

## LOWELL RYAN PROJECTS

# Moonrise

Mar 13

### Searching for Nuance and Exploring the Lasting Implications of Soviet Identity through Art with Molly Surazhsky

Artist Interview, [Favorite Artist Feature](#)



Last summer, I visited the [Wende Museum](#) in Culver City, CA, an archive devoted to preserving and exploring the history of the Cold War, to view their exhibit, [The Medium is the Message: Flags and Banners](#). Among an array of historic national flags and propaganda posters, I stumbled upon an incredibly vibrant, multi-layered work by [Molly Surazhsky](#), entitled *Dermokratizatsiya (Shitocracy)*.

*Dermokratizatsiya (Shitocracy)*  
2022

Digital print on duchess satin,  
poly organza, cotton thread,  
leather, wood, and nails  
135h x 117w x 62d inches

Courtesy of Molly Surazhsky and Lowell  
Ryan Projects

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I would come to learn that this was Surazhsky's very first exhibit, and was lucky enough to converse with her on some of the many important topics touched upon by her work. Born in Queens, New York to immigrant parents that brought her up in a very Soviet tradition, Surazhsky fervidly explores history, cultural identity, and the lasting implications of the USSR's collapse through her artistic work. Read on for our wonderful discussion about her first museum exhibit, the process behind creating *Dermokratizatsiya*, and Molly's understanding of her own cultural identity through her continuous artistic and personal studies.

**Can you tell us about the title, *Dermokratizatsiya* (*Shitocracy*)?**

"*Dermokratizatsiya*" is Russian slang that emerged in the aftermath of Soviet collapse in the 1990s. Amid the abrupt introduction of capitalism, liberalization, and privatization by way of shock therapy economic reform, the streets of the former Soviet Republics became riddled with gangster warfare as fighting ensued over the possession of once state-owned public utilities and services (i.e., Aeroflot, Gazprom, LADA, etc.) now available for pennies on the dollar. Meanwhile, citizens faced not only crippling prices for basic necessities, but inaccessibility to those basic goods as factory doors shattered with the introduction to Western style "democracy" and economics.

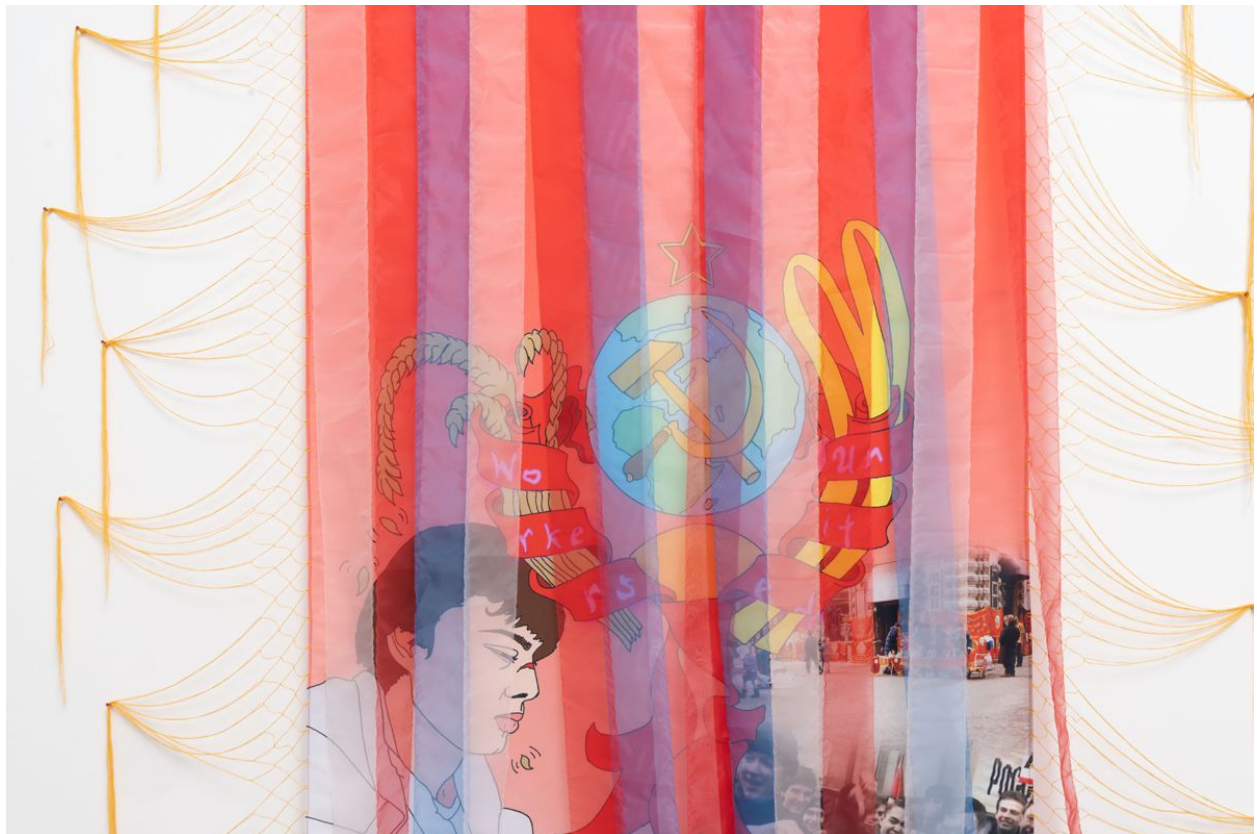
As explained by Paul Klebnikov in his seminal text, *Godfather of the Kremlin*:

*"Yeltsin was supposed to further the aims of glasnost and perestroika, but neither freedom of speech nor democratic accountability was expanded in any significant way. Democracy became a curse word — to be called a democrat became synonymous with being labeled a crook. The two concepts that were supposed to lead Russia to a Western-style future — privatization and democracy — were discredited. On the streets of Moscow, people began to speak of privatization as "grab-it-ization" (prikhvatizatsiya) and of democracy as "shitocracy" (dermokratizatsiya)." (p. 321)*

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*That is very interesting. I saw Dermokratizatsiya (Shitocracy) at the Wende Museum in Culver City, CA last summer and found it utterly fascinating. What was it like to have your first ever museum exhibit, and how do you feel about it being this particular work?*

*The time of Soviet collapse is still very little understood and it is a recent historic moment that continues to have its ripple effects today. I obsessively study and explore this point in history within my practice as an artist and as an individual whose family left the Soviet Union. I am constantly seeking to understand every facet and nuance that led to its collapse and how it affects the world today. To have been invited to unveil this particular work in my first ever museum exhibition feels highly redeeming.*



Courtesy of Molly Surazhsky and Lowell Ryan Projects

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The flag in *Dermokratizatsiya (Shitocracy)* consists of a collage-type assemblage of different elements and cultural references – some of the most poignant for me are the *TIME* magazine cover with Boris Yeltsin reading “Yanks to the Rescue” from July 15, 1996, an image of [the opening of the first] McDonald’s in the Soviet Union, and a smiling emoji waving an American flag in one hand and a wad of cash in the other. You did such an incredible job by evoking these pivotal, global-scale historical events, while also creating something remarkably unique. In other words, I’m awed by how you revisited this very major political and cultural moment with a completely fresh perspective over 30 years later. Can you speak a bit on the process of creating this work, from conception to execution?

I would say that the process behind creating any particular piece begins long before I actually set out to create it or begin to envision what it will look like. With this work, it was years of research and obsessively reading, studying material, and collecting images found online that I then incorporated rather intuitively into a piece like *Dermokratizatsiya*. As noted before, the *Godfather of the Kremlin* by Paul Klebnikov was largely important; other materials I have used or referenced are *The Shock Doctrine* by Naomi Klein, *Yasha Levine’s substack*, *Brat 2* (2000), etc. I constantly look up images or follow various Twitter and Instagram accounts on relevant subjects. I obsess and screenshot anything that is of interest and organize it all into files on my computer until they are one day used in an artwork. In creating *Dermokratizatsiya*, I understood that I wanted to use fabric to depict Western style democracy replacing Communism. Being that fabric is my predominant medium, I knew that I wanted beautifully seductive flowing ribbons of torn organza to mimic the stripes of the American flag. These were very intentionally torn to portray fragility and imperfection. Underneath these stripes I had my base satin fabric that would act simultaneously as a Soviet banner, flag, and Babushka shawl that creeps out from under the stripes of the American flag. In this way I wanted to portray that although the Soviet Union has been dissolved, the effects of that dissolution and ideas from the Communist

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state still persist today. After understanding how I would manipulate fabric, I created a preliminary sketch, and collaged the rest of the imagery in Photoshop. As I mentioned before, I study obsessively, take notes, and really sit with the material for long periods of time, after which it appears in my work rather fluidly.



*Courtesy of Molly Surazhsky and Lowell Ryan Projects*

You released *Dermokratizatsiya (Shitocracy)* in 2022, which was an especially difficult year due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. As we often see, complexity and nuance does not jive very well with the Western media machine, social media fauxtivism, and the simple monolithic narratives we would rather preserve than question, dissect, and understand. We saw this inability to understand nuance taken to extremes when certain universities went so far as to ban the writings of Fyodor Dostoevsky to boycott neo-tsar Putin – quite alarming, especially because Dostoevsky himself was

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**sentenced to a Siberian gulag for his “radical” and intellectually “inflammatory” writings! All this to say, have you found that the political and international climate surrounding the war in Ukraine has in any way affected how people digest and interact with your work?**

Well, this is a really great question because most certainly, yes, the invasion of Ukraine has indeed affected the way people interact with my work. For me personally, the most ironic and frankly comedic instance was being called a Russian propagandist, when both of my parents are actually from Ukraine. At the same time, I suppose that doesn't disqualify me from being a “Russian propagandist,” but I certainly find it amusing. I should back this up a little and begin by saying that when I was in art school (I graduated from California Institute of the Arts in 2019), there was a positive reception to my work and particularly to the Communist/Marxist themes that I explored in it, as it goes in art school. At that time, I would explain to classmates and professors that my family is from Russia because frankly, most people did not know Ukraine was a country up until this invasion occurred. Not to say that individuals in the arts wouldn't understand, but this was a force of habit that came out of a lifetime of people not knowing anything about Ukraine. Growing up, I was told by my family to just tell people we are from Russia, because Americans did not know Ukraine was a place on the world map.

Furthermore, my family is from Kharkov, an Eastern Ukrainian city that is approximately a one hour drive from the border of Russia and where 85% of the population speaks Russian. This is a nuance that is uncomfortable for many people to accept today, but nothing is ever black and white and I certainly did not become an artist to constrain myself to binary ideas. In my life and in my art, I choose to live in the discomforts of the greyzone. In another humorous turn of events, after the invasion of Ukraine, even the Wende Museum reframed their introduction of me, without I should say, even asking me. The Museum identified me as a Ukrainian American artist, which would not be an untruth, but I can't

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help to point it out, because it is unique to understand the way people interpret and interact with my work. For the record, I'm not easily offended, as much as I am curious, but I personally like to consider myself a Soviet American artist, simply for the reason that I was raised with Soviet traditions, as opposed to Ukrainian ones. On that note, I suppose I should also note the obvious, which is that of course I do not agree with this invasion and in fact, I hold a very strong anti-war stance on this invasion, which I would say is aligned with folks like [Clare Daly](#), Mike Wallace, [Noam Chomsky](#), and [Seymour Hersh](#). Some of these individuals have similarly been categorized as Russian propagandists or simply ignored, like in the case of Chomsky.



*Courtesy of Molly Surazhsky and Lowell Ryan Projects*

**While much of these ignorant mischaracterizations that you describe are quite disturbing, they most certainly are not shocking. Although the subject**

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**matter is at first glance focused on the Soviet and post-Soviet cultural sphere, *Dermokratizatsiya (Shitocracy)*, from my perspective, actually has much more to say about the West than it does the ills of the USSR. Do you feel that the narrative on the West "liberating" the Soviet Union has colored too many people's perceptions, particularly in the US, and how can works like yours help expand and challenge the monolithic fairy tale depicting "Americans = good, Soviets = bad"?**

I appreciate your interpretation of the work in this way, because I have in fact had viewers respond in unexpected ways, to let's say the *TIME Magazine* cover that appears prominently in the upper righthand corner of *Dermokratizatsiya* where Boris Yeltsin is featured alongside the headline reading "Yanks to the Rescue" from July 15, 1996. Many viewers of American descent responded with pride to that particular element of the piece, recalling how the United States helped disintegrate the Soviet Union. On the other hand, viewers from the actual former Soviet Union, when looking at Yeltsin, recall frustration mostly with the fact that Yeltsin appeared drunk on most public occasions and could not rectify the terrible economics of the time, nor could he resolve the violence on the streets. More than anything, putting *Dermokratizatsiya* out into the world has made me realize with how little nuance some people interpret the work, but I do hope that in some ways it challenges the notion of Americans = good, Soviets = bad. As I mentioned earlier, shock therapy economics modeled after the infamous Chicago Boys and previously unveiled in Chile by Pinochet's military coup (infamously known to have been backed by the CIA) was similarly introduced into the former Soviet Union after its collapse by Russian economist **Yegor Gaidar**, supported by Yeltsin, whom was supported by President Clinton. Nothing exists in a vacuum and in this historic instance, I can not separate any of these key players from one another and the events that unfolded.

**Textiles and clothing seem to be a preferred medium for your work. Do you have a particular affinity to the fashion world or apparel industry? Why are these textiles, fabrics, pieces of apparel, and even face masks some of your**



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## most recurrent mediums of choice?

I come from a multigenerational family of female tailors and so although I do incorporate photography, performance, and sculpture into my work, textile is always the predominant vessel. Working with textile is a way of continuing my family's legacy, and at the same time, I am able to communicate in a language everyone understands by creating fabrics and garments. So long as one makes a decision of what to wear every day, then I believe that individual is able to interpret a garment, not excluded to an art audience. In this way, I hope that the art I create is accessible to everyday people and this perhaps comes from my cultural upbringing in New York where museums and even galleries are welcome spaces to non-art audiences. In this vein, I also speak to the legacy of Soviet Constructivist artists, *Varvara Stepanova* and *Lyubov Popova*, who at the height of the revolution, imagined bringing art to the masses by printing textile designs for garments.



*Baba Yaga in Americhka*  
2020

Silk, elastic, thread, iron coffin nails, black feathers, candles, pyrite, sulphur crystals, salt crystals, sand, pumpkin, gourds, chamomile, honey, lemongrass, pencil, paper, cinnamon, rose, peppermint, cloves, bay leaves, hibiscus infused vodka, wheat, oils, sea salt, chili pepper, cayenne, black pepper, sage, orange peels, mugwort, ashes, and sulphur dust

*Courtesy of Molly Surazhsky and Hunter Shaw*

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*Fine Art*

**As an American born into a family of Ukrainian immigrants, your ethnic and familial background seems to play a large role in your work. How do you make sense of your identity – do you feel a sense of multiplicity, or do you have a more clear-cut delineation of self within this context? Does your art inform this cultural identity, or does the cultural identity inform your art?**

I would say that there is never a clear cut delineation of self. History and time changes these things constantly. One can look at many examples to understand. For instance there was a time when the term “queer” was considered a slur, today it has been repurposed in a positive light. Although I use identifiers like “Soviet, Jewish, American, etc.,” I try my very best to remain malleable to change, open to learn, and simultaneously I do not allow myself to be easily offended. Cultural identity is very important to me, but I recognize that it is constantly in flux and with that in mind, I refuse to weaponize it or to ever fall victim to it, both in my personal life and in my art. In this way, I allow my art and cultural identity to inform one another. In all cases, I try to approach identity from a historic lens.

With the concept of Soviet Jewry, for example, there is this narrative that Jews of the Soviet Union were discriminated against and America, as well as Israel, rallied to support the exodus of Soviet Jews and provided them with exit visas to leave the Soviet Union. However, when I ask my father whether he faced said discrimination, he refuses to acknowledge that it even existed. Perhaps some slurs were tossed around, but if asked whether he was not afforded the same opportunity as every other Soviet person? The answer is no. Further, he insists that there is no God and that our family came to America for better opportunities. Among Soviet Jewry, I have observed that there is a far more prevalent memory of the terrors of the Holocaust due to their proximity to the war. My grandfather, a WWII vet and Jewish person, proudly served in the Soviet Army and every year, my family celebrated the Soviet defeat of the Germans on May 9th. But my grandfather, like many Soviet Jews, also ate *salo*, a cured pork

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fat. In America, he might be considered less Jewish solely for this reason. I point this out because it is actually in America where it feels that there are rigid structures in place surrounding identity and I like to probe why that is. Why did, for instance, the United States push this narrative of a prevailing discrimination against Soviet Jews? What was the gain? Writer Yasha Levine writes a great deal on this topic and it is through reading his work that I've come to understand that this narrative was perhaps used to destabilize the Soviet Union by creating a point of contention amongst its citizens while simultaneously enabling one of the largest waves of citizens to leave a country for another. In this way, against the larger backdrop of history and geopolitics, I try to make sense of identity, both for myself and in my art.

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**How have the events of this last year impacted your relationship to identity, especially as a child of Ukrainian immigrants from the former Soviet Union? If there has been a notable change, has this affected your identity as represented by your art?**

Truthfully, it hasn't changed my relationship to my identity in any way. I know that I have addressed this question throughout the interview, but to put clearly, although my family is from Ukraine, I was raised in a Soviet tradition. I was born in Queens, New York, volunteered at the local synagogue with my Babushka in Kew Gardens, my family celebrated both Soviet New Years and Thanksgiving alike, and I was raised speaking Russian before learning English in school. I take pride in all of these facets of my identity and to identify in another way would be

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disingenuous to myself and my family.

**A great response, at that. Now, a purely theoretical question, just for fun: Is the meaning of your work determined by your intent, or is the meaning derived from the consumer's perception of your work? (I miss critical theory class, okay?)**

I of course always start out making a work with a specific intent in mind, but I also recognize that once the work is out of my studio and viewers are interacting with it, they will always walk away with their own interpretation. I celebrate that and ultimately I believe that the meaning of my work can exist in multiple ways –

whether that be by my intent in the studio, through someone's interpretation, or even when reading this interview. One thing I'm very certain about is that there are no rigid structures around art that would, let's say, enforce meaning, and this is another reason why I am fairly against any forms of censorship, regardless of how uncomfortable an artwork may make an individual feel.



*Not Very Kosher, 2022*

Custom dresses (duchess satin, organza, and elastic bands)  
foam Statue of Liberty crown,  
garment rack, hangers  
70h x 43w x 12d inches

*Courtesy of Molly Surazhsky and Lowell Ryan Projects*

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**You have a really incredible roster of work on your website, which I would highly encourage anyone interested in *Dermokratizatsiya (Shitocracy)* to also check out. What has been your biggest accomplishment as an artist thus far?**

Thank you very much. To be honest, every single time I complete a major show I feel a sense of accomplishment. It's never easy. I still work a day job and put all of my efforts into my art. I work to make art. Each time a show comes together it is almost painful. I don't sleep, I get delirious, I gain weight, but I love it and would do it all over again. In terms of biggest accomplishment, I still consider my final thesis exhibition at [CalArts](#) to be an immense moment of pride for myself. My thesis exhibition occurred in gallery A402 and simultaneously I presented a twenty person outdoor fashion show on campus, in February, on a uniquely snowy day in Southern California. It's hard to put into words, but after the runway show, I cried, and understood with every fiber of my being that *THIS* is what I want to do for the rest of my life.

**That is beautiful! Do you have any exciting projects, releases, or events people should keep an eye out for?**

I am currently living in the community of Brighton Beach in Brooklyn, New York, where I am very excited to have begun working on an archive, entitled *Brighton Beach Archive*, dedicated to preserving photography, artifacts, and oral histories of the former Soviet Diaspora community! I plan to create a substack for this archive shortly, but for the time being folks can follow along for any updates on [Instagram](#).

*Thank you so much to Molly Surazhsky for taking the time to partake in this interview, and for the wonderful, in-depth discussion on so many pertinent topics. Be sure to check out her existing art on her [website](#), and follow along on her personal [Instagram](#), too. Her exciting new project dedicated to the former*

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Soviet Diaspora community of Brighton Beach, entitled Brighton Beach Archive, can also be found on [Instagram](#).



Pauline Pechakjian