

Chromatic Reversals: On the work of Inga Bard

by Andrew Berardini

A positive is just a picture.

A negative however is its total inversion.

The colors change places with their opposites: reds trade with cyan, greens go magenta, blues flip to yellow. Reality upturned and rewritten in new hues, the ordinary is suddenly otherworldly and spectacularly so—psychedelic ghosts haunting lurid carnivals on exotic planets.

Though photography so easily gifted us this chromatic change in perception in its chemical processes, flipping things to their opposite is an aesthetic gesture beyond what happens in darkrooms alone. Seeing things in a new way or even seeing things at all can be harder than it looks.

It can be so easy to grow accustomed to what we see everyday that we no longer actually see it. A consensus enfolds us, our lazy brain accepts things as mundane then mostly forgets them, concentrating its finite energy on other, seemingly more pressing tasks. Outside of humble functionality, the familiar can lose all particularities. And often, too busy or distracted, we simply go along with what we're told, a hurried passive acceptance of status quo. Scoundrels can of course intentionally disorient our sight as well, and so often do. There are certain sights we've been trained by governments, religions, ideologies (a nasty trio of abusive boyfriends) to diligently ignore, and they will all but disappear.

A veil descends. Or that veil has been there for so very long we can no longer see it.

Political disappearance, invisibility, and manipulation are especially dark in affecting our vision. In the US where I live, we have disappeared more than grief can count, from the five hundred thousand homeless to the two million prisoners, and all those forcefully (million upon millions) shifted into untouchable classes because of gender, sexuality, or color, where violence against them is so often unnoted and invisible to justice. And there is also of course my country's universal blindspot when it comes to guns.... most here grow numbly accustomed to regular mass shootings and other forms of gun violence—the politics intractable, the refrain of “thoughts and prayers” rotely repeated, nothing changes—these horrifying acts of violence simply disappear into the headlines.

The churning cycle of news, flashing headlines keeping you clicking into a product. More than once, the newsy website you're reading misappropriated a photo, perhaps taking an image from a warzone in Syria for an article about a peaceful protest in Thailand; thus, the story dishonestly bent towards fear and the world looks different because of it. The peaceful cause disappearing under the presumed violence. You may even stand in that protest only to see images from it twisted and turned as every broadcaster shifts reality to fit their ideological position (or that of their bosses).

In the Soviet Union, misinformation was the norm, a practice being continued in the Russian Federation under its leader Vladimir Putin. It is currently illegal (with swift, brutal enforcement) to call that country's invasion of Ukraine a "war" and misinformation abounds. The daily horror of its terror and mayhem disappear under the term "special military operation" or the totally insidious "denazification" for a country that recently freely elected a Jewish president. Photographs and video footage of civilians executed by Russian soldiers are first said to be faked, and then to be evidence of an imaginary Nazi regime's particular cruelties. (I recently learned the Russian term *vranyo*, which can mean a lie where both the liar and their audience know it's a lie but both theatrically pretend that the lie is true.)

And though some people everywhere are certainly paying attention with a critical eye to any of our countries and news agencies outright lies and subtle disingenuities, so many more amongst us grow accustomed to this way of seeing and not seeing things. Purveyors of fake news call anything contrary to their illusions *fake*. Many either grow cynically apathetic or just start believing. And even when some attempt criticality, they may still end up with a sniggering superiority as the most fierce believers of disinformation.... *Don't trust the lamestream media, global warming is a hoax.*

And though the stakes are one thing on the macrocosmic levels of national and international politics, what we see (and don't see) is a part of our everyday in ways that are both pressing and poignant, mundane and urgent. The dull eyes in which we view the wonder perpetually beaming around us. The fictions and hearsay, the dreams and hopes that change the shape of our visions.

How can we see what's become invisible or distorted? How do we reveal the unseen beneath power, old or new, political or personal?

For the artist Inga Bard, the flow of information is as wet as paint and the messy politics of seeing essential to her artistic practice. And by reversing colors, taking absurdities to their limits, and revealing the mechanisms of power, Bard renews her ability and ours through her work to really see. But no matter what games with visibility Bard may play, when individuals pass her brush they're singular humanity beams from the often fraught atmospheres that backdrop their lives. Her style unfolds in multiple ways, with chromatic transpositions, unreal scenes, and the

lushly representational, but almost universally, the humans usually appear in their everyday fleshy beauty.

Bard (b. 1987) shifts perception and cuts through disinformation, unveiling invisible structures whilst maintaining the sovereignty and beauty of the individuals sometimes enmeshed in all the above. Though the artist has worked in manifold mediums, creating anarchic performances, framing traditional textiles, and flipping photographs, she has worked primarily in painting, a figuration informed by her classical training in Florence, Italy, learning all the tricks and skills that only this artistic capital of the Renaissance can truly teach one.

In describing certain problems in the politics of seeing above, I was really alluding to different series of works in Bard's oeuvre, many of which came together in an exhibition at The Laundry gallery in San Francisco in 2018. In two works regarding gun violence from 2015, only the guns appear to be real in the unreal flipped colors of their contexts, including the grimly petulant faces of their gun-toting owners. In her works from the series "Digital Pyrite" (2018), Bard explores the gold rush absurdities surrounding cryptocurrency, from a personal portrait of a crypto entrepreneur as a gilded server to the mining farms surreally stacked amidst melting glaciers and jungly backyards.

One of Bard's most moving series, in truth probably multiple series that discursively loop back to a singular subject, regard her homeland of Ukraine. Born in 1987 in the Ukrainian SSR, Bard toddled through the collapse of the Soviet Union and the difficult deprivations during the rebirth of an independent Ukraine. Her family emigrated to the United States when the artist was ten years old (where Bard currently resides, though she spent a long sojourn in Europe for art school and graduate study in Italy and Great Britain).

Through regular visits and family, Bard stayed heartfully connected to her homeland and its fate. From the Orange Revolution in 2004 to Euromaidan and the Revolution of Dignity in 2013, quickly followed by Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and that ongoing war's horrific escalation in 2022. Though Ukraine's history feels utterly present lately, for the uninitiated a brief background, the last twenty years have divided Ukraine between those that would prefer greater integration into Europe and those that would have closer ties with Russia (the latter a minority often instrumentalized by Russia for imperial meddling). Beginning with independence on through the Orange Revolution and continuing into the present, the Ukrainian people have popularly rejected Russia's overtures and aggressions in massive and ultimately successful protests.

Studying in London during Euromaidan, Bard traveled to the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv in the middle of the three months of protests to both witness and participate in this epochal moment in her homeland's history. I won't go into the granular details of what happened in those intense

days of agitation except to say that peaceful protests were marked by massacre before the then pro-Russian president was pushed out of office, which subsequently sparked a Russian invasion.

Documenting the protests and inspired by her homeland's fierce push towards self-determination, Bard painted a series of works capturing the tension and passion of this moment. From long lines of black clad riot in police to the impromptu barricades in the streets to her incredible portrait of a Ukrainian protester, *Neo Nationalist* (2014). With stormy hair crowned with the flowers of a traditional Ukrainian wreath and a long scarf rippling over her shoulders, this protesting woman in this lush and glorious painting captures something powerfully evocative, and beautiful. And while her gear and background appears in negative color, her face with its piercing eyes is rendered in all its realness and original chroma.

Captured with palpable romance, the half-masked protester stares us down beyond the tableau with defiance. Nationalist is a word that always gives me the heebie-jeebies. But in the context of a country with a history of colonial occupation, oppression, and genocide asserting its right to determine its own fate, 'nationalism' takes on a new color, which Bard flips as she does the colors surrounding the striking force of this protester.

Bard followed up this series after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014, updating the classic painting of Ukrainian resistance against would-be imperial conquerors, *Reply of the Zaporozhian Cossacks* (1881-1891) by Ilya Repin. The original painting depicts the Zaporozhian Cossacks in 1676 (seen as national antecedents by modern Ukrainians) roaring with laughter as they compose a letter telling the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire to both fuck his mother and kiss their Cossack ass (the entirety of letter's fuckery is worth reading truly).

Inspired by a recent restaging of this painting, Bard painted these modern Ukrainians invoking Repin's classic while defending their homeland. One hopes they're compose their own "fuck your mother" letter to another imperial invader. As in many of her paintings, the backgroundcolor is flipped whilst the people remain natural. In both *Neo Nationlist* and *Letter to the Tzar* (2014-15), Bard asserts the fragile mortality of its subjects with an assertion of their true color as it is a fragility worth defending, lest they are disappeared from the world as a people.

Beginning in 2022 as both a response and a fundraiser for the anti-war effort, Bard has been sourcing and reframing *vyshyvanka*. This folk form of embroidered clothing has been worn in Ukraine for centuries (if possibly millenia). The expertly stitched patterns are both story and talisman, relaying to others in its patterns where you are from but also often symbols for good luck and protection. By reframing these everyday and traditional patterns, Bard is elevating both the folk artform and the national identity (under assault) that it represents, another spell of protection.

Though geopolitics and especially those of Ukraine have informed Bard's work, these affairs also color the microcosmic of her everyday community as well. In 2017, she gathered many of her friends to a secret party to collectively fuck with a paint-by-numbers outline comps'd by Bard using the style of Soviet propaganda to depict the specific ideals of the well-heeled and (mostly) well-meaning young technocrats of the Bay Area. The resulting paintings make it clear that few really and truly wish to follow a script set out for them, whether delivered by a mustachioed strongman dictator or a blue-jeaned and black turtle-necked CEO.

Even with all that I've said, I wouldn't say that her works are wholly defined by politics and power. Alongside crypto miners, gun-toters, and protesters are pictures of those from her community: beloveds and friends, eccentrics and libertines, darlings and deviants. Transposing the colors to negative whilst maintaining individuals in positive was initially a way to flip the script of disinformation and help us to see things in a new way, it has evolved to become a way for her to re-engage in the world, to see even the everyday in a new way. Whilst her recent body of work includes a subtle political dynamic through a re-centering of women and a celebration of queer individuals, they are wrought through a exploration of self, understanding a relationship to the world through the humans and landscapes she lives with in California.

Though I don't truly have an answer how any of us can pierce and dissolve illicit illusions, I do see in the work of Inga Bard an expert and sincere attempt at seeing as well as she can, dismantling and elevating pictures in such a way that perhaps we can see what she's seeing, the struggle to witness whatever truth and beauty we can amidst disinformation and discouragement, political fictions and beloved companions. Flipping the colors as Bard does is certainly a transposition of perception. but also certainly turning the world upside down.

Awareness is an epiphany of the soul and flipping the world upside lets you see it again. Its realness or the lack of it. Besides, turning the world upside down in art can easily be a rehearsal for revolution, nothing changes until we can imagine it.