



# TOSKA

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1st EDITION  
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## Thanks for checking out Toska

The people who make Toska happen are  
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### Topic: Having a studio

Phil - Do you have a studio that you create in?

Sana - Actually the first time I almost had a studio was last month in Kiev, just 3 days before the war started. I had looked at the space, the landlord called me and asked "So are you signing the lease for the studio space?" and I was like "Yes...." but was hesitant. He asked if I was doubting the space and I said "Not the space but there is just this one obstacle that can happen", "What's that?" he replied. I said "Let's just give it a week and see if this war will happen." And I was laughing because it sounded rather bizarre. I think subconsciously I knew there was a percentage of possibility that it could happen. And the war did happen. So I guess I've never had a studio in my life. Yet!

## Topic: The Beginning

Phil - How much art did you do when you were a kid? Were you supported? Were there other people around you making art?

Sana - My grandfather had a natural predisposition to making art but he never kept up with it and completely stopped in his early 20's. I remember as a kid begging him to draw something for me and once in a while he would but then he just stopped and wouldn't even doodle anymore. I was supported in my art on a pretty basic level. My mom signed me up for after school art lessons from this old Jewish lady and I went two or three times each week. My grandmother would take me and wait outside while I had my lesson and then we would take the night bus home. We had to wait in a long line to get the bus and then sometimes it would take 2 hours to get home because of traffic. So there was support from my family but not like crazy support of putting me into crazy art schools as a kid, but they were doing what they could. They took my interests into account and I'm very grateful for that.

I remember taking art classes in 6th through 8th grade but it was always monotonous still lifes with pencil. I was always dreaming of painting with oils but all we did was pencil still lifes and I lost interest for a long time after that. But when my family immigrated to Canada after I graduated from Primary School (High School), I became depressed, I withdrew, and that was when I started drawing again. It was an impulse to start drawing again. And then my dream of painting with oils came back.

One day I was going to go to the ballet, got prepared and went, when I arrived I found I had the day wrong but ran into Darby Milbrath\*. I recognized her, I introduced myself, we exchanged information and a few months later I texted Darby and asked if she would mind having me in the studio as an assistant. She was also self taught, she welcomed me into her studio, taught me how to stretch canvases, and taught me how

to use oils on a very basic level. And the serendipitous thing that happened was the beautiful old Jewish lady that I took art lessons from as a child in Odessa first introduced me to Chagall, which was the first time I understood that being an artist could be a career, and the first time I arrived to Darby's studio the painting she was referencing was a Chagall. It was a very beautiful moment, it felt serendipitous, I felt like this was a sign that I am doing everything correctly, that I am on my path.

\*Darby Milbrath is a painter based in Toronto. Great work. Look her up!





## Topic: Planning or flowing?

Phil - I find that there are generally two types of artists. Ones that plan and ones that work intuitively. Obviously there's a lot of variation in between but what about you? Do you plan or flow freely?

Sana - Umm... I don't do any planning. That was what I hated the most in my 6th through 8th grade art classes. Too much planning. But what I love is investing lots of time into building the canvas, into preparing it and then it's like diving into the dream of your own creation. It's like a lucid dream because there is no plan, there is no nothing, it's just a free exploration of the unknown. (laughs) And it might sound like, not pretentious.... maybe cheesy, but that's how I feel about it. It's just diving into the unknown when I have this blank canvas in front of me.

Also, I find that I am a very impatient person. I am bad at following recipes, following instructions, I hate learning stuff on YouTube, but painting is a way to use my impatience as a tool. Impatience is something that is perceived by society and in my family as a negative characteristic. My mind is very chaotic. I've struggled with this a lot as a child, even when I would try to focus, I would make mistakes and miss things. So I had this focusing issue as a child and still some now as an adult but I'm coping with it. But painting is a place where I can let it be and even use it as a tool. This disruptive thinking can be beneficial in my art; it can guide me and be useful. To be productive with my impatience. This is the first time I've put this feeling into words but that is exactly how I feel. My impatience isn't a bad thing, in fact it is actually beneficial.

Phil - I really like that phrasing. I can see that impatience can be beneficial in many ways. It can push you to create when you don't have the perfect space or have the right tools. Being impulsive or impatient can cause someone to drop other things and get to work on a project.



### **Topic: Ancestry**

Phil - I saw on Instagram that you're doing some family history research. I recently did a big project with my dad on our family history. Where does that interest come from for you?

Sana - I've been a fan of researching family history since my early childhood. This was instilled by my grandfather who taught me the importance of ancestry, my family history, to know Ukrainian language because there were the dominant powers trying to destroy our connection to our roots to destroy our language.

I know all of the stories from my great great grandparents by heart. My mom's parents helped raise me and I remember the stories my grandfather shared about his grandfather. I would even search the etymology of my friends' last names. I even remember the first thing I ever googled, it was 'what's the origin of my last name' so ancestry is one of my most favorite topics and areas of exploration. So my grandfather helped me learn that it is important to remember and appreciate my history.

## Topic: Painting on Burlap

Phil - Painting on burlap seems a little unusual. Where did this come from for you?

Sana - So Darby would paint on burlap and I never understood the attraction. But about 4 or 5 years later I was in Kiev at a flea market passing by a man that was selling old burlap bags from the countryside. And I watched one guy bought a lot of these old burlap sacks. So I turned to him and asked if he was a painter, he said yes, so I asked if he gessoed them, and he said yes but in a kind of careless way. Not rude but just short and he left. It was an odd meeting with another artist but he made me recall the idea of working on burlap so I bought a couple of very old burlap bags. They had stains, smells, and holes in them. When I got home I prepared them by cutting off the large holes but left the small ones, and I didn't mind the stains. It took about 5 layers to prepare it, the first couple of gelatin\* and then with gesso, some of them just with gelatin. And it turned into a whole series that I was so excited about, I was so into it, addicted to burlap painting. Because the texture of burlap gives so much to the process, to the actual look of the painting, it adds texture and vibrancy.

I can only paint on burlap in the summer because I can't prepare the surface in the winter, it would take too long to dry. So it was just this beautiful summer of painting on burlap. Definitely a period in my life.

\*gelatin is a way to prime the canvas.



## Topic: War

Sana - I remember when I heard the first explosions I was in my apartment and very scared. I posted right away asking if anyone heard the sounds and many of my friends responded immediately that they also heard the sounds in three cities simultaneously, Kharkiv, Odessa, and Kiev. So I started immediately looking for a place to go underground. I made a post asking if anyone knew where to go and another artist who lives close to me said the vintage store on the corner had prepared their basement for people to shelter in because it used to be a bomb shelter back in the days. So I went there and



there were people with their children, two beautiful cats, and young couples. People would make coffee and sandwiches and be kind and supportive to each other.

It was dark, I was crying and I looked around the space and saw this small painting on the wall. It was like a little ray of light. It made me smile. It gave me a pinch of hope in that particular moment.

I stayed there for the first day and at 10pm my friend called me because she was stressed that I wasn't around people close to me. She ordered me a cab, I got to her place, and we spent the first night of the war in the subway station. And in the morning we really

just wanted to get back to her apartment so we left the subway station and it was a beautiful morning, a beautiful sunrise. And I thought maybe everything was over because the sunrise gave me a sense of hope. But the second that thought entered my mind we heard another series of explosions. So we ran, my hands were shaking, and in that moment I turned around and thought this city is so beautiful and so I took this picture. The last photo I took of Kiev.



## Topic: Being an artist in War

Phil - This war is very public. It's been called the most documented modern war. This means that your experience as an artist in war is also very public. Can you talk about that a little bit?

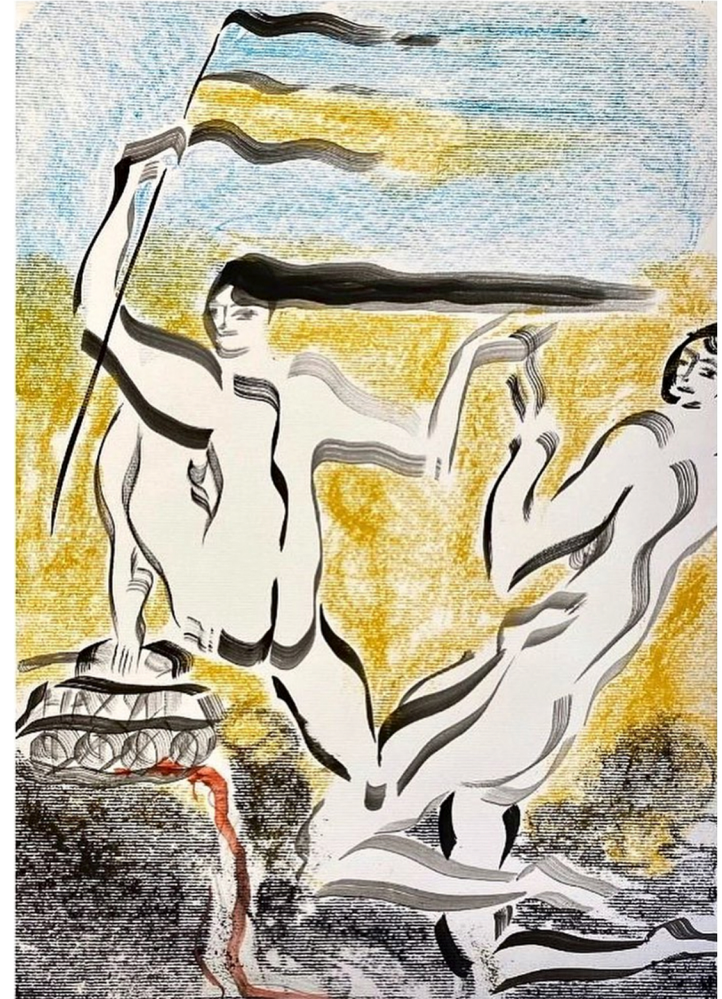
Sana - When the adrenaline was hitting me at the beginning of the war I was sharing my experience with no analysis. But after a while I started to realize that people wanted to share my experience and I wasn't sure what to do about it because I'm in a relatively safe area. Who am I to talk? But then I realized I should be grateful for the opportunity because the journalists are highlighting the situation here, they are contacting real people and hearing their stories, because there is a lot of propaganda out there, it's really important to hear real stories. So it's very beautiful that people still want to connect with real people. The world needs this at the moment.

And I'm like, okay, I'm not a soldier, I'm not a medical professional, I'm not a realistic painter, I'm not a photographer, but there is still some sort of reason why I am here in this moment. There is a task or mission that I should be doing because there is no way you can do nothing no matter what your profession is. Everyone should be doing what they can according to their own abilities both mental and physical.

So I thought, I either leave or I stay, I either be silent or I talk. So I decided to stay, keep working according to my mental and physical abilities. But if it gets too difficult, if it's too traumatizing, I will stop, no shame. But for now, I'm okay.

## Topic: Support during War

Two days before the war started I had proposed to my followers to exchange my drawing for a donation to the armed forces of Ukraine. But now I'm not able to ship my drawings to people. So now I'm sending a high resolution image and the person who gets the image decides how much they can afford to donate and half helps me and half goes to volunteers in Kiev or to the National Ukrainian Decorative Folk Art Museum in Kiev.



## Topic: Grandma

Phil - You escaped Kiev to your grandma's house. How is she doing?

Sana - These days my grandmother is doing well. She is the one supporting me when I'm having breakdowns. She says "We will remain here despite everything, this is our land. Don't worry you will get back to your practice, your friends, your city." But of course she is very sad and mad, experiencing lots of grief and pain about what is happening in Ukraine. She is trying her best to stay strong.



