

G A L L E R I A

Arsenal



KATYA LIBKIND

13.03—7.06.2026

TO DESPAIR – TO LOOK

ARSENAL GALLERY IN BIAŁYSTOK
2 A. MICKIEWICZA
15-222 BIAŁYSTOK

THE EXHIBITION IS INTENDED
FOR ADULTS (18+)

I first met the Ukrainian artist Katya Libkind in 2024, when she was quietly working on her installation *Dream During Curfew* for the group exhibition "Observe This Moment – How It Convulses."¹ In that silence, I sensed a spectrum of emotions: agitation, sadness, fear, fragility, but also a will to survive.

Her solo exhibition this year, "To Despair – To Look", like her work from 2024, is a reflection on war, dreamlike and metaphorical, yet no less difficult to confront for that reason. The works cannot be viewed or analysed in isolation, and the narratives that unfold within the exhibition resist forming a linear story. Instead, the exhibition emerges as a series of chapters composed of allegorical yet striking images of the present. Libkind has long emphasised the centrality of the body in her practice, alongside themes of sensuality, intimacy, trauma and memory, understood as a necessary process of working through both physical and psychological wounds. Drawing on memory, she constructs dreamlike yet tangible worlds: sensory scenographies filled with strange objects and visual metaphors, in which everything returns to the body, to the wound, to the need for genuine sensation and authentic experience in the face of the ongoing war in Ukraine.

¹ "Observe This Moment – How It Convulses", curated by Anna Łazar, Arsenal Gallery power station, Białystok, 1 March – 28 April 2024, <https://galeriaarsenal.pl/en/exhibition/observe-this-moment-how-it-convulses/>.

To Despair – To Look. Memories

In the chapter *To Despair – To Look. Memories*, Libkind leads us into a makeshift shelter set within an abandoned landscape. It reconstructs a place on Dzharylhach Island,² where Katya and her friend Sasha Pavlenko sought refuge from 2016 onwards, as the spectre of a full-scale russian³ invasion was already looming over Ukraine. It was an attempt to take a breath of air not yet saturated with the foreboding of an approaching war.

The image of an improvised canopy as a form of refuge repeatedly returns in Libkind's work, becoming almost a structure of belief. It is an image in which the artist believes, as she herself says, in the same way one believes in a country, in God, in death, or in victory. She describes it as the foundation of her system of faith. Scattered childhood relics appear here as traces of touch preserved in her memory. As a little girl, Katya would pull feathers from a duvet, a gesture both brutal and poetic, which the artist often revisits in her practice to signal the need to open something up, to look inside, to cross a boundary, and ultimately to enact a form of transgression. The island becomes a place that allows the artist to return to carefree childhood memories, momentarily pushing aside what is present and difficult: the everyday reality of war.

To Despair – To Look. Memories – Fear

Libkind also recalls her time on the island in several videos created together with Pavlenko. Scenes of isolation in Sasha's room intertwine with documentary footage of the sunlit island and the surrounding marshlands, where everything slowly gives way to decay. The images unfold in layered sequences: the room, the island, Sasha's family home in Mykolaiv (which he fled to avoid mobilisation) and the warm voice of his mother, Oksana, who sends him daily voice messages describing playing with her grandchildren, a burst pipe in the bathroom, and the bombings.

One of the scenes includes footage from a GoPro camera mounted on Katya's forehead as she examines Sasha as if he were a wounded body. Wearing gloves, she cuts open the protective suit, searching for haemorrhages and fractures, checking the reaction of the pupils and clearing the airways, only to find feathers everywhere. Once again, the artist repeats the childhood gesture of tearing open a duvet, while at the same time recalling an image from another video in which she gently strokes a dead swan found on the island. Beneath its wing, preserved by salt and wind, she discovers a white skeleton and a spider. It is a matter that endures, which the artist perceives as a form of beauty within decay.

To Despair – To Look. Memories – Fear – Suffering

The final chapter of the exhibition is a fountain made from the artist's blood (first presented in 2024 as *A Fountain for Meditation* at the solo exhibition "I Wish It Hadn't Happened" at thesteinstudio gallery in Kyiv). Stored in a refrigerator, the blood changes its smell from day to day: at first it recalls menstruation, later it begins to evoke death. Blood is what we are made of. Libkind, who recently completed a battlefield medicine course, recalls that the instructors referred to blood as "liquid gold." Using it as the material of a sculpture and installation is therefore an ambiguous gesture: at once an act of waste and a tribute to those who have, quite literally, shed their blood for their country.

The exhibition begins with an artificial landscape and concludes with the unmistakable smell of blood. What binds its chapters together is the tension between the real and its (dreamlike?) representation, enriched by memory and piercing emotion. Looking inside does not necessarily lead to truth; yet it may allow us to better understand what remains hidden within, and what has already been irreversibly scattered around us.

Ewa Chacianowska

2 The largest and uninhabited island of Ukraine, located in the Black Sea.

3 Purposefully written in lowercase.

Katya Libkind was born in Vladivostok and lives and works in Kyiv. She graduated from the National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture in Kyiv in 2016. Her practice spans graphic art, painting, sculpture, installation, film, and land art. She has collaborated as a curator with The Naked Room gallery in Kyiv and with the Khanenko Museum in Kyiv. She served as artistic director of the operas *Bread, Salt, Sand*, as well as *My Treacherous Light* and *Limb*, staged by the Ukho music agency between 2016 and 2019. From 2016 to 2019 she also worked with Ukho as a scenographer, including on the concert series *Voice Architecture*. She is a recipient of the *Gaude Polonia* scholarship awarded by the Polish Ministry of Culture and National Heritage (2020). From 2017 until the beginning of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, she participated annually in the Mohrytsia Land Art symposia held in the village of Mohrytsia in Ukraine's Sumy region. She is a member and co-founder of the Montage artistic collective, as well as of atelienormalno, a Kyiv-based studio for artists with and without Down syndrome, which in 2025 participated in the exhibition "Common Landscape / Greeting a Stranger" at the Arsenal Gallery power station in Białystok. A year earlier, Libkind took part in the group exhibition "Observe This Moment – How It Convulses" at the same venue.

EVENTS ACCOMPANYING THE EXHIBITION:

- 14.03.2026 (Saturday), 12 noon – curator and author guided tour of the exhibition
- 18.04.2026 (Saturday), 12 noon – guided tour of the exhibition in Ukrainian – Yulia Kostereva
- 19.04.2026 (Sunday), 12 noon – guided tour of the exhibition in Belarusian – Alina Wawrzeniuk
- 13.05.2026 (Wednesday) – publishing a video recording of the interview conducted by Oleksii Minko with Katya Libkind and Sasha Pavlenko on the Arsenal Gallery website

COLOPHON

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Exhibition supervisors: Maja MacKenzie, Krzysztof Kazimierski, Małgorzata Kopciowska, Tomasz Lelo, Olena Pruszyńska, Mateusz Smorczewski

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MUNICIPAL CULTURAL INSTITUTION



Exhibition open from Tuesday to Sunday, 10am–6pm. Last admission at 5.30pm

Entrance fee PLN 8, reduced PLN 4. Free admission on Thursdays

The Arsenal Gallery accepts Big Family Card, Białystok Big Family Card, and Active Senior 60+ Card

A detailed price list with a list of discounts is available at: <https://galeria-arsenal.pl/dla-zwiedzajacych>

Arsenal Gallery in Białystok offers free entry to exhibitions and events to all refugee persons

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SENSITIVE CONTENT



SENSORY CONTENT

