

Nadya Kotova Gallery

X Years in Art

2012-2022



HIGHLIGHT AND CONNECT
Nadya Kotova in conversation with Ory Dessau

My first memory of art was a relief created by my uncle who's an artist for the Yanka Kupala University in the city of Grodno, Belarus, where I was born and raised. The theme of the relief—done in social realist style typical for public art in the Soviet Union at the time—was knowledge and the love of knowledge, which, by the way, is the meaning of the word “philosophy”. The central figure was based on my mother. The relief celebrated the acquisition of knowledge and its effect on life, but as a childhood memory you could say that it was my first encounter with art and art making. The making of the relief played an important role in my family, since it was a huge project led by my uncle and thirty assistants.

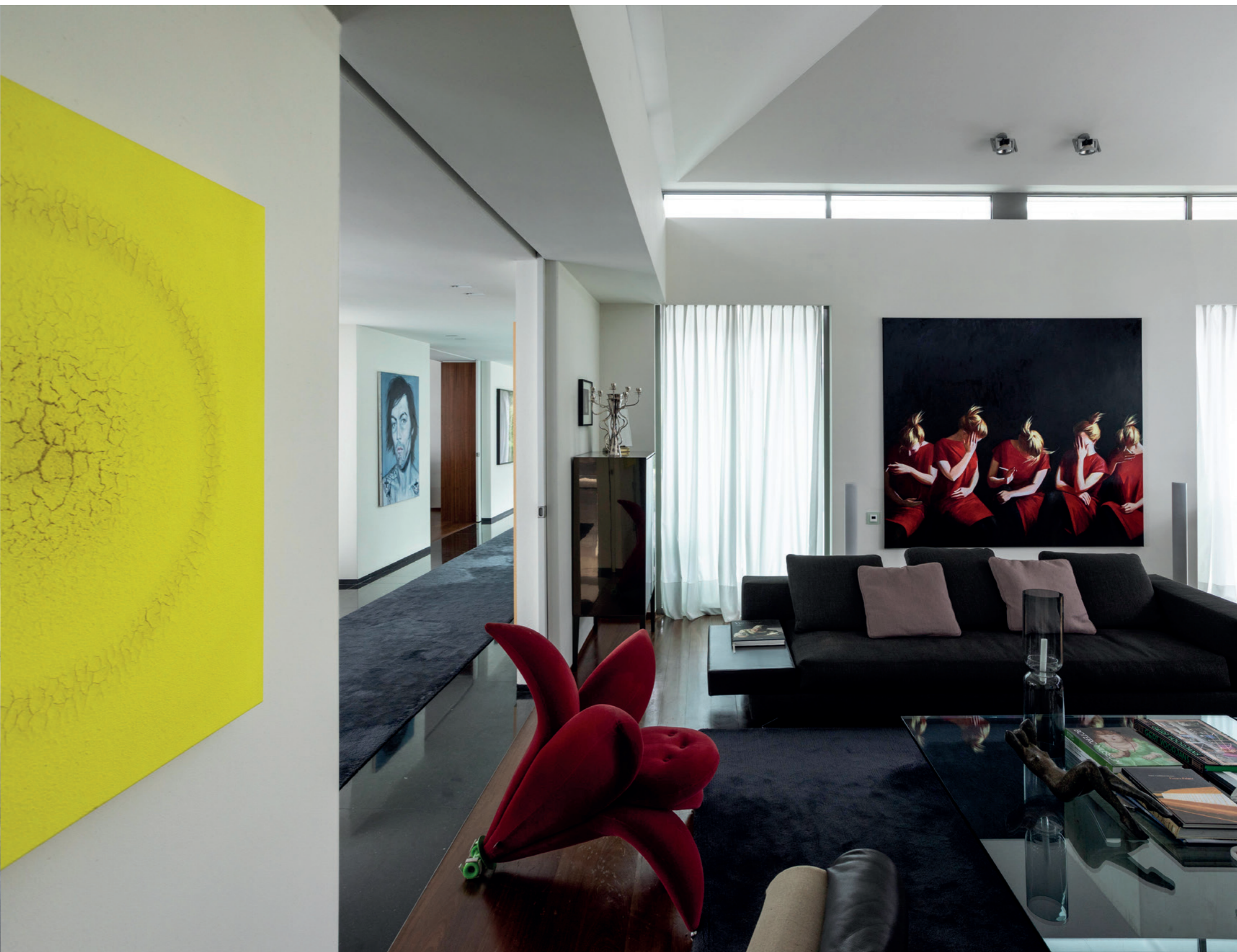
Later on, at the age of ten, we moved to St. Petersburg, then Leningrad. Our frequent visits to the Hermitage Museum and the Russian Museum left an impact on me, and made me acquainted with European and Russian art. Seeing works by Russian masters of the nineteenth century like Alexander Ivanov and Ivan Aivazovsky was an enduring experience from which I developed my fascination with figurative–realist painting. It influenced my aesthetic taste, and eventually, my gallery's program and artist list.

I never planned to become a gallerist or an art dealer. I graduated from St. Petersburg State University of Economics in the early 1990s, during the shift from a planned market economy to a free market economy in Russia. My concerns were different then. It was a very turbulent period. Nevertheless, I had artist friends, and by the mid-1990s, when I moved to Moscow and met my husband, my passion for art began to take shape. We increasingly frequented museums, local galleries, and artist studios. The turning point was when I discovered the work of Igor Kislitsyn, who was—and still is—relatively unknown, partly because he is zealously religious. Kislitsyn's works can be described as narrative paintings that take inspiration from his interpretation of biblical stories. My husband and I befriended Kislitsyn and purchased a few paintings by him. In 2016, when I was already living in Antwerp, we hosted Margarita Pushkina, one of the most powerful figures in the Russian art scene and the founder of Cosmocoew Art Fair, who visited Belgium to promote the fair. When she saw Kislitsyn's paintings in our house, she was deeply moved. She told me that, just like me, Kislitsyn changed her life and launched her journey in art.

From 1997 to 2000 I was living in Moscow with my husband, and during this time our first son was born. When we moved to Belgium—then in Limburg—I was pregnant with my second son. As I became more and more occupied with the idea of promoting Russian art in Belgium, I decided to carry my passion to a higher level, and took different kinds of courses to expand my knowledge. I attended the Sotheby's Institute of Art, and received my Master's degree from Maastricht University in Art Management with an emphasis on art markets. Then I started an internship at Barbara Gladstone Gallery in Brussels. The director in those years was Gael Diercxsens, but I also met Barbara a couple of times. Though the internship was only for three months, I learned a great deal about how the big galleries function; how the business is organised with regard to handling clients and collectors, art fairs, etc.



Relief in front of Yanka Kupala University, city of Grodno, Belarus.





Waiting, 2015. Graphite on canvas, 175 × 185 cm. Private collection Belgium.

I met Nadya Kotova for the first time when she visited my Paris studio in 2014. In January 2015, I opened Invasion, my first solo exhibition with Nadya Kotova Gallery. The opening took place during the first edition of Antwerp Art Weekend, which drew a lot of attention to my work and brought many visitors to the gallery. The theme of the exhibition was “war” and the struggle for influence. In it, I dealt with the omnipresent subject of power, domination, and influence—be it political, social, or interpersonal. One entity transgresses the borders of a territory controlled by another entity. From transgression on a personal, sexual, racial, or geopolitical level, entry without consent has become an inalienable part of reality, as expressed in the exhibition. My reflections on the topic were broad. The exhibition consisted of chromatically sober canvases populated by militant figures, both men and women, during a mundane, yet theatrically charged action.

This was followed by my second exhibition with the gallery a year later. Titled Nobody's Trail, it consisted of large-scale graphite drawings on canvas and works on paper, united by the topic which has been occupying my mind: the rapid diminishment of everything which can be characterised as “human” in the modern world. Hence the title, Nobody's Trail; it hints at the absence of a living being or its isolation in the probable scenario of our future.

My language is macrographic drawing devoid of anything decorative or extraneous. It is as if the drawing works with “nothing”, with the emptiness of white space and the contrast of light and shadow. It is devoid of any aesthetics, as if it constantly stands at a bifurcation point; the next minute it can become this or that, a painting or an engraving, a mural or a sculpture. I want to have a language which enables me to talk about all kinds of subjects, a tool to investigate different phenomena of life. This is related to the idea of presenting the initial, drafty, dirty, simple language of a drawing or a sketch, as a fundamental and independently working technology, with an intellectual abstraction that formulates the idea, allowing me to make the right choice and filter out the superfluous.

Studying the ways of generating an image and a form out of “nothing”, I invented “video sculptures”. These “video sculptures” were just an attempt to create such an image, in which the shape of the sculpture is dictated by the movement of the elements within the frame of the video. The plasticity of such a sculpture repeats the actions of the subjects of the video, like frozen traces, resulting in a rather strange object. Without light, without projection, it is as if it is asleep and imageless by itself, but as soon as the light (projection) is turned on, the object begins to live, and plays out whole stories within itself.

However, in all these manifestations of the artistic self, there is the formation of a language that describes the eternal conflict, the dissonance of the artist inside the world. I believe that in this awareness lies the way to reduce the power of circumstances over man.



Asleep, 2015. Graphite on canvas, 165 × 230 cm. Private collection Belgium.



It's Nothing, 2017. Graphite on canvas, 170 × 170 cm. Naila collection Saudi Arabia.



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Kirill Chelushkin



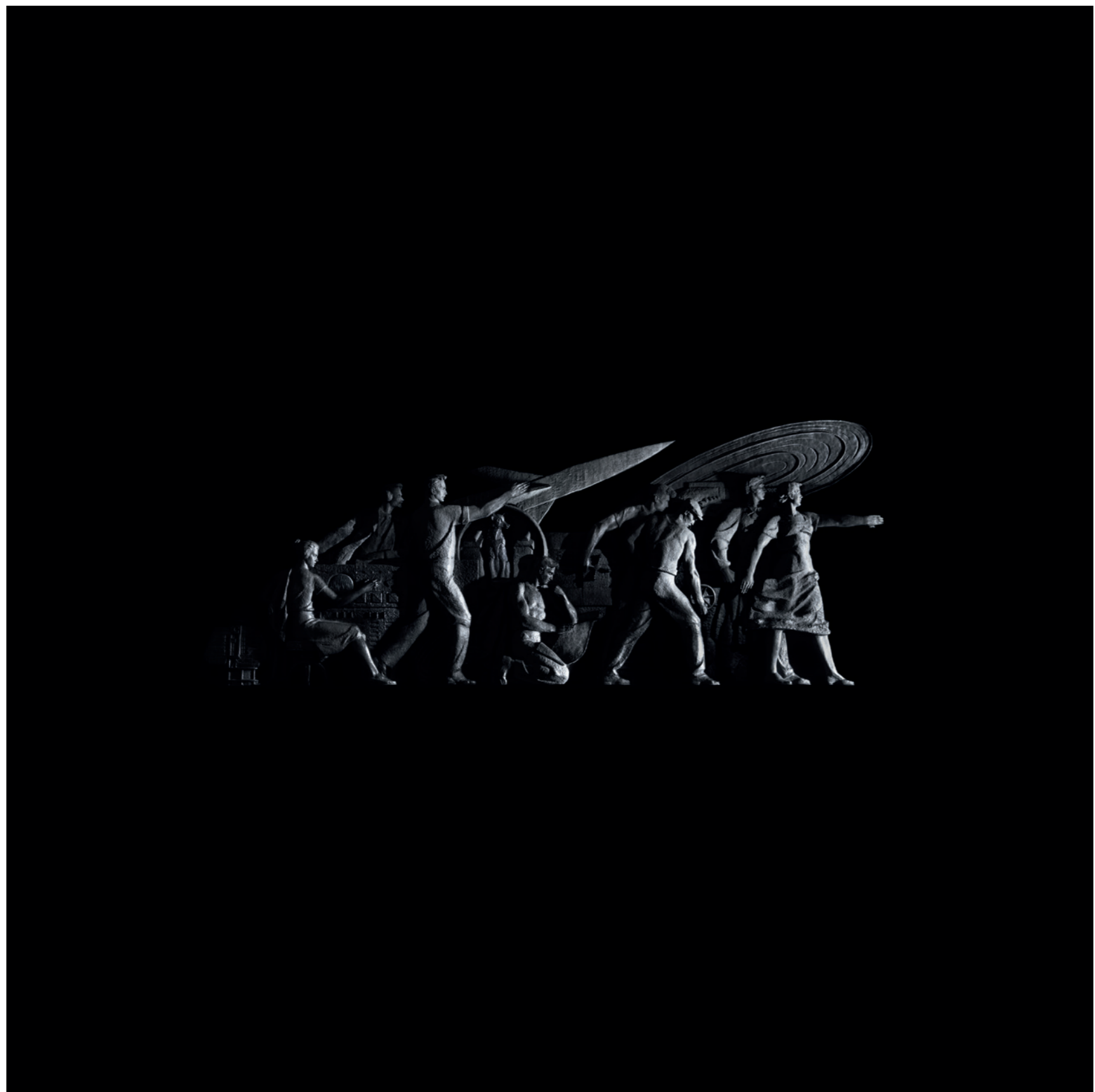
From the series *Motherland*, 2017. Photograph, 96 × 120 cm. Private collection Belgium.

With the representation of Danila Tkachenko, Nadya Kotova Gallery further strengthened its intercultural dialogue between contemporary Russian art and the Belgian art scene. Tkachenko's art practice, which focuses on photography exclusively, is situated on the border between aesthetics and research-based production, between visual poetry and information. Tkachenko's works offer an in-depth view on Russia's current state of affairs as an interface of the past-time ruins and the lost Utopian future of the Soviet Union.

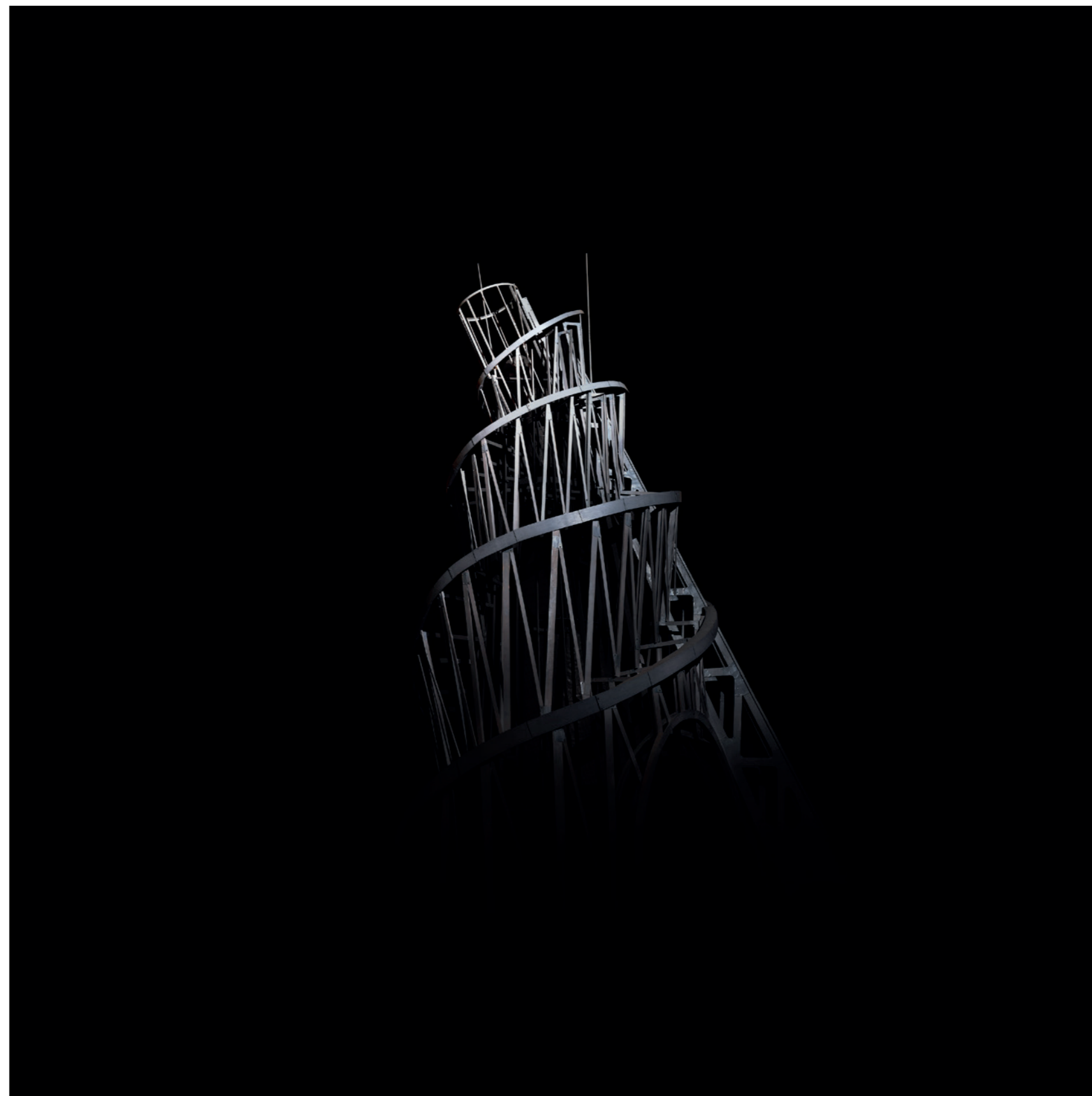
In the text accompanying Ghostlands, his solo exhibition in 2020 in Nadya Kotova Gallery, Tkachenko discloses the underlying motivation feeding his work: 'What's interesting for me is to witness what remains after progress has been put to an end. The photographs in the show are of full-fledged objects of total installations, fragments of large-scale performative actions presented by the two award winning photo series Restricted Areas and Motherland. In the series Restricted Areas the artist explores, exposes and mystifies scientific, technical and religious objects of the Soviet utopian past (an aeroplane, an abandoned observatory, oil and gas pumps, a memorial at a nuclear station, etc.). He places them in mysterious white matter, subtly reminding us of Malevich's White on White. Fragments of Soviet technological progress, historical monuments, and large-scale units, literally covered with the patina of time, are drowning in mist, and are consigned to oblivion.'

Motherland consists of chromatically saturated prints depicting burning Russian villages. In this series, Tkachenko literally burns the symbols of the departing era, liberating the space for a brighter future. Today, there are more than 150,000 abandoned villages in Russia. Their people were moved to the big cities with the promise of a bright future, which has failed to come true. The series can be described as an awakening ceremony that treats architectural structures and the ground on which they are placed as mortal creatures. At the same time, the use of fire suggested a transformation. The two series are devoid of human figures. They point to the disappearance of the human element in the Soviet project, and the regime's total reliance on machinery and technology.

However, both series stem from a personal point of departure, as mentioned by the artist in the context of Restricted Areas: 'One day, I went to visit my grandmother who lives in a closed and previously secret city where the first Soviet nuclear bomb was developed. While I was there, I learnt that in the 1960s, there had been a nuclear disaster, but it had been completely classified. As it turns out, a vast territory had been contaminated and the people living there developed a variety of chronic diseases because of the accident. The first shot of Restricted Areas was taken in this city.'



From the series *Lost Horizon*, 2016. Photograph, 122 × 122 cm.



From the series *Lost Horizon*, 2016. Photograph, 122 × 122 cm. Private collection Belgium.



From the series *Restricted Areas*, 2015. Photograph, 96 × 120 cm. Private collection Belgium.



Exhibition view *Ghost Lands*, 2020.

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From the series *Restricted Areas*, 2015. Photograph, 96 × 120 cm.

Danila Tkachenko

Tkachenko (b.1989) has participated in more than seventy museum and gallery exhibitions around the world, from Russia and Europe to Asia and North America. Tkachenko is the winner of prestigious art and photography awards, among others the Kandinsky Prize, World Press Photo Prize, The New East Photo Prize, 30 under 30 Magnum Selection Photography Prize, Leica Oskar Barnack Award, and the European Publishers Award For Photography. In 2019 Forbes made him the number one most promising Young Russian Artist.



Untitled, 2016. Mixed media on paper, 110 × 80 cm.

Didier Mahieu refers to his art practice as an adventurous voyage of interpreting archetypal motifs of our contemporary life, and of translating the geopolitical conditions in which his work is produced, displayed, and perceived. Part of the adventure guiding his practice—which mainly focuses on figurative painting and drawing—is his relationship with Nadya Kotova Gallery and with Nadya herself, a connection that revolves around their shared sensitivities.

The first solo exhibition of Didier Mahieu at Nadya Kotova Gallery, *La femme qui voyage* (January 2014), was curated by celebrated curator Willy Van den Bussche, who tragically passed away just a couple of weeks before the exhibition was set to open. However, the exhibition took place and launched the long-term collaboration and friendship between the artist and Nadya Kotova. According to Van den Bussche, Didier Mahieu 'makes work that oozes the atmosphere of a romantic landscape, and at the same time he uses pictorial means that represent this feeling on a technical level. His paintings seem to arise from themselves. It is painting with a story hidden in a fictional reality.'

The *Enactment of the Stone* (2016), Mahieu's second solo exhibition with the gallery, relied on multimedia resources elaborating on the topic of survival in extreme circumstances. It consisted of a wall installation of drawings, and a sculptural floor installation, which turned the gallery into a revelation or reconstruction of an archeological site, a ritualistic environment, both contemporary and ancient.

Mahieu had defined the space of this exhibition in geological terms, with respect to the drifting of the continents. In the exhibition text, he portrayed the situation: 'The drift has already started. We need to think and evaluate this process. It requires observation of the foundations which the continents are based on. In its essence a stone is immobile, it has not been made to be nomadic. Is a mountain in fact not but a huge stone frozen forever in time? Looking at a mountain, we are facing a mesmerising eternity, which confronts us with ourselves and our nomadism. Now the stone has started to move, but within its own time and space. Immobility and nomadism are a dialectic duo. The very fabrics of what we are made of and what surrounds us is full of paradoxes. We pick up stones and scatter them around the world. This gesture, repeated countless times, moves the territories.'

In his 2018 exhibition with the gallery, titled *Wool and Water*, the display amounted to a sort of visual travelogue introducing works of art, painting, drawing, and objects that depicted scenes from a voyage. A low row of foggy portraits and landscapes, as if on the verge of evaporation or emergence, conveyed the image of a journey, of a story-board of a travel story.

About his practice in general, Mahieu writes: 'The philosophy of my work lies in the reinterpretation of ancient or current events and geopolitical conditions. The metaphors and the metamorphoses are developed plastically by the play of chemical and alchemical conditions. Figurative painting at the starting point remains the very essence of my travel process. The portrait becomes iconic, because it is loaded with physical and organic stories; it is dedicated to moving from state to state. The landscape is absent of human presence. The spectator becomes an actor, and completes the scene in their own mind. The object is present in the process of installations, marking out, testifying, referring, while summoning the confusion of a linear reading.'