As our people extinguished the fourth reactor, as sacks fell onto the raging fire, and the heroes performed their military duty and left us, may their memory be eternal. And to those who are alive, Ukraine bows to the very ground.
Maria Prymachenko, 1995.

"This is how I dreamed of the fourth reactor"

Maria Prymachenko and (not) naive images of Chornobyl

by **Oksana Semenik**

abstract

Art in the Soviet Union was the mirror of the official communist party policy. However, Maria Prymachenko was successfully hiding the critique of the system behind "naive" pictures. She was one of the few artists who truly depicted the consequences of the Chornobyl catastrophe: from environmental issues to commemorating the dead, from illnesses to corruption surrounding liquidator certificates.
KEYWORDS: Maria Prymachenko, Chornobyl disaster, Ukrainian art, Russo-Ukrainian war, naive art.

No art exists outside of politics, even if you paint colorful animals, birds, and flowers in a quiet village far from the big cities. Politics can affect you in different ways: the government might decide to take all your food. Occupiers may come to your home and garden. Politics may force your teenage son to work on a collective farm instead of you, since you cannot work there due to a disability. And one day, a large nuclear power plant will be built near your idyllic village. And in ten years, the invisible result of hundreds of political decisions – uncontrolled radioactive contamination – will reach your land. The art of Ukrainian artist Maria Prymachenko (1908–1997) is often considered "naive" and "apolitical." Yet it is perhaps the best testimony to the Chornobyl disaster: from environmental issues to commemorating the dead, from illnesses to corruption surrounding liquidator certificates.

Prymachenko existed outside of systems and art schools and lived a few kilometers from the Exclusion Zone, in the village of Bolotnia in the Ivankiv district. She grew up, like all villagers, surrounded by folk art – *pysanky* (traditional decorated Easter eggs), embroidery, wooden sculptures, folk music, and folk beliefs. Her first artistic impressions came from traditional Ukrainian art and her own imagination. Later, she studied at the Lavra Workshops in Kyiv. In the mid-1930s, following the Holodomor, the Soviet authorities began "searching for talent in the villages." One of those searching for distinctive artists was embroiderer Tetiana Floru. She traveled to Ivankiv and immediately noticed an unusual embroidery. There, she was told about Prymachenko and directed to the village where the artist lived. According to various accounts, at Maria's home, Floru saw her drawings and decided to invite the artist to the newly-established workshops for folk artists from the village. In these workshops, located on the grounds of the Kyiv-Pechersk Lavra, folk and academic artists were to work and study side-by-side. In the 1940s, Maria Prymachenko returned to live in her native village, where she completely withdrew from the art world and lived as a single mother through World War II. In the 1960s, the generation of the young Ukrainian intellectuals called "The Sixtiers" (*Shistdesiatnyky*) revived interest in folk art and culture. While traveling through the Chornobyl region, Viktor Zaretskyi and Alla Horska (who was killed by the KGB in 1970 for her pro-Ukrainian stance) met Maria Prymachenko and helped her return to the art milieu. The Soviet authorities saw no threat in the "naive," "decorative" art of a "rural grandmother." "The Sixtiers" found not only inspiration in her magical-realist art but also safety in her home, where they could gather without KGB surveillance. All the well-known Ukrainian artists, poets, writers, museum curators, and even director Sergei Parajanov began to visit Bolotnia. Her colorful, almost conceptual art successfully conceals social and political issues behind naive images.

A BRIEF NEWS REPORT about the Chornobyl accident first appeared on Soviet television on April 28, 1986. It was not until May 14 that General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev delivered a speech that focused on accusations of an "anti-Soviet campaign" by the capitalist media, rather than on discussing the consequences of the accident or cleanup plans.[1] All these topics were classified. Other topics that could not be discussed included: the true causes of the accident at the fourth reactor, information on radiation levels, results of soil and water measurements, information on the number and condition of the population affected by radiation, and so on.[2]

For a long time, the heroism of the liquidators remained the official and permitted topic in both the media and official Soviet art. Artists were even specifically sent on assignments to the Exclusion Zone by order of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine to create portraits and "to boost morale." About a dozen artists worked in various parts of the Exclusion Zone: Prypiat, Chornobyl, the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant, and the villages of Kopachi, Stari and Novi Shepelychi, and Tovsty Lis. Some of the paintings created remained in the Zone forever – they were too contaminated by radiation.[3] Most of those who participated in the disaster consequences "liquidation" as artists have already passed away.

"I GIVE FLOWERS TO THOSE WHO WORK SHIFTS AT THE NUCLEAR PLANT. GRANT THEM, LORD, STRENGTH AND HEALTH, A LONG LIFE, AND THE ABILITY TO RAISE THEIR CHILDREN AND GRANDCHILDREN."

Oleg Veklenko, a renowned Ukrainian graphic artist and founder of the international environmental poster triennial "The 4th Block," was mobilized almost immediately – by May 3, he was already in the Exclusion Zone and remained there for two months. His duties included showing films from a special booth, painting ideological posters (as he himself recalled, for this he had to barter for or steal paint and boards on his own), and, of course, engaging in various tasks related to the cleanup of the accident. At the same time, Veklenko took documentary

The eagle flew in, landed on the fourth block, and grew sad: there's nowhere to feed, poplars are growing on the fourth block. Maria Prymachenko, 1995.

This bird flies everywhere, searching for her husband. But he is nowhere to be found; his body has scattered across all of Ukraine. Flowers will grow, children will pick them, and carry them to the graves. But my grave has flown into the sky. Maria Prymachenko, 1993.

photographs of his daily life and sketched portraits of the liquidators. The first exhibition of these portraits took place right in Chornobyl – at the entrance to the camp where the liquidators lived. At first, it was simply called "The Wall of Honor," but later the political department approved the title "Time Gives Birth to Heroes." Then, as Veklenko recalls in *Chornobyl: Sketches from life*, the command issued an order to display this "exhibition" in various locations throughout the zone.[4]

UNOFFICIAL ART had more freedom in expressing the consequences and imagery of the Chornobyl disaster. The theme of the liquidators' heroism, on the one hand, was fueled by the Soviet authorities. On the other hand, the desire to somehow support those affected by the accident and help mitigate the consequences was also sincere. Citizens raised funds for the victims, offered to host them in their homes, built new houses for the displaced free of charge, and volunteered to go work in the Exclusion Zone. There was a need for people in various professions: from builders to cooks, from nurses to laundry workers. For those artists who worked at the site of the accident, the heroes most often had names. For most artists outside of the disaster "liquidation" efforts, it was a tribute to abstract heroism.

Maria Prymachenko signed each of her works with almost poetic narratives, using her native Chornobyl dialect. Sometimes these signatures bear witness to historical events, and at other times they convey the philosophy and worldview of the artist and the people of Polissia. Prymachenko's floral compositions are always about dedication, wishes, or tribute. In particular, she dedicates a floral composition to the workers of the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant: *I give flowers to those who work shifts at the nuclear plant. Grant them, Lord, strength and health, a long life, and the ability to raise their children and grandchildren. Thank you, our dear workers*. Another work is dedicated to the liquidators – *As our people extinguished the fourth reactor, as sacks fell onto the raging fire, and the heroes performed their military duty and left us, may their memory be eternal. And to those who are alive, Ukraine bows to the very ground.*

It depicts a yellow helicopter in which a person, seemingly in a spacesuit, drops three sacks. We see fire rising from the reactor unit where a snake sits. The nuclear reactor appears as absolute evil, the devil, or even the Antichrist. For most artists who were not direct participants in the cleanup or did not live in areas close to the Exclusion Zone, the Chornobyl disaster took on mythological and even apocalyptic imagery. Hanna Chuchvaha, in her article *Memory, Trauma, the Maternal*, notes that:

> **[...] for many Belarusians and Ukrainians, Chornobyl is synonymous with an immeasurable trauma that goes beyond a simple association with the disaster zone and enters the existential realms of human birth and death.**[5]

According to Griselda Pollock, traumatic experience is primarily associated with the female gender, where the maternal-feminine is linked not only to life but also to death.[6] It was precisely the images of "Chornobyl Madonnas" that dominated Ukrainian art after the disaster. For example, the "Chornobyl Madonnas" by Ivan Marchuk, Vudon Baklyts'ki, and Ivan Zhupan. In Ukrainian literature, the seminal work that resonated even during the Soviet era was "The Chornobyl Madonna" by Ivan Drach, the poet from the generation of "The Sixties". The poem provides poetic images of contemporary Ukrainian (Chornobyl) women. For example, an elderly woman returning to her native village after

evacuation. In the section of the poem titled *Variation on a trite plot, or the old woman in cellophane – our mother*, he describes a fictional (but not entirely) story. Soldiers in a helicopter notice something strange: "two aliens from outer space" are walking around in cellophane suits. It turns out they aren't aliens at all, but an old woman and a cow, both wrapped in cellophane, who didn't leave during the evacuation.

> **'Why on earth did you wrap the cow in plastic, granny?'**
> **'What, haven't you heard about the radiation?'**[7]

Drach mocks the absurd and ineffective recommendations from the Soviet authorities. In 1986, Maria Prymachenko also depicted a cow in plastic wrap alongside an old man. As a conceptual artist, she creates allegorical images featuring animals, flowers, or people that, at first glance, appear merely decorative, and explains her idea on the back of the sheet. For example, a bird that at first glance appears ordinary, standing next to a frog, is actually discussing water contaminated with radionuclides ("The partridge speaks to the frog. The frog says: 'We are in trouble, nowhere to swim: the water is contaminated. Woe to us!"). And a large blue catfish, due to the danger of contaminated water, has crawled onto land in search for a clean body of water where it can live ("A Polissia catfish crawled out of the pond into the forest, looking for clean water. And we don't have any!"). She captions the cow in cellophane as follows: *Just as there was trouble with Reactor 4 in Chornobyl, an old man is herding a cow there. To protect it from radiation, he wrapped its legs, horns, and even its tail, but the cow is munching on grass – it won't listen to anyone. That's the kind of old man he is.*

The cow's tail, horns, and hooves are wrapped in cellophane, and its udder is protected by lead. Did Prymachenko realize that she was not merely criticizing the Soviet system – which failed to protect its citizens and covered up the disaster – but also illustrating the effects of external and internal radiation exposure? Even if the cow and the old man had been completely shielded by lead, the cow still ate contaminated grass and would produce contaminated milk. It is not known for certain whether Prymachenko read Drach, or whether, perhaps, Drach saw Prymachenko's work. But local residents of the Ivankiv district, which borders the Exclusion Zone, recall that shepherds were issued chemical protection suits.

AND ALTHOUGH Maria Prymachenko did not create her own "Chornobyl Madonna," she immortalized another, real mother – Hanna Khodemchuk: *The mother sits by the house, the mother sits by the garden, looking at her son's footprints, she weeps and says: "My son, my falcon, when will you fly to me, when I see you, I will only cry."* The day before the disaster, Valery Khodemchuk was at his mother's house in the village, working in the garden, pruning the trees. The ground was still damp, and his footprints remained. For a long time, his mother wouldn't let anyone into the garden, so as not to trample the footprints of her son, whose body had vanished and was buried forever in the ruins of the fourth reactor. Valery Khodemchuk became the first victim of the Chornobyl disaster. During the reactor explosion, he was in the pump room, almost at the epicenter. Beneath the new safe confinement now lie not only the ruins of the nuclear reactor, but also Valery Khodemchuk's grave. His death struck Maria Prymachenko not only because of the extraordinary story of a simple worker from a Polissia village whose name became known to the whole world – he was her nephew. The artist dedicated several works to "Valerik," as she called him. In 1989, she depicted a bird flying amidst nature: *This bird flies everywhere, searching for her husband. But he is nowhere to be found; his body has scattered across all of Ukraine. Flowers will grow, children will pick them, and carry them to the graves. But my grave has flown into the sky.* Prymachenko metaphysically senses Khodemchuk's demise: the atoms of his body scattered along with the radiation across all of Ukraine. And he is not buried beneath the rubble of the power plant, but in the sky. This bird is yet another depiction of the Chornobyl female figure: a bird symbolizing Valery's wife, Natalia Khodemchuk. In November 2025, Natalia also flew away into eternity. A Russian drone struck the woman's apartment. She died in the hospital from her injuries and burns.[8]

"PRYMACHENKO NOT ONLY ENVISIONS THE REBIRTH OF THE CHORNOBYL LAND BUT ALSO ALMOST PRECISELY DEPICTS THE NEW SAFE CONTAINMENT STRUCTURE – ONLY IN THE PAINTING IT IS BLACK, WHILE IN REALITY IT IS LIGHT."

The memory of the disaster was central to Maria Prymachenko's art. Her large-scale memorial work *This is how I dreamed of the fourth reactor* serves as a unique monument to the accident liquidators who lost their lives. The painting depicts a power unit adorned with flowers, with birds flying above it – the souls of the deceased; future generations come to it to honor the memory of the heroes. The flowers symbolize the artist's belief that the land of Chornobyl will be reborn. *This is how I dreamed of the fourth reactor. Flowers will grow on it. And children will carry flowers. It will stand as a monument forever beside it. Our heroes, the doves, will fly in; they saved us, they left us*, Maria Prymachenko captioned the painting, created in 1988. Prymachenko not only envisions the rebirth of the Chornobyl land but also almost precisely depicts the new safe containment structure – only in the painting it is black, while in reality it is light. The artist depicts a similar structure in yet another memorial work and further emphasizes the rebirth of nature: *The eagle flew in, landed on the fourth block, and grew sad: there's nowhere to feed, poplars are growing on the fourth block*. It is also striking that Prymachenko somehow knew that the abandoned city of Prypiat would be

Just as there was trouble with Reactor 4 in Chornobyl, an old man is herding a cow there. To protect it from radiation, he wrapped its legs, horns, and even its tail, but the cow is munching on grass – it won't listen to anyone. That's the kind of old man he is. Maria Prymachenko, 1989.

overgrown with poplars, many of which were planted during the construction of Atomgrad. In one of her interviews, Maria Prymachenko shares her vision of the future:

> **I had a dream that I am walking through a beautiful green field. The sun is shining, the birds are singing. It's as beautiful as paradise. Everything will be fine with us – and the radiation won't harm us. Ukraine will bloom again.**

Prymachenko felt a deep sorrow for the nature of her native, idyllic Polissia, which was facing a nuclear disaster. The artist's works addressing the environmental and socio-political themes of Chornobyl were censored. They were either excluded from exhibitions altogether or had their original titles replaced with neutral ones. For example, in the album *Maria Prymachenko*, published in 1989, the works from the Chornobyl series are ignored. Her works continue to be called "folk paintings," with the focus solely on fantastical beasts "that do not exist in nature," and she is described as "a peasant woman from a quiet Polissia village." And there is no mention that, after the Chornobyl disaster, Bolotnia is no longer an idyllic, quiet place. And the only work they did accept is a painting of a red beast opening its toothy mouth: *Mr. Reagan, look at this painting and think about how heavy, burdensome, and senseless this atomic thing is. Look at it and make peace with us, so there may be peace on Earth. The atom is beautiful, [but] you can play with it and say goodbye to your loved ones*. In it, Prymachenko addresses US' President Ronald Reagan, back in the year of the 1986 disaster, hinting at the end of the Cold War and nuclear arms. However, Soviet censors renamed it in the album to the more neutral *The threat of war*.

THE CHORNOBYL paintings were not purchased for Ukrainian museum collections under state commission. Almost all of them are in private collections, except for about ten "neutral" ones that did not criticize the Soviet authorities, did not address environmental issues, or were visually more typical of the artist's style. For example, another work depicting a bull and a frog from the Chernihiv Art Museum appears in catalogs with the abbreviated and neutral caption *The bull went to the Meadow*. In the artist's

original concept, the frog warns the bull not to eat the grass, as it is contaminated with radionuclides. The bull replies that he was born in Ukraine and lives in Polissia, and therefore he is not afraid of radiation. This reads as fatalism, an acceptance of one's fate – a life near the fourth reactor. After all, Maria Prymachenko herself, upon learning of the Chornobyl reactor explosion, as the matriarch of her family, decided not to leave her land and ordered her son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren to continue working in the garden and vegetable patch. She wasn't afraid of radiation; she was only worried that her paintings would get dirty and she wouldn't be able to show them to people. Ukrainian poet Iryna Zhylenko of "The Sixtiers" generation, who lived in Kyiv in 1986, kept a diary of her daily life during the Chornobyl disaster.

> **In Kyiv, children are being sent to pioneer camps starting on the 15th [of May][...] Yesterday I saw how Vira's elderly mother was calmly picking onions and radishes from the garden. I told her she shouldn't do that. And she (a completely illiterate peasant woman, half-deaf) gave me a lesson in wisdom – not so much wisdom as a clear-eyed understanding of our situation. She said: 'The land is poisoned for a long time, not just for a year or two. We won't be able to escape it far or for long. No one needs us anywhere. And we ourselves won't be able to leave our land forever. We'll still have to eat the fruits of our land, because if we don't eat, we'll die.' That is what the old woman told me, and I understood that this was not pessimism, but the realization of an inescapable truth, and therefore (since there is no escape) –reconciliation with it and acceptance [...].**[9]

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War came to the town of Ivankiv in northern Kyiv Oblast on February 25, 2022. The night before, Russian troops had invaded Ukraine through the Exclusion Zone. They seized the Chornobyl Nuclear Power Plant and its personnel, then advanced further from the Belarusian border – toward Bucha, Borodianka, Kyiv, and Ivankiv. On February 25, fighting broke out in the town. That same day, a shell struck the Ivankiv Local History Museum, where works by Prymachenko were housed. The fire engulfed the museum. The museum guard was the first to spot the fire. As the roof caught fire, the man pulled everything he could out of the flames. Fourteen of the artist's 25 paintings on display at the museum were saved. Local residents hid these works until the end of the Russian occupation. The fact that residents risked their lives to save the artist's works is the best testament to the pricelessness of Maria Pryimachenko's art.

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Note: All images are from the collection of Eduard Dymshyts, published with the courtesey of Prymachenko's family.

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