

**B**

**W**

22.03–16.06.2024

**EUROPA II  
ЄВРОПА II**

**YURIY BILEY**

CURATOR  
**MARTA CZYŻ**

**A**

Studio BWA Wrocław  
Ruska 46a/301 (III floor)



Artist: **Yuriy Biley**  
Curator: **Marta Czyż**

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This exhibition of Yuriy Biley's work tells the story of the pursuit of independence by three European countries to which the artist is personally connected: Ukraine, Poland and Germany. Biley describes their struggles from the perspective of both an outsider and an insider, an emigrant and an immigrant. In the works presented in this exhibition, he analyzes the visual culture of selected moments in history not through the context of pivotal events, but rather by examining the less obvious processes that led to them. In the exhibition at Studio BWA Wrocław, Yuriy Biley takes up the themes of freedom and democracy and explores how they have transformed and shifted in Europe, through an analysis of archival material dating from the 1960s to the 1990s. He begins with Rolf Goetze's photographs documenting the major events of the Cold War, including the mass protests in West Berlin. Biley then turns his attention to the propaganda slogans photographed by Władysław Hasiór in his Roadside Poetry series. He concludes the narrative with a project based on photographs from Soviet postcards and albums, presenting the key themes of the imperialist propaganda agenda that was implemented in Ukraine for decades. Each of the three series presented in the exhibition addresses the limits of the Soviet Union's political

influence – and, later, that of contemporary Russia, which is continuing its traditions. They also address the limits of democracy flowing from the West, which do not correspond to geographical borders. This fluid influence proceeds slowly from west to east. Yuriy Biley examines these processes from a historical perspective. He reflects on the extent to which they have the potential to repeat themselves today, when Ukraine, as the eastern outpost of European democracy, is fighting for its independence. Unlike the citizens of the other aforementioned countries, Ukrainians are currently engaged in a full-scale war, the likes of which Europe has not experienced since the Second World War. In this tragic and uncertain time, Biley's perspective on history offers the promise of a happy ending.

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The artist juxtaposes several ways in which propaganda has been represented: documentary photography, photographs printed on postcards, and photographs published in albums. The archival materials that he has selected effectively relate to the themes of the exhibition and illustrate the processes that culminate in an artistic vision of the victory of democracy. In the series *FREEDOM FOR ALL*, drawing on journalistic

photography, Biley highlights the slogans that appeared at mass protests in West Berlin at the height of the Cold War and during the construction of the Berlin Wall. These are the slogans that on November 9, 1989, were victorious against the faltering structure of a state divided between the Allies and the Soviets. Berlin had come to symbolize Europe's division between democracy and communism. When the wall finally came down, its remaining fragments became a symbol of the fall of communist totalitarianism. *THE VALUE OF THESE WORDS ALSO DEPENDS ON YOU* extracts the irony inherent in the propaganda slogans that were present in Poland's public space during the communist period. In a series of digital collages that stylistically make reference to the political propaganda of the late 20th century, Biley depicts an imagined, alternative, lost or future Poland. *PICTURESQUE UKRAINE* is the title of the third series in the exhibition, which makes reference to Taras Shevchenko's series of etchings from 1844, expanded and divided into themes: Ukrainian history, folk life, customs, folklore, nature and monuments, with Biley focusing particularly on history and monuments. The artist deliberately chose Shevchenko, inspired not only by his work and life story, but also by the figure of this artist as a symbol of Ukrainian identity. In Biley's works, the statues

and monuments that were supposed to create a shared Soviet history are depicted in the murky gloom of twilight. The shared Soviet history was a concocted story based on manipulation, misrepresenting both the origins of Ukraine and the significance of pivotal moments in history, such as the so-called Great Patriotic War, which replaced World War II in the narrative propagated by the Soviet Union. This period lasted from 1941 to 1945 and ended with the Soviet victory over the Nazis. The emphasis on the joint victory was meant to further strengthen the bond between the Soviet nations, and it was accentuated by numerous monuments to the friendship between them. This project, which was also continued by the Russian Federation, ended in failure. Today, the war to destroy Ukrainian independence continues. It is important for Ukraine to permanently remove its falsified history and consciously cut itself off from all Russian influence. Actions that Germany and Poland accomplished in a manner that was peaceful, though revolutionary, are now impossible in Ukraine. Tracing the outline of history, Biley analyzes the various visual motifs that accompanied it, and draws attention to the importance of rethinking pivotal moments in history and their various aspects. Biley emphasizes that the next stage in the fight for democracy's new borders in Europe has now begun.

# **FREEDOM FOR ALL**

**The Value of These Words Also Depends on You**

*2023–ongoing*

①

### **Freedom for all**

2023

charcoal, museum print,  
Solution Fine Art White Velvet 270 gsm  
146×100 cm

②

### **The human is more important**

2023

charcoal, museum print,  
Solution Fine Art White Velvet 270 gsm  
68×100 cm

③

### **Self-determination for us too, freedom for all, social justice**

2023

charcoal, museum print,  
Solution Fine Art White Velvet 270 gsm  
68×100 cm

④

### **Freedom knows no walls**

2023

charcoal, museum print,  
Solution Fine Art White Velvet 270 gsm  
100×68 cm

⑤

### **Unity, peace, freedom**

2023

charcoal, museum print,  
Solution Fine Art White Velvet 270 gsm  
68×100 cm

⑥

### **Finally stable prices**

2023

charcoal, museum print,  
Solution Fine Art White Velvet 270 gsm  
68×100 cm

⑦

### **Senate finally get firm**

2023

charcoal, museum print,  
Solution Fine Art White Velvet 270 gsm  
68×100 cm

⑧

### **Mariupol belongs to the free world**

2023

charcoal, museum print,  
Solution Fine Art White Velvet 270 gsm  
68×100 cm

⑨

### **Kherson place of freedom**

2023

charcoal, museum print,  
Solution Fine Art White Velvet 270 gsm  
68×100 cm

⑩

### **Kyiv stays free**

2023

charcoal, museum print,  
Solution Fine Art White Velvet 270 gsm  
100×68 cm

The 1960s were an extremely difficult time in Germany. Instead of strengthening the post-war division of power in Europe, this decade once again demonstrated the instability and dangers of imperial policies. After Nikita Khrushchev presented the Allies with an ultimatum, the Berlin Wall was built. The citizens of Germany, who were simultaneously experiencing a period of reflection and a shared sense of responsibility for the Second World War, were facing another crisis. A real military threat had emerged once again, and a wall was being constructed. This made them realize there are certain values that are not permanently guaranteed, for which they must fight.

*FREEDOM FOR ALL – The Value of These Words Also Depends on You* is a project in which Biley uses archival photographs by Rolf Goetze taken during the years 1955–1968 from the collection of the Stadtmuseum Berlin. These photographs document the most significant events and protests in West Berlin during that difficult period. In addition to protesters, we can see in these images numerous large signs bearing the following slogans: “Freedom for all,” “A human being matters,” “Freedom knows no walls,” and “Unity, peace, freedom.” Biley darkens the environment surrounding these images with pulverized charcoal, rearranging the composition of the work and highlighting the content that, for him, is most essential. When the slogans are removed from their historical context, their timeless relevance is revealed.

The photograph used in Freedom for All dates from May 1, 1960. It shows a peaceful protest and a giant structure bearing the words “FREEDOM for all,” which was part of the stage design for Labor Day solidarity events. The First of May is an official public holiday in Germany. Like in the former Soviet Union and other countries behind the Iron Curtain, workers come out for solidarity demonstrations on this day, but voluntarily and under the leadership of trade unions. In Ukraine, the largest Labor Day parades took place during the Soviet era, with participants mostly forced to take part.

The concept of workers' solidarity has remained distorted for a long time by the Soviet era. In Germany, "workers' solidarity" is not merely a catchphrase, but a real mechanism that is neither part of propaganda nor an element of the power structure. The original slogan from the work *Kyiv Stays Free* was "Berlin stays free" in 1955. Changing the name of the city from Berlin to Kyiv, Mariupol, and Kherson creates historical parallels.

In this series, the artist addresses the history of Berlin and relates it to the present-day situation in Ukraine, highlighting the persistence of Soviet imperial power as seen through the prism of Western European history after the Second World War. Biley uses the context of Goetze's work to make reference to contemporary political divisions that are the root cause of current conflicts in Europe. In particular, he highlights the continuation of Russian imperialism, which has left its mark on post-war Germany and demonstrates today, with the war in Ukraine, the brutal return of an authoritarian regime seeking to continually overstep sovereign borders. These slogans from Berlin's past, transformed into the theme of the series, encapsulate the values for which Ukraine is fighting today.

**THE VALUE OF  
THESE WORDS ALSO  
DEPENDS ON YOU**

*2021–ongoing*

11

**Building on the foundation of our nation's best traits: Patriotism, reliability, hard work, ambition / *Building on the foundation of our nation's best Traits: Tolerance, openness, freedom, equality***

2022

collage, museum print, Hahnemühle  
Photo Rag Baryta 315 gsm, 68x100 cm

12

**Let there always be SUN: Let there always be SKY / *Let there always be FREE, Let there always be SKY***

2022

collage, museum print, Hahnemühle  
Rag Baryta 315 gsm, 68x100 cm

13

**Poland – Labour / *Poland – Border***

2021

collage, museum print, Hahnemühle  
Photo Rag Baryta 315 gsm, 68x100 cm

14

**Poles' knowledge the wealth of their motherland / *Knowledge of immigrant women the wealth of the motherland***

2021

collage, museum print, Hahnemühle  
Photo Rag Baryta 315 gsm, 68x100 cm

15

**For People's Poland our Hearts, Minds, And Deeds / *For Queer Poland Our Hearts, Minds, and Deeds***

2022

collage, museum print, Hahnemühle  
Photo Rag Baryta 315 gsm, 68x100 cm

16

**Long live peace and friendship between nations long, live and grow the brotherly friendship between the nations of Poland and the USSR / *Long live peace and friendship between beings, and may brotherly friendship between all species grow stronger***

2023

collage, museum print, Hahnemühle  
Photo Rag Baryta 315 gsm, 68x100 cm

17

**Demand from others, but start with Yourself – ME, YOU, HIM / *Demand from others, start with yourself – ME, YOU, HER***

2021

collage, museum print, Hahnemühle  
Photo Rag Baryta 315 gsm, 68x100 cm

18

**Socialism sets the path for human growth / *Activism sets the path for human growth***

2021

collage, museum print, Hahnemühle  
Photo Rag Baryta 315 gsm, 68x100 cm

19

**Polish Man – Poland: The value of these words also depends on you / *Polish woman – Poland: The value of these words also depends on you***

2021

collage, museum print, Hahnemühle  
Photo Rag Baryta 315 gsm, 68x100 cm

20

**Farmer! Help the land bear more / *Farmer! Help the land***

2021

collage, museum print, Hahnemühle  
Photo Rag Baryta 315 gsm, 68x100 cm

21

**Our fatherland is the mother of all poles / *Our motherland is the mother of all refugees***

2021

collage, museum print, Hahnemühle  
Photo Rag Baryta 315 gsm, 100x68 cm

22

**Poland is us / *Poland is you***

2022

collage, museum print, Hahnemühle  
Photo Rag Baryta 315 gsm, 100x68 cm

23

**Better. More. Polish man can do it! / *Better. More. Polish woman can do it!***

2021

collage, museum print, Hahnemühle  
Photo Rag Baryta 315 gsm, 100x68 cm

24

**Gazing at the Vistula, we think of Poland / *Gazing at the Vistula, we think of water***

2022

collage, museum print, Hahnemühle  
Photo Rag Baryta 315 gsm, 100x68 cm

The propaganda activities carried out by the Polish communist regime were varied and wide-ranging. The duty to realize these goals was placed on all government and party institutions. They were overseen by the ideology and propaganda department of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, its regional branches, and the secretaries of the Central Committee. In a situation where almost every aspect of life had political undertones, the tools of indoctrination became education, art, science and sports, and its field of activity was in schools, universities, theaters, galleries, stadiums, etc.

Propaganda functioned on the level of language, but there were also other types of propaganda such as visual propaganda, the propaganda of success, and propaganda stigmatizing the enemies of the socialist state. Among the politically illiterate masses, slogans about social justice and the Marxist concept of a “people’s democracy” appealed to the public consciousness. Propaganda developed dynamically in Poland during the 1970s under the leadership of First Secretary Edward Gierek, and was characterized by the large-scale narrative of success. Gierek was the one who invented the slogan “Polak potrafi” (Polish man can do it!) which was used for the first time during the construction of the steelworks complex in Katowice, one of the most ill-fated investments of the time.

A large amount of the propaganda appeared in the public sphere in the form of large signboards bearing slogans, often embedded in more elaborate structures. These signboards were also placed in prominent urban locations or along roads. At the late 1960s, Władysław Hasiór became fascinated by these spatial compositions. In the 1970s, he travelled around Poland and meticulously documented them. He called this series *Roadside Poetry* and included it in his extensive *Photographic Notebooks*.

Hasiór’s photographs from the collection of the Tatra Museum in Zakopane were the source for the digital collages in Yuriy Biley’s series *THE VALUE OF THESE WORDS ALSO DEPENDS ON YOU*, in which the artist explores Polish identity in the visual culture of that time. In a series of collages that stylistically allude to the political propaganda of the late 20th century, the artist depicts an imagined, alternative, lost or future Poland. Biley has “updated” the slogans documented by Hasiór, swapping individual words with each other and making them contemporary by reflecting the dynamics of recent and current public debate.

The title of the series was taken from one of the structures Hasiór documented, which bore the slogan “Pole, Poland – The value of these words also depends on you.” Biley removes the slogans from the signboards, like in the work where the original slogan read “Better. More. A Pole can do it!”, by simply changing the form of the noun to feminine, thus restoring women’s subjectivity and reinforcing the real empowerment of women today. In turn, the slogan “Long live peace and friendship between nations, long live and grow the brotherly friendship between the nations of Poland and the USSR” was displayed in the center of Warsaw and emphasized friendly relations with the USSR, thus also reinforcing the perception of a threat from American imperialism and West German revisionism. Biley replaced the words “nations” and “nations of Poland and the USSR” with “beings” and “all species,” thereby creating a narrative that transcends history. He removed the geographical and political divisions from the displayed platitude and transformed it into a universal message, a vision of the world in which he would like to live. Biley leaves the original content of the slogans in the titles of his works. His works reveal the enduring nature of the language of propaganda as well as its disturbing relevance, and highlight the importance of language in public space.



# PICTURESQUE UKRAINE

2024–ongoing

25

## Ukraine to the liberators 1970–2022

2024

cyanotype, museum print,  
Solution Fine Art White Velvet 270 gsm, 70×100 cm

26

## Mound of Glory 1975

2024

cyanotype, museum print,  
Solution Fine Art White Velvet 270 gsm, 70×100 cm

27

## Monument-museum to the liberators of Kyiv

2024

cyanotype, museum print,  
Solution Fine Art White Velvet 270 gsm, 95×100 cm

28

## Shchors monument 1954–2023

2024

cyanotype, museum print,  
Solution Fine Art White Velvet 270 gsm, 60×100 cm

29

## People's Friendship Arch 1982 / Arch of Freedom of the Ukrainian People 2022

2024

cyanotype, museum print,  
Solution Fine Art White Velvet 270 gsm, 80×100 cm

30

## Three Sisters / Friendship Monument 1975 – planned

2024

cyanotype, museum print,  
Solution Fine Art White Velvet 270 gsm, 70×100 cm

31

## Mother Motherland

2024

cyanotype, museum print,  
Solution Fine Art White Velvet 270 gsm, 95×100 cm

32

## Monument to Pushkin in Kyiv 1962–2023

2024

cyanotype, museum print,  
Solution Fine Art White Velvet 270 gsm, 95×100 cm

33

## Monument to Lenin in Kyiv 1946–2013

2024

cyanotype, museum print,  
Solution Fine Art White Velvet 270 gsm, 70×100 cm

34

## Azovstal factory. Rolling mill 1933–2022

2024

cyanotype, museum print,  
Solution Fine Art White Velvet 270 gsm, 70×100 cm

35

## Odesa Sea Port

2024

cyanotype, museum print,  
Solution Fine Art White Velvet 270 gsm, 70×100 cm

Soviet propaganda in Ukraine was spectacular and on a massive scale. An overwritten historical narrative occupied every possible space. The agenda of imperial ideology was based on several fundamental principles. Propaganda perpetuated the myth of a shared victory over the Nazis and the liberating role of the Soviet Union, emphasized the friendship and brotherhood of nations, and constructed images of leaders and figures creating a “common” culture. The hundreds of monuments that were erected across Ukraine became a means of elevating and perpetuating these themes. Their symbolic content and form filled the public space, becoming permanently integrated into the landscape along with the numerous names of streets, squares, parks, and other topographical features containing symbols of Soviet imperial policy.

After the Great Patriotic War (a term used in Soviet propaganda for a specific period during the Second World War), hundreds of monuments were created of spectacular form and scale, often combined with other architectural elements, such as the Mound of Glory in Nova Odesa, the monument to the liberators of Ukraine in Uzhhorod (the artist’s hometown), and the monument to the liberators of Kyiv. Statues of Lenin, the “father of the nation,” and Alexander Pushkin also appeared throughout the country. These were used instrumentally in the expansion and imposition of a foreign culture.

The statues and monuments all met a similar fate. After Ukraine gained independence in 1991, Lenin quickly disappeared from pedestals, and Pushkin after 2022, in a process of de-imperialization. The Three Sisters (Friendship Monument) on the border between Belarus and Russia is a unique work – the sisters were meant to symbolize “friendship” between the neighboring countries. The People’s Friendship Arch in Kiev, on the other hand, is an example of how the Soviet Union continued the imperial traditions of Tsarist Russia. All of the monuments played an important role in the creation of a unified image of a world that disintegrated irrevocably after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

*PICTURESQUE UKRAINE* is a series in which Yuriy Biley focuses on postcards and photo albums, most of which date from the 1980s and depict selected monuments embodying the most prominent themes of Soviet propaganda. The title makes reference to a series of etchings by Taras Shevchenko that depict Ukrainian history, folk life, customs, folklore, nature and monuments of the mid-19th century. Biley singles out stories and historical monuments from them, tackling the theme of Russia’s influence on Ukraine and the contrived common history.

Postcards and photo albums were one of the methods of reinforcing the presence of propagandistic content and a pseudo-historical narrative. They were an important part of their distribution, as evidenced by the fact that their publication required multi-step approvals from the authorities. Biley enlarges them to the size of posters and creates works with the use of cyanotype – a photographic technique in which, when exposed to light, an image in a shade of Prussian blue is obtained, creating a twilight effect. The works look as if the photographs were taken after dusk or at dawn. The artist deliberately does not clarify this. He obscures the images of the objects and structures that created a false narrative. In recent years, most propaganda monuments have been removed from public space and their message is perpetuated no longer through peaceful transition, but through wartime aggression. In addition to themes connected to the history of Ukraine from the period of the Soviet Union, the series also includes images of structures destroyed by the Russians after the invasion in 2022 – the Azovstal factory in Mariupol and the port of Odesa – which are examples of the final solution, namely war as a continuation of the policies of Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union towards the annexed countries.

Biley’s work demonstrates that Ukraine is currently at a pivotal moment in its history, when it will either succeed in defending itself and emerge from the twilight or be lost in it. Emerging from the twilight is an opportunity for the country to reexamine its own history and undertake an analysis of the elements that constitute its identity.

