

LESIA fundamentally
indeterminate state
KHOMENKO

13.03–7.06.2026

G A L E R I A
Arsenal

“There is no such thing as good painting about nothing.”

– MARK ROTHKO

The Painting Department of the National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture in Kyiv undoubtedly offered solid preparation for becoming a painter. Yet, paradoxically, being an artist requires abandoning well-trodden paths. It demands disobedience, dissent, the questioning of the status quo, as well as sustained critical reflection. This tension defines the creative trajectory of Lesia Khomenko, a member of R.E.P., the most widely recognised Ukrainian artistic collective, known precisely for its transgressive approach, experimentation, and uncompromising search for its own language. Khomenko ultimately did not reject painting, often perceived as the most prestigious yet also the most traditional and therefore limiting medium. Instead, she sought a renewed and distinctly personal form for it, subjecting it to continual transformation: moving beyond the two-dimensional surface toward painterly installations, while simultaneously reflecting on the role of painting itself and on the methods that shape her artistic practice.

In the works presented at the Arsenal Gallery in Białystok, the artist examines film and photographic footage of the full-scale war in Ukraine, including material from military operations widely circulated through news outlets and social media. She closely analyses the impact of war, or rather its traces, on human perception. The internet has made these images instantly accessible to a global audience while simultaneously dulling our sensitivity to them, rendering them unreal. Khomenko is interested in the role of the witness and in the function of technology in the production of historical records. She approaches these questions with intellectual distance, leaving the emotional response to the viewer. The direction of attention through the use of a bird's-eye perspective, together with the futuristic compression of the content of a short video into a single frame containing “the entire moment of catastrophe,” allows the viewer to identify with the protagonist of the scene: the fighter, the drone, the fallen. Formal devices such as pixelation, which make the image abstract, refer to protective techniques used to conceal strategic objects, while at the same time conveying the condition of both viewers and the protagonists of these canvases – a fundamentally indeterminate state.

Monika Szewczyk

LESIA KHOMENKO IN CONVERSATION WITH DASHA ANOSOVA

Dasha Anosova: You shared earlier that this show is a movement between figuration and abstraction, a deconstruction of the figure of the soldier. Can you share more of your process?

Lesia Khomenko: Well, I don't work with war per se. I work with the mediation of war, with its online representation. That's a very important distinction. When I made the trench piece, I wasn't reconstructing a physical space.¹ I worked with a video, two and a half minutes long, and made a timeline out of it. I took around twenty freeze-frames and laid them out in a horizontal composition, fifteen metres long. It's a deconstruction of the document, not a place. I took one frame and split it into two: one half on one side, the other half on the opposite side, thus making a stereo image. The visitor crosses a kind of membrane and finds themselves inside. For me, this work is closer to sculpture than to painting, and many connotations are layered in there. For example, if viewed from above, it looks like an unrolled canvas on tubes, like an editing table with film reels.

DA: Ugh, such a shame I didn't see it, but I've seen plenty of photos taken from that perspective! This vertical gaze, aerial optic, runs through your painting. You've worked with it for a long time, even before the full-scale invasion. But it takes on a completely different meaning now. I've been reading Weizman a lot recently; you must know his famous discussion of the materiality of the image, the phenomenon of the pixel as the smallest unit of a light-sensitive digital matrix? Farocki addressed it too.²

LK: Oh yeah, I know that case, of course. You see, I also work with archives, essentially. Except these archives have no temporal distance; they unfold in real time. And the distance happens somehow through the translation into the language of painting. Without distance, we can't understand anything that's happening to us; we can't name it.

DA: Where do you source the material to work from?

LK: From Telegram channels mostly, now a lot from Instagram too. I clearly remember the moment drone footage from the battlefield entered public circulation, from Mavics mostly. And I remember how quickly those channels became popular, the ones that post evening summaries from their cameras. Those absolutely brutal images, when a grenade is dropped on a soldier, and he doesn't die immediately... The war in Ukraine entails battlefield fighting, but also social media and surveillance. This intersection really interests me.³

DA: How do you know that the videos and photos are not fake? Not AI-generated? Does that even matter to you?

LK: It matters enormously. I look very carefully at who is circulating them. I've had suspicions a couple of times. For instance, there was one video of an explosion where the debris flew so cinematically. I already know what a real impact looks like when someone is standing close to the moment of a strike, whether it's

1 Lesia is talking about "Battle in the Trench" (Бій в окопі, 2025), a spatial painting environment at her solo Imaginary Distance (Уявна відстань) at the PinchukArtCentre, Kyiv (2024–2025). The imagery is modelled from soldiers' body-cam footage. Notably, Kathrin Maurer delivered a lecture in conjunction with the show titled "Eyes in the Sky: Drone Art and Military Optics" (Очі в небі: мистецтво дронів та мілітарна оптика), situating Khomenko alongside Trevor Paglen, Omer Fast, James Bridle, and Mauvish Chishti. We refer to Maurer's work throughout the interview.

2 Eyal Weizman is an architect and the founding director of Forensic Architecture, a research agency based at Goldsmiths, University of London, that uses architectural and spatial analysis as evidence in human rights cases. The text I'm referencing here is Weizman's 'Violence at the Threshold of Detectability,' published in "e-flux journal", no. 64 (April 2015). Weizman examines the materiality of the image through the paradigmatic case of Holocaust denier David Irving, who argued in court in 2000 that the absence of visible holes in the roof of Crematorium II at Auschwitz-Birkenau proved the building could not have functioned as a gas chamber. Irving's claim, 'no holes, no Holocaust,' relied on what Weizman terms 'negative positivism': using the absence of evidence as evidence of absence. The case turned on

aerial photographs taken by Allied reconnaissance in 1944, in which the relevant apertures were just at the threshold of the image's resolution. Harun Farocki addressed a related problematic in his landmark film "Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges" [Images of the World and the Inscription of War] (1988), revealing how the same Allied reconnaissance photographs that captured the roof of Crematorium II were initially analysed exclusively for military-industrial targets, rendering the death camp invisible in plain sight. Farocki's work is foundational for understanding how images simultaneously reveal and conceal, and how the operational logic of military vision systematically produces blind spots. See: Eyal Weizman, 'Violence at the Threshold of Detectability,' "e-flux journal", no. 64 (2015); Harun Farocki, "Images of the World and the Inscription of War" (film, 75 min., 1988).

3 This convergence of battlefield fighting, social media mobilisation, digital surveillance, and hacking is precisely what constitutes 'cyberwar.' For one of the sharpest discussions of the concept, see Nick Dyer-Witheford and Svitlana Matvienko, "Cyberwar and Revolution: Digital Subterfuge in Global Capitalism" (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), which reads digital warfare through the lens of both Marxist critical theory and psychoanalysis.

a Shahed or ballistics. The camera should shake, there should be overexposure, and blur. The witnesses themselves would be falling or running. But this video looked almost painted. The black fragments were flying too precisely, some of them very close to the lens, and it just had this quality of being 'drawn' rather than recorded. So, I started checking, looking for it on serious verification platforms that actually vet content. It was posted only on some Telegram channels and then quietly deleted, so I concluded it was a very spectacular fake. It would have made a beautiful painting, but I deleted it.

DA: I've just read a review of your solo in Kyiv, and what struck me was what the critic says about your images being cinematic, or rather game-like, which we've actually been messaging about a lot, this idea that war itself is now gamified to an exceptional degree. The Ukrainian army has implemented a gamified points-based rewards system, allowing drone operators and units to earn points for destroying Russian equipment and personnel, which are redeemed for essential equipment. Meanwhile, the critic shared that she was "triggered" by the first-person shooter aesthetics in your paintings. What do you think?⁴

LK: It's a fair observation, but I don't receive it as criticism. The soldiers themselves edit their own footage in the aesthetic of shooters, of video games; that visual language is genuinely theirs, and you see, I don't want to dismiss soldiers' experiences and views as secondary. And many of them, when they're resting, literally play shooters. That's not a metaphor, that's just what's happening. So if gamification has seeped into the imagery, it's because gamification has seeped into the war itself, into how people fighting it experience and process it, especially drone warfare. If distancing themselves helps them get through the horrors, then why not? Do we really want them to be solemn and suffering at all times? A lot of people in Ukrainian service are there by necessity; they didn't choose this. What I will say is that civilians and soldiers have completely different perspectives on this. And I think criticism of my work for drawing on gamification comes from a civilian vantage point, which is, of course, completely legitimate too.

DA: There's something that interests me about the precision attributed to drone vision in military discourse: its vision is composed of

both visible and invisible worlds. Infrared, thermal, synthetic aperture. It sees beyond what the human eye can see. And yet what you're working with is footage that is, in practice, extraordinarily low resolution. There's this paradox between the claimed omniscience of the drone gaze and the actual image it produces.⁵

LK: Drone perspective radically changes your relationship to a person, to the figure altogether. Such a small shift in angle, and estrangement from the human body sets in immediately. And through the low resolution of the cameras, the figures look very abstract. I've been studying the footage frame by frame, and each individual frame is very abstract, but we render them hyperrealistic in our imagination. We fill in what we can't see. The moving image does that work on us collectively: each frame is almost nothing, but accumulated together, in motion, they become unbearably clear.

DA: How does this translate to your painting?

LK: I started by working through archives of photos of pixelated soldiers, photographs with faces blurred. Quite figurative works. But the more I painted, the more I began selecting a pictorial language to fit the image. A protocol of mark-making was developed. And at some point, they became fragmented, broken. Then the big turn: I started taking the same soldiers from the video. It happened accidentally. I didn't have enough material, so I started watching footage frame by frame to find a good frame. And I realised: the pixels overlaid on moving footage also move. They blend the figure directly into the landscape.

DA: And that pushed you toward abstraction?

LK: Well, as you know, my figurative language is deeply rooted in Eastern European post-Soviet training. I don't hide that; on the contrary, I show it and deconstruct it. But finding myself in the US, I kept thinking about how local my practice actually is. The war is local, and the language is local. For me, abstraction was a methodologically worked-out thing, derived from real military content. This, I believe, is a contrastive development to how abstraction came about in America. At my first solo show in New York in 2023 at Fridman Gallery, there was a work: a soldier firing

4 Referring to a detailed and perceptive review by Tetiana Kochubinska, 'Real Distance: On Lesia Khomenko's Exhibition,' *ArtSlooker* (28 January 2026), <https://artslooker.com/realna-vidstan-pro-vystavku-lesi-khomenko/>. Kochubinska observes that the viewer finds themselves surrounded by visual images in which corporeality is seemingly absent: 'we see only a fragment of a hand, a weapon in close-up. For me personally, this became a triggering motif. I cannot stop seeing in it the image from the 1992 computer game "Wolfenstein 3D". My own translation from Ukrainian.

5 The paradox of drone vision, its claimed omniscience versus its actual output, is central to what Kathrin Maurer theorises as the drone's 'scopic

regime.' In 'Visual Power: The Scopic Regime of Military Drone Operations,' *Media, War & Conflict* 10, no. 2 (2017): 141–151, Maurer analyses three scopic dimensions of military drones: hypervisibility (the drone's capacity for persistent, panoptic surveillance), visual immersion (the pilot's embodied yet remote engagement with the visual field), and invisibility (the drone's capacity to evade the target's field of vision). I am indebted to Alex Quicho's "Small Gods: Perspectives on the Drone" for providing my first entry point into deconstructing the mythology of the drone, both from the perspective of sound and artworks, and from the drone-driven War on Terror. It was through this book that I found so many of the key references in this field.

a Javelin, almost completely pixelated, just rectangular squares, because of how dynamic the scene was. Very abstract. And the New York audience gave me more feedback about their experience of the war standing in front of that abstract work than in front of the realistic ones. They were commenting a lot on the materiality of painting, on how it's made, but also empathising with the realities of war.

DA: Interesting!

LK: And as I said, I like to compose so that it's not clear what's primary, the content or the painting itself. I want the viewer to make their own selection, their own montage. This is still the pre-painterly stage, as I watch the footage frame by frame. There's one series where I take a single frame at the exact moment of an explosion, when particles are flying. It looks very abstract. True Abstract Expressionism [smiles]. I'm drawn to those moments of culmination.

DA: I see more and more abstraction in your painting now. It seems the figure is gradually dissolving.

LK: I started moving in this direction precisely before the full-scale invasion. In 2018, I was looking at soldiers from the window of my grandfather's studio in Kyiv; there was an old military base nearby. I photographed them on my phone at maximum zoom, used the photographs in my works. Even then what interested me was this: the artist and the shooter both have an objectifying gaze on the human body, both through knowledge of anatomy. The difference I only understood in 2021: the painter always looks at the 'surface' of the body. The sniper thinks immediately about penetration, about passing through the membrane. Maybe he thinks in organs straight away, I don't know. For me, a photograph is not a representation of something that happened. It is itself an event, a situation between people. And that changes everything about how I use this material.⁶

When I watch these videos and the soldiers are commenting, they comment very erotically, homo-erotically, I'd even say. They're always talking about penetration. I don't moralise about this at all, as I understand war as very kinetic. But it also links to the idea of penetration as punishment. I'm sure there are well-developed theories about that in connection to warfare, but I don't yet have enough theoretical grounding to speak to this. Many things come to me intuitively, and then I start looking for the relevant materials. I think that's actually a good approach for a practising artist. I don't like it when artists illustrate theories too heavily; they become very limited.

But what I want to say is that graphic content is absolutely pornographic, and it's devastatingly traumatising. The brain simply cannot process death directly; some form of self-defence kicks in. Death is abstract for us. So mediation is needed, through metaphor, through painting. I make it more abstract, but through this language, I mediate the subject toward something we can actually receive. And also, I'm interested in objectification. Victim and hunter. Kathrin Maurer speaks a lot about hunting, and when I talk with soldiers, the theme of hunting comes up as well.⁷

DA: You don't use textual documents in your research?

LK: For me, they're more traumatic than images, actually. They give enormous scope to the imagination. They allow describing things that are never documented: torture, abuse. I can't work with that.

DA: Do you read drones' optics as an extension of the sniper's eye?

LK: Absolutely. A kamikaze drone flies very fast toward a target, and the operator sees this rapid approach. It's like a bullet with eyes, "an eye turned into a weapon." The whole drone is the bullet. Maurer describes this synthesis so well: the machine gaze together with the human gaze. And that's why the semi-abstraction appears. It's not only a human looking; the machine is looking, too.⁸

6 Lesia's insistence that the photograph is an event rather than a representation echoes Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's foundational rethinking of photographic ethics. We don't discuss Azoulay here, but we discussed her writing in dm's, so I feel I should reference her here. For instance, in "The Civil Contract of Photography" (New York: Zone Books, 2008), Azoulay argues that a photograph is not a record made by one person of another but a political situation involving at minimum three participants: the photographer, the photographed subject, and the spectator. Each is bound by what she calls a 'civil contract,' an unwritten set of obligations that precede and exceed the frame. The act of looking is never neutral: it is structured by relations of power, proximity, and complicity. I find Khomenko's distinction between the painter who attends to the surface and the sniper who thinks about penetration maps onto the following framework: to look at a body is already to enter a political relation with it, and the terms of that relation, whether it tends toward care or toward targeting, are never settled.

7 Maurer draws on Grégoire Chamayou's concept of cynegetic (hunting-related) violence in her "The Sensorium of the Drone and Communities"

(Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023). Chamayou's "A Theory of the Drone" (New York: The New Press, 2015; orig. "Théorie du drone", Paris: La Fabrique, 2013) argues that drone warfare constitutes a fundamentally new form of 'manhunting' that collapses the classical distinctions between combatant and non-combatant, battlefield and everywhere. The drone is not merely a more efficient weapon but a philosophical object that transforms the moral and political architecture of killing.

8 The phrase 'an eye turned into a weapon' is from Grégoire Chamayou, "A Theory of the Drone" (New York: The New Press, 2015), 12-13. Chamayou uses this formulation to describe the fusion of surveillance and lethal capacity that defines the drone as a weapons platform. In his account, the drone does not simply observe and then strike; it collapses the distinction between seeing and killing into a single continuous operation. The pilot wears goggles and 'rides' the drone into its target, experiencing a first-person perspective that Maurer's framework would describe as maximal visual immersion with minimal temporal distance.

DA: Oh yeah, wait, I'll email you this Hito Steyerl's text we talked about, 'In Free Fall' it's called. She writes about pilots describing merging with the aircraft, and about the loss of horizon, and the vertical perspective. You just have to read it!⁹ I remember you've been thinking about snipers since 2014?

LK: Yes. After Maidan, after the leaked intercepts of the snipers' communications, I spent a very long time not knowing how to work with that material. Snipers who don't shoot: they observe. They describe what they see through the radio. The language is unbelievably precise, as if they are describing a painting. When I was working at Kyiv railway station I accidentally met a sniper from military intelligence. I showed him my paintings, asked how they aim, and whether they study anatomy. For me, learning from people who work like this every day is key.

DA: You said you don't want to work from the victim position.

LK: Yes. I located that opposition in myself early on. In the twentieth century enormous attention was paid to the discourse of victims. I want to offer something against the image of the Ukrainian soldier as a victim of circumstances. I work on looking into scenes of violence in conventional warfare. Painting is a good medium for this: it has historically always represented battle scenes. I'm simply watching how contemporary reality shifts the perspective. We don't fully know what's happening in this war. I used to use the phrase 'fog of war,' but I was told by soldiers that it's incorrect now. Fog of war refers to conditions on the battlefield where you can rapidly deploy equipment and go undetected. But with the density of drones in the sky, that fog in any twentieth-century sense no longer exists. Drone surveillance is basically everywhere, and soldiers call it 'dirty sky.'

There are so many testimonies online. They matter, but through sheer quantity, they turn into noise and become invisible. Quantity produces invisibility. Social media is an unreliable place to store archives. And the video document itself contains a trap of fear: it loops, it starts again and again, like a hamster wheel. I caught myself watching one explosion five times in a row. So I started making these timelines, showing a video's entire duration in a single image, beginning and end. To free myself from the temporal loop, from that compulsion. I'm in no way claiming my painting has therapeutic qualities. But the frame holds something still, and maybe that stillness is where distance from the archive can actually form.

9 I'm referring to Hito Steyerl, 'In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective,' *e-flux journal*, no. 24 (April 2011). Steyerl describes how pilots in free fall report a state of disorientation so complete that they cannot distinguish subject from vehicle, merging with the aircraft entirely. The essay traces how the stable horizon line that once anchored both linear perspective and the Enlightenment subject has been replaced by a vertiginous vertical view, driven by satellite imaging, drone surveillance, and 3D cinema. Steyerl argues that aircraft now function simultaneously as tools of com-

munication, aerial cameras, and killing machines, while the entertainment industry exploits the same vertigo in its construction of imaginary worlds. Drawing on Weizman's analysis of vertical sovereignty in occupied Palestine, she describes how geopolitical power is no longer distributed across a flat, map-like surface but stacked into horizontal layers. Achille Mbembe's notion of 'necropolitics' enters here too: the occupation of the skies becomes critical, with policing conducted from above through UAVs, reconnaissance jets, and satellite observation.

LESIA KHOMENKO

A multidisciplinary artist who reconsiders the role of painting: she deconstructs narrative images and transforms paintings into objects, installations, performances, or videos.

She was born in 1980 in Kyiv (Ukraine), and graduated from the National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture in 2004. She is a co-founder and member of the R.E.P. group (since 2004) and of the curatorial group Hudrada (since 2008) in Ukraine. She was on the shortlist for the Pinchuk Art Prize (2009, 2011, and 2013); together with the R.E.P. group, for the Future Generations Art Prize, founded by the Pinchuk Art Centre (2012); and the Kazimir Malevich Artist Award (2012 and 2016).

Khomenko's works have been shown in solo and group exhibitions, among others at the Ukrainian Museum in New York (US); Museum de Fundatie, Zwolle (NL), Albertinum, Dresden (DE); Collateral Event of the 59th International Art Exhibition the Venice Biennial, Venice (IT); the European Parliament (BE); Museum Folkwang (DE); Fridman Gallery, NYC (US), Voloshyn Gallery, Miami (US).

Her works are in public collections including M HKA (BEL), Ludwig Museum (HU), Art Collection Telecom (DE), Kupferstich-Kabinett (DE), the Ukrainian Museum (USA), Zuzeum Art Centre (Latvia), Mystetskyi Arsenal (UA), Maidan Museum (UA), Pinchuk Art Centre (UA).

She participated in residencies at the Oasis Pointe Residency, Miami, FL, USA (2022–2023), the Martha MOCA Artist Residency, NJ, USA (2022), the Emergency Residency at Ujazdowski Castle, Warsaw, Poland (2022), the Working Room, Ivano-Frankivsk, Ukraine (2022, as a curator and participant), the Salzburg International Summer Academy of Fine Arts, Salzburg, Austria (2021), LIA (Leipzig International Art), Leipzig, Germany (2008).

Khomenko's works have been covered and reviewed by "The New York Times", "The Brooklyn Rail", "The Washington Post", "The New Yorker", "The Art Newspaper", and "Frieze", among others. She has taken part in panels and public talks at the MoMA, New York, NY (2022), the Eastern Connecticut State University, Willimantic, CT (2022), the James Gallery at CUNY, NY (2023), the Florida State University Museum of Fine Arts, Tallahassee, FL (2023), the Scandinavia House, New York, NY (2023).

She currently lives in New York City, NY, USA.

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

curator: Monika Szewczyk

production: Yulia Kostereva

visual identity: Katarzyna Dudziec

Polish to English translation: Anna Bergiel

Ukrainian to Polish translation: Olena Pruszyńska

editing and proofreading: Ewa Borowska

exhibition realisation: Maciej Zaniewski,

Kacper Gorysz, Krzysztof Kazimierski,

Michał Mateczek, Mateusz Smorczewski

communication and promotion:

Gabriela Owdziej, Piotr Trypus

exhibition supervisors: Maja MacKenzie,

Krzysztof Kazimierski, Małgorzata Kopciowska,

Tomasz Lelo, Olena Pruszyńska, Mateusz Smorczewski

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exhibition open

Tue–Sun

10 a.m.–6 p.m.

last admission to exhibition is at 5.30 p.m.

entrance fee

8 pln

reduced 4 pln

free admission on Thursdays

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