

The Arts of War: Ukrainian Artists Confront Russia

Written by **BLAIR A RUBLE**

In Ukrainian, Freedom and Will are One

Internationally acclaimed sculptor Oleksiy Sai's giant sculptures of English and Ukrainian words and phrases proclaim the Ukrainian resolve to exist, and the power of art to inspire.

Early on the morning of April 24, *Guardian* opinion writer Oleksandr Mykhed met his father at Kyiv's Main Station after one of the worst nights of Russian bombardment in recent weeks. His father was arriving from western Ukraine at 7:00 am, and Mykhed had rushed to the station once the "all clear" had sounded just forty minutes before. As it had throughout the war, Ukrainian Railways somehow managed to retain an air of normality. Mykhed greeted his father on the platform, and they entered the station.

"It's 30 minutes after one of the most brutal shelling of this war," [he records](#), "and a soldier is playing the piano. His trunk is next to him. And he is playing his music against all odds. My father and I step onto the escalator to go up to the second floor. I turn back to look at the pianist," he continues, "then shift my gaze, and at the exit we are greeted by the sculpture 'Volya' by Ukrainian artist Oleksiy Sai, installed just a few days ago. The sculpture is made from letters recovered from a welcome sign in the frontline village of Lyubimovka in the Kherson region. Broken and mangled letters form the word 'Volya', which in Ukrainian means both 'freedom' and 'will'. Freedom and will. I think these words should be enough to get us through another day."

The sculpture's installation is the result of a partnership between Kyiv's PinchukArtCentre and Ukrainian railways to fill stations with cultural life. As Railways CEO Oleksandr Pertsovskiy [explains](#), "We are developing our railway stations. Alongside launching useful services – from bookshops and children's rooms to bakeries – we are filling them with cultural life." Their arts-in-the-station initiative has continued since Russia launched its full-scale invasion in February 2022 despite untold fighting directed at shutting the rails down.

Internationally acclaimed artist Sai has promoted Ukrainian art throughout Europe and North America to assert Ukraine's existence. In 2024, he crafted a gigantic 105-foot by 23-foot sculpture at the Burning Man festival constructed [from debris collected from various parts of Ukraine](#). Volunteers built the phrase "I'm Fine" with street signs, fences, and gates punctured by bullet holes and damaged by shrapnel. The work suggests the ironic "This is Fine" meme in which a dog smiles while the room around him is engulfed in flames. For Sai, the work symbolized Ukraine's dual realities of everyday life against the backdrop of war. This is precisely the experience of Mykhed and his father as they were leaving a train station early on a Thursday morning.

The fifty-year-old Sai graduated with degrees in design from the Kyiv Art and Industrial School and the National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture following Ukrainian independence. He enjoyed success in various artistic media – including using Microsoft Excel spreadsheets to create artworks -- and has exhibited at galleries around Ukraine and the world. His largescale sculptures created during the war – such as "Volya" and "I'm Fine" -- use the detritus left by war to communicate Ukrainian determination against Russian aggression.

As Sai told the London based contemporary art magazine [XIBT](#), he sees the function of art at this moment “to draw attention to Ukraine. Not just to our war – we need a place both on the world map and in the minds of people. We need to reclaim our status as a country and our status as a culture.”

For Oleksandr Mykhed and his father, Sai’s art had an additional purpose. The “Volya” sculpture in the Kyiv train station at first glance resembles Robert Indiana’s famous “Love” sculpture of the 1960s and 1970s. Sai proclaims a different, perhaps more forceful message. His art speaks to the need of Ukrainians to be reminded of their humanity and their resolve at an existential moment for their country. It is about getting through another day; and so much more.

