

Artist at work

Pauline Chernichaw of Englewood Cliffs talks about art, family history, and life

By **JOANNE PALMER**

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Pauline Chernichaw PHOTO BY ELLEN DENUTO

When she was young, Pauline Chernichaw of Englewood Cliffs said, she thought that her house would be light-filled and elegantly minimalist.

She got the light-filled part right.

The minimalist part? Not so much.

Ms. Chernichaw's house is filled with light and art. Brightly colored paintings, sculptures, and hard-to-classify objects are everywhere. But the effect, while maximalist, is not cluttered. Instead, it's glorious. To walk into her house is to want to stare at every wall and every surface for a very long time.



Ms. Chernichaw hugging one of her granddaughters, Elli Chernichaw. (All photos courtesy Pauline Chernichaw)

But to do that would be to miss the story.

The art upstairs isn't hers, but the studio downstairs — very much a working artist's refuge — is.

So, meet the artist Pauline Chernichaw.

She's well-respected and well-credentialed. She has a piece in a show at the Heller Museum at Hebrew Union College in Manhattan, "One Nation," that's about the hopes, dreams, and ironies that come together in our understanding of our national past, present, and future. (See box.) She's also represented by the Carter Burden Gallery on 28th Street.

Her art doesn't come from nowhere. Like most artists — like every artist? — Ms. Chernichaw is very much the product of her family, her life, her times, her roots.



Ms. Chernichaw's basement is a working artist's studio, full of color and controlled mess.

Both of her parents were from Poland; her father, Baruch Papernik, was born in 1923, in a small village outside Lvov called Podkiemen. "It means two rocks," Ms. Chernichaw said. "There really are two gigantic rocks there." He was related to Eliezer Papernik, a young sharpshooter who died in 1943; "when his ammunition ran out, he blew himself up with his last hand grenade," a history of Soviet Jews who fought the Nazis, "In the Shadow of the Red Banner," tells us. As he died, it adds, he shouted, "Bolsheviks do not surrender!" Comrade Papernik was named a Hero of the Soviet Union for that act of suicidal heroism.

Baruch Papernik and his family moved to Majdan-Pienaky, a town that without moving has shuttled between Austria, Poland, and Ukraine; it was Ukrainian when the family lived there.

“They weren’t rich, but my father’s grandfather was very wealthy.” He worked for the local lumber baron, operating his flour mills as well as brokering his wood; he flourished until World War I, which ruined him.

Ms. Chernichaw’s grandmother was Pesha Kubryk; she was a cousin of the similarly named Pesha Kubrick, the mother of the film director Stanley. (Ms. Chernichaw frustratingly never met Mr. Kubrick.)





This is an acrylic work showing her life's journey, Ms. Chernichaw said. "And I am still standing."

World War II ravaged Mr. Papernik's family. "The Nazis didn't get to my father's area until 1941," she said. "I asked him, 'Dad, why didn't you leave?' He said, 'We were too poor. Everybody was too poor.'

"I think that also they didn't think that what happened would happen."

When the Nazis arrived, his father, the youngest of a large family, was 18. The family was shipped to the ghetto in Zloczow. "My father's sister and his father said, 'Don't go with us. Go hide. You have the best chance of surviving.'

"He wanted to take his sister Chaya with him — she was already married and had a child, but her husband had been deported to a labor camp — but she said, 'I can't leave our parents. I will go with them.'

"Zloczow was a killing center. They took my father's family and shot them all. But my father told me that his mother had died of typhus a few weeks before, and he was glad that she didn't see her children being murdered.



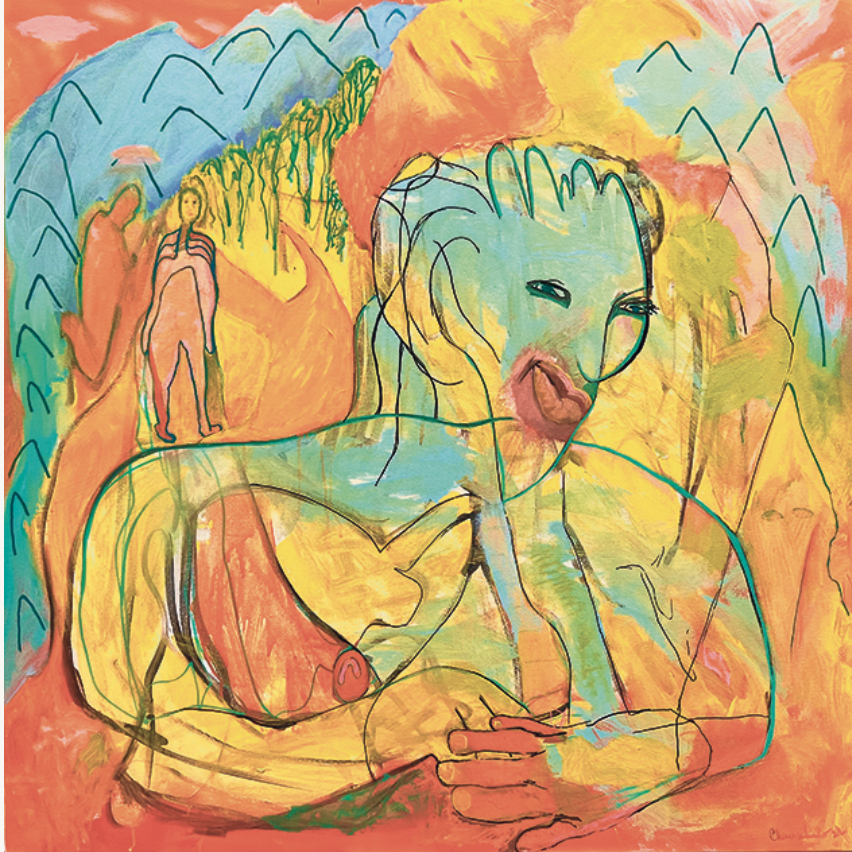
“My father couldn’t remember his nephew’s name. He was 18 months old. It would bother him. It always bothered him.”

Her father hid in the forest, occasionally venturing back into town for food and shelter. “My grandfather told my father that the only person out of all his friends in town— they had been the only Jewish family there, and my

grandfather had a lot of friends — was Frank. Frank Orlovski. And he was right.” Mr. Orlovski proved to be a true friend, a real righteous gentile.

Her father had many stories of near-capture — including one where he was caught by Ukrainians, who said that they’d let him go if he would bring them some gold. “My father said he would; that he’d be back with the gold in 10 days. He was a very honorable man; he came back in 10 days and left a note, saying, ‘I’m sorry, but I couldn’t find anything.’

“Those guys didn’t come back. They just let him go. He was very lucky.”



In the ironically named acrylic work “Somewhere Safe,” Jews look for a haven but instead are taken away.

He also came up with a brilliant trick, at least according to family lore. His grandfather had been a flour merchant, so maybe that predisposed him to this idea, but he realized that when it was snowy, and it usually was during a Polish winter, he could hide his tracks, and his companions’, by sifting flour on top of them. Flour camouflages telltale marks in snow, as the family story goes.

After the war, once he learned that his whole family had been wiped out, Mr. Papernik went west to Germany, where he supported himself by working the black market. It was during that time that he met his future wife, Estera Fischerman.

Estera, who was born in 1927, also had yichus — but she survived not because of her lineage, but because of her survival skills. She was born in Pryznitz, a shtetl outside Warsaw, into a long line of chasidim, and the daughter of Hennie Rosen Fischerman, “an extremely bright woman, who ran a business in the shtetl,” Ms. Chernichaw said. “It was a candy store, and she’d go in the back room and play chess with the men. She was the only woman who could play chess.”

The Fischermans were related to prominent people. Her mother’s sister Rivka was married to Rabbi Alter Pekier, who was connected to the yeshiva in Lakewood. She’s also related to Rabbi Shlomo Goren — ne Gorenczik — the third Ashkenazi chief rabbi of Israel. Rabbi Goren, who left Poland for Palestine in the 1920s, was the only survivor of his part of the family, but all of Estera’s family survived. They fled to Siberia, and then to Chimkent, Kazakhstan. Much of

their journey was on foot. There were eight of them, two parents, five children, “and a grandfather who died on the way,” Ms. Chernichaw said. “They buried him somewhere in the forest.”

Estera had a lot of street smarts, her daughter said; “if it weren’t for my mother, the family wouldn’t have survived. She would steal food. Once, she got caught and ended up in jail, and then she got out of jail. She’d go to the train station in Chimkent with a basket of apples, and she’d sell the basket to passengers on the train. Her customers assumed that there were more apples below the top layer of fruit in the basket that the 12-year-old girl had sold them. By the time they realized their error, the train already had left the station, and they were out of luck. And out of apples. “There were a lot of horrific stories, I know that, but my mother didn’t tell them,” Ms. Chernichaw said.



In this family photo, Ms. Chernichaw's grandmother, Pesha, right, stands behind her father, Joseph Kubryk.

The family was in Chimkent when the war ended. “The Russians told them that they could go back home, but my grandparents knew there wasn’t anything to go back home to,” Ms. Chernichaw said. One sister and her husband went to Montevideo, Uruguay; the others went to Germany, where they lived in the DP camp near Neu Ulm. That’s where Estera and Baruch met and got married, and where Pepi was born in 1948. Most of Estera’s family went to Israel, but she came to America — and then Estera and Baruch became Esther and Bernard, and Pepi became Pauline.

“It took us two years to get out,” Ms. Chernichaw said; that happened with help from HIAS, the organization once more clearly known as the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. “We left on the SS Greeley, from the port of Bremerhaven. My mother told me that she and I were sick as dogs, throwing up all over the place,” but she was too young to remember any of that.

What she does know, because it was preserved, is that she drew all over the information booklet the family got from the ship. It’s just squiggles — it’s hard to see her artistic talent that early — but she did love to draw, even back then.

Once they got to America, the family was reunited with her aunt Rivka and her uncle Alter, who was the rabbi of the West Side Institutional Synagogue in Manhattan. HIAS tried to send the family to Oklahoma, but they refused. “My father went to HIAS and said, ‘I’m sorry, but we’re not going to Oklahoma,’ and they said, ‘Then we can’t sponsor you,’ and my father said, ‘That’s okay. I will make it on my own.’”



"Free Fall" is up at the Trenton State Museum until April in the "Reemergence" exhibition.

"That was my father," she added.

The family lived in Williamsburg at first, and her father, trained in ingenuity through his black-market work in Germany, worked as a broker in the meat business. "His clients were huge — Buitoni, Swift — and they were not kosher," Ms. Chernichaw said.

The family moved from Brooklyn to the Bronx, and from College Avenue there to the height of luxury at the time, the Grand Concourse.

One of Ms. Chernichaw's most cherished memories is of "going to the courthouse in the Bronx to get my citizenship papers," she said. "I remember the judge was on a big podium, and I remember standing straight up, with my hand in the air, pledging allegiance." Being born in a DP camp meant being stateless; finally belonging somewhere, being wanted somewhere, was a major big deal.

And so did living someplace magical.



"We Are All Connected" shows the ties that bind all of us to each other.

No, her apartment did not have one of the Concourse's fabled sunken living rooms, but the building, Roosevelt Gardens, was "amazing," she said. "Amazing! It was an entire block, with gardens in the middle, and a fountain in the middle of that, and there were colored lights that made the water all different colors.

"It was the best place to grow up. Our little paradise."

Almost everyone who lived in the building was Jewish, she said, although few were Holocaust survivors. There was an artist who lived above her — Toby Knoebel Fluek, who painted "memories of her shtetl," and encouraged Pauline to grow as an artist. The family belonged to a little Orthodox shul, Ms. Chernichaw said, and she went to public school.

"The New York City public school system was great," she said. Kids went on field trips to museums. They were encouraged to develop relationships to art and music, as both practitioners and as listeners and viewers. They learned to appreciate what they saw and heard.



"From Moscow With Love" shows Ms. Chernichaw's great-grandmother, Chaya Fisherman, who survived the Holocaust in Moscow, died at 101, and is buried in Bnei Brak.

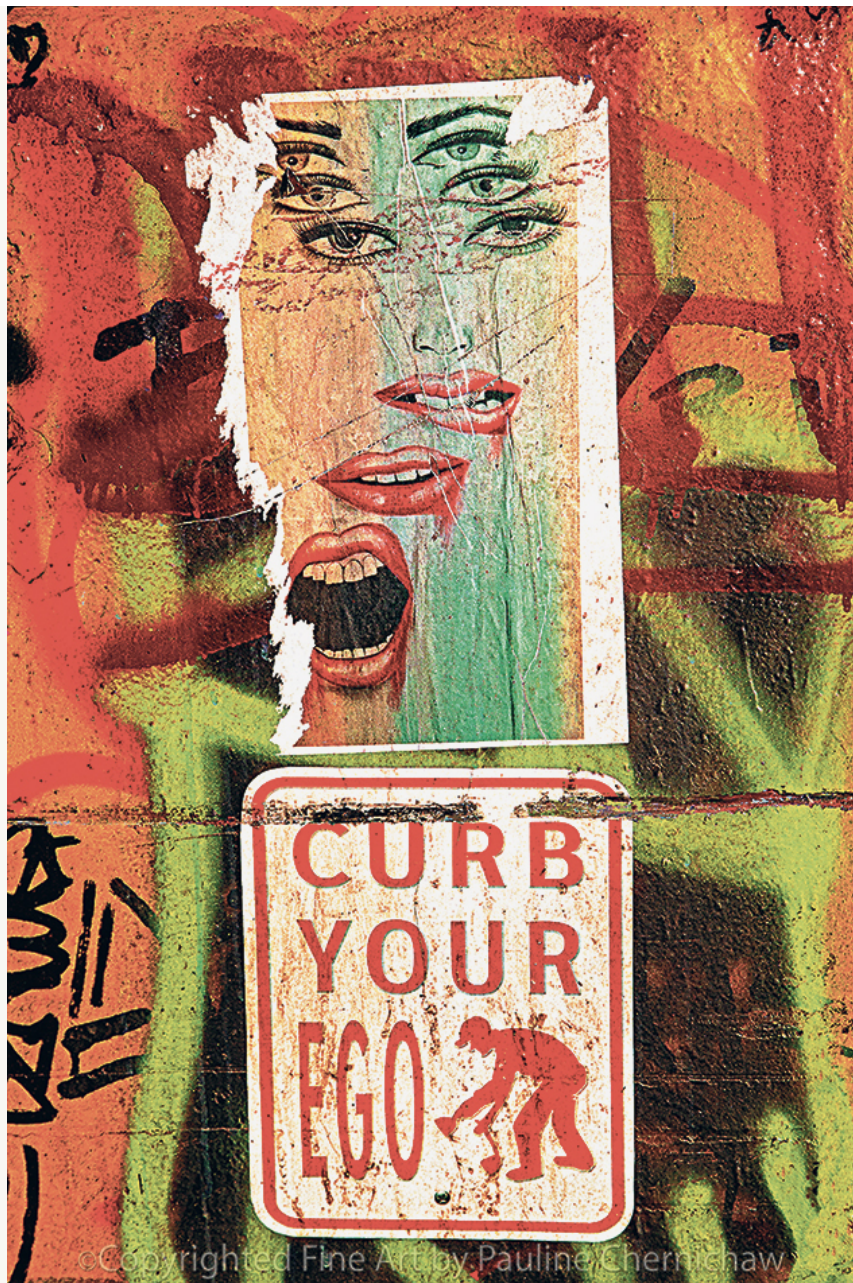
When she was in junior high, one of her teachers urged her to apply to the High School of Music and Art.

But instead, the family moved to Teaneck. "The neighborhood was changing, and my parents wanted a house," she said. It was 1962. Ms. Chernichaw went to Teaneck High School, where her art teacher, Mr. Reilly, also encouraged her. "He was a great teacher," she said.

She also had many artists in her family, on both sides, and her sons are artists too. Even the family in South America "are painters, filmmakers, journalists, costume designers, and I have first cousins in Israel who are painters, art teachers, and photographers," she said. Art was strong in her genes. "And I found my way.

"I was always, always, always drawing."

Her family was religiously observant, Ms. Chernichaw said. They joined the Jewish Center of Teaneck; later, her father became one of the founders of Congregation Beth Aaron. "My father was a macher there," she said.



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"Curb Your Ego" is a photograph Ms. Chernichaw took at 5Pointz in Long Island City.

She had two brothers. Herbert — Chayim Meyer — died at 54. The other brother, Moshe — Dr. Morris — is a physician with two daughters, one a photographer and the other an associate curator at the Museum of Modern Art. Art's in the family's blood.

While she was in high school, Ms. Chernichaw met her husband, Mark Chernichaw, at a party. He was an older man — he was two years older than she was. He was in college then, Ohio Wesleyan, but he was a Teanecker; in fact, his aunt, Lillian Kapitnikoff, was among the founders of Congregation B'nai Yeshurun, another of the town's Orthodox shuls.

Mr. Chernichaw, who died in 2018, had a long and important career in television and communications; he was, among other things, vice president of communications at Avon, an executive at the Home Shopping Network, retired as vice president of global communications for Prudential, and possibly most importantly, was tenured as an associate professor of film and television at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts.

Ms. Chernichaw followed her husband's career, and after a stint in Florida — which she did not like — they eventually moved back to Teaneck, where her parents still lived. She graduated from Fairleigh Dickinson. Eventually, her parents moved to Paramus, and she and her husband and their two sons followed. Why? "Because children of survivors really protect their parents," she said. "They went through so much pain."

After her parents died, the Chernichaws moved to Englewood Cliffs, where she lives today.



Ms. Chernichaw took this photograph at a march supporting immigration at Newark City Hall in March 2018. It's in "One Nation" at HUC.

She and Mark have two sons. Adam is a lawyer; Ian — no surprise — is an artist. He's worked for Sesame Workshop, Blues Clues, and Nickelodeon, and he's illustrated many children's books, his mother said. They have seven grandchildren, and perhaps inevitably, one of them, Amit, also is an artist. She is studying photography at the Savannah College of Art and Design.

Okay. So that's Ms. Chernichaw's complicated background, with its many many connections to art and artists. What about her art?

She works in acrylics and in oil; some of her work is representational and some of it is abstract, she said. She's also a photographer. But the one constant in her work — sometimes overt, sometimes hidden, but always present — is the Holocaust. Pain, fear, upheaval, cruelty; sometimes hope, sometimes love. It's all there.

"There's a void in me that will never go away," she said. "My father's whole family — cousins, uncles, grandparents — they all existed. What would they have been? They could have contributed to making the world a better place. It is a void that never will be filled. Never ever ever.

"That is what my work is about. It's in everything I do."



"Coming to America," a mixed-media collage, tells the story of the Paperniks' early years in America.

She's been through a hard time, she said. Her husband, whom she loved deeply, suffered from long-term Alzheimer's; she took care of him at home. The mind-robbing disease forced him to stop working when he was 65; he died at 72.

"I'm in a good place now," she said. "It took me four years to be able to feel good again."

Memories of her husband, her parents, their lost world, are all over her house. But what you notice when you walk in is color and light.

The Holocaust is visible in all her work, but you don't always see it.

Life is complicated. Art is complicated. Artists are complicated. That's a good thing.

Although she's had other pieces in other shows at the Heller Gallery, this one is particularly meaningful to her, Ms. Chernichaw said. Her contribution to this show is a photograph called "WE THE PEOPLE."

“I shot this photograph of a child holding a poster that reads ‘WE THE PEOPLE’ in 2018, at an immigration march at Newark City Hall,” she said.

“As a mother, a grandmother, an artist working in both painting and photography, and as a naturalized citizen, I hold dear to my heart the belief in freedom, democracy, and equality for all.”

It shows in her work.

Who: Pauline Chernichaw

What: Is among the 45 artists represented in the exhibition called “One Nation,” where “contemporary artists illuminate the diverse and vibrant identities comprising American society and express their aspirations for equity, inclusion, and justice.”

Where: At the Heller Museum at Hebrew Union College; 1 West Fourth Street between Broadway and Mercer Street in Manhattan.

When: Mondays through Thursdays, from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Through when: The exhibit will close on July 2

How much: It’s free, but visitors must show a valid government-issued ID and proof of vaccination.

To learn more: Go to huc.edu, call (212) 824-2218, or email hellermuseum@huc.edu

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