

Artful look at Orange Revolution



A painting of Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko titled "Labyrinth," by Kyrylo Hryniw and Yaroslav Kolomyichuk.



Tribune photos by Zdzislaw Budak
Vladimir Pavlik (left), Liaila Kuchma and Nicholas Sawicki carry a piece at the Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art.

Chicago exhibit shows works of Ukrainian protesters

By Russell Working
Tribune staff reporter

Twelve battered mattresses—rolled up, bound with duct tape and huddled on an art gallery floor in Chicago—hold the power of an archaeological find.

They are part of a show of artwork created by students and other young protesters in Kiev during Ukraine's Orange Revolution last year, when hundreds of thousands of citizens reversed a fraud-

riddled election.

The artist used the kind of mattresses that fellow protesters slept on in a makeshift tent city in Kiev. He titled the work "Crowd" to represent the masses. Some university students photographed military and civilian clothing; others painted portraits of political figures or Ukrainian foods to explore ideas of national identity.

The exhibition opens Friday at the Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art after a his-

toric year for one of the Chicago area's largest ethnic groups. Nearby, the Ukrainian National Museum of Chicago is also hosting a show of work by artists who supported President Viktor Yushchenko's democratic movement.

The shows are signs of the increasing optimism in Chicago's Ukrainian-American communities about the future of their native country.

Many Ukrainians have expressed disillusionment at

recent political dealing Yushchenko, the hero of last year's elections and victim of near-fatal poisoning, allegedly by his political enemies.

Yet in Chicago's Ukrainian Village, many believe his movement has brought changes that will endure, both here and in Ukraine.

Yushchenko and his Chicago-born wife, Kateryna Chumachenko Yushchenko, remain respected figures here.

PLEASE SEE UKRAINE, PAGE 11

DECEMBER 2, 2005 FRIDAY * 3

UKRAINE: Locals support social changes in homeland

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

"I haven't lost faith in the idea of democracy in Ukraine," said Walter Tun, who serves on the board of the Ukrainian American Youth Association of Palatine. "The genie's out of the bottle."

Over the last year, more young people have been joining the area's Ukrainian folk dance and cultural groups, such as the Ukrainian American Youth Association in Palatine. Saturday schools, where children study the Slavic language of their parents and grandparents, have continued a growth spurt that began with the nation's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

An ad hoc group of activists who organized pro-Yushchenko demonstrations in Chicago last year have formed a permanent organization called Orange Wave, and they have organized speakers and other events.

'Part of the motherland'

"What's happened after the revolution is that different waves of immigrants are together now, and very proud to be together and feel like part of one family," said Maria Klimchak, administrator of the Ukrainian National Museum. "Even if you are living here for good, you are part of the motherland."

About 44,000 people of Ukrainian heritage live in the metro-

politan area extending from southern Wisconsin to Gary, according to the 2000 census.

November and December 2004, the Ukrainian Diaspora, among them Illinois residents, provided essential funding for the demonstrations that brought Yushchenko to power.

Yushchenko's reputation suffered this fall when a government whistle-blower alleged widespread corruption in his administration. He fired his entire Cabinet, including his popular prime minister, Yulia Tymoshenko. To secure the votes he needed for a new prime minister, Yushchenko struck a deal with his rival in last year's election, Viktor Yanukovich, a parliamentary leader despised among supporters of the Orange Revolution.

But Klimchak and many others remain enthusiastic about Yushchenko. He was poisoned at a dinner in an apparent assassination attempt last year, and tests later proved that he had been served a nearly lethal dose of dioxin. His scarred face be-

came a symbol of suffering in a nation that had lost tens of millions of people to war, arrests and famine under its former communist leadership.

Nowadays, Chicago Ukrainians are pleased that others are less likely to jump the nation of 48 million with Russia, which has traditionally dominated its smaller neighbor and remains mired in post-Soviet corruption.

Bohdan Watral, president and chief executive of Chicago's Self-Reliance Ukrainian American Federal Credit Union, sees further signs of hope in Ukrainian parliamentary elections scheduled for March.

Here in Chicago, officials have seen growth in Ukrainian community groups and school attendance this year. "There's been a revitalization of Ukrainian-American identity," Watral said.

The protesters' artworks, which include paintings and three-dimensional works, serve as time capsules from a more idealistic political season, when

Ukrainians saw the chance to exchange their corrupt leadership for those committed to human rights and a market economy. The works were created after Yuliya Vaganova, director of Kiev's Centre for Contemporary Art and co-creator of the Chicago show, opened her institution to university artists as a makeshift studio space.

Nicholas Sawicki, the Chicago-based co-curator of the exhibition, said he chose works that would hold up over time and distance. "Propaganda doesn't hold up," Sawicki said. "You can't make an exhibition today of Yushchenko posters and have it speak beyond that particular moment. But once an artist begins to engage in the process of thinking about events, thinking about his or her medium or technique, things happen that really make a work stand up."

Symbols of change

A black-and-white painting titled "Labyrinth" depicts Yushchenko standing in the middle of a maze decorated with eyes and mouths.

One piece is made of 36 cardboard egg cartons, some stained in egg yolk or with bits of shell clinging to them. Demonstrators in Kiev stood on such cartons to insulate their feet from the cold.

The subject matter of the Ukrainian National Museum show doesn't necessarily deal with the revolution itself. There are traditional folk figures, flower arrangements and abstracts, Klimchak said.

Klimchak admits that some are disappointed that things haven't changed faster for Ukraine. But she added, "Nothing happens in a day."

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