art, Ethics, and the Anthropocene*, which took place in Edmonton (Canada) in 2016, the keynote speaker, the feminist thinker and art historian Griselda Pollock, referred to the famous novel *Zhizn' i sud'ba* (*Life and Fate,* 1959, first published in 1980) by the Jewish-Ukrainian Soviet writer Vasilii Grossman (1905-64), and eloquently established connections between expressions of Holocaust-related trauma and images of the Virgin, images of motherhood, and images of early childhood. Pollock emphasized the connection between the Anthropocene and the maternal, linking it to mortality and natality ("Feminist Art, Ethics, and Anthropocene"). The colloquium's main agenda was to use maternal ethics defined by the philosopher Sara Riddick as "a non-violent, anti-militaristic approach based on the daily job of nurturing children" and by the "psychoanalyst Bracha Ettinger as an early language based on the threads of the present societal and ecological imbalance in the world today" (Klein 1). Ettinger defines a psychoanalytic symbolic concept of a "matrixial borderspace," or "matrix"—a metaphorical reference to the uterus—as follows:[15]

> The Matrix is not the opposite of the Phallus; it is rather a supplementary perspective. It grants a different meaning. It draws a different field of desire. The intrauterine feminine/pre-natal encounter represents, and can serve as a model for, the matrixial stratum of subjectivisation in which partial subjects composed of co-emerging Is and non-Is simultaneously inhabit a shared borderspace, discerning one another, yet in mutual ignorance, and sharing their *impure hybrid objet a.* (Pollock, "Thinking the Feminine" 5)

Ettinger's idea of the matrixial is explained via psychoanalytic interpretations, such as "facilitating the unfolding of unconscious processes, assisting in our capacity to symbolize experiences through naming, containing primitive anxieties arising from the emergence of physical and emotional understanding" (Giffney et al. 6). Pollock suggests that in theorizing trauma, Ettinger "inflects Freud's pre-fantasmatic, pre-symbolic 'dark continent' with a specifically feminine association, exposing the effect in Lacanian theory of placing the maternal-feminine in the sphere of the unthinkable, unknowable, unpresentable Real" ("Art/Trauma/Representation" 46). Ettinger also links woman not only with birth but also with death, explaining that "the idea of death is very closely

[15] For more about "matrix" and its meanings, see Aristarkhova 10-28.

connected to the feminine in western culture and it is very strongly embedded inside Freudian psychoanalysis in general and Lacanian theory in particular" (Pollock, "Art/Trauma/Representation" 47).

In the examples considered here, art works that express the Chornobyl trauma and death are often connected to the maternal; they express subconscious fears, the significance of maternal (and prenatal) protection, and the idea that each human comes to this world to eventually die. Thus, images that depict mothers with babies in their hands shown against a background of disaster can be read as a reference to ultimate suffering, inescapable doom, and death. Bringing a child into a world full of sorrows becomes a mother's sole responsibility, not to speak of the child's traumatic (subconscious) experience of leaving the maternal womb to only temporarily visit this world. Thus, the allusions to motherhood are the most powerful expressions of traumatic experience, and they work as a universal aesthetic trope that is always comprehended by the beholder because, as Pollock explains, "the unremembered, traumatic dimension of the Matrix is not about fusion/loss, but about shareability and co-emergence" ("Art/Trauma/Representation," 48; see also Aristarkhova). Pollock also defines how the concept of beauty differs from the concept of the maternal: "The paradox of the phallic and the aesthetic opposition it creates between beauty—the clearly distinguished object and the defensive shield against death-limit and the feminine: hence the most beautiful thing is the beautified idealized non-maternal non-death bearing female body—and the sublime: a frightening proximity still managed through overwhelming—is mutated into the feminine" ("Art/Trauma/Representation" 52).

Death, trauma, and inescapable doom linked to the maternal were powerful means of representation employed by male artists. They generalized the motherhood and portrayed madonnas with babies delivering a message of unknown futures, a responsibility that was placed on the mother. Paternal messages are rarely associated with Chornobyl trauma, and male personages are mostly associated with liquidators of the catastrophe and shown as heroes.[16] Women artists expressed Chornobyl traumas, too, and also employed images associated with motherhood. However, the vision of trauma was different for male and female artists. Male artists often portrayed a universal symbol of motherhood, whereas female artists often linked to Chornobyl with their personalized traumatic experiences.

[16] A motif of an elderly male is sometimes present in post-Chornobyl artwork. Such images of forefathers and ancestors refer to a strong Slavic folkloric pre-Christian tradition ("*dziady*" in Belarusian; "*didy*" in Ukrainian), in which generalized dead ancestors who are commemorated on certain days of the year come from the other world to see how the new generations live.

One of the first after-Chornobyl paintings in Ukraine is Larysa Mishchenko's (b. 1941) *Ia khochu zhyty* (*I Want to Live*), painted shortly after the disaster in 1986 (Figure 8). In this painting, the artist portrays her young daughter[17] as a symbol of all children, especially girls, and future mothers who became hostages of the ecological disaster nobody ever expected. A barefoot teenage girl stands on the dry cracked soil that symbolizes infertility. In her hands, she holds two bird feeders, one full of grains, the other empty. The girl with bird feeders suggests Themis, the Greek goddess of justice and divine order, and poses the question: what will be the choice for this new generation—procreation or infertility? Birds are flying around the girl and the beholder sees broken birds' eggs at the bottom of the canvas. These broken eggs are symbols of children who will never be born.

Figure 8. Larysa Mishchenko, *Ia khochu zhyty* (*I Want to Live*), 1986. 100 cm × 100 cm, oil on canvas. The National Museum "Chornobyl," Kyiv. Courtesy of the National Museum "Chornobyl." The image was provided by Anna Korolevs'ka.

[17] Information about this painting was provided by the National Museum "Chornobyl" in Kyiv, Ukraine.

An even more eloquent representation of personal trauma is found in the paintings in the series *The Zone* (2010) by Christina Katrakis (b. 1980). Surrealist in their delivery, most images depict people in military masks, while several paintings in this series contain a glimpse of the artist's self-representation; the face of a little girl with red ribbons in her hair, the artist's self-portrait, appears in several works. The artist's story is a collage of her recollections after the Chornobyl explosion. While a child, Katrakis was in the zone of exclusion in a village some fifteen miles from the Chornobyl disaster. She explains her experience: "We were evacuated a week later, but by then I was severely radiated and developed a tumor in my throat. I spent nearly two years recovering from the surgery, but the radiation affected my body forever.[18] Yet I never considered myself as a victim, just a happy survivor" ("The Zone"). The series combines the artist's "personal grief with the lore of the local folk in the Chornobyl region, foretelling the end of the world with the coming of the Beast in the shape of a silver cloud" (Katrakis, "The Zone").

Katrakis's most poignant images in the series touch the theme of the maternal—her first child was born premature and died several days after his birth, an experience that traumatized her to her core. Only after the premature birth and death of her son did the spectre of Chornobyl glimpses begin to preoccupy the artist. Her second baby was also lost due to her radiation exposure. Thus, the most horrifying image from the series is *The Omen* (2010) (Figure 9). Here, the artist explains,

> The Beast tears out the golden child out of my womb, yet the child sprinkles me with the gold dust of life and love. While these works seem monochromatic, specific primary colors are associated with my memory: red/blood (with surgery), black-white (old photographs), yellow (radiation), and brown-blue (iodine and Prussian blue, given to drink to absorb heavy metals). Other pieces will follow, some invoking the concept of space-time continuum in terms of maps and symbols. In all, it is not so much a commentary of the vagaries of nuclear power as on the vagaries of life. (Katrakis, "The Zone")

[18] Katrakis also describes her tragic childhood experience of the Chornobyl disaster and its consequences for her health in her unpublished manuscript "Fields of Silver."

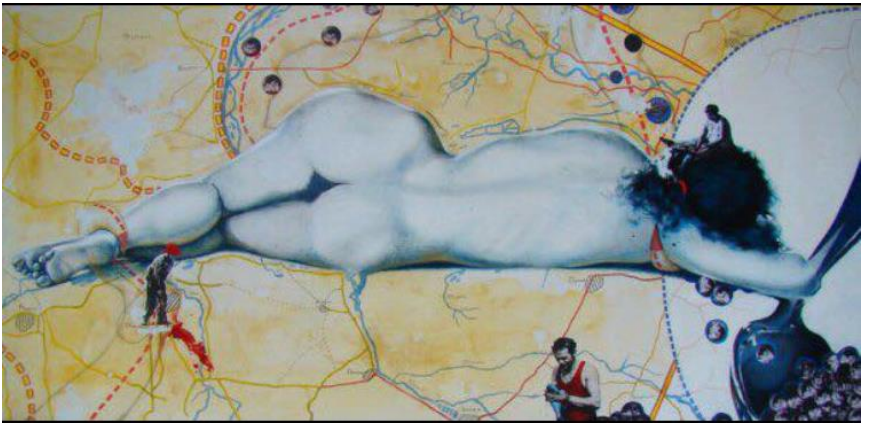
Figure 9. Christina Katrakis, *The Omen*, from the series *The Zone*, 2010. Mixed technique. 6 X 4' (183 X 122 cm). Courtesy of Christina Katrakis.

The canvas combines two painting modes. The surrealist and completely flat Beast is a schematic, symbolic, and imaginary creature that contrasts with a realistically-depicted with careful chiaroscuro, woman in a red dress (a symbol of blood) who lies on a bed of a grey rock. Referring to Henry Fuseli's *Nightmare* (1781), the dreaming woman seems calm and undisturbed. But the golden baby with an umbilical cord that stretches from her eviscerated womb appears directly at the centre of the composition and creates a message of personal, not generalized, tragedy. Another Katrakis's work, *Caviar - The Map of Eastern Promises* (2010), also refers to women and their infertilities caused by Chornobyl and reverberates with Mishchenko's *I Want to Live*. It portrays the body of a nude woman shaped as the Sea of Kyiv (the water reservoir), which was damaged by Chornobyl catastrophe.[19] As Katrakis describes, "The area around it is a map of the Zone, with the soviet collage of caviar factory workers. Yet caviar produced by them is in the shape of embryos, since the explosion damaged female reproduction function and brought upon born-defects in babies" ("Caviar"). The nude female body is perfectly beautiful and resembles a sleeping Venus (with an allusion to Diego Velasquez's *Rokeby Venus*, painted between 1647 and

[19] For a close-up, see: http://katrakis.com/caviar.

1651), a non-maternal image of ideal femininity, according to Pollock's explanation. But this non-child-bearing flawless body clashes with the actual meaning of this painting, in which the sleeping woman is a representation of her damaged reproduction function which she is not aware of (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Christina Katrakis. *Caviar - The Map of Eastern Promises.* 2010. 3x6.5'(92 x199cm) mixed media on wood. Courtesy of Christina Katrakis.



Expressing traumas or traumatic memories associated with a certain place and experience is never an easy task. Producing a meaningful conversation using visual means is an even harder mission. Trauma-related art works are not usually created in a condition of post-traumatic distress but emerge as an intellectual and, therefore, a creative attempt to overcome trauma and conduct a dialogue with yourself and your contemporaries about lived traumatic experiences. Trauma is like the Beast in Katrakis's painting: it is invisible, schematic, often incomprehensible, and sometimes can be expressed only with the use of archaic symbols and ideas in order to produce a metaphor of suffering.

Global, national, and local memories affect our individual lives and personalities and alter societal norms, individual behaviours, collective consciousness, and cultural appropriation. Functioning as the messenger of the Anthropocene and creating a warning for the next generations, post-Chornobyl disaster changed the lives of millions of Belarusians and Ukrainians, but never produced a global memory, remaining local tragedy. Traumatic memories change us and establish a new relationship between the self and society; they provoke endless conversations about collective and personal traumas and their healing.

Certainly, we live in an "age of trauma" in which ecological crises and natural disasters, the Me-Too movement, mass migrations, refugee crises, post-colonialism, and now the COVID-19 pandemic create new collective traumatic memories (Casper and Wertheimer 4-6). In these contexts, art works quietly retell the stories of traumas in symbolic terms and images. Excavated from the subconscious, the pictorial language of trauma is suffused with cultural archetypes, understood by many. The recurring images of motherhood in different interpretations and on different levels signify the prominence of motherly protection and vulnerability, sorrow and sacrifice, the temporality of being, and the fragility of life. In the case of Chornobyl, this universal trope returns as the most eloquent manifestation of trauma again and again.

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