

THE GROUND SHIFTS BENEATH OUR FEET

ZHANNA KADYROVA





Fig 1. Still from *IDP* (directed by Zhanna Kadyrova, 2026).

The Ukrainian Museum presents ***The Ground Shifts Beneath Our Feet | Zhanna Kadyrova***, the first North American museum exhibition of internationally acclaimed Ukrainian artist Zhanna Kadyrova. Working across performance, public art, sculpture, and film, Kadyrova first gained recognition for her exploration of sociopolitical change and urban life.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine changed everything.

Kadyrova fled her hometown, seeking refuge in the natural world. This forced interruption of daily life and artistic practice marked a profound shift in Kadyrova's work, leading her to employ unexpected materials and forms in response to wartime conditions.

Upon returning to Kyiv, Kadyrova dedicated her artistic practice to the examination of both the devastating consequences of conflict and the unexpected moments of beauty that can emerge from destruction. Since then, she has become a leading voice in contemporary art, demonstrating how wartime artworks can function simultaneously as an act of resistance, an immediate response to unfolding events, and a poetic reflection on violence.

Bringing together five bodies of work created since the invasion—*Palianytsia* (2022–present), *Russian Rocket* (2022–present), *The Forest* (2023–2025), *Anxiety* (2022–present), and *IDP* (2026)—*The Ground Shifts Beneath Our Feet* traces Kadyrova's evolving engagement with war through the lens of ecological transformation.



Fig 2. David Levene, “Zhanna Kadyrova and the IDP team at UNESCO in Paris.” *The Guardian*, 2026.

Kadyrova extends her longstanding use of found materials in projects such as *Palianytsia*, where stones from the Carpathian Mountains are fashioned, through both natural and human intervention, to resemble traditional loaves of bread. Works such as *Russian Rocket* and *Anxiety* bear witness to the persistence of ordinary life under extraordinary pressure through subtle transformations of cultural textiles and familiar landscapes. The exhibition culminates with *The Forest* and *IDP*, video works that draw parallels between the horrific destruction and inevitable resilience of natural landscapes and that of the Ukrainian people.

The Ground Shifts Beneath Our Feet reminds us not only of the fundamental relationship between humanity and the earth, but also of our shared capacity for regeneration.

Kadyrova lives and works in Kyiv. She is the recipient of the 2012 Kazimir Malevich Prize, the 2013 PinchukArtCentre Grand Prize, and the 2025 Taras Shevchenko National Prize in Visual Arts. Her work has been exhibited at the Centre Pompidou, Palais de Tokyo, Castello di Rivoli, Ludwig Museum Budapest, Kunstverein Hannover, and numerous institutions across Europe, the Middle East, and the Americas.

The exhibition is conceived by the Ukrainian Museum, Zhanna Kadyrova, and curated by the artist in collaboration with the curatorial team at the Ukrainian Museum, with contributions from Asha Bukojemsky.

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Major support for The Ground Shifts Beneath Our Feet has been provided by Illiana van Meeteren and Terrence Boylan. Additional support has been provided by Stefan and Larissa Sygida Peleschuk, and the Leshko family.

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Fig 3. Zhanna Kadyrova, *Palianytsia*, 2022–present. Found river stones; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

Palianytsia (2022–present) centers on the Ukrainian word for traditional wheat bread, now a symbol of resistance and national identity since Russia’s invasion. The project includes drawings and stone sculptures carved to resemble palianytsia loaves, made from stones collected in the Carpathian rivers. Arranged on a banquet-style table, the sculptures transform everyday food into a political statement.



Fig 4. Zhanna Kadyrova, *Russian Rocket*, 2022–present. Multimedia series; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

Employing quotidian materials such as stickers and iPhone cameras, Kadyrova’s ***Russian Rocket*** (2022–present) relies on a simple visual gesture to simulate the flight of a Russian missile across peaceful landscapes. This multimedia work reflects the intrusion of war into everyday life and brings the reality of Ukraine’s conflict into familiar settings around the world.



Fig 5. Zhanna Kadyrova, *The Forest*, 2023–2025. Multimedia installation; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

The Forest (2023–2025) draws upon video, sound, photography, and archival materials to explore the aftermath of Russia’s destruction of the Kakhovka Dam in 2023. Over a two-year period, Kadyrova filmed the unexpected growth of a forest on this site of ecological disaster, creating a work reflective of both environmental loss and nature’s capacity for renewal.

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Fig 6. Zhanna Kadyrova, *Anxiety*, 2022–present. Hand embroidery with hand and machine-embroidered text; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

Anxiety (2022–present) juxtaposes domestic comfort with the constant threat of air raids that has shaped daily life in Ukraine since 2022. Using traditional embroidered textiles and contemporary drawings, Kadyrova transposes the words повітряна тривога (air alarm) into idyllic scenes, revealing how war permeates familiar spaces.



Fig 7. Still from *IDP* (directed by Zhanna Kadyrova, 2026).

IDP (*Internally Displaced Person*) (2026) is a documentary film centered on the forced evacuation of Kadyrova's *Origami Deer*, a monument to disarmament originally installed on the plinth of a former nuclear-capable aircraft. Following the sculpture's journey across Europe, *IDP* frames *Origami Deer* as an internally displaced person, tracing migratory paths that parallel those of individuals uprooted by war—collapsing the distance between artwork and lived experience.

PALIANYTSIA



PALIANYTSIA

Palianytsia means bread. In the traditional sense, it refers to a large, round wheat loaf baked in an oven. At the start of the war Russia unleashed against Ukraine, the word *palianytsia* became a symbol because Russian occupiers were unable to pronounce it correctly. It became a shibboleth, distinguishing friend from enemy. In addition to conventional troops, Russia sent groups of saboteurs into Ukrainian cities ahead of the invasion. Dressed as civilians, they gathered intelligence on military positions, checkpoints, and infrastructure, while leaving identifying marks to guide aviation and landing forces.



Fig 8. Nataliia Diachenko, “Zhanna Kadyrova’s *Palianytsia*.” Courtesy of the artist.

The *Palianytsia* project was inspired by the Transcarpathian region, where my collaborator Denis Ruban and I took refuge. During the second week of the war, our family was forced to leave Kyiv. The villages here are sheltered by the Carpathian Mountains and are crossed by fast-moving rivers that polish the stones along their beds.

There are no strategic military sites nearby, so we believed we were safe. While searching for a place to live, we noticed the river stones and the idea for the project emerged. There was no time for distance or analysis—only a growing need to do something useful.

After days of searching, we found a small house without utilities and began rebuilding it with the owners. Eventually, we restored electricity, internet access, and the basic necessities needed to live and work. Being able to continue working helped us remain sane because it gave us a sense of purpose. We donated all proceeds from these artworks to volunteer organizations and friends who remained in Kyiv and joined the Territorial Defense forces. During the first weeks of the war, art seemed powerless in the face of destruction and loss. I no longer believe that. Every artistic gesture makes us visible and ensures that our voices are heard.

— ZHANNA KADYROVA, 2022



RUSSIAN ROCKET



Fig 9. Zhanna Kadyrova, *Russian Rocket*, 2022-present. Multimedia series; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

Russian Rocket is a multimedia project that simulates the flight of a Russian missile through peaceful environments. Rocket-shaped stickers are affixed to the windows of moving vehicles; while the stickers themselves remain static, the motion of the vehicle creates the illusion of missiles cutting across the landscape.

While Kadyrova typically works with documentary materials and found objects, this project relies on deliberate visual manipulation. Rather than recording destruction directly, Kadyrova constructs a universal image of impending danger, conveying both the psychological toll of war and the vulnerability of everyday life.

This simple yet powerful gesture evokes a pervasive sense of threat, one intimately familiar to Ukrainians. Transforming an ordinary cityscape into a site of unease, *Russian Rocket* generates an experience that resonates with viewers regardless of their geographic or political context.



THE FOREST

Zhanna Kadyrova, *The Forest*, 2025. Camera obscura image. Courtesy of the artist.

In June 2023, Russia's war on Ukraine led to the destruction of the Kakhovka Dam. A reservoir providing drinking water and food security for more than 700,000 people, the dam's explosion resulted in a humanitarian catastrophe, destroying 40 villages and displacing thousands.

Yet in the face of violence, the Kakhovka area, like the Ukrainian people, has persisted. Today, a large forest and swamp ecosystem has reclaimed the land, welcoming back long-absent species and becoming the largest floodplain forest on the Ukrainian steppe. The Kakhovka landscape—shifting between meadow and sea over millennia—has long mirrored the Ukrainian people, serving as a dual symbol of cultural endurance and ecological adaptability.

The Forest is a multimedia installation documenting the transformation of the Kakhovka landscape. Over two years, Kadyrova filmed the rebirth of the forest across changing seasons and shifting war-zone boundaries, capturing meditative images of swaying poplars and expansive willows that counteract what was thought to be irreversible damage. The crux of this work is a boat floating at the height of the treetops. As a symbol for humanity, the boat serves as a measure of the forest's vitality and a monument to the area's identity as the cradle of Cossack culture.

The Forest was commissioned by IHME Helsinki, and was realized together with the Dovzhenko Centre film archive in Kyiv, the City of Zaporizhzhia, and the Khortytsia Museum. Numerous local people in the Zaporizhzhia region have also assisted Kadyrova.



Fig 10. Zhanna Kadyrova, *The Forest*, 2023–2025. Multimedia installation; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

THE LANDSCAPE OF OUR TIME

This essay was written by Paula Toppila, Executive Director and Curator of IHME Helsinki, on the occasion of the institution's presentation of The Forest as the 2025 IHME Helsinki Commission.

The Great Meadow. The Kakhovka Sea. The Kakhovka Forest. Three names for the same geographical area, each reflecting a different stage of human transformation: first from meadow to sea, and then from sea to forest. The Kakhovka Forest is the central subject of Ukrainian artist Zhanna Kadyrova's *The Forest*.

It took just one year for the Kakhovka Forest to emerge on the site of the former reservoir built on Ukraine's largest river, the Dnipro. The Kakhovka Dam, which was destroyed in June 2023 during Russia's war against Ukraine, had held back an enormous reservoir. The sudden release of water caused by the dam's destruction triggered both a humanitarian and an environmental catastrophe. More than 40 towns and villages were flooded, affecting tens of thousands of people and animals. The drinking water supply and food security of over 700,000 people were put at risk.

The environmental consequences extended beyond the immediate flooding. Pollutants that had accumulated on the reservoir bed were released into the water, creating a long-term source of contamination that future floods could spread across an even wider area. Parts of the region were also mined during the war, rendering them unsafe for human use and posing a threat to numerous animal species. "A return to life or a toxic timebomb?" asked a July 2025 *Guardian* article about the rapidly growing forest that forms the subject of Kadyrova's work.

The construction of the dam 75 years ago was a violent act, comparable in its impact on the area's environmental diversity and cultural identity to its destruction by bombing. Construction began in 1950, during the final years of Joseph Stalin's (1878–1953) dictatorial rule, as part of his large-scale industrialization projects intended to ensure the Soviet Union's self-sufficiency. Technological progress was combined with a grandiose exercise of power, while the culture and history of local people were treated as insignificant. An immeasurable part of the region's cultural history and material heritage was buried beneath the vast reservoir. According to archaeological research, the area has been inhabited for more than two thousand years and is particularly known as the cradle of Cossack culture from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Part of this history has been preserved on Khortytsia—the largest island in the Dnipro River, located in the city of Zaporizhzhia—where the region's natural and cultural heritage is safeguarded by the Khortytsia Museum.

The Kakhovka Reservoir covered a vast forest and wetland ecosystem known as Velykyi Luh, or the Great Meadow. In June 2023, the reservoir was emptied, and just one year later the young forest depicted in Kadyrova’s work had grown in its place. This rapid transformation demonstrates the power of nature. Willows and poplars, grown from seeds that had settled on the reservoir bed, reached heights of three to four metres within a single year, forming the largest floodplain forest on the Ukrainian steppe. The forest grew far more quickly than any human-led reforestation effort could have achieved in the same period. Numerous plant and animal species are returning to the former reservoir area, but climate change, along with plans to rebuild the dam, threatens its future.

Kadyrova’s decision to remain in her homeland after the outbreak of the war, and her desire to witness its scars with her own eyes, powerfully shaped the creation of *The Forest*. As Executive Director of IHME Helsinki, I commissioned this work from Zhanna Kadyrova, inviting her to explore the environmental dimension of the war. The project took on a new urgency when the artist encountered the landscape revealed beneath the “Kakhovka Sea” and began to grapple with its uncertain and complex future. The central subject of this commission became the vast wooded area known as the Kakhovka Forest.

Her first artistic intervention in this landscape was to bring in a boat and suspend it at the height of the former water level of the Sea. Time became a significant factor, as did the need to document the unusually rapid growth of nature, with the boat serving as a poetic measure of this transformation. The ambitious goal was to film the forest regularly over the course of a year. This was particularly challenging because the Kakhovka Forest lies partly within a war zone. In the end, a safer filming location was found just 27 kilometres from the frontline. With the help of many friends and local residents, Kadyrova achieved her goal, capturing part of the second year of the young forest’s life, from autumn through summer. Camera obscura images of the forest’s growth were made in July 2025.

The exhibition presents moving images of the forest that has grown where the reservoir once stood. Amid trees swaying in the wind, we see a boat suspended at the height of the treetops—the same height as the water level of the reservoir that once occupied this place. The boat is simultaneously a symbol of humanity, a measure of the forest’s extraordinary vitality, and a monument to the area’s past as the “Kakhovka Sea”—the locals’ name for the reservoir—as that past gradually disappears beneath the forest. Set against the growth of the forest, the boat travels through time from morning to dusk, through night and dawn, accompanied by a succession of moonlight, fog, sunrises, and sunsets. The exhibition functions as a condensation of time: a cyclical image of a landscape in which past and future utopias and dystopias continue to simmer ominously.

The past, present, and speculative futures are present not only in the video works, but also in the documents displayed on an oval table. These trace the cruel history of dam construction on the Dnipro and its tributaries, rivers that in Ukrainian culture symbolize the cycles of nature.

When presented at IHME Helsinki, the oval table accompanying *The Forest* also was spread with research materials, maps, and video footage documenting the fate of people and animals stranded by the flooding caused by the war. These materials were loaned from *The River Wailed Like a Wounded Beast*, an exhibition presented in Kyiv in 2023. The exhibition also included artist Mykola Bazarkin's reinterpretation of Oleksandr Dovzhenko's Stalin-era propaganda film on the construction of the dam.

A battle is being fought on two fronts over the future of the Kakhovka Dam. There are compelling arguments for rebuilding the dam and restoring the reservoir, as they would help meet the drinking water and agricultural irrigation needs of southern Ukraine. If reconstruction proceeds, however, the process is expected to take around five years and would once again submerge the forest. The young, largely unexplored ecosystem that has emerged since the reservoir's disappearance would be lost.

At the same time, the value of this new landscape is becoming an increasingly important topic of debate in Ukraine. According to a 2025 report by the Ukrainian War Environmental Consequences Work Group (UWEC), the newly formed forest ecosystem offers significant opportunities for carbon capture and storage. "This is an opportunity we cannot afford to miss," Eugene Simonov, International Coordinator of the Rivers Without Boundaries Coalition, told *The Guardian* in July 2025. "If Ukraine chooses to protect Velykyi Luh, it won't just be saving a landscape, it will be choosing to believe in its own future." Oleksiy Vasyliuk, co-author of the UWEC's 2025 report on the reservoir and head of the Ukrainian Nature Conservation Group, adds:

"This is our biocultural sovereignty at stake and that means our nature, our identity, our independence, and a symbol of the kind of nation we want to become."

The main protagonists of Kadyrova's commission are two of the planet's life-sustaining systems: forests and waterways. The third is humankind, whose actions have endangered both—not only in the case study presented by the commission, but on a planetary scale. *The Forest* offers a powerful image of a landscape, a nation, and humanity at a crossroads, where the possibilities of both utopia and dystopia coexist. Yet the extraordinary vitality of the forest depicted by Kadyrova also offers hope: for ecological renewal, and for reconstruction in the aftermath of war.



For the time being, the cycle of life documented in *The Forest* is still governed by nature and its laws. The lives of plants and animals are guided by an inherent knowledge of how to sustain life.

It is the human species whose boat is in danger of sinking. Yet if we learn to disappear into the forest like the boat, there may still be hope.

Paula Toppila
Executive Director, Curator
IHME Helsinki

August 17, 2025

ANXIETY

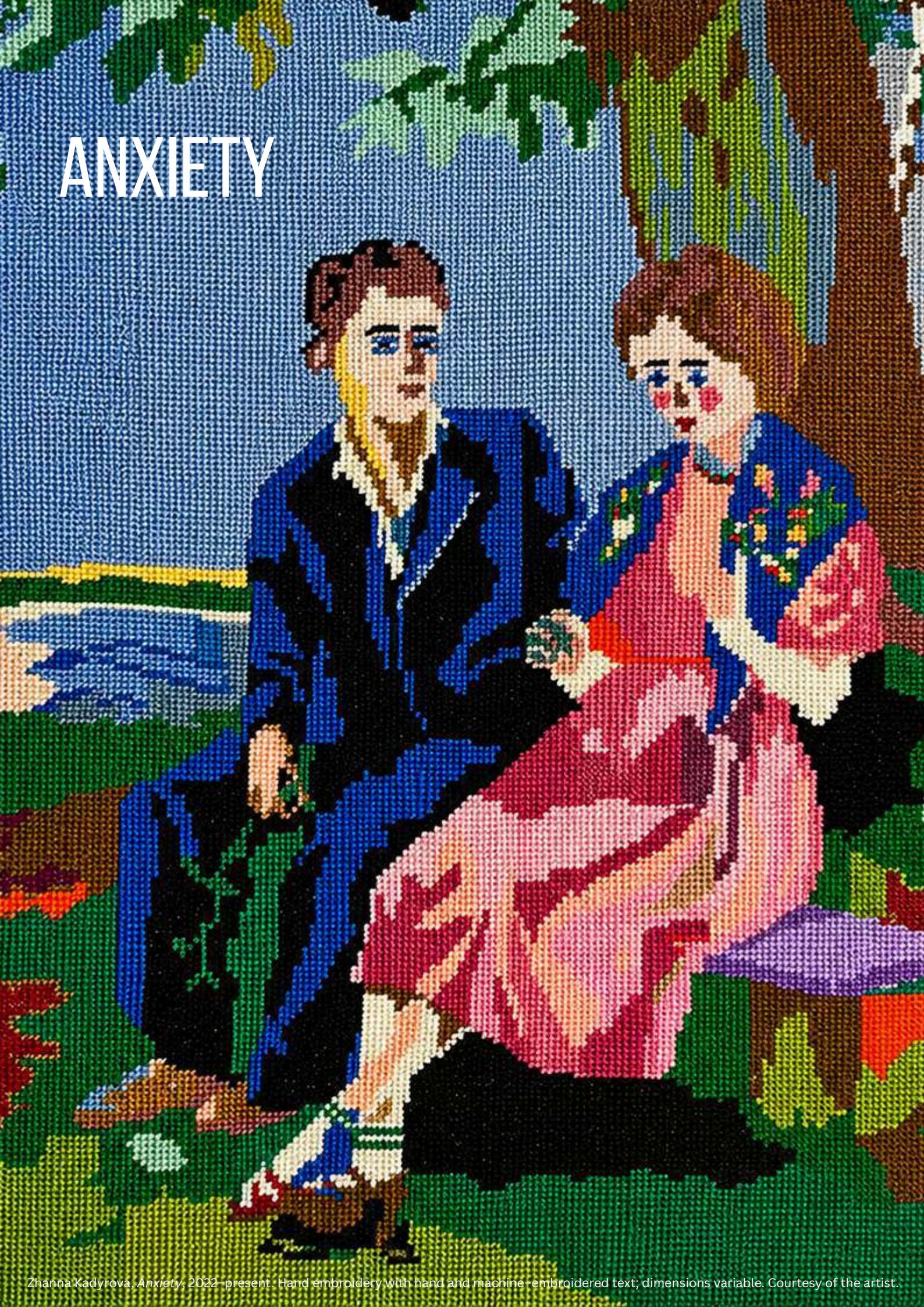




Fig 11. Zhanna Kadyrova, *Anxiety*, 2024. Hand embroidery with hand and machine-embroidered text; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.

Anxiety began with the sound of an air alarm. While sheltering from military attacks in March 2022, Kadyrova and those around her were exposed to air alarms several times a day. The blaring sirens quickly became an unwanted yet inescapable leitmotif of everyday life during war.

Drawing on culturally-specific textiles and contemporary sketches, Kadyrova overlays the words of the air raid warning onto idyllic scenes—a couple sitting by a river, a cat nestled in a flower basket, and other images of domestic peace. This juxtaposition of tranquillity and disruption captures the pervasive anxiety that Ukrainians continue to experience under the shadow of war. With повітряна тривога (air alarm) suspended across embroidered blue skies, *Anxiety* reminds us that, until the war ends, there are no truly safe places in Ukraine.

Work on *Anxiety* continues, with Kadyrova adapting the series to the cultural specificities of different countries. The phrase повітряна тривога is translated into the local language and incorporated into native textile traditions and contemporary visual imagery.

The expansion of *Anxiety* can be understood not only as an act of international solidarity, but also as a metaphor for the far-reaching impact of Russian aggression beyond Ukraine's borders. The series serves as a reminder that war is not solely a Ukrainian concern, but a global challenge whose consequences extend far beyond the immediate battlefield.

IDP



Simone Padovani, "Origami Deer at the 2026 Venice Biennale." Getty Images, 2026.



Fig 12. Still from *IDP* (directed by Zhanna Kadyrova, 2026).

IDP (*Internally Displaced Person*) is a documentary film that follows the wartime evacuation of Kadyrova's *Origami Deer*, a sculpture originally created for Leontovych Park in Pokrovsk, Donetsk region. Through the sculpture's displacement, the film examines how war transforms the meaning of monuments, places, and cultural objects.

The story begins with *Origami Deer* itself, a work rooted in Kadyrova's interest in origami as a democratic art form. Following origami manuals step by step, she translated a familiar garden motif into a monumental concrete sculpture. Originally installed atop the plinth of a former nuclear-capable aircraft, *Origami Deer* stood as a monument to peace, disarmament, and cultural independence. As Russian forces approached, however, the sculpture was cut from its pedestal and evacuated alongside civilians.

IDP traces the sculpture's migration through Poland, Austria, Czechia, Germany, and beyond, before its eventual arrival at Ukraine's pavilion for the 2026 Venice Biennale, *Security Guarantees*. As Kadyrova notes, the sculpture "followed the same routes as people" displaced by war. Situating the sculpture's journey within the context of *Security Guarantees*—named after the 1994 Budapest Memorandum—*IDP* connects *Origami Deer* to the failed assurances that accompanied Ukraine's nuclear disarmament. In doing so, the film transforms the sculpture from a monument to peace and disarmament into a lens through which to consider displacement, uncertainty, and survival during wartime.

THE UKRAINIAN PAVILION'S DEER SEEN AROUND THE WORLD

This article by Gregory Volk was originally published in Hyperallergic on May 13, 2026. At the exhibition's opening on June 20, Volk will join Zadyrova in an artist talk.

On Tuesday, May 5, the day before previews began at this year's Venice Biennale, Russia launched a massive missile attack on Ukraine, targeting, as is usual, civilians and civilian infrastructure. Twenty-seven people perished, and well over one hundred were injured. At the 61st iteration of the international art event, among many scandals and controversies, the Biennale's startling decision to welcome Russia back into the fold despite the now five years of its brutal, unprovoked war on Ukraine looms as especially shameful.

With very few exceptions, this war—the worst in Europe since World War II—was largely invisible throughout the sprawling Biennale, including the main exhibition *In Minor Keys*, the national pavilions, and copious collateral events, although there were occasionally emphatic protests outside the Russian pavilion. This makes Zhanna Kadyrova's multifaceted project *Security Guarantees*, which is in the Ukrainian Pavilion at the Arsenale, especially significant, a project that confronts the war head-on.

For me, it is a signature work in the Biennale, and one of the most consequential.

Fitted into an orange harness and suspended from a crane, Kadyrova's sculpture *Origami Deer* (2019) is prominently displayed at the entrance to the Giardini, a short distance from the Russian Pavilion. Made of heavy gray concrete and shaped like a deer, it also looks delicate and light, suggesting a giant origami construction; it encapsulates both fragility and strength. According to accompanying texts, the suggestion of folded paper invokes the 1994 Budapest Memorandum, a document signed by the Russian Federation, United Kingdom, and United States, information on which is provided in the pavilion. In exchange for Ukraine relinquishing its sizable store of nuclear weapons remaining from Soviet times, these three powerful countries “guaranteed” Ukraine's security and territorial integrity. When Russia invaded and annexed Crimea in 2014, stormed into Donetsk and Luhansk that same year under sham pretexts, and launched its full-scale invasion on February 24, 2022, facing little resistance from the US and UK, those guarantees proved worthless, the signed memorandum meaningless. Ukraine would have to withstand the Russian onslaught largely on its own.

Kadyrova's sculpture has quite a history. She originally installed it outdoors in the Ukrainian city of Pokrovsk, on a stone plinth that formerly displayed a nuclear-capable Soviet jet—a Ukrainian artwork that supplanted a militaristic symbol of Soviet power. Intended as a permanent sculpture, it quickly became a beloved piece of public art for many, one integral to the city.

With the Russian army advancing on Pokrovsk in 2024, Kadyrova, Leonid Maruschak (one of the two curators of the pavilion alongside Ksenia Malykh), and assistants succeeded in removing her work and bringing it to relative safety, not an easy feat. Otherwise, it surely would have been destroyed by the Russians, who have demolished much Ukrainian cultural heritage and art. It became a displaced sculpture, evocative of the large majority of Pokrovsk's citizens (along with many other Ukrainians) who have likewise been displaced. Later, it became a sort of refugee sculpture. Prior to the Biennale, it traveled through several European countries, making stops in cities including Vienna, Warsaw, Prague, Berlin, and Paris before arriving in Venice—an epic voyage that connects with those undertaken by six million or so Ukrainians fleeing the war.

The video installation—*IDP*—is captivating and engrossing, with the circular construction echoing the roughly circular route of the voyage. Short, silent clips from different perspectives record the sculpture en route on a flatbed truck—inquisitively eyeing its surroundings as it rolls through the countryside, regal and proud as it enters the city (including Venice, on a boat)—often tender, yet always forceful. One sees the people—scholars, programming staff, curators—who made this voyage possible, Kadyrova's roving Ukrainian “family”; the connection they developed with one another is palpable in the familial way they greet each other. At each stop the sculpture was exhibited (I saw it in Berlin), the organizers held symposia concerning Ukraine and the war, and threw parties, with the videos capturing the revelry—joy and exuberance amid grief, war, and outrage. The work confirms the life spirit and humanity of Kadyrova's project, which contrasts so extremely with the death and destruction wrought by Russia. Deeply emotional refugees from Pokrovsk showed up at each stop to experience this reminder of a stolen home.

Some excerpts are delightful, as when Kadyrova and her team, all wearing orange “Security Guarantees” vests, along with what seem to be politicians and dignitaries, line up in front of the deer in Paris, or when a smiling, jostling, camera-wielding crowd in Lviv, Ukraine, welcomes and celebrates the deer. Others are searing. In a shot from a sunny day in 2024, Kadyrova and her team attend to the sculpture while passersby stroll about. Pokrovsk looks normal and pleasant, a mid-sized city of some 70,000 inhabitants (although many had already fled) with a newly renovated park. The front line was not far off, and getting closer; explosions and mayhem were on the horizon.

Then there is the deer itself, with its complex messaging. Dangling in mid-air, a sculpture pried from its base and torn from its rightful home, it signals precarity and uprootedness, upheaval and vulnerability, all of which have been and are currently being painfully experienced by Ukrainians in droves. With its upraised head and powerful, defiant posture, it also signals hope, strength, resilience, and resolve—a totemic animal for these trying, war-wracked, freedom-seeking times.

DIRECT EXPERIENCE: A CONVERSATION WITH ZHANNA KADYROVA

This interview with art writer John Gayer was originally published in the March/April 2026 issue of Sculpture Magazine.

Zhanna Kadyrova transmits a vitality and commitment to her work that almost escapes understanding, considering that she lives and works in Kyiv, Ukraine's capital city and the target of indiscriminate missile attacks. A classically trained sculptor, she likes to use heavy materials, such as stone, concrete, and ceramic tiles, and, before the Russian invasion, she preferred to develop site-specific installations, often employing found materials, rescued plants, and collected fragments of road asphalt. Since the beginning of the war, her work has become increasingly focused, serious, and sardonic, in equal measure—starting with the stone bread loaves of *Palianytsia* (2022-present) and *Russian Rocket* (2022-present), a series of stickers that when placed on vehicle windows simulate the flight of ballistic missiles. While the stickers themselves remain static, the moving vehicle creates the illusion of a missile slicing through a peaceful landscape. These defiant gestures, like much of Kadyrova's recent work, offer a certain gallows humor for those under siege, while viscerally conveying the realities of war to audiences who remain unaffected.

John Gayer: I am curious to learn more about the connections that define *The Forest*, the video installation you produced for the IHME Helsinki Commission 2025. It was shown in the city's Power Station Museum, which occupies a historical steam power plant. How did this project come about, and could you explain the various aspects that fed into it?

Zhanna Kadyrova: *The Forest* deals with the history and consequences of the Kakhovka dam in Ukraine, which was built in the 1950s and destroyed in June 2023 during the Russian invasion. When IHME Helsinki Commission Director and Curator Paula Toppila invited me in 2023, she explained that the organization focuses on the environment, ecology, and the contemporary transformation of the world. I replied that it would be difficult for me to switch from my current focus, which is on the war. But after visiting Helsinki and seeing that it was founded on a river, I began to think about the Kakhovka Dam. When it was destroyed, its massive, 2,100-square-kilometer (810-square-mile) reservoir was lost, and a forest quickly grew in its place. I realized that I could compare the Ukrainian situation to the European idea that dams shouldn't fragment rivers. Helsinki, for example, plans to remove the dam beside the Power Station Museum in 10 years' time.

Much of the documentary information that circled the heavy machinery in the steam power plant was borrowed from the Dovzhenko Centre in Kyiv, where it was part of the exhibition *The River Wailed Like a Wounded Beast* (2023). In addition to showing the rescue of people and animals and the damage after the water had receded, the Deep State map of the war in Ukraine revealed the location of my site-specific installation at the site of the former reservoir, a boat situated at the height of the cresting flood waters.

JG: What was the boat installation about?

ZK: Researching the Kakhovka Dam, I learned about the double catastrophe that it precipitated. While its construction displaced many people and destroyed centuries of heritage, its destruction resulted in widespread flooding, extensive damage, and death. We now have issues such as the lack of biodiversity in the forest, the proximity of the frontline, the presence of mines, and untold metallurgical pollutants lodged in the soil. The image of the boat floating over the forest points to all these things.

Even with great support, I have never spent so much time on one project. When I installed the boat at the end of August 2024, at a height of 4.5 meters when the trees were four meters high—the forest had been growing for a year, and I expected it to grow more, immersing the boat in a sea of leaves and branches. But that didn't happen. The trees have grown, but not much.

The boat is documented in two time-lapse video projections: one spanning a month, and another spanning a year. Then, at the end of July 2025, we built a camera obscura on site and made prints. It is important to understand that this project is about time. It encompasses the past, the life of this new forest, and what might happen in the future. I particularly like the print where the trees are moving. The blurring suggests the boat is on water.

JG: There's no way of predicting what will happen, is there?

ZK: Absolutely not. Because a summer of intense heat severely limited the camera obscura's use, I planned to organize one more expedition. From its outset, the project kept evolving. But I have learned many things and am happy with the result.

JG: *The Forest* was introduced with a showing of *Palianytsia* (2022). Bread holds great cultural importance. What grounds this work?

ZK: It's about what is symbolized by bread. This was the first work that I made after the Russians invaded in 2022 and the first work that involves my personal history. When the war began, I sent my mother and sisters to Germany, while I spent three months living as a refugee in the Transcarpathian region. Leaving Kyiv was very scary. I thought we would never return. I had to figure out what to do, so I turned to making art with things around me. I found the stones, bought a basic machine, and cut them to look like bread, specifically palianytsia, which symbolizes hospitality.

JG: So, it's a very special bread?

ZK: This bread is prepared and presented to welcome people into one's home. My bread, however, is for unwanted guests. It is bread for the enemy. You can't eat it; any attempt would destroy the teeth. Since Russians cannot pronounce the word, *palianytsia* was used as a password during the first two months of the invasion. It helped us to catch the enemy. Had I stayed in Kyiv, this project would not have been realized.

Strictly speaking, *Palianytsia* is not an artwork. When I created it, I hoped to support people. It is a humanitarian project, and we use it to raise money. It is sold at a rate of one gram per euro, or 1,000 euros for one kilogram, to help support artists who are at the front. In the beginning, needs were different. People needed roofs, windows, animal feed. But over the last two and a half years, artists at the front have been the focus. Many have died there.

JG: Your war-related work didn't begin in 2022. They go back to the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

ZK: That's correct. In terms of my life, the war started in 2014. But one could say Russia's war against Ukraine began 300 years ago, which is when the Russian empire first occupied our territory. The 2014 annexation of Crimea shocked people. They feared the war would soon reach Kyiv, which eventually happened in 2022. Though I made a few works related to the Crimean situation, my focus was less intense than now.

JG: You have used hard and heavy materials like stone, concrete, and steel for a long time.

ZK: I studied sculpture from the age of 12 to 19 and graduated from the Taras Shevchenko State Art School. I also took private classes several times a week. The program, being quite traditional, involved studying anatomy, composition, representational sculpture, and art history; there was no contemporary art. Because of my skills, I do not fear working with heavy materials. I also rely on people who will work with me. They include architects, a designer, a film editor, an engineer, and local professionals for some site-specific projects.

JG: Your work encompasses many themes and often includes humor. I like how in your *Second Hand* series, you repurposed ceramic tiles to portray clothing and textiles.

ZK: *Second Hand*, which began in 2014 and continued to 2020, changes the function of the tiles. One of these works was done at the Soviet-era Darnitski Silk Factory. Since the building was slowly being converted into a shopping mall, I was free to use the wall tiles for my clothing. That led me to other interesting locations, for example, the Chernobyl bus station and the Kyiv Film Copy Factory (both 2017), and along the streets of Havana, Cuba, and the Venice Biennale (both 2019). In Venice, my tile sheets and clothing were suspended over the streets in the same way that the city's residents dry their laundry.

Before the war, my main focus was on site-specific installations. I like the process of discovering local stories and specific materials, devising the composition, and then installing the work. I also did many residencies and accepted project invitations, but now I only attend exhibition openings. I find it difficult to be abroad for longer time periods.

JG: Your use of tiles recalls the faceted surfaces in a number of your sculptures, including *Monument to a New Monument* (2009), *Market* (2017-19), *Origami Deer* (2019), and *Fruit* (2021).

ZK: *Market* is an old project now, but a well-known one, since it was shown at the 2019 Venice Biennale. The concrete deer is the second work in my *Origami* series. In 2019, when I made it in Pokrovsk, in the Donetsk region, the frontline was 39 kilometers away. Now, it passes through the city. So, in 2024, as the last civilians were being evacuated, we also moved the deer and filmed its removal. The current plan is to exhibit the sculpture, the film, and some support material under the title *Security Guarantees* in the Ukrainian Pavilion at the 2026 Venice Biennale.

JG: The size of the tiled apple and pear in *Fruit* attests to your confident approach.

ZK: They are huge. Seeing pictures with people next to them shows just how big.

JG: Then, there is the large diary/planner that forms *Daily-Bike Parking* (2018).

ZK: *Daily-Bike Parking* was also installed in Leontovych Park in Pokrovsk—the same park where *Origami Deer* was located—but it was impossible to remove. Bicycles can be locked to the sculpture's metal binder rings, and the red metal bookmark serves as a bench. The diary, which records exchange rates, gasoline prices, public transportation rates, the minimum wage, and the value of one bitcoin, presents exact data from the day when the sculpture was created. I see it as a time capsule in the form of street furniture.

JG: At times, your work seems to approach Pop art.

ZK: It's not Pop art, though, it just looks a bit like that.

JG: Your use of disguise and mimicry distinguishes certain projects, such as *Animalier* (2020).

ZK: In 2019, I was invited to Santa Croce sull'Arno, an Italian town known for its leather tanning, and I noticed how they imitated the skins of endangered animals with cow hide. Though it was absurd, this became the focus of my project. I produced camouflaged outfits for animals, for instance, a leopard pattern outfit for a goat and a snakeskin costume for a duck, that became the subject of a photo series and sculpture exhibition.

Horses wearing strange costumes made of cow skin with tiger-like patterning, set off on a journey through the empty city streets, while chickens and geese wearing skins embossed with scales pose against views of the Tuscan countryside. There is an inherent transgression to the works, manifesting as a tension between nature and society, and the reversal of traditional roles caused by ecological imbalance as endangered predators become more helpless than their herbivorous prey. We humans are super predators at the top of the food chain, and should think harder about our own vulnerability.

JG: Camouflage, applied to humans, also appears in *Resources* (2024), an installation of felled and cut timber.

ZK: This work treats humans as a resource. Upon joining the army, people lose their individuality and become a unit. It is said that we lack human resources, while Russia seems to have an unlimited supply. Of course, they use prisoners and poor people from the regions they've colonized. This war is very sad work.

JG: The title makes me think of mining, which chews up the earth.

ZK: Wood and forests are also resources. But here, wood has been camouflaged to look more like a forest. That strangeness captures people's attention. The pieces also resemble body parts—arms and legs.

JG: The floating swans made of shredded car tires in *Outdoor* (2015) display an unexpected delicacy.

ZK: They were made by village people to decorate their properties. This is something that emerged in the early 2000s in post-Soviet cities, started by public utility workers who used materials found on site to create aesthetic compositions. I attempted to make one of those swans, but it looked too beautiful, so I decided to borrow the originals and place them on the lake, in their natural environment.

JG: You gave them a new context—or perhaps the proper one.

ZK: Yes, swans belong on the water, not on bare asphalt. I find such scenes simultaneously funny and dark. The villagers make unusual things, like palm trees created out of plastic bottles. What is regrettable is that *Outdoor* was made for the BIRUCHIY contemporary art symposium, an important international event for artists that occurred year after year. Many friendships were forged there. But now that it is in occupied territory, no one knows what is happening there.

JG: For me, the torn tire forms in *Outdoor* echo the shredded organ pipes in *Instrument* (2024).

ZK: That is original damage caused by explosions. We took missiles that were laying on the ground and fused them to the organ's pipes. *Instrument* spent nine months in Lviv's train station where it was used for music concerts and theatrical performances.

JG: *Instrument* manifests an unusual blend of grandeur and cruelty.

ZK: The work stems from my visits to destroyed villages in the Kyiv region, where I saw the missiles. I was impressed that they could project the beauty that we see in Baroque art and decided to try and show this in a strong way. So, we bought an organ and adapted the missiles for its pipes. When one of the missiles was being worked, exposure to heat caused residues to explode in the worker's hand. That scared us, but, luckily, he was not seriously hurt.

JG: *Souvenir* (2023) comes across as a dreamy work.

ZK: It is also connected to the BIRUCHIY symposium where I made *Outdoor*. *Souvenir* was also part of *Strategic Locations* (2025), at Galleria Continua in Paris. It's about the occupation, moving borders, relocation, and my personal memories.

JG: The shapes seem to be some kind of viewer.

ZK: These plastic seashells are Soviet-era souvenirs, diasscopes that were sold at the seaside in Crimea and along the Sea of Azov. I bought them from the Ukrainian eBay and flea markets, and then I replaced the original images with my own slides.

JG: Although the lacerated surfaces of *Harmless War* (2023) appear to be related to the swans and shredded organ pipes, they are also different. You collected bullet-riddled metal sheets from roofs and gates across Ukraine, then repurposed them into sculptural compositions of basic geometric shapes.

ZK: It's a kind of "conservation" of physical violence, preserving trauma in material form while also abstracting it. This project criticizes the view of people living outside Ukraine. The works seem to be Minimalist sculptures, but they are made from objects riddled by bullets. I applied many, many layers of a neutralizing white paint to dull the sharp, ragged edges. War can only be understood through direct experience. For people living elsewhere, distant wars present no threat. There is a dissonance between formal beauty and the violent realities embodied in these materials.

JG: You can't imagine the realities of war.

ZK: No, you cannot. *Harmless War* is a way of showing this. It's not meant for Ukrainian viewers.

Zhanna Kadyrova, born in 1981 in Brovary, Ukraine, is an artist and former member of the Revolutionary Experimental Space (R.E.P.). She graduated from the Taras Shevchenko State Art School in the sculpture department and has received numerous awards, including the Kazimir Malevich Artist Award (2012) and the Grand Prix of the Kyiv Sculpture Project. She has also been recognized by the PinchukArtCentre with the Special Prize (2011), Main Prize (2013), and Special Prize – Future Generation International (2014). In 2025, she was awarded the Taras Shevchenko National Prize of Ukraine in visual art, becoming the first woman in 20 years to receive this distinction. That same year, she received the Her Art Prize for international women artists, launched at the initiative of Marie Claire in partnership with Boucheron.

In June 2022, Kadyrova returned to Kyiv and began creating new works responding to the war. These were presented in her first major retrospective at Kunstverein Hannover (Germany) in 2023. That same year, her exhibition *Flying Trajectories* was shown at the PinchukArtCentre in Kyiv. In 2024, she participated in *From Ukraine: Dare to Dream*, curated by the PinchukArtCentre as a Collateral Event of the 60th International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia. Also in 2024, her exhibition *Unexpected* at Galerie Rudolfinum in Prague was recognized as one of “The Top Ten Shows in Europe in 2024” by Frieze magazine. In 2025, she participated in BIAM, the Biennial of Medellín and Antioquia, Colombia, and presented a major solo exhibition at Galeria Arsenal in Białystok, Poland. She represented Ukraine at the National Pavilion of the 61st International Art Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia in 2026.

Her work has been exhibited extensively both nationally and internationally, including at Galeria Arsenal, Białystok (Poland); Kunstverein Hannover (Germany); Stavanger Museum (Norway); Kunstforum Wien (Austria); Eretz Israel Museum, Tel Aviv (Israel); Centre Pompidou, Palais de Tokyo, and La Kunsthalle Mulhouse (France); Kunstraum Innsbruck (Austria); Ludwig Museum, Budapest (Hungary); Museum of Modern Art, Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw (Poland); Spinnerei Leipzig; Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe; DAAD, Zimmerstraße, Berlin (Germany); the National Union of Cuban Architects and Construction Engineers, Havana (Cuba); Sara Hildén Art Museum, Tampere (Finland); Lviv Municipal Art Center, Lviv; the National Art Museum of Ukraine; and the PinchukArtCentre, Kyiv (Ukraine), as well as La Biennale di Venezia and Castello di Rivoli Museo d’Arte Contemporanea (Italy).

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Zhanna Kadyrova, *Palianytsia*, 2022–present. Found river stones; dimensions variable.
Zhanna Kadyrova, *Russian Rocket*, 2022–present. Multimedia series; dimensions variable.
Zhanna Kadyrova, *The Forest*, 2023–2025. Multimedia installation; dimensions variable.
Zhanna Kadyrova, *Anxiety*, 2022–present. Hand embroidery with hand and machine–embroidered text; dimensions variable.
Zhanna Kadyrova, *IDP*, 2026. Multimedia installation; dimensions variable.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Fig 1. Still from *IDP* (directed by Zhanna Kadyrova, 2026).
Fig 2. David Levene, “Zhanna Kadyrova and the *IDP* team at UNESCO in Paris.” *The Guardian*, 2026.
Fig 3. Zhanna Kadyrova, *Palianytsia*, 2022–present. Found river stones; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.
Fig 4. Zhanna Kadyrova, *Russian Rocket*, 2022–present. Multimedia series; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.
Fig 5. Zhanna Kadyrova, *The Forest*, 2023–2025. Multimedia installation; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.
Fig 6. Zhanna Kadyrova, *Anxiety*, 2022–present. Hand embroidery with hand and machine–embroidered text; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.
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Fig 10. Zhanna Kadyrova, *The Forest*, 2023–2025. Multimedia installation; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.
Fig 11. Zhanna Kadyrova, *Anxiety*, 2024. Hand embroidery with hand and machine–embroidered text; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.
Fig 12. Still from *IDP* (directed by Zhanna Kadyrova, 2026).

TEXTS

Kadyrova, Zhanna. “Direct Experience: A Conversation with Zhanna Kadyrova.” *Sculpture Magazine*, April 2026.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The exhibition is conceived by the Ukrainian Museum, Zhanna Kadyrova, and curated by the artist in collaboration with the curatorial team at the Ukrainian Museum, with contributions from Asha Bukojemsky.

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Graphic Designer: Alexander Tochilovsky

Fabricators: Dessa Ely and Dean Ballard

Audio-Visual Support: Billy Clark and Sangmin Chae, CultureHub

*Major support for *The Ground Shifts Beneath Our Feet* has been provided by Illiana van Meeteren and Terrence Boylan. Additional support has been provided by Stefan and Larissa Sygida Peleschuk, and the Leshko family.*

COVER IMAGES

*Zhanna Kadyrova, *Russian Rocket*, 2022-present. Multimedia series; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.*

*Zhanna Kadyrova, *Palianytsia*, 2022-present. Found river stones; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.*

*Zhanna Kadyrova, *The Forest*, 2025. Camera obscura image; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.*

*Zhanna Kadyrova, *Anxiety*, 2022-present. Hand embroidery with hand and machine-embroidered text; dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist.*

Simone Padovani, "Origami Deer at the 2026 Venice Biennale." Getty Images, 2026.