

Vera Jacyk
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Vera JACYK *Chysto, Chysto, Chysto*

Margaret RODGERS

Richly coloured eggs, red and black embroidery, gravity defying Cossack dancers, wooden parquetry and distinctive ceramics project comfortable ideas about Ukrainian heritage within our multicultural mosaic. Sometimes artists use this iconography to celebrate or to criticize old country ways.

In *Chysto, Chysto, Chysto*, Vera Jacyk uses these cultural references to focus upon the modern historical trauma that Ukraine has undergone as it endured both Nazi and Soviet rule and as subsequent generations sensed the unspoken histories of resistance and subjugation.

Devoid of the characteristic colours and patterns of Ukrainian arts and crafts, Jacyk's pristine installation is a severe and nightmarish environment. Small-scale and disembodied fragments of a home are depicted in matte white — a closet, a pantry, and stairs that go nowhere communicate bleak sorrow and loss. One small suit hangs in a closet, the kind of dark clothing seen in old pass-

port and wedding photographs. A cupboard, its door ajar, reveals a bust of Stalin composed of wax and wheat seeds, recalling the famine and forced starvation the tyrant wreaked upon Ukrainian people. On the stairs are scattered small disembodied arms, implying a life fragmented, and people displaced.

A blackboard drawing of a healthy child goose-stepping obediently suggests another grim aspect of the country's history. In the drawer lies a partially embroidered swastika. A child's lower torso and a woman stretched into agonized elongation are created from barbed wire. Two pysanky are positioned at a child-sized table where the artist, as a little girl, might have played quietly while hearing the silence and tension endured by adults around her, those who brought these histories and terrible memories to Canada. But these eggs are not coloured in the symbols representative of their culture, they are black with white



David ARMSTRONG SIX, *Your Sadness Equals My Sadness And So On*, 2008. Carved wood, cardboard box. 11 x 22 16 inches. Photo: Nestor Kruger.

same time announcing, perhaps, some other terrible or sorrowful calamity. A comedic accent to offset the overbearing excesses of its neighbour? It could be, since the thing wouldn't seem out of place amongst the macabre gags and other necrophilia one might expect to find in something like the Addams family's attic. One could imagine that the thing, the finger that is, as being more or less alive, and that, being constrained to the insides of the box, gets transported from venue to venue — under the arm of the artist, its master, no doubt. A mobile quasi-object, a joker of sorts, its only function is to point. But to what does it gesture? To the centre of the interior of its prison of course, the set piece of which we now have the privilege to view from the outside. But this stage, this theatrical opening, has no outside. That's the joke, and it isn't particularly amusing. Why? Because it doesn't really exist. There are no walls, for in this labyrinth it is terror that holds court. And what is the nature of this terror? Let's just say that it comes

with the territory, that it arises from the opening itself. Here, as Lyotard once wrote, there are only encounters, "each tracing at full speed around itself a multitude of transparent walls, secret thresholds, open grounds, empty skies in which each encounter flees itself, overflows itself, is forgotten, — or is repeated, ceasing then to be an encounter."⁵

The labyrinth, then, issues forth from the encounter, around which turn two very different stories of a support: a staging of the stage (the *templum* already a labyrinth *en abyme*) whose fate is itself mediated by a story of light. A devastating cannibalistic light, one that comes to voraciously consume the eye as well as the scene. ←

Gordon LEBREDT is an artist and writer living in Toronto. Recently, he exhibited in *Art in the Halls* at 401 Richmond Street (September 11–October 9, 2008) and at Convenience Gallery (October 28–November 25, 2008). Recent publications include *Afterthoughts: a monologue [to R.S.]*, YYZBooks, Toronto (2007), "Notes from the Parergon: A few off-centre remarks concerning the artist-run facility as medium," *Decentre: concerning artist-run culture/à propos de centres d'artistes*, also from YYZBooks (2008), and "Some Bad Timing: stance, stasis, and movement in the work of Tom Dean and Murray Favro," *Espace Sculpture*, no. 85, Montréal (2008).

NOTES

1. Morris, Robert, *Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: The MIT Press, 1993), 11.
2. The choice of the word "ornament" is Morris' given that, when speaking of scale with respect to the medium of sculpture, he reserves the term "object" to mean any three-dimensional thing falling between the monument and the ornament. See *Continuous Project Altered Daily*, 11.
3. Using commercially available fixtures (the fluorescent tubes are eight feet in length), Armstrong Six comes close to duplicating the overall dimensions of Smith's *Free Ride* which were based on the height of a standard domestic (interior) door opening. Here, I have taken the liberty of substituting Morris's use of the word "intimate" with "domestic."
4. Serres, Michel, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 52–53.
5. Lyotard, Jean-François, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 36.

Vera JACYK, *Chysto, Chysto, Chysto*, 2009. Detail. Courtesy: MacLaren Art Centre. Photo: Holly McClellan.





Vera JACYK, *Chysto, Chysto, Chysto*, 2009. Details. Courtesy: MacLaren Art Centre. Photo: Holly McClellan.

lettering, which spells the Ukrainian national anthem in both Cyrillic and Latin script. Jacyk describes the silences of her elders, making the point that, as Ukraine was battered between warring ideologies, the people who inherited these memories were traumatized into silence.

The 2007 theft and destruction of the bronze monument to 19th century figure Taras Shevchenko brought an earlier aspect of Ukrainian culture to media attention. Donated in 1951 by the Soviet Union, it commemorated the 60th anniversary of Ukrainian immigration to Canada. Shevchenko, a poet, writer, artist and activist was arrested and imprisoned repeatedly during his lifetime for his defiance of Czarist Russia and its control over Ukraine.¹ While the valorization of this heroic figure effectively sidestepped the bloody 20th century, Jacyk will not allow her viewers to do so. *Chysto, Chysto, Chysto* means clean, clean, clean, a title suggestive

of white wash and erasure. Jacyk illuminates a facet of the Ukrainian tragedy that has ongoing reverberations. ←

Vera JACYK: *Chysto, Chysto, Chysto*
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NOTE

1. An orphaned serf, his freedom was purchased for 2500 rubles through funds raised by a community of artists who recognized his brilliance. His paintings and romantic poem about *Kateryna* has captured Ukrainian imaginations for decades, and his burial site by the Dniro River is a sacred site for the Ukrainian people. (<http://www.infoukes.com/shevchenkomuseum/bio.htm>).