



**TELL THEM  
ABOUT BATTLES,  
METEORS AND  
EGGPLANT  
CAVIAR**

7 UKRAINIAN  
PHOTOGRAPHERS

ALEX BLANCO,  
MAXIM DONDYUK,  
YANA KONONOVA ,  
OLGA KUKUSH,  
OKSANA NEVMERZHITSKA,  
ELENA SUBACH,  
DARIA SVERTILOVA

The artists tell of the paper parrots the young would hang onto the walls of Kiev's collective housing. They also tell of the women's pregnancy, and their loneliness. The hospitals that could melt like butter. Odessa's eggplant caviar recipe. Some garlic, a pinch of pepper, a few bell peppers. The meteor the people of Chervonohrad are waiting for, holding crucifixes. Naked bodies - long forbidden. They tell of the night, the sea and ultimately the snow that will soon be covered with Lao Tzu's poetry.

Some questions have been swirling around for a few weeks. What can we show now of the Ukrainian creation? How do the artists look upon their previous work? How do these pieces resonate in a war-torn country? These questions were asked to the artists, and the answers accompany this exhibition of photographs taken before February 2022.

ODESA PHOTO DAYS is a Ukraine-based international festival of contemporary photography and educational platform. It pushes forward Ukrainian photography and connects artists, curators and researchers from different parts of the world: Western Europe, USA, Eastern Europe, Central and Northeast Asia.

The eighth edition of the Festival was scheduled to take place in Odesa on 19-22 May 2022. Russia's military invasion of Ukraine, however, has changed everything. 24 February 2022, a full-scale war started in Ukraine. Now Kateryna Radchenko, director and curator of Odesa Photo Days, and the festival team are working to spread the word about the situation in Ukraine and support Ukrainian documentary photographers and photography-based artists affected by war.

# ALEX BLANCO

*Meat, Fish and Aubergine Caviar*, 2016-2019



Born in Odesa  
in 1988

Alex Blanco left Odesa at the age of 16. The city on the Black Sea coast had everything in abundance : fish, sun, exposed flesh... Her parents were emotionally repressed. Her father drowned his sorrows in liquor, and her narcissistic mother was absorbed by her personal traumas.

*Meat, Fish and Aubergine Caviar* is a project in which Blanco creates a utopian universe for her parents and for herself, where life is beautiful and everyone lives up to their expectations. Blanco's camera transformed her parents into different characters. In front of her lens, her mother becomes a famous actress and her father – a superhero.

## Stimultania: What can we show of Ukrainian creation today?

Alex Blanco: We have so many creative people in Ukraine from fashion designers and filmmakers to book publishers and amazingly talented photographers who promote Ukrainian culture all over the world. And they all need help and support right now. For example, Kyiv-based art book publisher Rodovid accepts donations to be able to continue creating publications and promoting Ukrainian artists. There is also MOKSOP (The Museum of Kharkiv School of Photography) which had to be evacuated from Kharkiv in order to preserve its archives and we need to be vocal about the struggles they're facing. And I saw that the former fashion director of

Vogue Ukraine, Julie Pelipas who is originally from Mariupol, created a list of Ukrainians from different creative industries and showcased their portfolios at [community.bettter.us](http://community.bettter.us) so they can be booked for assignments. Every one of us can help Ukrainian creatives on an individual level by simply sharing their work so they can have enough visibility to receive the help they need.

## S.: What makes sense?

A.B.: To continue making art because art has always been a form of resistance and an individual protest against aggression. It is also something that keeps us sane and grounded in these difficult times. Personally, it also makes even more sense to promote Ukrainian culture everywhere it is possible. For me, it also makes sense to donate 100% profit from the sale of my prints to the

different voluntary organisations in Ukraine and help individuals with anything they need right now whether it's money, a piece of advice, or a job recommendation.

**S.: How do you view these “old” series?**

The “old” series has never felt so fresh and new. Before the war, my project *Meat, Fish and Aubergine Caviar* was a form of sharing my family story in the first place and showing Odesan culture and cuisine in the second. After the war, the positions switched, as I know that now is the moment to shout about my beautiful country and the city as loud as ever. Everyone has to know how incredible Ukraine is, how many talented people it has and how our culture is completely different from the Russian one, as it was propagandised over the decades.

**S.: How do you think these works resonate in a country at war?**

A.B.: I believe that it gives people hope that we all can go back to living in the abundant Ukraine of meat, fish and scrumptious aubergine caviar. It reminds us that Ukrainian culture is rich and impressive. We have 25 amazingly diverse regions, each with its unique traditions, beliefs and delicious cuisine. *Meat, Fish and Aubergine Caviar* for example, is very typically Odesan. The series personally gives me the energy to resist Russian aggression because I want to see my parents again. We will sit down at the dinner table filled with my mother's meat croquettes, Black sea

anchovies pancakes and aubergine caviar spread on a slice of rye bread and talk and cry and hug each other.



Born in Slavuta  
in 1983

# MAXIM DONDYUK

*Between Life and Death, 2017*

The war unleashes all of humanity's destructive forces against itself. Pure madness ! War creates emptiness. The mind of a traumatized person following a war is as arid as the barren lands that remain, misunderstood and forgotten.

*Between life and death* is a reflection on wars, where humanity got stuck. East Ukraine devastated territories are presented here. These areas where schools, hospitals, factories and checkpoints used to stand, were the scene of bloody confrontations. They now lie abandoned in absolute silence.

This series portrays the war-induced scars left in the human souls. It gives voice to nothingness and solitude. Wars change everyone and everything. Returning soldiers are often left out by their administration and misunderstood by their family and friends. The civilian population who faced the war is a traumatized one. These people had to leave their homes with their fears, anger and pain for only luggage. The question is not who won the war. Only destruction remains.

Having faced the war myself, I didn't want to show its frightening, bloody component anymore, nor to romanticize it. The turmoil of death transpires, strangely enough, through these images' silence. I chose to photograph landscapes so I could convey deeper, more intimate feelings. For war survivors, past memories are generally more painful than actual fights.

# YANA KONONOVA

*Studies, 2018-2020*



Born on  
Pirallakhi island,  
Azerbaijan  
in 1977

**Studies is a cycle of works exploring the room of male character's manifestations through Figure Studies in a fictional way. The Figure is used here not as a means to anatomically inquire gestures and postures, but as a fiction allowing access to the situation of challenging masculinity, of examining its bounds. Somewhere bounds are outward-oriented and then their performance takes place externally. But somewhere they addict to turn inward, deepening: the spectacle of violence becomes more and more uncertain as an effect of confusion and the bounds are transformed into an incision or a wound. By following this ever-deepening wound having rather poetic origins, we sink « below » cultural norms that define the performed social role.**

**I am grateful to all the subjects who took part in this experiment.**

## **Stimultania: What can we show of Ukrainian creation today?**

Yana Kononova: I have taken part in several exhibitions since the beginning of the war, organized to raise funds in support of the Ukrainian armed forces and for other charitable causes. As a rule, they represent works about the war horrors or about the world in which Ukrainians lived before it. I don't know if there is an alternative to this direct broadcast of war and peace when all systems of representation are collapsing. It seems to me that time must pass for some reflections to arise about the nature of this war, as well as about the world in which we lived before,

since now the chronicles are so monstrous that the only relevant response to it is a feeling of emptiness, grief, rage and also the absence of the necessary distance for the gaze or to the transformation of this absence into something else...

## **S.: What makes sense?**

Y.K.: Before the war, I spent a lot of time in wild natural landscapes and the being in them was the least communicated with the pastoral aesthetics, rather I felt an incredible mental tension, as if the psyche were a dam holding back the onslaught of something indefinite. When I tried to describe for myself what it was like, only war came to mind, for some

reason it seemed to me that this experience was comparable to the experience of war. In the first days of the war, when I have moved to the city where my parents were and which is located thirty kilometers from Kyiv, I felt the low vibrations of the earth when Boryspil was bombed, I saw explosions and a fire at the oil depot in Vasylkiv from the balcony of my fifteenth floor, flashes of terrifying light, when Russian fighters were shot down in the same place above the Vasylkiv sky. And for some reason, I don't know why it was so important for me, I tried to answer the question of whether the war is similar to the elements of the earth, forces of nature... Now, when I travel and work on material about the war in Bucha, Irpin, Gostomel, and it seems that this terrible sweetish smell of burnt metal and human flesh is constantly in the nostrils and penetrate the cells, I can definitely answer that no, war is not like the forces of nature even when it coincides with them – in how the distribution of the effects of firepower is influenced by relief, wind direction, climate. But war is like a shadowy, dystopian side of civilization, which manifests – in its barbarity on the planet, it feigns power over life and death.

## **S.: How do you view these “old” series? How do you think these works resonate in a country at war?**

Y.K.: Since the conflict has always interested me more than the idyll, my connection with these works has not broken. In a sense, they are about the fact that in some cases, cruelty, trauma, violence cannot be represented exclusively by documentary means, but the theater

(or rather, its 'double') is a more suitable environment for this, since it is also cruel; because it focuses on those aspects of the conflict that do not fall into the frame of direct fixation of reality; because it can include things that we might prefer not to see. A few days ago, I have filmed a short episode in Bucha, where the son of a murdered man – which was lying on the grass surrounded by scattered food from a package – tells foreign journalists why his father did not leave the city. It was noticeable that he had done this many times before, and his speech, his gestures, appealing outward to the audience against the backdrop of a mute lying figure, whose gray hair was stirred only by the wind, turned what was happening into a terrible, absurd, cruel staging. It seemed to me then that the cruelty of this scene speaks of the nature of the war no less definitely than the journalist's shot, fixing the grief and suffering of people, since it is also a certain cutout from reality.

# OLGA KUKUSH

*Scenography of pregnancy, 2019*



Bron in Mariupol  
in 1982

Waiting for a miracle is the time traditionally called of pregnancy. But this magic has another side that we cannot talk about. The organism of a pregnant woman suffers from huge changes – physical, hormonal, psychological. Women must change their way of life and their habits radically. They often give up their career in favor of caring for children.

Waiting for the child is like staying in the white room. Freedom is insulated by your vulnerability. Your movements, thoughts, dreams, plans are bounded now. Your way of life and your world are beyond the boundaries of this room. You can see it but you are not a part of it anymore.

**Stimultania: What can we show of Ukrainian creation today? What makes sense?**

Olga Kukush: Now is the period when the most important thing, in my opinion, is to tell as much as possible about Ukraine, its existence, its identity. Any project of Ukrainians artists conveys important meanings. Stylistics can and should attract the attention of a worldwide audience. We need to raise the Ukrainian issue.

**S.: How do you view these “old” series?**

O.K.: The serie shows my mood during a certain period of my life. For me, this mood is part of my past life, of a personal story.

**S.: How do you think these works**

**resonate in a country at war?**

O.K.: Feeling of insecurity, fear of the future, loss of a habitual way of life, despair – this is the mood of Scenography of Pregnancy. And these feelings are shared by a large number of Ukrainians during the war.

# OKSANA NEVMERZHITSKA

*Hospital. Lost in time. 2020*



Bron in  
Ukraine

Ukraine is located in the center of Europe – in the developed, modern part of the world. But when you get to small towns, sometimes there is a sense of time gap. It is difficult to fathom that this is the 21st century. Provincial hospitals for example. Some hopelessness of possibilities, absurdity of the context with color combination and comparison to modern possibilities and technologies. Fear and pain are felt in the air. Solitude. Lost in time ...

**Stimultania: What can we show of Ukrainian creation today?**

Oksana Nevmerzhytska: Today's atrocious reality is already reflected in the works of modern authors and will stay there for the long time in future – pain, fear, destruction, freedom, courage, strength, death, struggle, hope... All of this can already be seen in the works of mostly Ukrainian authors that live through their own experience, reflect on it and bring the new reality to their art. Today we also can see the works, the artistic view of the “before” period... All the things that moved people, that they were excited about, talked about – their mindset before the war in Ukraine started. And we can see these two realities in contrast.

**S.: What makes sense?**

O.N.: What makes sense is moving forward. Any situation is but a part

of history. The events form the new reality, strengthen or change our mindset, transform it – this is the eternal movement of human life. All events leave their mark on the art also in order to preserve this period of time, to develop and move on forming a new reality that is connected with the past and will affect the future. The main thing here is the movement forward and rebirth, because movement means life.

**S.: How do you view these “old” series?**

O.N.: My series was created in 2020. It was important for me that the reality in my country, especially in the small cities, often disagrees with the time that we live in, as though lost in time. I would like for my country situated in the center of Europe to develop and modernize faster. In its turn this would influence the quality people's lives. Fully-functioning hospitals as an example. By the means of just color and context in my works I wanted to provoke emotions and raise awareness

of this topic, and also to give a sense of my feelings about the place where people get help, are cared for, their lives are saved, and at the same time to the conditions that for long do not correspond to the time, are not acceptable and sometimes evoke despair and anger.

**S.: How do you think these works resonate in a country at war?**

O.N.: In the current situation in my country there are two aspects most resonating within me. The hospitals are overcrowded – this field is under a lot of pressure. And right now it's not about the discomfort or conditions, it's about saving lives. Where there was lack of modern medical equipment and technologies it most affects the number of lives saved. Another thing is the Soviet past, its ideology of attitude to the individual, and corruption that led to this state of the medical sector. It is widely wished to break all the ties with that mindset, connections, corruption that are left, in order to move to the future of European values, possibilities, standards, where the life of each individual has the most value.

With immense gratitude to all the doctors, all health-care workers that do their duty in the conditions of war, constant danger and fatigue; and with huge gratitude to all the countries that help to save human lives by sending medical humanitarian aid.

# ELENA SUBACH

*Meteorite Berdychiv, 2018*



Born in  
Chervonohrad  
in 1980

This project is a dedication to the story that happened in the place, where I come from. A small unremarkable city becomes famous because of the tragic event: four children died in a crush in densely packed cinema during Armageddon movie screening. That day a few schools were coming to see the film, and so many children were in hurry to get in. Bruce Willis did not save the world and the meteorite still fell. Later I even learned the name of that meteorite.

In another small town, one person, passionately dreaming of becoming an astronomer, built himself an observatory and even managed to discover few previously unknown asteroids. As a discoverer he got the right to name these celestial bodies as he wished. The astronomer, as a great patriot, named asteroids in honor of the townships of his region. So now, somewhere in outer space, meteorite Zhitomir and meteorite Berdychiv are flying. And I imagine, that it is one of them that must fall to Earth and destroy everything.

My story is about agitation of the apocalypse, a common mood of people living in cities like mine. About endless expectation of whatever is coming – a God, a Hero, a Saviour, or an impending meteorite.

# DARIA SVERTILOVA

*Temporary homes, 2019*



Née à Odessa  
en 1996

Dormitories are the only type of social housing which exists in Ukraine nowadays. They were constructed during the Soviet and since that time, buildings and living conditions haven't changed that much but Ukraine and its people did. In this project I explore the confrontation of the soviet heritage and the new pro-western generation.

The buildings which look cold and unified from outside hide diverse rooms that unite soviet interiors and unique belongings, drawings and posters of each student. Neither family house, nor a rented flat, dormitories are a kind of cocoon, the place of transition from teenage years to adult life.

## **Stimultania: What can we show of Ukrainian creation today? What makes sense?**

Daria Svertilova: Soon after the war started, a lot of art institutions, media and private initiatives got interested in Ukrainian artists. Being overwhelmed by this wave of attention at some moment I thought "where have you been before?". Why does Ukrainian art deserve to be seen at this price (in the context of war)? Everyday we see images of destroyed buildings, dead people, fleeing refugees, empty streets, scorched earth ... My heart is tearing apart when I realize that the world associates Ukraine with this imagery. That's why I believe that in the creative field it is important to show peaceful Ukraine, the Ukraine which we have lost and which we will rebuild when the war ends.

Besides, I also think that Ukrainian artists should live through this tragic moment and reflect on it, continue to produce. By now it makes sense even as a sort of therapy – to keep working and stay active, to distract; then, it will make sense because it will become a part of our history.

## **S.: How do you view these "old" series?**

D.S.: First few days after the war started I couldn't see these pictures without crying. In my work I aimed to show the young generation of Ukrainians, our future, which is being so violently destroyed. I was looking at the students I photographed asking myself whether they are safe, whether they left Ukraine, what they feel now... I felt a lot of pain looking at my series and to deal with it I decided to contact the students and to record our zoom calls. I wanted to ask where they are now, how their

perception of home changed and in which mental state they are. So, the project is continuing within a new tragic context.

## **S.: How do you think these works resonate in a country at war?**

D.S.: Couple of weeks ago I took part in a fundraising organized by a British printing company, who was collecting money for humanitarian organizations.

One of the pictures submitted by me was of a huge residential building in Odesa, surrounded by dormitories and just next to Odesa National University where I studied. My mother saw this photo and said "What a picture! There is life, living people and happiness behind these windows... Now all the high buildings are either burned or destroyed...."



# STIMULTANIA STRASBOURG

Pôle de photographie

33 rue Kageneck  
67000 Strasbourg  
03 88 23 63 11

Free entrance  
From wednesday to saturday  
2-6:30 pm

[stimultania.org](http://stimultania.org)



## **Stimultania, Strasbourg**

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## **Carré d'art, Centre culturel Pôle Sud, Chartres de Bretagne**

From Friday, January 20, to Saturday, March 4, 2023

## **Centre Claude Cahun, Nantes**

May - June 2023

**Exhibition commissioner: Céline Duval.**

**With support from Odesa Photo Days.**

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