

Levan Chogoshvili

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The following text is by the Georgian art historian Nana Kipiani. It provides a context for Levan Chogoshvili's art and informs the reader about how it is deeply rooted in the complex and complicated history of Georgia – a history unknown to most of us. In the conversation that follows this introduction, Daniel Baumann put questions to the artist and Kipiani in order to further clarify Chogoshvili's work and his life as an artist in Georgia. His art is an art of many layers and references, one that has been banned and silenced multiple times, not only in the 1970s and '80s, but even after 1989. Despite this (or because of it), Chogoshvili has become one of the influential and respected Georgian artists. This is the most comprehensive exhibition of his oeuvre so far.

Georgia is at the crossroads between East and West. It has been a kingdom, an independent state, a Soviet republic, and, since April 1991, a democracy. Throughout its turbulent history it has been subject to numerous invasions by, among others, Persians, Turks, Mongols and Russians – and equally exposed to numerous cultures. After a short period of independence from 1918 to 1921, Georgia was forcibly incorporated into the Soviet Union and became the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. It only regained its independence with the dissolution of the Soviet Union – an independence which today is once more at stake.

Nana Kipiani: Georgian Art of the 1970 and the 1980s

Until the 1970s, Georgia remained fundamentally isolated. However, during the 1960s, small cracks in the wall of this isolation emerged, opening a narrow view to the other side. One such crack, an important one for culture, was created by print media. In 1956 the Soviet Union started to import the Russian-language magazine *America*. About 50,000 copies would be published, though it was practically impossible to subscribe to it, as it was almost exclusively available through Soviet bureaucracy. However, people in Georgia somehow managed to get hold of it and by this means became familiar with the American way of life, its culture and art, albeit on a very superficial level and within the scope of the limited information available. The magazine became more accessible in the 1960s during the so-called 'Khrushchev Thaw' when repression and censorship in the Soviet Union were relaxed due to Nikita Khrushchev's policies of de-Stalinization. In 1962 (and until 1993) another Russian-language magazine, *England*, began to be imported from Great Britain, and *Japan* from Japan. Furthermore, the Tbilisi Public Library (the National Library) and other libraries such as the library of the Institute of History of Georgian Art subscribed to famous magazines such *Art in America*, *Art News*, *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*, *Domus*, *Décoration*, *Architectural Design*, *Japan Architecture*, *Canadian Architect* or *Architectural Record*. These magazines were mostly dedicated to the field of architecture and design, but not art. The authorities also allowed the import of the leftist French comic magazine *PIF Gadget*, and, at least for a time, left wing and communist newspapers such as *L'Humanité*, *Paese Sera*, *Morning Star* and others. There were also magazines and newspapers from socialist and communist countries, some of which were distributed freely, while others had to be purchased through contacts because of the limited number of copies. These were magazines from the German Democratic Republic, *Bildende Kunst* and *Film Spiegel*; *Művészet*

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from Yugoslavia; the Polish *Vitvarne Umeni* and *Projekt*; Hungarian *Film Színház Muzsika* and *Filmvilag*; and *Umeni/Art*, *Tvar* and several publications about Czech photography from Czechoslovakia. This was the information available to professionals and, given language barriers, it was often limited to images. Foreign films and contemporary literature were accessible mostly through the Russian magazine *Иностранная литература* (*Foreign Literature*) or printed in a very limited number of copies. For example, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* from 1929 was first published in the Soviet Union in 1973 in *Foreign Literature*. It became a sensation among Georgian readers, who became entangled in discussions about the understanding, acceptance and non-acceptance of the form of the novel. At that time, Soviet scholars also started to publish critical articles about contemporary Western culture. Although very dismissive, they became an important source of information on Pop Art, for instance; audiences became very skilled in reading between the lines, ignoring the ideological 'noise' to concentrate on the bare facts and the visual material accompanying these critical texts. Thus towards the end of the 1960s, a magazine like *America* provided important information about the existence of Abstract Expressionism and the discussion surrounding it. These were some of the cracks developing.

It was also a time when vinyl LPs were brought into the country illegally: The Beatles, Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, Jimi Hendrix or Queen. Until the 1980s, people in Georgia did not know about the existence of video cameras and players, which at that time had been in use for almost 15 years. Despite these limitations, Soviet citizens still managed to see Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice's rock-opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*. And there were very rare and expensive jeans by Lee, Wrangler, Levi Strauss and shirts by Batten. It was possible to buy drugs, and criminals with knives hunted down the jeans and Batten shirts.

In the 1960s the Beriozka chain of state-run retail stores opened its doors in the Soviet Union. It sold foreign products and clothes in exchange for foreign currency or special cheques. One of the stores was on Tbilisi's main Rustaveli Avenue and was exclusively accessible to diplomats and Soviet citizens who worked abroad. From the mid-1970s Beriozka also allowed ordinary buyers, who had to be courageous enough to buy the 'cheques' on the black market from dealers who usually operated next to the stores. Each of the shops was additionally monitored by the state security services. Beriozka became another place to see beyond the wall, another crack. For a Soviet citizen, purchasing consumer goods there meant getting in touch with capitalism, and the fulfillment of dreams.

On 19 March 1970 physicists Andrei Sakharov and Valery Turchin and historian Roy Medvedev wrote an open letter requesting the democratisation of Soviet society. Today this letter and its diplomatic text are considered to have been a very bold step. Nonetheless, it does not mention the constitutional right of national republics such as Georgia to leave the Soviet Union or exercise other rights. On the contrary, one of the recommendations was to abolish any indication of nationality in the Soviet passport, meaning to erase any borders between the national republics. The manifesto demanded uninterrupted broadcast of foreign radio programmes, unlimited sales of foreign books and periodicals, abolishment of any censorship of publications, and the extension and simplification of international tourism and exchange with foreign countries. It requested the establishment of public control of prisons and psychiatric hospitals and advocated an amnesty for political prisoners.

In the 1970s the Soviet dissident movement became stronger. Authorities countered by using psychiatric hospitals as a means of repression, while the number of political prisoners increased. In 1974 a 'Georgian Initiative Group for the Protection of Human Rights' was formed; it would be suppressed and

punished for its actions. From 1976 onwards the illegal dissident magazines *The Golden Fleece* and *The Georgian Bulletin* were published. Meanwhile, on 29 September 1976 Tbilisi Stadium hosted its first international football match between Dinamo Tbilisi and Cardiff City from Wales. In the 1970s Modernist painters such as Clara Kvess and Otar Andronikashvili, Irina Stenberg and Tamar Tavadze were still alive. They all had been victims of the Soviet system and, as Modernists and avant-gardists of the first and the second generation, had been erased from history. At that time, only a handful of people remained who knew of them and identified them as artists. In 1971 the artist Avto Varazi decided to organise his first personal exhibition in a non-official space. It took place in the apartment of Modernist artist Elene Akhvlediani. As the works were about to be installed, Varazi called off the exhibition suddenly for unknown reasons.

In 1974 the so-called *Bulldozer Exhibition* opened in Moscow with the painter Otar Chkhartishvili, a non-official Georgian artist, participating. It can be seen as an attempt by unofficial artists to take over an official space. Contradictory information circulates about this exhibition, which was organised by Oskar Rabin, Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid (while Ilya Kabakov and Evgeny Kropivnitski refused to participate) on vacant land. It became a surreal event: it was visited by Western diplomats who arrived in black diplomatic vehicles, foreign photographers with cameras and recording devices, a mixed audience of art lovers, relatives of the artists, 'strange' people in civilian clothes, cars loaded with saplings (it was 'planned' to plant these trees on the site). As soon as the painters decided to present their works, they were attacked by the 'gardeners' who tore, trampled down, burned the works and started to beat people. Mikhail Rochal-Fedorov, one of the participants of the exhibition, later recalled that there were no bulldozers, but instead 'mobile detachments' of the irrigation machines ZIL-10, a cargo truck used by the Soviet military. However, when these machines started to move towards the artists, they seemed like bulldozers. According to Komar there were bulldozers too. The action was planned in a protest against the repressive policy of the artists' union and fuelled by the hope that Leonid Brezhnev would sign the Helsinki Agreement to reduce Cold War tensions. The *Bulldozer Exhibition* was nevertheless a success for many of its participants. The Western press reported about the non-conformist artists, while foreign collectors and gallerists started to purchase their works and many artists left the Soviet Union.

Daniel Baumann: Levan, at this time you obtained your diploma from the Academy of Fine Arts in Tbilisi, right?

Levan Choghoshvili: Yes. In 1976, when I wanted to get my diploma from the Academy of Arts in Tbilisi, we could choose between a few types of images: A soldier going to war or coming home from war, or workers in a factory producing metal, a socialist realist subject already very popular in the 1960s. But young artists were tired of these. There was a third option: farmers at work, preferably with horses or cows or, another option, with a goat or, better still, women with goats. This is what our professor, a Stalinist, liked; he thought it was beautiful. If you didn't want to go with the goat, you could do the horse, but with another professor. So all the diploma paintings were the same: a women or a man with a horse, or a goat. I didn't want to do this.

So first I went to the library and read some history books about the 19th century, and I came upon a Russian-Turkish war which led to the establishment of a local Georgian army to combat the Turks. The Georgians won and their general became a famous figure. Each region of Georgia had their own uniform. So, I planned a nice painting with all the different costumes representing the regions of Georgia, and I decided to paint this war. Before starting the painting,

I had to present some sketches of the soldiers dressed in old Georgian dress. I thought this was all fine since, after all, they were all fighting the Turks! But they told me: "Levan, what are you doing? Are they homosexuals?" I asked "Why? They are warriors." But they said that no, they are wearing long dresses, so therefore they were homosexuals, and I was not allowed to take the diploma. What could I do? My father was a famous and respected mathematician, but he was not a communist and not a member of the party. They couldn't touch him, he could do whatever he wanted, he was too important for Moscow, yet he could never be in an important position due to being too independent. My father decided to ask my professor about all this and went to talk to him. He answered that it was impossible to just paint warriors. My brother suggested I just go with it and paint some cows in order to get the diploma. Instead I decided to paint myself with my daughter, but it came out so horribly that I destroyed it.

I was also interested in Vakhtang VI, a Georgian king in the early 18th century who became the first commander in chief of the Persian armies because at that time Georgia was a dependent territory of Persia. His Persian name was Ḥosaynqolī Khan, he was a poet, an intellectual, a scholar, a very good poet, a critic and translator. Vakhtang VI got in contact with Peter the Great in Russia and convinced him to come to the Caucasus to fight against the Turks and the Persians. Vakhtang assembled the best Georgian generals, intellectuals and aristocrats and took them to Russia. But Peter the Great changed his mind and Vakhtang and his peers were stuck in Russia, unable to get back to Georgia where the Persians, angered by his decision, were going to attack them and treat Vakhtang as a traitor. After Peter's death, Katharina the Great elevated these Georgians to Russian nobility and gave them land. They were a great addition to Russia, in fact one of them founded the first Russian university. This meant that the best Georgians remained in Russia. In the late 1970s we were approaching the 300-year anniversary of this king, a jubilee. So I decided to paint Vakhtang standing in a winter landscape, like Napoleons's army, to honour him, since they were going to celebrate him anyway. The painting's title was *We shall never return*; it was not bad, and I was convinced that given the jubilee, they couldn't refuse it for the diploma. But they did. My father went back and asked the professor why. They said that it was a good painting but impossible to accept. My father got upset and asked again; he continued and met the professor for whom only goats counted and who was some kind of dean. The professor finally relented and said that they would give me the diploma nevertheless. A second artist, Irakli Parjiani, refused the diploma because he was interested in German art and Rudolf Steiner, but he was clearly the most talented student back then. For the final round of the diploma exam a Russian academic always came to Tbilisi as an official judge. When I turned up with my diploma during the final celebration, the professor stood up and left the room. The Russian academic got very angry and was looking at me like a traitor. They couldn't change it and I received the diploma, but they didn't want to have any record of me ever having studied there. I was happy, and left. This was 1976.

Writing about non-official art of this period resembles wandering in a dense, unfamiliar forest. The period has not been studied extensively, despite the fact that it determined the trends in artistic development over the following decades. The non-official art of the 1970s remains the least appreciated, the most overlooked and forgotten of all periods.

Georgian non-official art emerged around 1974-75. Contrary to Russian non-conformism, which was linked to social and political issues, it expressed itself as historical, political, aesthetic and conceptual protest. Subjects were Georgian annexation in the 1920s, the mass terror of 1924 and the 1930s, the

arrests of 1950–51 and 1954, mass shootings at a Tbilisi demonstration on 9 March 1956 and the disappearance of people at the very start of a so-called period of liberalisation by Khrushchev. All this played a crucial role in starting the processes of ‘stabilisation’ and ‘normalisation’ in the 1960s; it laid the groundwork for the emergence of the dissident movement. After the 1956 public uprising in Hungary, the Prague Spring of 1968 and invasion of socialist Czechoslovakia by Soviet troops on 21 August that same year, the 1970s became a period of normalisation, which meant increasing monitoring and surveillance activities by the Soviet Union. This period lasted until the end of the 1980s.

Despite all this, non-official art brought about some change. There was an emerging interest in German, American and British culture and art – the prohibited culture of the arch enemy. This interest was of great significance to contemporary Georgian art, which, in parallel, tried to restore the taboo, erased and forgotten Georgian Modernism and the avant-garde of the 1910s and ’20s.

At the beginning of the 1980s, Levan Chogoshvili and Giorgi Marjanishvili shot a film about the topic of Saingilo, a cultural region of the Caucasus in today’s Azerbaijan with an Ingiloy minority (Ingiloy is a small Georgian minority speaking the Ingiloy dialect). It was dangerous to approach this forbidden topic. Their film was immediately banned and seen by only a few people as a result. The preparation phase had already proved complicated: it was difficult to find funds for cameraman and travel, to ensure security for the crew members and to find a director. In the end Niko Tsuladze took the job. In Chogoshvili’s career, this film became a model for how to confront an existing reality from historical, political and conceptual points of view. Already in 1973, after a short interest in Nicolas de Staël’s painting method, he had started a new phase in his art, building a complex new language based on photography.

DB: Levan, can you say something the series entitled *Destroyed Aristocracy* that you started in the 1970s, which is based on photography? It seems to me that, employing historical photography, you invented a new form of pictures. It allowed you to address, at least initially, your own biography, but even more so the destruction of Georgian aristocracy. Many of them, women and men, were important intellectuals, democrats, socially engaged citizens and key figures for Georgian independence. By killing them, Stalin tried to erase the history of Georgia and its progressive forces, the artistic avant-garde and the intelligentsia, in order to transform the country into a submissive Soviet province. Can you say something about this series, from which we are showing several works?

LC: One of the motivations of art, from ancient times, has been the defence of the oppressed and lamentation for heroic defenders. Thus, Gilgamesh mourns his friend, Homer mourns Hector, Ferdowsi mourns the heroes of Persia, chivalric epics mourn Roland, Cervantes mourns chivalry, Tolstoy mourns the noble Russia, and Chekhov mourns Russia itself, while the Georgian poet Vazha-Pshavela mourns the life and poetry of the mountains. This is why major artists often emerge at the end of significant, epochal events – at the moment when something draws to a close we bid farewell to what has been lost.

The Soviet Union not only brought an end to the aristocracy in Georgia and other nations as a physical class, but it also eradicated an entire way of life. In Georgia, as in Poland, the aristocracy constituted a particularly large percentage of society. The State Museum once housed – and likely still does – a 1930s poster showing a hunter killing a wolf with the caption: ‘Let’s reduce the world’s most populous Georgian and Polish nobility to 0.’ But more significant to me than the social class itself was the realisation that the Soviet system was destroying the spiritual aristocracy and integrity of Georgian culture. Much like

the Chinese Communists, it was eradicating old family photographs that depicted just such individuals: intellectuals, officers, clergy, industrialists, farmers, mountain populations, members of the Polish or German diasporas and others.

Photography, in turn, was banned not only because it served as documentary evidence but also because it was associated with the forbidden realms of 1900–20 Modernism and its avant-garde. Thus, when I began painting forbidden family photographs, it was my way of defending a culture that had been destroyed and forcibly erased from memory. This meant it was something particularly valuable – something no one else across the Soviet Union was interested in at the time.

To me, these images were akin to the first Christians' icons, which were depictions of the repressed, displayed secretly in caves and hidden-away places. This was the starting point, and how the series began to take shape.

DB: In this context, can you say something about the works entitled *1924*?

LC: In 1924, the Bolsheviks executed the educated people in every city and village in Georgia. After this, Georgia changed as a country. My grandfather, who was a doctor in one of the regions of Western Georgia, was the first to be listed among those to be executed. My grandmother used to tell me the well-known story of how families, officers, clergy, workers and nobility were locked in a train and gunned down with machine guns. Then, supposedly, dogs carried off parts of human bodies (as features in my works), and people could identify whose family member had been killed by the rings on the fingers. This picture, which I first made in the late 1970s (followed by later versions), is the unifying image of the series entitled *Destroyed Aristocracy*.

'The 1924 uprising and its bloody suppression was a turning point especially regarding the position the international socialist movement should adopt towards the Soviet regime. The Soviet regime no longer played a positive revolutionary role. In 1951, the split between the socialist and communist movements was finally completed – and a significant contribution to this was made by the long-forgotten 1924 uprising in Georgia.' (Eric Lee, *The August Uprising 1924. Georgia and the Birth of Democratic Socialism*, 2024)

In the 1970s, so-called apartment exhibitions became popular among the non-official artists in Tbilisi. They were organised in the flats of art historian Giorgi Marjanishvili, Shura Bandzeladze and artist Gia Edzgeradze, and were the only way to show work, since there was no opportunity to present it in official art spaces. One of the exhibitions took place at the hall of the Tbilisi Actors House in 1978 – a semi-official space that did not attract a huge number of visitors. It presented the young artists Irakli Parjiani, Levan Chogoshvili, Iliko Zautashvili and others.

DB: Levan, can you say something about the apartment exhibitions?

LC: In the 1970s, works that did not align with what was described as Socialist Realism were not only excluded from exhibitions but also risky to make – though, of course, the danger was not as severe as during Stalin's era. Young artists often refused to participate in official exhibitions altogether. For instance, I declined an offer of a studio from the official Artists' Union, as well as a commission to paint Lenin, which, though it was the only possible source of a livelihood, was deeply insulting. Unofficial exhibitions were organised in Alexander Bandzeladze's studio; he was a nonconformist abstract artist of the 1950s generation. Another venue was the apartment of the sister of Modernist artist Valerian Sidamon-Eristavi and her grandson, art historian Giorgi Marjanishvili, located in the house of the famous esoteric George Gurdjieff. This was in 1976,

the year I graduated from the Art Academy, and it was the first unofficial exhibition. Some art historians and artists warned me at the time that this was risky, because my works incorporated old documentary photographs of the destroyed aristocracy. The only consequence was that my works were not accepted for official exhibitions afterwards.

There were several other venues where dissident artists organised unofficial exhibitions. One was the Cinema House, where the families of communist leaders could watch foreign films banned in the Soviet Union, such as films by Fellini or Coppola. Another was the Actors' House, which had once been the base for the avant-garde theatre group Duruji in the 1920s. Its courtyard housed an abandoned studio, where several unofficial exhibitions were held. These exhibitions were not raided, likely due to some caution following Moscow's famous *Bulldozer Exhibition*. One unofficial exhibition even took place in a dental clinic, though this was already during Gorbachev's era. At the Cinema House, filmmaker Sergei Parajanov also held a performance where he greeted 'notable figures from the artistic world' dressed in unusual and exotic costumes. During the 1980s, I hosted several unofficial exhibitions in my small studio, supporting younger, similarly banned artists. Later, in the 1990s and 2000s, after the war, many Swiss artists worked in that studio as part of a Basel exchange programme.

My first semi-official solo exhibition was held at the Artists' House. Although I was told that a few anonymous letters were sent to Moscow labelling me a 'bourgeois artist', there were no consequences. By then, unbeknownst to us, Gorbachev's *perestroika* had already begun. An unofficial exhibition of younger artists, including myself, was held in an old caravanserai – a building that once hosted Eastern merchants and their camels. It was there that Parajanov suggested we collaborate in the theatre, an offer I declined. I also refused to participate in the first Sotheby's auction in Moscow, although the curator invited me. However, I accepted an offer from the head of the AICA (International Association of Art Critics) to exhibit at the Mona Bismarck Foundation in Paris. Despite this, I was not allowed to attend the exhibition opening, and by the time I managed to arrive, the event had already ended.

Whilst I was in Paris, the Soviet Union dissolved, and I found myself without a passport, let alone a curator. As a result, many of my older works were either lost or impossible to retrieve. Even the prize I won at a festival in Cannes was entrusted to a Soviet jury member, who indignantly remarked, "We don't send invitations to the festivals to Georgia, so how did you Georgians even get here?" French television broadcast footage of a well-known collector, a former model for Maillol, purchasing my paintings. Meanwhile, I, without a passport and carrying what turned out to be a fake bank check from the gallery, had no way to contact the buyers. In the meantime, war broke out in Georgia, and I returned home. What followed – my time in Switzerland and other events – belongs to the post-Soviet period.

DB: What is work *The Swiss Border, 1984* about?

LC: In 1984, a year that turned out to be truly symbolic for the Soviet Empire, a friend secretly showed me a few small posters from Basel Art Fair, which contained information and visuals that, as Soviet propaganda would say, were prohibited. *The Swiss Border, 1984* was influenced by these posters, related to the act of doing the forbidden. In the 19th century, Georgia was often referred to as 'Little Switzerland' due to its mountains, beautiful nature and how our famous guards fought in various countries. The word 'Swiss' also meant guardian. It seemed that a new concept, 'art fair', had crossed the border from Switzerland to us. I named the painting *The Swiss Border, 1984*. I was not allowed to exhibit this work until 1990.

DB: Beside the series *1924* and the *Destroyed Aristocracy*, there is *Venus and Mar(x)s*, a third series, about prostitution.

LC: In the Soviet Union, along with art and religion, prostitution was also forbidden. However, corrupt Communist officials occasionally offered each other 'elite' prostitutes as a form of illicit reward. Local women were almost non-existent in this context, a dynamic that changed during the terror and blockade of the 1990s, when famine-stricken and homeless people were displaced from regions of genocide in Georgia, which gave rise to the first street prostitutes, often working in police-controlled bars. Among them were underage children, a grim reality that went largely ignored for 15 years. It was during this period that the series entitled *Venus and Mar(x)s*, started.

DB: Nana, Levan's oeuvre stretches now over five decades, and you have known it for as long. How do you view it today?

Nana Kipiani: We are now discussing the entire body of work by Levan Chogoshvili, rather than pieces created at a specific time, such as the present. I think this is interesting, especially as the exhibition is, in some sense, a retrospective. This means that we can talk about the beginnings of his work and a certain continuity that has carried through to the present day. It is, let's say, one large cycle that tells one overarching story, but of course, with internal shifts, with linguistic and conceptual transformations that you must observe and interpret.

Interestingly, the artist himself primarily speaks about facts, about the context that conditions his works, which is manifested in the principle of an obvious cyclicity, while rarely discussing his methodology. He highlights the historical and cultural background that is important to him in the process of artistic analysis. But we can briefly speak about his methodology, about linguistic and formal aspects and about the impression the works leave. Two things often come to mind in connection with these works: Walter Benjamin's 'aura', and history as a series of metaphors expressed in the various intonations of Borges.

From the earliest period, from the mid-1970s on, Chogoshvili began using photography to create paintings. However, he did not do it in the way artists typically use photography. No, for him, family photos are historical documents, something forbidden, as they confirm the existence of what had to be eliminated, destroyed, stolen, that which was not supposed to be remembered and known. These black and white portraits of families on which Levan based his paintings are more than photographs: they document the period before Georgia's annexation by the Soviets in the early 1920s. These photographs were banned and many of them were destroyed by the Soviet Union, as they depict a socio-cultural and intellectual milieu, various social strata and specific individuals who fought for an independent Georgia, who were leaders of a national independence, reformers, artists, writers, educators, entrepreneurs and so on. Their physical and ideological destruction began in 1924 and lasted for decades – and they could be identified through these family portraits.

These photographs are therefore witnesses of and metaphors for forgotten stories. What were once unimportant family photos are transformed by Chogoshvili into symbols of ongoing and dramatic consequences. They are not bound to their time; they extend into the future, into the future of this shattered past. He employs visual arts materials (oil, tempera, gouache, canvas) and he incorporates old images and texts cut from magazines from the early and mid-20th century to awaken our memory. They are also metaphors for nostalgic irony; essentially, they are texts subject to constant conceptual shifts. Dmitry Tumanishvili, a distinguished art historian who is unfortunately and for understandable reasons little-known in the West, once wrote that Chogoshvili

'cancels time'. It's an interesting observation, and in this case, it calls to mind our experience of Modernism and the avant-garde's relationship with time – a relationship that seems to be inherited and perpetuated in Chogoshvili's work. The famous avant-garde artist Ilya Zdanevich wrote: 'And by pronouncing all the sounds included in the word at the same time, we get their synthesis, a sound that hides the word and a multitude of combinations, but freed from time, overthrown by Everythingism, we get timeless words. The timeless word, the combination of sounds and the poetry of Modernity.' The concept of Everythingism can indeed be seen as the foundation and the ideology of Georgian Modernism and the avant-garde – a unification of various times within a single artistic space, and thus the disappearance of time, as Zdanevich called it. If you ask me, this property of time's diminishing is partially a result of the influence of Eastern, that is, Islamic culture, on our consciousness.

In any case, this idea resonates with what the Georgian post-symbolist poet Titian Tabidze once wrote in the 1910s: 'In Georgian art, Rustaveli [a Georgian poet of the 12th century] and Mallarmé must meet. Rustaveli [...] as the collector of the Georgian word, and Mallarmé [...] of presentism and futurism.' The combination of different times in a single artistic space is even more logical due to Chogoshvili's counter-position to the existing reality – his artistic-intellectual, historical-political, and conceptual opposition to both the Soviet and post-Soviet realities. This is the method. And this method is conditioned, so to speak, by bringing together multiple different styles. And once again, Ilya Zdanevich writes: 'It is possible to bring together various modes of painting onto one canvas rather than to paint in one definite manner. Each mode attempts to tackle a specific task, but fails to encompass painting in its entirety. By combining modes, an artist liberates art from the power of temporary tasks, and by destroying the arbitrary character of each style grants a work [...] wholeness!' In Chogoshvili's paintings based on photography, despite the fact that the combination of modes concludes with a wholeness of form, the observant eye will notice many things: early Christian frescoes, the Tbilisi portrait school of painting, Persian Qajar portraits, Arabic, Persian, Armenian miniatures, Polish-Sarmatian, early Scottish portraits, the language of Modernism and avant-garde, and so on. And they all merge into a unified, and yet poly-stylistic artistic whole.

The existential quality of Chogoshvili's works is profound, rooted in a premise that could stem from a traumatic history, a historical episode, an event or a chance occurrence. This creates a constant connection between the past and the future, the past with the future – where the past serves as an unmasker of the future; or conversely, the future with the past. And all of this converges in the present. Thus, the present becomes a simultaneous process of foretelling and recollection, as well as the 'accidental' rediscovery of that lost thread in the labyrinth of cancelled time, which, to borrow Borges' words, we will remember until the moment we become happy.

The exhibition is curated by Daniel Baumann.

With thanks to Atinati and Levan Chogoshvili's friends.

Levan Chogoshvili's exhibition is accompanied by an extensive art education programme including public tours of the exhibition every Thursday at 6.30 pm. The creative 'Afternoon for all' workshops take place on the following Sundays: 16 March and 25 May 2025, from 3-5 pm. We will celebrate 'Open House Löwenbräukunst' on Saturday 5 April 2025. Please see our website for further information.

Opening hours: Tue–Sun 11 am–6pm, Thu 11 am–8 pm, Mon closed
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