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## The art of protest

Spencer Fordin  
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Pussy Riot's Nadya Tolokonnikova;  
Courtesy CONTAINER

details

***Putin's Ashes* at CONTAINER**

- June 30 to July 7

- 1226 Flagman Way
- 505-995-0012; containerc.org

### ***Pussy Riot at Meow Wolf***

- 10 p.m. June 30
- 1352 Rufina Circle
- Call for ticket availability
- 866-636-9969; meowwolf.com or pussyriot.love

### **Judy Chicago and Nadya Tolokonnikova Book Event**

- 2 to 4:30 p.m. July 1
- Through the Flower Art Space, 107 Becker Ave., Belen
- 505-864-4080; throughtheflower.org

She enlisted herself in a war at age 16, armed only with her art and her hope for a better future. And now, more than a decade later, Nadya Tolokonnikova finds herself an international fugitive wanted in Russia and an iconic symbol of resistance known around the world.

Tolokonnikova, a founding member of feminist protest art collective Pussy Riot, would give anything for a simpler life.

She's geo-anonymous, which means she can't tell people where she lives, and she's unsure whether she'll ever be able to return to her homeland. But she says that she never really had a choice to lead another life.

"Let me just say — not about myself but about a lot of people like me — we all want to live in Russia, and we want to live in Russia openly," says Tolokonnikova, who has a pair of appearances in Santa Fe the last week of June. "We don't want to hide, and we don't want to hide our political views. We also don't want to live in exile. We love our country; we believe that our future is connected deeply with the future of Russia. But it has to be a different Russia."

They're not just words for Tolokonnikova; she's put her life on the line in a way that might be hard for Americans to comprehend. In May, Pussy Riot was awarded the Woody Guthrie Prize, which is given annually "to an artist who best exemplifies Woody Guthrie's spirit and work by speaking for the less fortunate through music, film, literature, dance, or other art forms and serving as a positive force for social change," according to its website.

She was jailed in 2012 after a protest performance at Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior, and after spending more than a year in various prison camps, she was released in the run-up to the 2014 Sochi Olympics.

But that hardly stopped her from expressing herself — through various art forms.

She took her freedom certificate, the document produced when she was released from prison, and embellished it with her own blood.

Most of her art pieces, in fact, contain an explicit political message, including the piece that reads, “This button neutralizes Vladimir Putin.”

“Activism and art always go hand in hand,” she says. “I was inspired by Russian avant-garde movements, and a lot of those people had utopian dreams and big ideas about how we want to restructure society. I wouldn’t say they succeeded in restructuring society just because the political power was really questionable as it happens in Russia. But I really loved their idealism.”



Pussy Riot’s Nadya Tolokonnikova created a series of 23 mixed media works that are part of the *Putin’s Ashes* exhibit at CONTAINER. Courtesy CONTAINER

In August 2022, she and a group of comrades burned a 10-by-10 foot portrait of Russian President Vladimir Putin, and Tolokonnikova bottled the ashes to incorporate them into new pieces of art. That symbolic act of defiance — a thumb in the eye of one of the world’s most dangerous men — had delayed repercussions.

She held a show in Los Angeles titled *Putin’s Ashes* in January — an exhibition that will be reprised at Santa Fe’s CONTAINER — and Russia responded by issuing a federal arrest warrant for Tolokonnikova at the end of March.

Today, she wears that warrant like a badge of honor.

“Let me just say — not about myself but about a lot of people like me — we all want to live in Russia, and we want to live in Russia openly. We don’t want to hide, and we don’t want to hide our political views. We also don’t want to live in exile. We love our country; we believe that our future is connected deeply with the future of Russia. But it has to be a different Russia.” —

*Nadya Tolokonnikova*

Tolokonnikova says she speaks out because other Russians do not have the opportunity to speak for themselves, and she cannot afford to take her foot off the throttle when so many of her compatriots are suffering.

“My heart is saddened by Russian political prisoners, many of them who are my friends like Alexei Navalny [jailed Kremlin critic who was poisoned], Ilya Yashin [Russian opposition politician currently serving time in prison for criticizing the war against Ukraine], or Mikhail Krieger [imprisoned Russian activist],” she says. “Some of them I don’t know, like Sasha Skochilenko, who is a young woman whose only so-called crime was to put stickers in supermarkets against the war.

“She replaced price tags with stickers against the war, and it was enough to lock her up for years. I think she’s facing 10 years, and she’s facing struggles with her health. And she’s just one example. They’re arresting people every day. Those people, I don’t want their fight, their work, and their efforts to make our world better to just die in vain.”



The members of Russian punk band Pussy Riot wear balaclavas as a form of protest. Courtesy CONTAINER

To understand her perspective, you have to understand the time and place in which she grew up. Tolokonnikova says she was born in 1989 right after the Soviet Union fell; she grew up in a time of unprecedented artistic freedom in Russia and didn't know repression.

When she enrolled at Moscow State University, she was an idealistic teenager. She started a protest group called Voina, which means "war" in Russian, and was dedicated to opposing not just Putin but also social forces supporting status quo. A few years later, she founded Pussy Riot with the hope of attracting Western attention.

And then, she says, the group started to get attention.

"It's amazing when something you hope is going to happen actually happens. Most of the time, life doesn't work according to your expectations," she says. "We had major luck; the reason we called [ourselves] Pussy Riot was these are English words. We got a lot of shit from Russian propagandists for calling our art collective English words versus Russian. We wanted to be understood internationally, and for that, like it or not, English is the best language."

But her struggles have taken a toll. Tolokonnikova says she suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, a condition that also impacts her 15-year-old daughter. Her ex-husband, Pyotr Verzilov, is in harm's way in the fight for Ukraine. Tolokonnikova says that Verzilov — while risking his life — is

already planning for a future without Putin. But for her, everything is more complicated than it was a few years ago.



Pussy Riot's Nadya Tolokonnikova created a series of 23 mixed media works that are part of the Putin's Ashes exhibit at CONTAINER, including *This art was not made by a successful white male*. Courtesy CONTAINER

States, although she visited Capitol Hill in 2014 to discuss civil rights abuses in Russia and in America.

Last year, she met with Secretary of State Antony Blinken to discuss freedom of the press around the world, and Maria Zakharova, Russian spokeswoman for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, criticized the meeting.

Tolokonnikova says she despises former President Donald Trump and hopes to never see him again but has more nuanced opinions of whistleblower Edward Snowden. She questioned Snowden's choice of accepting Russian citizenship last year — calling it a “weird decision” — but says she ultimately does not feel she has a right to criticize him or WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange.

“Everything was so much easier before the war,” she says. “I would answer you easily, ‘Russia belongs to us. It doesn’t belong to Putin. It has a beautiful future. Russian people are mostly amazing, and they want freedom.’”

Now, though, Tolokonnikova says she just doesn't know what the future holds. “I think so many people are going to be growing up with this trauma; those young kids who are being sent to the war, and those kids who might be sent to the war in five years. Who knows? It might last longer than we think.”

There are two ground rules for any conversation with Tolokonnikova; journalists are not allowed to ask where she lives and cannot ask her about her time in prison. If you inquire about American politics, she'll tell you she's far from an expert on the United

“I was in touch with those guys. We had those conversations,” she says. “They put themselves in tricky situations. Let’s say it’s easier for me to forgive Julian Assange for appearing on Russian state TV than it is for me to forgive a free American leftist who would support Putin just to say something against the United States. Julian Assange, his life is literally on the line.

“He has to pick one of the evils just to stay alive. If you’re just comfortably sitting on your couch and saying, ‘I don’t like the American government, so let’s just support Putin,’ that’s weird to me. It’s like me saying, ‘I don’t like Putin, let me go support the North Korean dictator for no reason.’”

“A lot of people ask me, ‘Why Santa Fe?’ It’s definitely smaller than New York or L.A. But for me, it’s exciting to work with local context and local culture and to interact with people who are sometimes overlooked by artists and musicians. And I just love Santa Fe.” — *Nadya Tolokonnikova*

Tolokonnikova, speaking to *Pasatiempo* via Zoom, says she’s thrilled to be coming to Santa Fe. She visited a few years ago and fell in love with the city, and she was scheduled to appear at Meow Wolf in 2020 before it was canceled due to the pandemic. This time around, her appearance was precipitated by her friendship with Belen-based artist Judy Chicago.

“Judy called one of her friends and said, ‘You absolutely have to go to Los Angeles to see Nadya’s show, *Putin’s Ashes*,’ she says. “They came all the way to L.A. just for the show, and they loved it. They collected two pieces; they were the first collectors of *Putin’s Ashes*. It was Tonya [Turner Carroll] and Michael [Carroll] who run CONTAINER, and besides collecting the two pieces, they said they loved the exhibition so much that they wanted to bring it to their gallery.”

Tolokonnikova made some new pieces for the Santa Fe exhibit, which will open June 30 and run through July 7 at CONTAINER. She’ll also perform at Meow Wolf on June 30 and attend a Belen book-signing with Judy Chicago on July 1.

“A lot of people ask me, ‘Why Santa Fe?’ she says. “It’s definitely smaller than New York or L.A. But for me, it’s exciting to work with local context and local culture and to interact with people who are sometimes overlooked by artists and musicians. And I just love Santa Fe. I’ve been there multiple

times and am really looking forward to coming back.”

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**Spencer Fordin**

Writer