

REFLECTION

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty

of

Laguna College of Art & Design

by

EVGENIA WILLIS

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

of

Master of Fine Arts

May, 2013

Laguna College of Art and Design
Master of Fine Arts Thesis Approval
Signature Page

Title of Thesis: Reflection

Master of Fine Arts Candidate Signature: _____

(Print name) _____

Thesis faculty advisor: _____

(Print name) _____

Second reader (optional): _____

(Print name) _____

MFA Program Chair: _____

(Print name) _____

Dean of MFA Program: _____

(Print name) _____

LCAD President: _____

(Print name) _____

Date Approved: _____

© 2013 by Evgenia Willis

No part of this work can be reproduced without permission except as indicated by the “Fair Use” clause of the copyright law. Passages, images, or ideas taken from this work must be properly credited in any written or published materials.

ABSTRACT

My thesis is meant to be an exciting adventure in which I attempt to convey to the viewer a human portrait as an enigmatic puzzle, filled with allegorical interpretations of moral, social and cultural issues. Recently I came to the conclusion that the environment we build around us is a reflection of ourselves. Being inspired by the latest discovery I attempt to depict a portrait of a human character by blending the reality and imagination, including personal and allegorical matters, living spaces and historical places. Each project is a part of a bigger idea to bring the attention to human values.

It is not the final work that is important to me; it is the process by which the work is created that has the impact on me. Some time ago I discovered an addiction to art which I had never felt before with anything else. Today I consider the process of making art as my true reality where I have found my emotional comfort. I realized that only by experience I improve and refine my art; each error or false start is the tool that helps me along the path to better work and for that reason I no longer resent them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Dr. William Havlicek, who helped me understand how to really process the form, theme and context of historical works of art, and contributed to a new way of conceiving my own compositions and concepts within my own work. Professors Wes Christensen and John Brosio; for their encouragement, and support through the MFA mentoring process. I would also like to convey my gratitude to the library staff at the Ruth Osgood Salyer Library in Laguna College of Art & Design for their knowledge and professionalism in assisting me through my time at LCAD.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this paper to my parents Liubov and Gennadi; they always believed in me and encouraged my journey. I miss them greatly. I would also like to thank my husband Bruce and son Pasha for their support during the last few years of my life. I know I would not have been able to do it without them. Also, I would like to thank my teachers, colleagues and friends at LCAD with whom I studied during both the BFA and MFA programs.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DESCRIPTION	1
RESEARCH	5
INSPIRATION	7
METHODOLOGY	15
LIMITATIONS	21
CONCLUSION	21
WORK CITED	23
APPENDIX A	25

TABLE OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1	<i>Glass of Milk</i> , Evgenia Willis, 2013	Page #2
FIGURE 2	<i>Thinker</i> , Evgenia Willis, 2013	Page #3
FIGURE 3	<i>Demolition</i> , Evgenia Willis, 2010	Page #4
FIGURE 4	<i>Little Things 1</i> , Evgenia Willis, 2013	Page #4
FIGURE 5	<i>Little Things 2</i> , Evgenia Willis, 2013	Page #4
FIGURE 6	<i>Dorothea</i> , Loretta Lux, 2001	Page #8
FIGURE 7	<i>Bride</i> , Gabriela Dellosso, 2001	Page #8
FIGURE 8	<i>Untitled</i> , Gabriela Dellosso, 2001	Page #8
FIGURE 9	<i>Allegory of Painting</i> , Vincent Desiderio,	Page#11
FIGURE 10	<i>Sleep</i> , Vincent Desiderio, 2000	Page#11
FIGURE 11	<i>Baccus</i> , Paul Rubens, 1638	Page#13
FIGURE 12	Oil painting, Euan Uglow, private collection	Page#15
FIGURE 13	<i>Thinker</i> , drawing preparation, Evgenia Willis, 2013	Page#19

DESCRIPTION

In my thesis work, consisting of two paintings, three drawings and a number of drawing studies, I attempted to depict a personal interpretation of fear, anxiety and loneliness by simply observing and comparing the experiences of other people. Though portraying other people and imagery, in a metaphorical sense I was really illustrating 'feelings' from moments of my life, rather than illustrating the moments themselves. Art became a way of resolving my own identity and I was especially interested in the physical manifestation of my emotional state.

My thesis concept was mainly driven by a long time interest in psychotherapy. I learned that there are many diverse theories dealing with psychological disorders, but what unifies them is a practical approach involving the patient's imagination, self-analyses, and, in fact, an empty chair.

In the "Empty Chair" psychotherapy technique the patient is directed to talk to a person of interest imagined to be sitting in the empty chair. Periodically switching chairs, the patient takes the mental space of the imaginary person; usually these figures are relatives, bosses, friends, or teachers. During these sessions, the patient may place in the chair sensuous objects associated with the conversations, such as toys, garments, or books. Using the same empty chair he may also have a dialogue with contradicting states of his own mind, for example, being brave against a fear, happy against depression, etc. The key is a long, detailed, emotional interaction that clarifies the feelings of the patient. Based on the practice of Doctor Kellogg, it is important to find an inspiring imaginary person or object to transfer outside of the self. I found the Empty Chair transformational exercises particularly

interesting and decided to explore this idea in my thesis. The chosen sitters in my thesis work became indicators of my inner state.

The canvas has become a mini stage of my life whereupon I place my experience, emotions and concerns. Once, when I was misjudged, I found myself in an uncomfortable state of anxiety and fear. Following the method of psychotherapy described above, I placed my good friend Mike in the conversational chair. My empathetic understanding of him was based on the fact that we both, to some extent, belong to minority groups. Often responding in a defensive manner against negativity, I presumed that Mike replied to offensive actions toward him in the same protective way. To my astonishment he was always equally kind to all people. Mike's personality became an inspiration for my artwork.

In painting *Glass of Milk*, 40 by 30 inches, (Fig. 1) executed in oil, I depicted the green outskirts of some town. A heavy storm is seen to the side, still far from the main scene, and may yet go away. In the middle of the field, a young man in a formal blue suit and red tie is sitting in the chair. His straight posture, crossed legs, and open gaze hold the attention of the viewer. He is aware of, but not responding to, three odd rabbit-humanoids circling behind him. These rabbits are busy with themselves; repeatedly picking and dropping stones on the ground, they continually outline an artificial maze to a state of perfection.

Though in the background, the rabbits play as important a role in the picture as the sitter. They bear the external characteristics of animals, such as ears and fur coats. These animals are reminiscent of macho men, wearing boots and carrying bags. In addition, their daring body gestures contrast with their sycophantic and inviting smiles. These rabbits became mental images of anxiety; the conflicting visual presentation in the painting creates

confusion and puzzlement in the mind of the viewer. I have experienced similar feelings of uncertainty during times of sadness.

The complicated maze passages made by the rabbits symbolize life decisions lead by fear. Ignoring or following the rabbit's path is the choice before the young man; meanwhile he is enjoying his glass of milk, considered a healthy food. The name of the painting, "Glass of Milk," purposefully redirects the viewers' attention to the healthy side of life. Overall, an artwork named for an object of secondary importance in the image raises one more question in the viewer's mind what the work is about.

As his mind is occupied with rabbits, the young man takes no notice of the coming storm. Anxiety, in the form of the rabbits, covers the entire horizon and makes him unaware of the actual threat. The message I attempted to convey in this work was that unpredictable nature is the danger, not the imaginary rabbits I created in my mind.

In painting *Thinker* (Fig. 2) I attempted to describe the feeling of loneliness. The work, 40 by 30 inches, executed in oil on canvas, is an intricate portrait of an old man depicted in a mysterious environment. He is sitting in the chair next to a closet hanger. The man's white crispy shirt and provocative red colored tie suggest his dominant importance in business. He wears stylish black pants, polished shoes of the particular fashion that will never be out of style. The metallic luster of the gold Rolex watch is a perfect complement to his neat appearance. The expression on his face is not pronounced, but his chin, brought up, creates the impression of mild sarcasm. His crossed hands and legs helps build the impression of a man with attitude, but it can also be described as a defensive pose. Four Roman antique sculptures of female servants are standing next to the man; one on the left side and three on the right side. They are turned toward the man, making him the center of attention. A heap of

ruins and broken toys lie on the ground next to the sculptures. At first glance, the space is reminiscent of a bedroom closet. The coat hanger is associated with privacy, nakedness, and inner thoughts, but sculptures are usually located in open spaces, such as gardens. The figures relate to human communication, but the man ignores them. A spaceship in the left upper corner of the picture suggests that man's private space, somewhere far away in the dark expanse. An astronaut entering the spaceship is the last human being leaving the sitter.

The idea of depicting a human character out of the surrounding environment applies to a narrative scene entitled *Demolition*. Executed in charcoal on Mylar, 18 by 40 inches, (Fig. 3) this drawing evokes layers of multiple and conflicting emotions. With light sources pulled through the drawing, it depicts a dark, puzzling place reminiscent of a falling ramshackle two-person empire, or a sturdy living space of a happy couple. On the left side of the drawing one sees a storage room filled with construction materials that are either leftovers or left for the future. The same mysterious effect establishes an oversized tank on the right side of the drawing; it can be an oxygen life source, or a reactor with nuclear fallout – denoting the slow, bitter death of a marriage. Only the middle section is clearly available to the viewer, which is a quiet corner of the living room where two figures reside in peaceful coexistence. The absence of walls gives the impression of a neglected place, but the presence of contractors in the picture supports the idea of a building in progress. The house is an allegory; black and white colors and a strong contrast in the drawing create drama and express the contradictions of the relationship as a whole.

In my charcoal drawing *Little Things*, 40 by 30 inches, I explored themes of an imagined scene from my past that related to the difficulties that I have been having, specifically the psychological dramas of girlhood (Fig. 4) (Fig.5). Dolls, depicted in my

drawing, essentially evoke a sense of play and imagination in the mind of the viewer, and this accounts for my fascination with them. I remember my first experience playing with toys began through an acquaintance with my neighbor, an old lady, who had a huge collection of toys left over from her grown-up children. I was allowed to play with the toys every time I visited her. While frolicking with cars, bears, dolls and petite furniture, I created a naive and beautiful imaginary world, structured the way I wanted. Today, depicting odd little narratives using dolls and articles of ordinary life, I am again attempting to reflect and manage reality.

Overall, my thesis work created feelings of a detachment from reality. In each painting and drawing I attempted to visualize the condition of a daydream, infusing scenes with uncanny, magical traces. In most of my works I have faced the main characters toward the viewer, so that the viewer is able to communicate with the narrative of the work through the eyes of the sitter. The facial expressions of the models are often the key determinant of the meaning behind a message and served as a barometer of their innermost feelings. They may be unconcerned, or may be detached, because they need to be in order to cope. Or, it could even be that the people in my works are absolutely brilliant, completely aware, and just know something that the rest of us don't know (Blue Canvas, 21). Body language and overall appearance is a significant descriptive mark of the human characters in my work. Supported by allegory and personal imagination the narrative of the work tightly resides in the relationship between the human figure and secondary objects; they become an extension of the human characters.

RESEARCH

My first step toward my thesis work was to figure out how I would represent my theme, which required understanding what the theme meant, and looking for possible examples to

further my ideas. I used a wide variety of symbols in order to communicate with the viewer and to identify myself and the world around me. Researching about rabbits for the project *Glass of Milk* certainly made me aware of how prevalent they are in the contemporary art world. I noticed that the symbolism of the rabbit tends to evolve significantly from children's media to that of adults. While the rabbits in books, television shows and movies for children are generally lovable, adorable and childlike, adult rabbit tales feature more mature themes, including sexuality, death and transcendence.

The most thought-provoking rabbits I found were in the film *Donnie Darko*, 2001, and the book, *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, 1902. Each one contained a wide range of characteristics typical for a human being. In her book, Beatrix Potter's most famous character, Peter Rabbit, replaces a human figure completely. His emotional trauma in Mr. McGregor's garden is so realistically portrayed that readers with access to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders could diagnose him with Acute Stress Disorder (Massey).

Rabbit Frank, in the film *Donnie Darko*, is a slightly demonic, very tall and lean figure in a fully covering black body costume. He comes to teenager Donnie Darko's dreams and tells him about the end of the world. The premise of the film takes a look at the supernatural, time travel and an individual who appears to be on the brink of insanity.

In both the film and book, rabbits are active partners in play. In contrast, the rabbits in my painting *Glass of Milk* avoided by central figure, but communicate between themselves. They are not as frightening as Frank and not as shy as Peter; their ambiguous description arouses uncertain emotions in the viewer's mind.

The posture and language of the body speaks a lot about person's attitude, mental status and character. How someone positions his arms can say a lot about the thoughts that are

running in one's mind. In painting *Thinker* the sitter's arms held out crosswise create a visual barrier toward the viewer. Another important subject that has been studied deeply by me is the language of legs and feet. Crossing one's legs tightly while communicating is a sign of a defiant act towards others. The more I study human behavior and gestures, the better I understand myself and others.

One of the tasks in my projects was to find a way to visually describe a human condition. Our behavior as it may be facial expression, body stance, and movements, is affected by the way we think about things. My interest in distinctive began when I arrived to America. Without knowing the English language my communication was limited to observation only. I quickly learned that to fit in a new culture, I needed to be aware of - and sensitive to – the “other” language around me, the language of nonverbal behavior. I found that it was a language I could translate and understand immediately. In my mind, I saw the human body as a kind of billboard that transmitted what a person was thinking via gestures, facial expressions, and physical movements that I could read. Over time, obviously, I learned English, but the nuances of nonverbal language I never forgot (Navarro, 2).

INSPIRATION

While combining the stylistic traditions of the old masters with the way I perceive the reality, and depict objects, I recognize myself as a practitioner of representational art. In addition, I identify in my work the presence of Magic Realism, a contemporary movement with, to me, the most interesting philosophical aspects of human consciousness. According to the definition of The Oxford Dictionary of Art, Magic Realism is described as the style where “objects are depicted with photographic naturalism, but because of paradoxical

elements or strange juxtapositions convey a feeling of unreality, infusing the ordinary with a sense of mystery” (Chilvers, 431).

Elements of Magic Realism I recognize in works of two contemporary artists German photographer Loretta Lux and New York painter Gabriela Dellosso. I have great interest in their artistic adventure because their approach to art is very similar to mine.

Children are the main subject matter in art of Loretta Lux. The composition of the photo works she builds carefully, organizing forms and color like an old master does on canvas. In artist’s interview to newspaper *The New York Sun* she admits that it will be no Lux’s famous photos today if she hadn’t been a painter previously. The art critic Lori Waxman in magazine *Artforum* perfectly describes one of my favorite works *Dorothea*, 2001, “the girl has strangely colored eyes, translucent skin, silky hair, and clothing that mirrors the sky spreading behind her half-length portrait. The result is a breathtaking paradox of photographic authenticity and painterly disbelief, of children too real to be believed, too ideal to be real” (Fig. 6). Interesting that the artist describes her art not as a psychology of an individual portrait but as a general nostalgia for childhood and the art is the vehicle to go there. The marble color of the skin tone, typical for Renaissance portrait, and uncanny expressions of the children’s faces, obviously modern idea, become her signature style which in addition with virtuoso use of digital photography and computer brought her worldwide success. Gabriela Dellosso paints herself using contemporary version of old masters techniques. A classic realist, the artist employs surrealistic elements through which she describes her emotional interior. The general environment in her paintings is rural; she dresses for stage into vintage cloth. Two favorite paintings *Bride* (Fig.7) and *Untitled* (Fig.8) are larger than life size. In first painting depicted woman in white bridal dress and in the second the same woman dressed in funeral black clothes. The face of the bride clearly visible under the veil doesn’t reveal any emotion, only mouth somehow marks the resignation. She holds a bridal bouquet in her right hand. In the second painting the expression of another woman’s face under her black veil is equally visible to the viewer. There is no sign of

unhappiness in her mien. In left hand she holds a lighted candle and laurel leaves. Seems to me this is an intentional statement of artist's polar extremes, aspiration to find the truth about herself.

As both artists I spend a great amount of energy and time preparing stages for my drawing projects using all sorts of accessories: costumes, old fashion hats, masks and unusual shoes. I am like them practicing techniques of old masters and using latest digital technology. They have academic art education, entirely dedicate their lives to art and at age forty already achieved public recognition; I believe I can do the same.

Speaking about art in general, the significance of every period in art history is in the state of being unlike the previous one because art, in fact, is the reflection of reality which, in turn, is constantly modifying. This means that each of the artistic periods reflects the current values of society, and solves current matters. The revolutionary ideas in Europe at the end of the 19th century laid down the foundation for the brave innovations in art that later developed into Modernism. From one side, Modernism as an art movement deserves respect and attention as a reflection of historical events, but with its emphasis on progress and the rejection of the traditional canons of representational art, I obviously have a problem. In any case, I accept Modernism's daring innovations; just like them I explore new techniques and materials in dry media. I also learned from their unfortunate mistakes; instead of rejecting old artistic traditions of representational art, like most modernists did, I adopted them into my art. Having experienced the study art in different cultures, I tend to identify representational art as an immortal foundation for all existing art philosophies and movements.

The current movement's term, Postmodernism, is used in a variety of ways; for some it means the revision of modernism, for others a return to old traditions, but for me it means a continuation of the course I started a long time ago. The Russian culture where I was raised and lived most of my life gave me a general knowledge of representational art. My American

art education in Laguna College of Art and Design, particularly art history classes of Professor William J. Havlicek, PhD, refined my aesthetic perception by expanding my horizons in art history. My main achievement is not to select which one is right, but to understand how each position of understanding brings a different perspective and alternative experience to of works of art.

Regardless of the geographical location, political roots and different languages, I believe artists have the same humanitarian ideals and principles; such concepts belong to postmodernism, the period we now live in. It only matters to me to a certain degree if the art I appreciate belongs to modern or traditional versions of realism, or promotes personal or social ideas, because behind each work I first see a series of decisions the artist makes. What I really want is to figure out those decisions; how and why the artist may have made them. Overall I am interested in the process of creation.

Correlation with the artists of the twenty first century orients me in the surrounding world. In addition to unique artistic styles, I am interested in the moral, social and cultural positions artists express through their art; such understanding helps me shape my own principles, which I then apply to my work.

An American contemporary artist I think highly of is Vincent Desiderio. I admire his fearless exposing of personal tragedy to public discussion. In the work *Allegory of Painting*, 2003, (Fig. 9) “the artist cradles his brain damaged son with infinite tenderness. Surrounded by the sacraments of his craft - optical devices, frames, photos, books, tools for making and viewing art - his attention belongs only to the child. All focus is on the limpid flesh of the boy and his bandages. There is no bravura here. The painting is classical, not in its subject, but in its sanity and reticence. Its discretion is rooted in Desiderio’s own humility before the

irreducible worth of this one frail life” (Mullarkey). The painting is associated with the artist's personal beliefs. “At the time, driven by the critical illness of his 4-year-old son, he was spending his days compulsively painting and repainting the child's portrait. If he got it just right, he believed, somehow the boy would live forever” (Pall).

One of Desiderio’s most unforgettable paintings is *Sleep*, 8 by 24 feet (Fig. 10). This vast picture grew out of the artist’s traumatic experience in 2000, when he lay prone in bed and staring up at the ceiling for months while being treated for cancer. The scene in the painting is depicted from above, in eerie light. A dozen, mostly naked, slumbering figures of men and women, are arrayed among rumpled sheets. The artist described his agony by painting other people in exhausted poses, as I reflected my fear and anxiety in painting *Glass of Milk* using a model and metaphorical images of rabbits.

Observing Desiderio’s painting *Sleep*, I find myself looking at the spaces between the sleeping bodies. It seems not the bodies, but the involute negative shapes in the composition create the emotions. This discovery inspired me to make my own version of a distraction that would go with main idea of the painting. I thought if the female sculptures in my painting *Thinker* are the painful memories of previous marriages, they must emotionally hurt the sitter. At the beginning of the project the sculptures were standing as one big mass on the right side of the painting and didn’t really communicate with the sitter. Then, I distanced them from each other enough to create a teeth-like pattern, similar to the slumbering figures in Desiderio’s painting. The shape of the deepest gap above sitter’s head created sore emotions.

In speech at Hamilton College Desiderio said:

“My pictures have been described as having a lot of emotion in them, but I paint them with ice water in my veins. It’s impossible to feel the full weight of what you’re doing at the same time that you’re executing it because you’re really making an artifice that describes or conveys very carefully the emotion, the sense of what you want the picture to generate, and to do that you have to be very cunning.”

My experience of transmuting emotional conditions into an art form was similar to Desiderio’s practice. I didn’t have sentiments for my experienced feelings; the objective in my work was in finding accurate shapes for particular emotional conditions and properly placing them in a pictorial composition. For instance, in depicting the straight posture of the sitter in my painting *Glass of Milk* I have described a state of self-awareness, but the intended connotation in the pose is meaningful only because of the odd rabbits behind the sitter. In another painting *Thinker*, the coat hanger, female sculptures and spaceship symbolized different spatial scales. For example, a coat hanger usually is attributed to a home closet and the man has some privacy in a small space; sculptures traditionally belong to exterior spaces and he may be lost in gardens; the spaceship as interplanetary transportation suggests that the man is the only inhabitant of an entire planet. Only in comparative relationship with each other do these objects describe the magnitude of the old man loneliness.

Vincent Desiderio's opinion about the use of allegory makes me think critically about my own work. In an interview with writer Alexandra Reyes the artist said:

“... Anyone could take images from their computer and project them or blow them up into photographs and it could be allegorical. As far as I’m concerned, what painters do when they work from the work of other painters is that they create an allegory of the

method. They take things that are present in the technical narrative of painters that precede them, and they imbue them with an anthropomorphic presence or give it a name or reissue it in a different way, but in doing so they treat that quality or character or set of relationships in a different way. So the allegorization of method, for me is the true allegory within paintings. I am interested in method - in the procedures of painters being re-investigated, re-understood, even misread, in using them as touchstones for our own progress, process and the process of painting to come.”

Following the advice of contemporary artist Desiderio, I have turned my attention to the work of the seventeenth century Flemish master, Peter Paul Rubens. I consider the most valuable characteristic of Rubens art to be the way he builds a complex composition. In my favorite oil painting *Bacchus*, 1638, (fig. 11) which I had the chance to see at the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg, Russia, the artist depicts a scene from Greek mythology; the sumptuous feast of Bacchus and his followers.

In painting *Bacchus*, the artist builds a compositional structure by placing legs and hands of figures, the wrinkles of cloth, and branches of trees in a circular rhythmic pattern and directing them into the stream of the compositional spiral. In academic rules such a principle is called “a curvilinear system” (Kingstone 38). The trick is found in the loop at the inner end of the spiral. Objects like the right hand, the chest, and the face of Bacchus, the naked bosom of the lover-woman are locked into a circle. Such tricks keep the viewer’s eyes inside of the painting.

While working on my project *Thinker*, I was particularly interested in keeping the viewer’s eye inside the work, so I appropriated the idea of Ruben’s spiral path. Before I constructed the spiral, I created a solid geometrical structure of vertical and horizontal lines.

The spiral path in the painting starts from the low left corner as a striped rag, moving right to the feet of the sitter, then jumps through the stones on the ground. The vertical sides of the sculptures' bases make the eye move up through the mass of the female-sculptures. Jumping over negative space the path lands on the spaceship, then passes down through the female sculpture on the left side of the picture. Turning right at the corner of the sculpture's base, the path slides off the red shirt on the hanger and then enter the body of the sitter. Circling counterclockwise through sitter's right hip, then the knee, the path jumps to the elbow. From the elbow the path turns in a double circle loop in which the red tie is the center. Like Rubens, I created the loop at the inner end of the path.

In comparing Rubens' painting with my work I realized that his composition consisted of only organic shapes, though I give preference to both organic and structural shapes in equal proportions. In painting *Thinker* the presence of geometric shapes, such as the sculptures' bases, the chair, striped rag, and coat hanger, create a solid structure within the pictorial composition. I need straight lines and corners; they are like a structural grid marks in the compositional field.

As in Rubens' art I have found the same excitement in the work of English figurative artist Euan Uglow (Fig.12). He is remarkable in his commitment to visual analyses using the knowledge of geometry and proportion. The artist intentionally leaves his marks of calculation on the surface of a painting and they become a part of the pictorial composition. In the words of the art educator Lawrence Gowing “(the work of Euan Uglow becomes) more energetic and inspiring ... in verifying and realizing the record of what is seen” (Lampert, 38).

I recognize the similarity of Uglow's techniques to my drawings. Like Uglow, I leave marks in my drawings as a measurement between different points and it becomes a script of my working process. While working I frequently make changes in drawing; repositioning or replacing one object for another, and I never know when I might need to refer to original marks again. If Uglow's marks in painting introduce a calculation, the marks in my work create some kind of vibrating motion. For instance, while drawing the doll in my piece, *Little Things*, I intentionally left the marks of altered poses because the broken doll simply didn't stay in a desirable position. By the end my marks had turned into a record of my working process. This painting is in the final stages of development.

METHODOLOGY

My work is a form of conversation with myself. While working with projects my vision of what it should be, and my ideas of what I want, frequently change. The first idea was to work with urban landscape, particularly construction zones. Walking the dog every day I witnessed the progress of each construction site in my town. My interest in this subject matter originated with my previous career as an industrial architect. After many hours of sketching construction zones, I realized that drawing geometric forms was some kind of nostalgia for the past. Then my interest moved inside the house under reconstruction, with the idea of exploring figural gesture in construction chaos. I made a few large drawings. Unfortunately, they are now lost, including my favorite project *Memories*.

I never have a title in mind before starting a new work. Rather, I settle upon a title after a painting's completion. The title of a piece suggests itself after I have had a chance to live with it a while. More importantly, my titles typically do not impart assertions of what a work is about. Occasionally a viewer will see something in a painting that I hadn't seen before.

Though figurative art is my main specialty, developed through years of study, I felt a necessity to venture into the process of adding exterior and interior spaces to rediscover the potentials of backgrounds in my work. In comparison to my previous figurative work, with little of attention to the background, the process of creating deeper space in the latest work led to an interest in a more compound narrative with multiple figures. It was astonishing to watch how, by adding the environment, the whole feeling of the work changed. For instance, the painting *Glass of Milk* without rabbits would be just a full-length portrait of a young man in a stiff pose, and without the female sculptures and spaceship my painting *Thinker* would show just an old man with a sarcastic attitude. The satisfaction of both paintings comes from secondary images in the background.

At one time my preparative digital collage work consisted of a basic rule of finding assorted images and then reintroducing them into my work as a collective image with the objective of communicating a particular message. While translating them into my work I dealt with images from various sources and originally may have had different conditions and qualities; black-white, washed out colors, oversized, or simply too small. To unify the images into one pictorial space I adjusted their initially unsuitable condition using my experience in studio practice and knowledge of computer design programs such as Photoshop and Illustrator. At the end of the digital preparation the work appeared as a reinvented joint image containing a brand new idea. That kind of preparation was done until my computer suddenly crushed. I realized my dependence on the computer and decided to work from life. My drawings thereafter were done as still images made of dolls and accessories I have at home.

Usually I start my project with soft vine charcoal, drawing the simple forms and when it needs it I apply a layer of charcoal powder. Then, I use a soft eraser to erase the highlights,

relying on the paper as the white. Soon the eraser becomes increasingly dirty and it actually helps make nice gradual shadings by repeatedly blending the charcoal. Working back and forth between charcoal and eraser I achieve a fine detailed drawing.

I work in a manner responsive to changes; layering, obscuring, erasing, and adding elements until a certain visual compactness is achieved. A feeling of pure satisfaction from my own work is rare for me except for the times when I achieve a breakthrough. While drawing I am looking for long lines, gestures, main angles, and positive and negative shapes to create a satisfying composition. The mixture of different drawing styles allows me to accomplish desirable effects in my work. By using a tonal drawing style that consists entirely of shading and produces a chiaroscuro effect, I achieve the necessary density of the imagery and create dramatic moods in the scene. In addition to tonal drawing, I define the form of the subject using contour and gestural styles. Outlines and some internal lines vary in thickness; they are used to express motion and emotive qualities.

Each tool I use creates a different texture and spreads each medium differently. Magic Black Eraser, for example, formulated especially for charcoal, does not smudge and won't harm the paper. I use it to draw in a reversible way – erasing charcoal and leaving cuts with clean and sharp edges. Kneaded Eraser, formed into any shape, is used to keep my drawings clean and highlights bright. I also use it to gently lighten areas and to adjust values and create textures. Chamois with a velvety surface is a good eraser to lighten large masses of dark charcoal or graphite. One thing I do not do is touch important areas of the paper with bare hands because my fingertips will transfer oil to the paper and after a while oil becomes visible. To protect the drawing I wear gloves while working.

The pencils used for my thesis projects are manufactured in the USA by General Pencil Company. The General's Primo Euro Blend pencils have a creamy formula and blend easily, and I use their regular General's 2H Extra Hard charcoal pencil. It was the most important pencil used in my drawing process; all charcoals smear easily, but this one is hard enough to hold a needle sharp point. In addition to pencil I use the brick charcoal which creates as dark a value as black ink. Charcoal is a fragile medium and I spray my drawings with fixative between sessions and after their completion to avoid bleeding and smearing.

Using a simple blade to sharpen a pencil is the tradition of Russian artists that I have used for many years. With a blade I make the point of my pencil exactly how I wanted it to be - elongated and pointy or stumpy and flat. An extra benefit is that the attention required to sharpen using a blade allows the rest of my brain to simmer for a moment or so, and good ideas can better ferment and bubble to the surface. I might say that sharpening with a blade makes me smarter.

I like the immediacy of drawing. Strong contrast helps emphasize gloomy feelings. Pencil line manipulation transforms emotions. With all of these image position lines, plum lines, dots to measure elements, the final drawings are alive with markings.

For the paintings, I complete drawings for which I solve compositional problems while working in Photoshop. The drawings are executed on Mylar paper cut to the size of the future paintings. The semitransparent characteristic of this paper allows me to easily transfer the drawing onto the canvas. Having a completed drawing, I am not burdened by major changes and can concentrate solely on applying the paint (Fig. 13).

For painting I prefer a ready-made canvas with a smooth surface. The preparation of the surface consists of applying four layers of acrylic gesso. Each dried gesso layer is

polished with fine sand paper. Extra layers of gesso make the canvas less absorbent. The general method of applying the paint was wet-on-dry.

The method I use to start the painting is called *imprimatura*; this consists of applying a thin layer of one color. My choice is warm and transparent earth color Burnt Sienna. By building heavier layers of Burnt Sienna in dark areas and lifting up the paint in light areas I establish tonal values in the painting, and then I let the painting dry to the touch.

‘Fat over lean’ is the technique painters use to prevent oil paintings from cracking while going through the aging process. Technically it means that each succeeding layer of the paint should have more oil than the preceding layer. For the early stages in the painting process I use paint mixed with turpentine, so it has a lean layer which usually dries quickly. In the next stage of painting I use mixed paint with oil medium made from existed ingredients. Recommended by Ralph Mayer in his *Artist’s Handbook*, the formula requires nothing more than pouring the ingredients into a jar and stirring until the components are smoothly blended. The components by volume are: Linseed oil – 1 part, Damar varnish – 1 part, and Gamsol – 1 part. I use linseed oil for the medium because it dries the most thoroughly of all the oils used as mediums. Gamsol is odorless mineral spirits. It is less toxic than turpentine, because the harmful aromatic solvent has been removed. The presence of Damar varnish enhances paint distribution and imparts an even gloss. My only problem with this resin is in its strong odor that does not allow me to work at home. So, I experimented with several mediums within one painting. I tried Poppy oil with Gamsol. The medium works well with light cool colors, but dries slowly. To speed the drying time I added few drops of Cobalt Drier.

While creating the work I was constantly thinking about technical execution in relationship with the idea. Painting *Thinker* is a good example. Even though I was creating an imaginary scene I still made it in realistic way using traditional compositional tricks. For instance, the overlapping shapes of the female sculptures in the painting create the illusion of depth. Closer figures appear larger than more distant ones. Nearby objects have greater detail and more texture than distant ones. The sitting old man, being the main point of interest, has the most detail. I have some difficulty employing edges in to enhance the effect of distance; all have an equal softness. The horizon line is at the sitter's eye level, which is considered a low level, so that the sculptures behind him appear to be much higher. Such optical effects greatly emphasize the importance of female nature.

The composition is constructed of positive and negative spaces arranged around the sitting figure. The equal distribution of vertical and horizontal lines creates a strong geometrical structure within the composition. I borrowed the idea of curvilinear principium from Rubens' painting *Bacchus*. The direction of the curved lines in relationship to the dark and light shapes creates a circling path from the lower left side corner of the painting toward the center of attention at the sitter. The unity of the composition was made by every element in the painting being adjusted to one point – the model. The mood of the painting introduced by use of dark tones and muted colors.

LIMITATIONS

While working on my thesis I discovered a new approach to creating art that resolved a long time problem of mine, and made me feel better about myself. At the beginning I was working on only one project at a time and very often came to an impasse. Without any idea of what to do next to resolve the issue I tended to force the answer and the only result was

wasted time and depression. Finally, in the book by William V. Dunning, “Advice to Young Artists in a Postmodern Era,” I found the answer that resolved my issue. Using a scientific approach, he explains that an artist consciously attempting to solve the problem will definitely fail “because intuitive leaps are seldom made by the focused consciousness. Such leaps are usually made by the peripheral mind, the unconscious, the right brain – whatever your favorite term happens to be” (Dunning, 33). Reading his book I realized that it was not really my fault. What I needed to do was to “set the work aside and work on another piece, or two, or three. “You become involved in the other pieces, but can still see the first of the corner of your eye. Then, a day or a week or a month later, when your mind is focused on something entirely different, the solution (perhaps an embarrassingly obvious one) pops suddenly into your awareness.” Following Dunning’s advice I started working on several pieces simultaneously and realized that I was speeding my progress and, most importantly, came back to my original time schedule.

CONCLUSION

My thesis was meant to be a thrilling adventure in which I attempted to convey to the viewer a human portrait as an enigmatic puzzle, filled with allegorical interpretations of moral issues. Recently I came to the conclusion that the environment we build around us is a reflection of ourselves. By utilizing the chair as a device for depicting fear, anxiety, loneliness, alienation and discovering the way to deal with these emotions, I realized that these are universal experiences, common within all human beings, including me. Being inspired by this latest discovery I attempted to depict a portrait of a human character by blending reality and imagination, including personal and allegorical matters, living spaces and historical places. My art is not a judgment of the people portrayed but rather an effort to

share with the viewer my understanding of life with a delicate hint of emotions. The most fascinating fact is that by painting other people I attempt to understand myself.

It is not the final work that is important to me; it is the process by which the work is created that has an impact on me. I have a total addiction to art that I have never felt before with anything else. Today I consider the process of making art as a private world where I find emotional comfort. I realize that only by experience do I improve and refine my art; each error or false direction is a tool that helps me along the path to better work. For that reason, I no longer resent them.

I have so many ideas that are constantly being processed and polished in my mind, but the most important and difficult job for me as an artist is finding meaningful ideas that have a personal resonance, and then trusting them to the end. Through overcoming the hardships of an MFA program, I have learned to pursue ideas to their conclusion, to process those ideas into physical existence. I came to the answer that the question of whether I am capable of being an artist or not is no longer significant. I am already in action. I am the one who has learned lessons in art, learned from making mistakes and finding solutions and became strong enough to deal with future demands. I consider the best is still ahead of me.

WORKS CITED

- Chilvers, Ian. The Oxford Dictionary of Art. Magic Realism. 2004.
www.encyclopedia.com. Web. 01February 2013.
- Davis, Susan. *Stories Rabbits Tell: A Natural and Cultural History of a Misunderstood Creature*. Brooklyn, NY: Lantern Books, 2003. Print.
- Dunning, William. *Advice To Young Artists In A Postmodern Era*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000. Print.
- “John Brosio.” *Blue Canvas*. Issue 6. 2010: 16-25. Print.
- Kingstone, Jeremy. *Arts and Artists*. London: Bloomsbury Books. 1989. Print.
- Massey, Peter Galen. *Acute Stress Disorder in Beatrix Potter’s Peter Rabbit*.
www.petergalenmassey.com. 30 Sept. 2012. Web. 01 April 2013.
- Lampert, Catherine. Kendall, Richard. Euan Uglow: Catalogue Raisonne. New Haven: Yale University Press. 2007. Print.
- Mullarkey, Maureen. *Studio Matters: Notes and Commentary. The Human Figure: Presence or Decoration?* www.maureenmullarkey.com. February, 2004. Web. 01 April 2013.
- Navarro, Joe. *What Everybody is Saying: An Ex-FBI Agent’s Guide to Speed-Reading People*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2008. Print.
- Pall, Elen. *Painting Life Into Sammy*. www.nytimes.com. 29 January 1995. Web. 01 April 2013.
- Sir Listalot. Top 5 movies featuring Rabbits. *sirlistalot.com*. Sir Listalot, 2007. Web. 01 April, 2013.
- Toastmasters International. “Gestures: Your Body Speaks.” *Toastmasters.org*. Toastmasters International, 2011. Web. 01 April 2013.
- Zupnick, Irving. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism. Concept of Space and Spatial*

Organization in Art. Vol. 18, No. 2, Dec. 1959.

APPENDIX A



Fig. 1. Evgenia Willis, *Glass of Milk*, 2013, Oil on canvas, 40" x 30"



Fig. 2. Evgenia Willis, *Thinker*, 2013, Oil on canvas, 40" x 30"



Fig. 3. Evgenia Willis, *Demolition*, 2010, charcoal on mylar, 24" x 48"

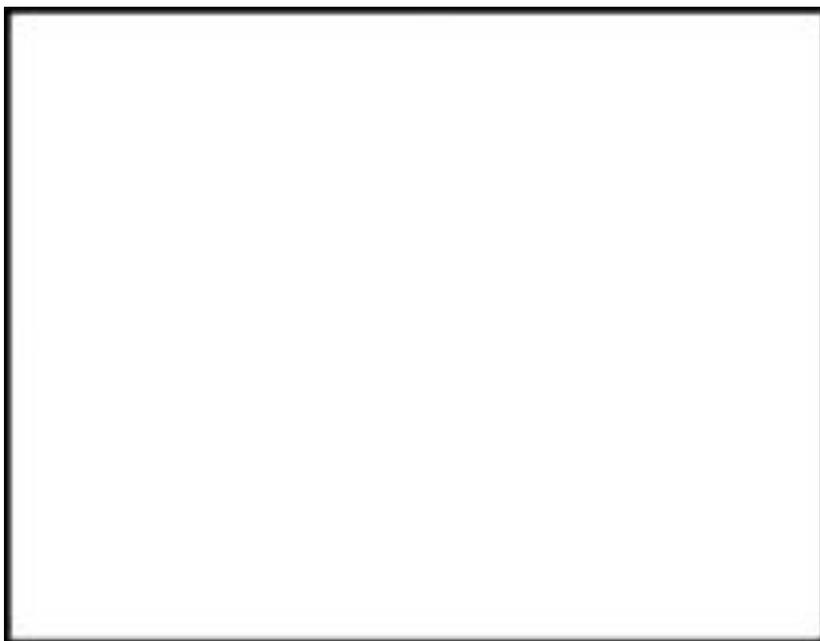


Fig. 4. Evgenia Willis, *Little Things 1*, 2013, charcoal on paper, 40" x 30"

Image to be added



Fig. 5. Evgenia Willis, *Little Things 2*, 2013, charcoal on paper, 40" x 30"

Image to be added



Fig. 6. Loretta Lux, *Dorothea*, 2001, digital photography, Torch Gallery, Amsterdam, Netherlands.



Fig. 7. Gabriela Gonzalez Dellosso, *Bride*, 2000, oil on linen, 80" x 46," private collection.



Fig. 8. Gabriela Gonzalez Dellosso, *Untitled*, 2000, oil on linen, 80" x 46," private collection.



Fig. 9. Vinsent Desiderio, *Allegory of Painting*, 2003, Oil on linen.



Fig. 10. Vincent Desiderio, *Sleep*, 2013, Oil on canvas, 8' x 24'



Fig. 11. Paul Rubens, *Bacchus*, 1638, Oil on canvas, Hermitage, St. Petersburg, Russia.

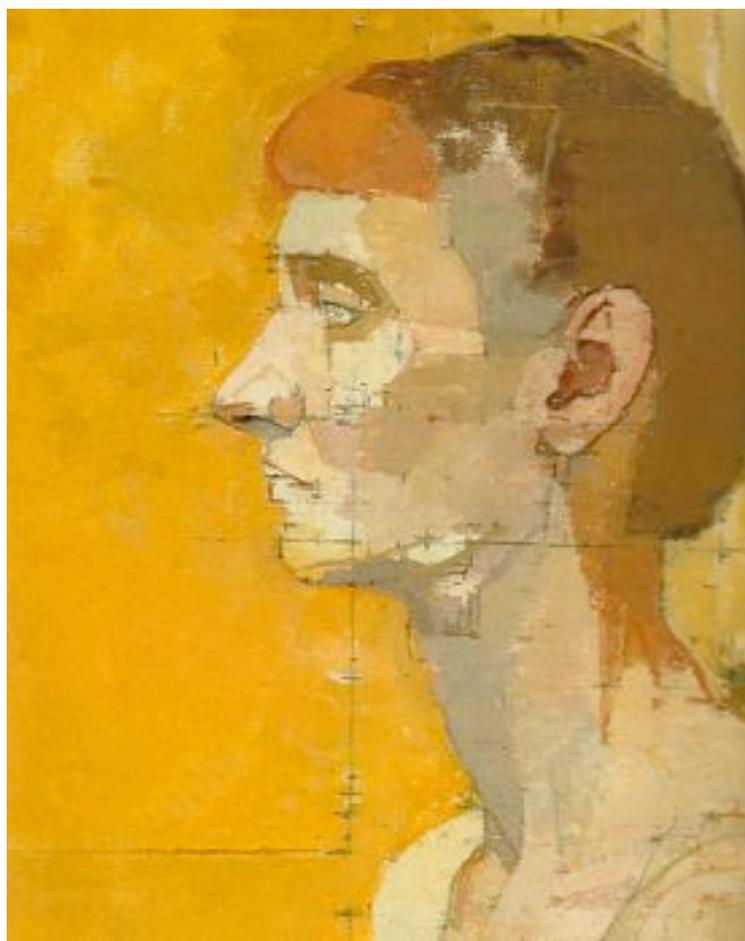


Fig. 12. Euan Uglow, oil on canvas, private collection.



Fig. 13. Evgenia Willis, *Thinker*, 2013, charcoal on paper, 40" x 30," drawing preparation.

ARTIST'S NOTE

Website: www.bluecanvas.com/evgenia,

www.artbreak.com/evgenia.

Email: gennadia@gmail.com