

Exhibition Review: "The Code of Presence: Belarusian Protest Embroideries and Textile Patterns" University of Michigan Library

Library Exhibitions Review, Issue 1, March 2023

Reviewed by

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In this first large scale digital exhibition of contemporary Belarusian textile art, curator Sasha Razor features the mixed textile work of twelve contemporary Belarusian women. Created in response to the socio-political climate in Belarus since August 2020, these works provide a revealing glimpse into the protest movement and serve as an important historical record of a volatile moment in the country's history. "The Code of Presence" examines the significance of these artworks and their contribution to art history and Belarusian culture.



Exhibiting twelve individual art projects is ambitious and this exposition could easily become disjointed; fortunately, there is a clear framework in place. Razor's introduction is extensively researched and provides important historical and political context around these works, framing them as acts of dissent. Razor also articulates the pedagogical value and the curatorial aims of this show as setting forth the artists' protest messages as well as exploring Belarusian ethnic identity and culture, specifically by focusing on women's voices and labor. The works are categorized into three sections: Craftivist Strategies, Collective Embroidery Practices, and Traditional Textile Patterns in Other Mediums. These categories also structure layout of the digital exhibition, with each section accessed on the site like chapters of a book. Navigating the simple layout of the exhibition is straightforward. Visually, this site design is somewhat underwhelming but it is functional and accessible.

Many of the works in "The Code of Presence" are discreet acts of resistance that are both beautiful and powerful such as Rufina Bazlova's (2020) series "The History of Belarusian Vyzhyvanka," that uses the traditional medium of folk embroidery to record the recent protests

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in Belarus. The juxtaposition of the traditional aesthetic with contemporary political messages is striking. Like recovered fragments they are collected and displayed to the viewer.

One criticism of this exhibition is that the heavy moderation in the form of accompanying text prevents the audience from exploring or reflecting on these works without significant intervention. While the works of art are not allotted much space in this exhibition to stand alone, the methodical presentation of information, including a useful section of Artists Biographies, found in this exhibition is highly informative, and the curator appears strongly motivated to thoroughly document and disseminate these facts to a wider audience. At points the density and breadth of the information can begin to wear on the casual viewer and may be more oriented to academic researchers. With so much content, this exhibition may be more successful if it is viewed in multiple sittings. It is a valuable resource for research in this subject area and a fascinating exploration of the use of traditional craft in contemporary activist art in Belarus.

Image Credit:

[Rufina Bazlova. *The Female Solidarity*, digital graphics, 2020.](#)