

Victoria Lomasko in conversation with Daria Khan

On 24 October 2023

Daria Khan, Curator and Founder, Mimosa House, London

Translated from Russian by Elina Alter

Daria Khan: Hi Victoria, I'm very glad to speak with you today. We're talking about your show *Cocoon* at Edel Assanti. Could you talk about the works you'll be showing?

Victoria Lomasko: They're new panels that I created in Leipzig over the course of the summer, working every day, in my first studio. The panels all share a single theme – the transformation of the contemporary world, and the way we can come to understand this transformation. This has to do with my personal experience: the fact that I had a week to pack a suitcase and leave Russia, and for over a year and a half I haven't been able to return home. I am thinking about the fact that I had a choice, either to say that what happened to me was that "Putin ruined my life," or to decide that this would yield a personal transformation, and my transformation as an author...including the transformation of a graphic journalist into a monumental painter.

DK: You're going to be showing a triptych entitled *Favourite*; I have a question about it. The central panel depicts a matador, a bullfighter, and you've said that this is a self-portrait. Could you speak about the reason you've chosen the image of the bullfighter as the image of the artist, your image?

VL: The matador appears in every panel of the triptych. I had myself in mind as I painted the central panel, but for me this is the image of any artist who's ambitious enough to try to depict the epoch in which she lives. I think that's the greatest possible ambition for an artist. And there are different possible outcomes, it's not a given that the artist will be victorious – the artist could perish.

I was thinking about the possibilities. The leftmost panel depicts the situation in Russian art wherein there's enormous pressure, we're obligated to react to a concrete political situation. There's the Putin regime, there's the war in Ukraine, and all artists have to respond to it. And many people, particularly activists and political experts, expect the artist to just illustrate the political situation, something along those lines. Putin's a bastard and a murderer. Russian culture is entirely bloodthirsty. But that's a transient kind of art. An artist has to think through what's happening but be above the opinions of political experts. An artist has to be receptive not just to the current moment but to the entire process, to the past, and she has to have some premonition of the future. In the rightmost panel of the triptych, I was thinking about the situation I found in the West, within which I have to live now, which involves other kinds of risk. I was thinking of an artist Jenkin van Zyl, who recently had a show at Edel Assanti and came to the opening in an outfit that combined elements of a bullfighter and also of a bull. I thought of him as a kind of solitary gambler, who both seduces and provokes the public, plays at the boundary of what's allowed, and might also perish in this game. The central panel isn't necessarily my self-portrait, though I would like to live this way. It's the image of an artist who possesses such strength of will that she doesn't depend on the political situation, she creates her own artistic sphere and dwells there and draws her audience in.

DK: I noticed that you painted a hybrid bullfighter, who combines elements of a bullfighter and a bull. And all the bullfighter figures have these flame-colored capes. As I was looking at photos of the works I was reminded of the story of Pontius Pilate, the quote from Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita* that we all learned in school – "in a white cloak lined with blood-red, emerged with his shuffling cavalry-man's walk..." [tr. Michael Glenny]. You've also written that for you fire is a symbol of great histories, and here the images began to overlap for me, and I started wanting to think of the artist or creator as a judge. To what extent is Bulgakov's Pontius Pilate character helpful in understanding your work?

VL: What I really wouldn't want to do is be a judge... I don't think that's the right role for an artist. Quite the opposite, I'd like to grant the utmost respect to everything I depict. To make space for it, to give it a voice. The image of fire – obviously, when all of this happened, in a single instant, the war in Ukraine, the dictatorship in Russia, of course the image of fire haunted me. But also, in Leipzig, where I created this series, I lived in a high-rise on the 14th story. I was always seeing these unbelievable sunsets and clouds through my large windows; it looked as though on the other side of the curtains there was a real theatre...and at the same time I was thinking about what had happened to me, that I was forced to emigrate and had no idea when I could go back. And I was reading the memoirs and letters of the participants of Diaghilev's Russian seasons. These famous Russian ballet participants went on tour before the beginning of the October Revolution, and none of them ever went back home. For the rest of the rest of their lives, they couldn't believe this had happened. Most of them found themselves in really difficult circumstances. But as I was reading their writing, I felt so inspired, what a will they had to create... It's like the fire of history was on the outside, and the fire of their incredible will was on the inside, that's the interplay of the two different flames.

DK: The question of a great history, and the role of a person, an artist, in the whirlwind, the stream, in this powerful motion – for me this raises the question of agency, the agency and the function of an artist in the historical process. I understand that it was a turning point for you when you began to move away from your activist work, and, as you've said, turn toward monumental painting. I'd like to hear more about this process, this transformation, when you began to have this realisation, and whether you can describe the new role you've chosen.

VL: I wouldn't say that I was ever an activist. I was just called one because it's convenient. If an artist works with political or social themes, it means they're an activist. But I draw a distinction between the roles of an activist, a volunteer, and a dissident. For example, for five years I was a volunteer, I taught drawing in juvenile detention centres. But for me to volunteer is to devote some part of your life to helping people. It's a choice I make. Today I help prisoners, tomorrow I might help migrants, or I might shift to providing another kind of assistance. I think volunteers very seldom advertise the fact that they help people. They do it for themselves. But being an activist means constantly having to publicly announce, "I'm an activist. I'm an activist. That's my way of life." And unfortunately, being an activist is very often linked to condemning someone, fighting *against* something. There's not a lot of assistance, not a lot of respect, but a whole lot of condemnation. And it's fine when activists condemn the regime, the dictatorship, or the war. But unfortunately, they often condemn entire countries. For me, an important moment was the peaceful revolution in Belarus in 2020, in which I took part. I saw with my own eyes people disappearing without a trace, killed, thousands were tortured, raped. And at first the media's stance was, "What a wonderful new revolution in Belarus, we support these people," but then they lost, and the Putin regime occupied their country, and we know the Belarussians are under sanctions. And many activists now say that they're also involved in the war in Ukraine, so let's exclude them from cultural projects, and so on. So, I definitely don't want to be an activist, but I'm fine with being called a dissident, because to be a dissident is to call things by their proper names, even in situations when most people are afraid to do that in order not to lose something. A dissident is someone who's already lost everything. In my case, what else can I lose? I don't know. And it doesn't matter to me whether I'm a dissident in Russia or in Europe, it's not as though there's any shortage of topics that people are afraid to talk about in the West.

DK: You say that activism requires a kind of public announcement, and these announcements become the focus of the work, while providing assistance to people becomes secondary. What concerns me the most in the realm of so-called activist art, and what I've always found problematic, is the existence of exploitation, the exploitation of the people who are helped. People who are made to be part of the work are also assigned a public function, and not necessarily with their consent. Maybe there's a documentary piece, some kind of representation of people, of victims, which forces people into the position of a victim. There's a lot involved, and it's all very problematic. What do you think about this, do you think this is avoidable? If an artwork is connected somehow to helping people, and involves images of people who are oppressed or suffering?

VL: I think it's important not just to show people's suffering, or that they're in dangerous situations, but to show their strength, to show that they're individuals, they're interesting, to show their hopes and wishes, to show things that they've done... That's what I've tried to do in my graphic reportage practice. And when possible, I showed the reporting to the characters in it when it was in the publication process, so that they could make changes. I know journalists really don't like to let interview subjects read their interviews, but in my case, there was no self-censorship on behalf of the people who featured in my work. On the contrary, they gave me even more interesting details. I think that's because for them I wasn't a journalist, but an artist, and an artist in Russia is an odd figure—an artist isn't dangerous, but interesting...

DK: Yes, and I think in the Russian sphere an artist is sometimes taken as a kind of judge.

VL: That's more the writer, I think. I think writers are judges, in Russia, but an artist is a kind of fool, a marginal figure, and there's a lot of sympathy for her. How does she manage to even exist in the world, this artist? Well, fine, we need people like that, too.

DK: There's a kind of hierarchy, the writer is at the top, then the poet is a little lower—the more metaphor involved, the lower the artist is in the hierarchy.

VL: When I was drawing in the truck drivers' protest camp, all kinds of people visited them – journalists, activists, sociologists. And I was definitely lowest in that hierarchy. They just didn't really understand what I was doing there or what the results of my being there would be. But they weren't going to chase me away, they gave me tea and cookies. And then later, when my reporting was published...they understood that I was good for something! And they really wanted me to keep drawing their protest, after that.

DK: So, there's some sense of the artist's efficacy, even if it comes after the fact.

VL: I'm glad that after reading my reporting people sent the drivers money, or food, or whatever else, but my main goal was to depict significant shifts in Russian society. For me it's not like, now I'm looking at drivers, now I'm looking at sex workers, now I'm looking at migrants. For me it's a single chronicle. Thirteen years ago, I felt how dysfunctional our society was. At first it was like, oh, some clouds in a clear sky, the wind picking up, water in the river rising – and nobody pays attention. But when you notice it, you see that every year the situation becomes more dire, and even before the war started it had become actually frightening. It had to be observed, you had to follow along the investigation. I was trying to depict this: how you might be living your regular life, hoping to have shows, be published, start a family, and then you realize that none of that is going to happen. That there are these historical processes going on that you're probably not going to be able to resist, they're too powerful. So, this new series, *Cocoon*, it's about that. All of these elemental forces have broken out, and all at the same time – it's the storm, the hurricane, the flood, the fire, everything at once, all the elements at once.

DK: In one of your interviews, you said that in the Soviet Union people had a kind of adolescent mentality because the government controlled every aspect of their lives, met their basic needs. They had free medicine, housing, and so on. So, following that, and looking at some of your work from this most recent series, I thought of post-Soviet people, who seem to be stuck in a childhood mentality. They have to learn how to meet their own basic needs and learn to distinguish between good and evil, all from scratch. And there's

this learned lack of responsibility, stemming from the Soviet era, a lack of responsibility for what happens. For me it's a process of returning to the womb, the cocoon, which is also the name of your show. To what extent is the image of a cocoon an optimistic one?

VL: When I compare Soviet people to kindergarteners, I'm thinking of the economic situation. Economically, you didn't have to think about survival. For example, now, living in Europe, I can see how much economic pressure there is, how much money you have to make. Everything costs money. But I was born in the Soviet Union, where there was no danger of ending up on the street, or that there wouldn't be enough money for medical care, or for university. These pressures just didn't exist. And because of this, in one respect Soviet people were childlike, because they didn't know how to economically provide for themselves. But in another respect, they had a lot of free time. I remember from my childhood that people would drink tea instead of working. For hours! And sure, maybe they were gossiping, but it was equally possible that they were talking about politics or philosophy. That was also very common. I wouldn't say that Soviet people were naïve. Even in a small provincial town, I was surrounded by people who had no faith at all in Communist ideas.

DK: You've said that when you were studying art, symbolism wasn't accepted. Instead, you were taught that art had to be utilitarian. In Cocoon, you return to symbolism, to metaphor, both in the works and in their titles, as well as the title of the show. I notice these fairy-tale, lubok motifs in your new works. And you've spoken about this as a privilege, being able to return to motifs you wanted to explore in childhood. Could you say more about this?

VL: When I was a child, I wrote a lot of poems and illustrated them, and I wrote short stories and drew symbolic compositions to go along with them. But although I really liked what I was making, the style of it and these images, it's clear that I didn't have enough experience to really explore any interesting themes. That's obvious, a child or a teenager just isn't able to do that. And then came decades of my getting to know my environment. What sort of society do I live in, and what's my role in it? I think a great deal became clear to me, and before the war I also traveled a lot through Europe, through the US. I visited the UK several times. I had the opportunity to compare different societies, different political systems. And now I want to make a kind of artistic resume about the things I've understood, and so I've returned to a kind of symbolic language. It was interesting to draw these political trials when no one was paying attention, to draw protests when they happened. But suppose I was able to remain in Russia and could now go and draw a political trial. What would be the point? The war has started, and everyone knows now that Russia is a dictatorship. It's like there's a tornado and you're drawing a tiny little leaf that's spinning in the wind. The language of a graphic journalist isn't enough for me, now, to depict what's happening. It's a real drama. It's a tragedy. Not just a tragedy for Ukraine, but for Russian society, too. It's going to be changed forever.

DK: The theme of the fall is present in your work, the metaphor of the fall. Airplanes fall, butterflies, people. You've written that "That's how you live in a vacuum, the fall will never end. I see hundreds of thousands of people around me who've also found themselves suspended somewhere between the flight and the fall." You've also written that "Twenty-year-olds flutter like little colorful butterflies through the tears of post-Soviet realities." There are really powerful, affecting images. Can you speak about them?

VL: In my first months of exile, I was surrounded by other people who found themselves in a similar situation, from Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine. Just these streams of people from Eastern Europe, all of them in shock, all unable to understand how they've ended up where they are, not knowing the language, not knowing what to do next... In a different culture, a different context. And I met a lot of political refugees from Iran and Palestine. I was living in a residency for artists and writers at risk. I know that there's a difference between people coming from Ukraine, Belarus, and Iran, but that in general, their situation is that of free fall, of floating, and people have to decide for themselves, is it a fall that will destroy them, or is it a kind of floating, a flight, which will allow them to transform and begin a second life.

As for butterflies, I first thought of this idea in 2021, when there was a protest in support of Navalny, the opposition leader, in Moscow. He had returned to Russia after being poisoned and was immediately arrested. And this was the last large-scale protest, though nobody knew then it would be the last. A friend called me, she's ten years younger than I am, and she was remarkably inspired, saying, "Look at what's happening, what a protest, all of Moscow will be there, we have to be there. It's so good to live in Russia, this is the start of a major change." I was listening to her, and I was imagining the flames of history, and I had no hope that this protest would change anything other than bringing on new repressions. I had a sense that the protest would be broken up and that this would be the beginning of the end. Listening to her I imagined that she was a kind of colorful moth, merrily flying around toward this flame of history where it would be destroyed... This friend left Russia along with me. And even as she was leaving, she didn't really understand what was happening. She brought a suitcase of summer dresses. She didn't understand that it was unlikely she'd come back to the future she had envisioned.

DK: You've spoken about your work and your murals as static poems. And in your new cycle of works, you refer to Anna Akhmatova's *Poem Without a Hero*, which I reread, thanks to you. That poem has a triptych structure too, and "triptych" is the subtitle. How was this poem important to you?

VL: In that poem, Akhmatova sees, senses, and even predicts several historical epochs. Anna Akhmatova lived a very long life, so she can write about the Silver Age and about Stalin's repressions at the same time. But it's not obvious that this kind of writing is easy to do. I think it's an enormous challenge to see the flow of historical time. I think most people see only a single point, a point that's illuminated by the media. In Stalin's time, most people were only thinking of the repressions. About the catastrophe happening around

them. Marina Tsvetaeva made fun of Akhmatova for it, for reaching back to the Silver Age. It felt so unrealistic at that time. What's the point of all these Harlequins and Columbines? But this is what a writer is obligated to do. Not focus on a single point, but see the entire landscape, a gigantic one without beginning or end. Or rather, the beginning is our childhood, and the end is our death. Whatever we have time to understand between birth and death, that's what we're obligated to think through. That's another reason I dislike activism. Activists are unable to this, they don't have it as a goal. To the contrary, they must respond to whatever happened today, not even yesterday or a month ago, but specifically today. And that's ridiculous.

DK: Akhmatova, in a foreword to the *Poem Without a Hero*, says that she's writing from the tower of 1940. Her perspective is that she's standing at a historical height, a culmination, right before the second World War. She's looking behind her, at 1913, and analysing these events. And you also touch on the question of historical time, the passage of time, and you mention traveling through time. In psychoanalysis, traveling through time is often discussed in the context of trauma. In sci-fi, trauma can be a trigger for time-travel, it's a plot device that allows the hero to travel to the past or the future, powered by a strong emotional shock, trauma. You've also mentioned the sense of "unstable time," this collective feeling in post-Soviet space...

VL: I'd say that this instability began in the so-called post-Soviet space, but I don't believe that it'll end there. You see what's happening. New wars. Armenia and Azerbaijan, now Israel and Palestine. It seems like the flame is growing. This new series, it's not just my reflection on Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and so forth. It's a reflection on a challenge all of humanity is going to face, because I think it's only going to get more intense and more widespread. And everyone will have to decide whether they want to split countries into good ones and bad ones or whether we're a single people who return to the ideals of humanism.

DK: Speaking of humanism, in your work, nearly every panel contains the image of an observer. These are dark silhouettes depicted from the back, and often they're holding a phone or a microphone. They're anonymous and uninvolved in the action, and it's tempting to accuse them of indifference, because before them is the canvas of historical events, and they're standing there in safety, watching, commenting. I see them as commentary on the flood of information, on social media, a kind of benumbed sensitivity, an immunity we've developed as we keep reacting to these endlessly proliferating catastrophes and acts of brutality. How can we interpret these images? Are they a critique of indifference? And speaking again of humanism, are you calling upon the viewer to feel some empathy?

VL: This triptych is about the role of the artist. The space within the work is divided. The colorful, dynamic space is the space of art, created by the artist, and that's the space in which the artist dwells. The black silhouettes are the audience. They're not necessarily indifferent. In the central panel, which contains what's probably my self-portrait, in the foreground there's the director of the Edel Assanti, Jeremy, who's also my curator. He's very deeply involved in my creative process. We talked about the work a lot when I was making sketches. So, it's not indifference, it's a dialogue. But at the same time, he can't enter into it, because then he'd have to become an artist. And we can't all be artists. Someone has to be the gallerist. But in the left panel, there's an artist who's been run through by the bullfighter's sword and two others, and he also can't enter the space of art. He's just chosen the role of illustrating the political situation. He's not independent.

DK: Yes, this symbol of the death of the artist—I think he's run through by three swords—

VL: Yes, they're the bullfighter's weapons. They're called *banderillas*. First the bullfighter uses these short pikes to anger the bull, then the bull is killed with a sword. And all of these personas, though they look so fantastical, they each have a real-life prototype. I love that each image, on the one hand, is based in reality, and on the other hand, becomes a sign. In the left panel there's a famous Russian political expert who sheds some light on what's happening, and most artists think they're supposed to listen to her and then illustrate her ideas. But really, it's the artist, not the political expert, who can see what's coming next.

DK: Returning to the theme of empathy, I wonder what you're asking your viewer to feel. How do you approach indifference and empathy? How important is it for you to have an effect on your viewer, to have an affective impact?

VL: I'd say that I'm not particularly concerned about indifference. I'm more concerned about unconsciousness emotionality. I'll give you an example. This year I presented my book in Italy. There was a young woman who pounced on me very aggressively, shouting, "Why is she here? Russian authors shouldn't appear anywhere, none of them stood up to the dictatorship." I asked her, "What do you mean by standing up to the dictatorship?" "I mean like the protests now happening in Iran." This was during the time when there were large-scale clashes between the protesters and the police in Iran. She said, "The Iranians are a noble nation, Iranian culture deserves respect, and Russian culture should be banished from everywhere." She wasn't indifferent, she was the opposite—she was outraged. That's a lot scarier, to me. Because I thought, honey, when did you start caring about the Iranians? The Islamic Revolution happened about forty-four years ago. And all this time you've been thinking about them? About what's been happening to the people who've died in these protests, who've been arrested, tortured, raped, a few of them hanged? Are you going to be thinking of them in a month? Are you thinking of them now? I'm sure that now this woman is writing with the same sense of outrage about the Israelis or about the Palestinians. I'd rather people feel indifferent than aggressive in this way.

What I want to show is that we're all the same. Yes, there are different countries, but I'd call that drapery on the single body of humanity. I've worked outside Russia, I traveled to the ex-Soviet republics, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, Georgia. I worked in the US. Now that I'm in Germany, I've worked at documenta 15, as an invited "harvester," a journalist. It's all the same. People basically want

the same things: to live happily, to love, to drink wine with their friends, to travel in a world without borders. This is what I want to portray, that regular people have pretty peaceful desires.

DK: The theme of metamorphosis, the cocoon, the chrysalis...I think in a previous conversation we had you've also mentioned optimism, that the theme of optimism is very important for you. I was thinking about this, and I remembered that Judith Butler said that optimism isn't the expectation of a bright future but a responsibility and the work to make such a future possible. I wanted to ask what form of optimism you espouse, and where we can find it in your work.

VL: The great faith of humanity, the faith of everyone I talk to...and my own experience, also... When I left Russia without any resources, on the one hand I encountered the cancellation of Russian culture, an unbelievable kind of discrimination, occasionally public, and on the other hand, every day, I received an unbelievable amount of support from people I didn't even know, who bought me art materials, for instance. I always thought politicians were cynics, and politics can't be clean, of course. But people are capable of many things, they just need to regain faith in themselves.

In general, an artist shouldn't wait for something to happen, for the next revolution to occur. The artist should imagine a desirable future, with new images, and look for new forms, a new language to express not only the present time, but the future.

DK: On the subject of the art you call transient, this instantaneous reaction to events... I found a quote from Tsvetaeva, talking about the *Poem Without a Hero*, and she's saying that one must be very brave to write about Harlequin, Columbine, and Pierrot in 1941. And Tsvetaeva, who in general loved and respected Akhmatova, she saw an [inaudible] style in this poem. So, symbols and metaphors seem unacceptable in the public consciousness, or the artistic consciousness, they're not an effective artistic form to use when describing current events.

VL: That's because it's hugely ambitious! It's ambitious to say that you'll find the right symbols for your time. It's issuing a challenge. I'm known as a graphic journalist, specifically the creator of socially minded, political works dealing with very specific topics. It's a kind of challenge, now, to say that I'm now a monumental painter and I'm going to use a symbolic language in my work. I'm really grateful to the gallery that they've allowed me to do this and provided the resources to make it possible.

DK: Are there any other important things we should discuss about the show, or about your work that you'd like to share?

VL: I suppose we can add that this isn't my first show in London, and all the shows I've had before this also sort of come together in a triptych. My first London show was at Pushkin House, and it was called *On the Eve* (2018), like the Turgenev novel. I didn't quite understand then—I could feel that we were on the eve of something, but what? I just felt a rising sense of anxiety. My last show at Edel Assanti was called *Separated World* (2019). It was about the fact that in our globalised world, new borders keep appearing...and soon the world would be split up. To some extent, this was a premonition. I included a self-portrait with suitcase, an artist that keeps moving between her own home and the West. And I thought that at some point these borders would close, which is what happened. And the artist has to either stay in a dictatorship or in a safe place but separated from parents, friends, culture, home. We're now at the culmination of these events, no longer on the eve of them, or separated. We're there. But there's some hope here, too. That we can make sense of what's happening. "We" being people of all nationalities and cultures.

DK: It's interesting how these three shows you've had in London also compose a triptych. Like Akhmatova on her tower, here we are on the tower of 2023. You're analysing your presentiment, how accurate it was. The image of the artist with a suitcase, the exhibition in a suitcase, that you can't come to London now...

VL: I think insofar as I don't only draw but write, I can say that I'm also a writer. And because of this the narrative is important to me, these connections in the story. I'm always telling a story. It's a global story but also my personal story, they're always intertwined. I often include self-portraits because I participate in these events. If in the *On the Eve* show, it's an artist holding an album, now it's [inaudible], that's where this process has gotten me. At first, I lost the ability to make a living with my art, to be exhibited or published in Russia. Then there were physical threats. One of the most dangerous moments was my participation in the revolution in Belarus. And in the end, I had to leave everything: my home, a possibility to see my parents and friends, my savings, working in my native language. In such a moment I have to remain stable, I am already within the eye of the storm, and I must continue speaking without fear, trying to see what's going to happen next, what the future will be.

DK: Right, and in the culmination your portrait is that of a bullfighter.

VL: It's a hybrid image, it's not a real bullfighter. The costume isn't so much of a bullfighter but the hero of an Italian comedy. Art remains a game, even a dangerous game—and that's lovely, that's wonderful, that there's room for games, room for laughter, room for self-irony.