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"Artists of Odessa" Is A Brutally Funny Travelogue...And More

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by [Elina Mishuris](#)

A 47-minute time capsule of crumbling graffiti and quick, wry grins under neat mustaches, "Artists of Odessa" is a discursive, loving, and admirably even-handed essay on the present existence of the city most Westerners only know as the site of "Battleship Potemkin's" staircase scene.

Eastern Europe, and the city's citizens, know it differently. The artists, among whom directors Dmitry Khavin and Liliya Klimova include painters, poets, pranksters, street musicians, and a bearded, antic man rushing through bushes - talk and walk viewers through an Odessa in which the past has stuck - pointedly - around.

Near a 'Ukraine Got Talent' billboard - its model looking for all the world like an Eastern Orthodox icon in red leathers - unfolds the neighborhood of Moldavanka, pre-dating the city proper, once the center of its Orthodox Jewish population but now in actual danger of collapse. This hasn't stopped a woman named Victoria from opening a second-hand shop there - the first new business in a hundred years, she boasts to the camera - and a very different phenomenon it is from its East Village contemporaries, selling not tastefully tailored '50s jackets and pumps, but Soviet-era milk and kefir bottles... Collector's items, maybe, or junk with a half-life that shows on the faces of the city's residents. Victoria's toughest customers, haggling over the bottles, are her parents.

The New York-based Khavin and Ukrainian journalist Kimova - shooting with help from a CEC Artslink grant - assume a rewardingly loose stance toward their subjects; they allow them to argue, half-seriously, in cafeterias; show off their paintings; lead the filmmakers into their tiny rooms within still-extant communal apartments - like Kostya Kostyuchenko, whose cell may soon be sold. Others recite their poetry on a jaunt through the market.

What results is a half-improvised, half-fated perfection, stemming partially from the subjects themselves - a streak of absurdism, some cheerful fatalism having developed in the community through the years of nonsense governmental directives and repression, and now revealing itself languorously, with proper comedic timing, as a gaping pig's head becomes the subject an ode to penetration. Overcome, the head rolls to the ground and bleeds profusely. "Yulia!" yelps the saleswoman in mock terror - meaning then-PM Tymoshenko, of course.

Tymoshenko pops again in Sergey Zarva's icon paintings - even during Soviet rule, when religious iconography was banned, people elevated other things to that status, Zarva explains. And at his first show - paintings of family members - relatives called the cops. "My uncle," Zarva explains, "he couldn't understand why I had to paint Grandma naked. Then he said - OK, Grandma's fine. But why did you paint Grandpa naked?"

Another of Khavin's subjects didn't fare as well - for illegal living-room exhibitions in the '80s, Leonid Voitsekhov spent two years in prison. The fact is mentioned toward the end of the film, casually, as the man sorts through his drawings, recounts the summer sex came to Odessa, lounges in his studio. Outside, an old woman - my whole family is long-lived, she explains - busks with an accordion to support her newly schizophrenic son.

Aha, you think, I know this story - the rapacious forces of globalization gnawing away at an ever-shrinking

morsel of authenticity, and the brief and peculiar balance thus achieved at this react moment, twisted and ephemeral, never again to be seen. But happily, "Artists" is not quite that.

Like any port city, Odessa owes its existence to the ebb and flow of the market and international politics; its interior was developed by an exiled Frenchman serving as Governor; the first automobile to run ruts into the roads of the Russian Empire did so in Odessa; Jews, Germans, Italians, Albanians, Turks and Poles, among others, thrived there at one or another time. The city exists as a crossroads, and its people are constitutionally crossroads dwellers; they adapt, invent, watch half-amused, half-sorrowful, as directives of the empire - be it Moscow or global capitalism - warp the landscape.

Shaky, absently paced, occasionally hilarious, ultimately "Artists of Odessa" is a successful hand-sketch of the artists as palpably real women and men.

"Artists of Oidessa" will screen on March 19th at Millenium Worshop, 66 E. 4th St., as part of [Kinofest NYC](#).