

**Yana Chernova, the author of the painting “Belarusian Venus”: “People are Simply Afraid to Speak. But We Want to Live and not be Afraid”**

*Originally interviewed in Russian by Lidiia Akryshora, 09.22.2020*

*Translated from Russian by Kamila Orlova, 10.04.2020*

A nude woman with the forms of Rembrandt’s Venus is lying on a red cloth. Her body is covered with abrasions, her back reveals traces of beatings. The painting “[Belarusian Venus](#)”, created by Belarusian artist Yana Chernova, reflects the movement of Belarusian demonstrations and systematic violence, to which the protesters are being subjected for over a month. Yana spoke with [IWM Chronicle from Belarus](#) about how “Belarusian Venus” was born, about why it is important not to deny that violence takes place, and about what motivates Belarusians to come out and protest every day.

[“Belarusian Venus”](#) by Yana Chernova



- *Yana, could you talk about what motivated you to support the protests?*

I often visit Minsk. Minsk is a place of strength; this is my home. And for this reason I could not stand idly by. Everything that is here and everyone who are here are important to me. Despite the fact that I live in Moscow, despite the fact that I would like to travel and live in different places, **home is home, home is family. Family is to be upheld and defended. And after August 9, I had an understanding that in addition to everything, I have such a huge family.** Because all people finally started smiling at each other. This is amazing and this is the indescribable **feeling of unity; something that was never felt the**

**way it feels now.** You understand that you are together, you are all in this together. I think there was never such a **perception of people who are truly together!**

- *Could you talk about what was happening after the elections and why you were not indifferent to the outcome?*

I vaguely remember it, but a week after the election I could not do anything at all. I was not feeling well and only occasionally went for walks. Actually, I could not understand how people could create in situations like this. **But when I saw the first [videos of the people from Okrestina](#) [the street, on which the Center for Isolation of Offenders (TsIP) and Temporary Confinement Ward (IVS) are located], I poured it all out, I could not control it. For the first time I cried.** And this was not easy because it is almost as if you feel everything and at the same time you feel nothing!

- *Were you politically active prior to the protests?*

Prior to that I was not politically active. But until the summer of this year we did not have such a political movement. Everyone was against the authorities, but it was not clear what to do about that. The previous election cycle was ignored for this very reason — there were no candidates and it was not clear how anything would play out. **I feel it by looking at my acquaintances that the Belarusian society is very conscious. Today, more than ever before, they understand that the life of their country depends on them.**

- *Why, in your opinion, people used to tolerate and did not come out to protest in previous years?*

First of all, because this year there were several decent candidates. And maybe people in Belarus do want to leave the country; but this is not because they do not like it, but because of the authorities, **because they want to live in the country that supports them. Many people came out because they want to do everything that depends on them** in order to live in a normal country. It is one thing when you want to leave the country of your own volition and it is a whole other thing when you are forced to leave because your country is ruled by the usurpers.

You know, it is no longer possible to listen to the stories of our retirees about how their pensions are enough only to buy apples of all the fruit. This is terrible! **I want my grandmas and grandads to live well and be happy.** I want my family to live and feel happiness. I do not want this atmosphere, in which you are afraid that you will be arrested if you do anything. Today it does not matter whether you do something good or something evil; in any case they can take you away. This is not normal. People are simply afraid to talk, to express their opinion, to live. But we want to live and not be afraid.

- *And what helps you live in this kind of situation?*

Every single new day helps me live. It was Hugo, perhaps, who cultivated this feeling in me. This is my favorite writer. I really like the book *Les Misérables*. In it there is a lot about freedom, about truth.

- *Why do you think older people, even those, who grew up in the Soviet Union, support the protests?*

Among my friends and acquaintances there is not one person who supports Lukashenko. I think even the erstwhile adherents of Lukashenko now support the protests because they were promised and only promised that some better life was coming, that they would be happy; but their children flee the country in search of a better life - away from these pensions. **There are many promises that were made but cannot be kept under this kind of authorities.**

- *How do you imagine the Soviet Union? What is it, in your opinion? After all, you were raised under Lukashenko's power.*

My attitude towards the current authorities used to always be the same. **I have never supported them. Now, in light of my age, I have the right to declare my position.** I was raised on the notions, according to which every person is entitled to her/his own opinion and has a right to life as long as it does not interfere with others. And one cannot be imprisoned on the basis of this.

I imagine the Soviet Union as people living in fear. I have never felt any nostalgia for that time - living on food stamps, informing on one another... This very much reminds of something else... For instance, today you can get a text message from the ministry of internal affairs, saying: "if your neighbor participates in the protests - file a report". This is terrible! How can you live like this in the twenty-first century. People are being pitted against each other. But this is not the essence. The essence is in the fact that the authorities that lost do not want to leave the seat.

The world is friendly now. We communicate with one other, we exchange information. **And this causes such a powerful dissonance in the country.** Because from TV channels you get the message that everything is bad out there, but you do see that this is not the case. **The world is so diverse and so interesting — go take a chance on it, so to say. This sort of conservative politics does not lead to anything good. This is so obvious; and experience showed that it is strange that such methods are even used.**

- *What do you think can explain the phenomenon of a women's protest in Belarus? Female strength and the role of women do draw considerable attention, of course.*

At the beginning of protests, it was mostly men, who were being taken away. And what about women? Would they just stay home? So they came out to protest. **But this protest was strictly peaceful. No one wanted violence.** We Belarusians are peaceful people, this is a fact. Everyone wants to resolve it by peaceful means. **What year do we live in? Why violence if we can talk? This is nonsense.** What can be more peaceful than a mom, a wife, a young lady with flowers in hand expressing their stance. **Her voice was 'against', but it was taken away from her. And this is unfair.**

- *How do you understand OMON [a special military unit that has been treating the protesters with particular cruelty]? What do you feel?*

There are many videos and texts out there explaining the actions of OMON, explaining that these are the people with militaristic mentality, so to speak, explaining that when a soldier obeys the command, he does not have the time to think about who is right and who is wrong. He must obey the order. **But in this case, I refuse to understand and accept this.** Because it is one thing when the order is given to a soldier on a battlefield, where a war transpires. And it is a whole other thing when you go against your own people. And why? Because someone told you that a neighbor of yours, with whom you exchange greetings every day, is a bad person? How this is possible, I do not understand... **It is very difficult to understand people who fight against their own people.**

- *Your work "Belarusian Venus" is very moving. But I know that you created two more paintings on the issue of protests - "August" and "Haematoma". Could you share how you were creating them, what was happening, and why in your paintings you express protest in exactly this manner?*

When I saw all those videos and everything that was happening, I was absolutely unable to cry, and I **felt powerless**. At that moment I was at my friends'; then I went home, took a blank piece of paper and began working. Of course, I first crumpled it up a great deal... But then I hung it up and did not stop until I finished the work [the painting "August"]. This painting took me five days. I was grinding the pencils down into the sheet until they turned into dust. **"August" is dedicated to the people who disappeared, to the people who were killed, and to the people who are being suddenly found...**

- *And how did you come up with the idea of creating "Haematoma" and "Belarusian Venus"?*

New videos and news reports were appearing every day and so I painted the sketch "Haematoma". At some point everything came together in my head - these bodies, the assaults, the powerlessness... And then emerged a picture of the assaulted young women - and not only that, but of violence at large. This is how "Venus" was born. I was preparing the canvas for about a week and then worked on it for about another week. You are waking up, having breakfast, and working until the sun goes down.

- *Did your feelings change after you finished the painting? Did powerlessness go away? Were you somewhat relieved?*

I wish I felt relieved, but it did not get easier. I will be relieved when violence stops. **But even then, there's memory...** Memory about the bestialities that were committed. And so I don't know what needs to happen in order to feel relieved. A real relief will be if someone decides to step down, for example... But other than that, ... It's complex.

**I really wanted people to look at what is going on through art. I would like even more people to see this painting.** Because it is very painful to look at such photos and videos. People don't want to look at all this. I wanted to illustrate all this pain and violence. **In order to look our fear in the eye.** I wanted to help in this situation. I am an artist, and this is how I help. After all, everyone helps through hard work. I want to keep revealing the situation on the ground and I want people to see it.

*Proofreading in Russian: Stepan Sveshnikov*

**Yana Chernova** - Belarusian artist from Minsk. Currently Yana is finishing her senior year of the Moscow art college. Her paintings can be found at the Chronicle from Belarus under [Arts and Protests](#).

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