

PAINTING THE ROSES RED



PAINTING THE ROSES RED

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ABSTRACT

In the film *American Psycho*, Patrick Bateman stares blankly at his reflection in the mirror as he states, “There is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory—I simply am not there.” This famous scene highlights a theme that I, along with countless artists, writers, and filmmakers, explore in my work—the idea that the identity we present to others is a performance of a persona rather than a reflection of one’s authentic self and that perhaps there is no “authentic self” behind the mask at all. Through my exploration of identity—what it is, how it’s formed, transformed, and destroyed—I divide my paintings into three categories: a self-portrait series that focuses on more personal and existential themes, a family series that explores how identity is shaped by family dynamics and roles, and a series that examines, reinterprets, and/or subverts popular narratives that center on identity. My painting style, strongly influenced by German Expressionism, is expressive and direct. I use thick layers of paint, distorted perspective, collage elements such as stitching, and a lurid palette heavy in yellows and greens. Theatrical imagery such as stages, curtains, and makeup associated with clowns and other such performers are common motifs in my paintings. Drawing compositional and thematic inspiration from literature and film, I create uneasy *mise-en-scenes*, highlighting the suffocating effects and psychological damage of grappling with one’s self-identity and of performing a fake persona.

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DEDICATION

To my dad, my first and best teacher, my mom, for always supporting my artistic ambitions against her better judgement, and my grandfather, who was my biggest fan.

EPIGRAPH

The world's a theatre, the earth a stage

Which God and Nature do with actors fill.

- **Thomas Heywood**, *Apology for Actors*, 1612.

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PAINTING THE ROSES RED

DESCRIPTION

The American painter Margaret Bowland once wrote, “It has often been said that every artist has one story that he or she tells over and over again” (RDJ Gallery). Producing my thesis has been an exercise in uncovering my own recurring story. After examining and discerning the themes that repeat throughout my art, I realized they all centered on personal identity and the struggles that come with attempting to understand oneself and one’s place in the universe, especially when a panoply of external forces and influences are at play.

The late psychologist Carl Rogers stated, “What is most personal is most universal” (Rowson). This famous quote reflects my attitude towards my work and creative process. Although my narratives are driven by deeply personal emotions and experiences, I have no interest in the audience knowing my intention or interpreting my work “correctly”—that is, I don’t feel that I’ve failed if a viewer’s interpretation of my work differs from my own. My aim as a painter is not to convey a specific message or even a clear story, but rather to express various emotions, such as melancholy, unease, angst, and even dark humor, in a narrative that is ambiguous enough for viewers to be able to connect with and interpret in a way that is meaningful for them. As personal as my work is, I don’t want or need the audience to see me, but rather themselves and their own memories, experiences, and humanity reflected to them.

My paintings explore self-identity, particularly the notion of identity being a performance of a role or persona. Over the course of a few semesters, my paintings gradually began to diverge into three subcategories. The first explores identity through self-portraits. These paintings focus on personal and existential themes such as growing up, working, and dying. The second series centers on family and the relationship dynamics between members. Finally, the third series looks at popular narratives such as fairy tales. These paintings are inspired by literature focused on the theme of identity— the loss of identity, the performance of persona, and the roles designated for us by culture/society. The self-portrait series examines inward dynamics and personal thoughts, the family series begins looking outward



Fig. 1. Emma Yervandyan, *The Dream*, 2021, Oil on canvas, 30" x 30".

but in proximity to the individual, and the narrative series looks even farther out and explores how identity is shaped by the narratives and archetypes that are passed down through popular culture. I view these three categories of work as an exploration of self-identity that broadens with each successive series.

I am a frequent subject

in my artwork. Many of my paintings, especially from my first semester, are wistful self-portraits with ambiguous, emotionally driven narratives such as *The Dream* (Fig.1). Using

myself as a model is not only a direct way to explore themes of self-identity, but through the personal nature of self-portraits, it helps draw viewers in and identify with the narrative. In many of these self-portraits as well as in other figurative paintings, my subjects don white face paint or the theatrical, performance makeup of clowns and harlequins.



Fig. 2. Ingmar Bergman, Scene from *Wild Strawberries*, 1957.

These are characters that I've always associated with the notion of identity seeing as they have parodied humanity and represented the full array of human emotions in literature and artwork for centuries (Goldner). The use of theatrical makeup in my work also allows me to represent the spirit of a past age—when masks and makeup were used in elaborate festivals, carnivals, and pageants where everyone from every class and walk of life participated in a collective suspension of reality. In that setting, anyone could be anything (Oaxaca).

My work is heavily influenced by Expressionism, particularly German Expressionism. Like the Expressionists, I represent emotions rather than reality through distortion, heavy brushstrokes, and lurid palettes. Many of the artists belonging to this movement drew inspiration from classic Hollywood films, film noir, and early horror films. Similarly, my compositions are often inspired by the themes and visuals of cinema from a wide range of genres. The playful, theatrical aesthetics of Federico Fellini's films and the theme of self-identity that runs throughout Ingmar Bergman's filmography have been

important influences on my thesis work. *The Dream* was inspired by an eerie dream sequence from Bergman's 1957 film *Wild Strawberries* (Fig. 2). During Bergman's scene, the main character is confronted with his past and his approaching mortality symbolized by handless clocks. The symbol of the handless clock appears on the wall in *The Dream*, while the reposing figure is visited during an apparent dream by her younger self who makes a priest's gesture of "absolution," echoing the themes of aging and confronting and forgiving oneself from Bergman's film.

Avant-garde filmmakers like Alejandro Jodorowsky and Jan Švankmajer have also had an influence on my work, both visually and thematically. My painting series *Welcome to*



Fig. 3. Emma Yervandyan, *Welcome to the Dollhouse (Page 6)*, 2022, Oil and embroidery on canvas, 18" x 18".

the Dollhouse (Fig. 3), inspired by Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, which also features Bergman's handless clock motif, was strongly influenced by Švankmajer's 1988 film of the same name. *Welcome to the Dollhouse*, a series of paintings on loose canvas stitched together in a book format, combines elements of illustration and fine art, and was also aptly influenced by book illustrations

from the late 19th and early 20th century. Artists from this era, such as Aubrey Beardsley, Harry Clarke, and Ray Coyle, often used flat, graphic shapes to form backgrounds and

settings while featuring detailed, three-dimensional figures in the foreground (Fig. 4). This



Fig. 4. Harry Clarke, *The Tinderbox Fairy Tale*, 1875, Print in book.

are special protagonists or main characters in an infinite, indifferent universe.

Along with Expressionism, cinema, and illustration, my Armenian background plays an important part in many of my paintings, especially the works that reference family or explore my own personal identity. Armenian painters such as Arshile Gorky and filmmakers such as Sergei Parajanov are

style of illustration, popular in Victorian England, is an influence on most of my paintings that reference literature, such as *The Red Parade* (Fig. 5) which alludes to L. Frank Baum's children's novel, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. This painting features the famous image of the ruby red slippers from the 1939 film adaptation of Baum's novel. While in *The Wizard of Oz*, the heroine Dorothy is one of the only characters to wear the mystical red slippers, in *The Red Parade*, multiple figures wear the red shoes, suggesting that, in actuality, none of us



Fig. 5. Emma Yervandyan, *The Red Parade*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 18" x 18".

artists that I frequently turn to when making paintings that touch upon my cultural



Fig. 6. Emma Yervandyan, *The Artist and her Mother*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 48" x 36".

background. My painting *The Artist and her Mother* (Fig. 6) for example, originally featured myself standing beside my seated mother and was inspired by Gorky's most famous painting, *The Artist with his Mother* (Fig. 7) in which he, the painter, stands beside his seated mother. I eventually removed the mother figure from my painting as a compositional preference rather than a conceptual choice, but the influence remains. Gorky's seemingly standard double portrait was made around the time of the Armenian Genocide and is thus

regarded as an important representation of Armenia's tumultuous history. Much of my painting's imagery is also influenced by visual motifs including patterned tapestry inspired by traditional Armenian rugs and white face paint from Sergei Parajanov's art-house film, *The Color of Pomegranates* (1969), a film known for its depiction of Armenian history,

symbology, and iconography (Fig. 8). White face paint in *The Artist and her Mother* is used both as an homage to Parajanov's film and as a motif that ties in with my other works. I use face paint as a guise or mask used to hide or manipulate identity.

Many of my recent works, especially those exploring narratives, have collage elements including embroidery, stitching, and glue. The process of gluing and sewing canvas together began as a way to mend a technical mistake, however it quickly became an important way to enhance or



Fig. 7. Arshile Gorky, *The Artist with his Mother*, 1936, Oil on canvas, 60" x 50 1/4", Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City, New York.

subvert certain narratives by physically representing detachment and displacement as in



Fig. 8. Sergei Parajanov, *Scene from The Color of Pomegranates*, 1969.

Welcome to the Dollhouse. I enjoy the act of defiling a painting by aggressively poking holes in it and leaving it frayed, unstretched, and unframed. The act of “damaging” a painting allows me to let go of the constrictive notion of “preciousness” associated with fine art and

transform my paintings into tactile objects. Thematically, many of my paintings deal with the notion of constructing and dismantling ideas, emotions, and identities. While I keep the specific stories behind most of my paintings purposely elusive, the physical act of deconstructing paintings relays these ideas of destruction and angst to an audience in a direct, raw, and hopefully impactful way.

RESEARCH

I've long been enamored with the highly dramatic, poignant, and sometimes disturbing elements of German Expressionism. The movement is characterized by lurid and



Fig. 9. Robert Wiene, Scene from *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, 1920.

anxiety, anger, and angst that were prevalent in post-WWI Germany (MOMA). Many of my paintings are fueled by these emotions, and I often implement unnatural and sometimes clashing colors and distorted perspectives to create a sense of unease and eeriness in my work. A classic example of German

jarring color palettes and distorted shapes with the intent of creating emotional intensity and expressing the feelings of



Fig. 10. Emma Yervandyan, 1970, 2022, Oil on canvas, 40" x 30".

Expressionism is the 1920 silent horror film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Fig. 9) which “utilized distorted sets, strong contrasts of light and dark, expressionistic acting, and other devices to evoke moods through visuals” (Film Lifestyle). Like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, many of my paintings such as *1970* (Fig. 10) feature strong contrasts between light and dark and distortion in either the figures or the spaces in which they inhabit. In *1970*, these expressive elements help establish an unsettling atmosphere and depict the discord and tense dynamics between the family members in the painting.

In my adolescence, the films of Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, and Andrei Tarkovsky introduced me to new ideas about the human condition and encouraged my introspective tendencies that would later influence my paintings. The playful, theatrical

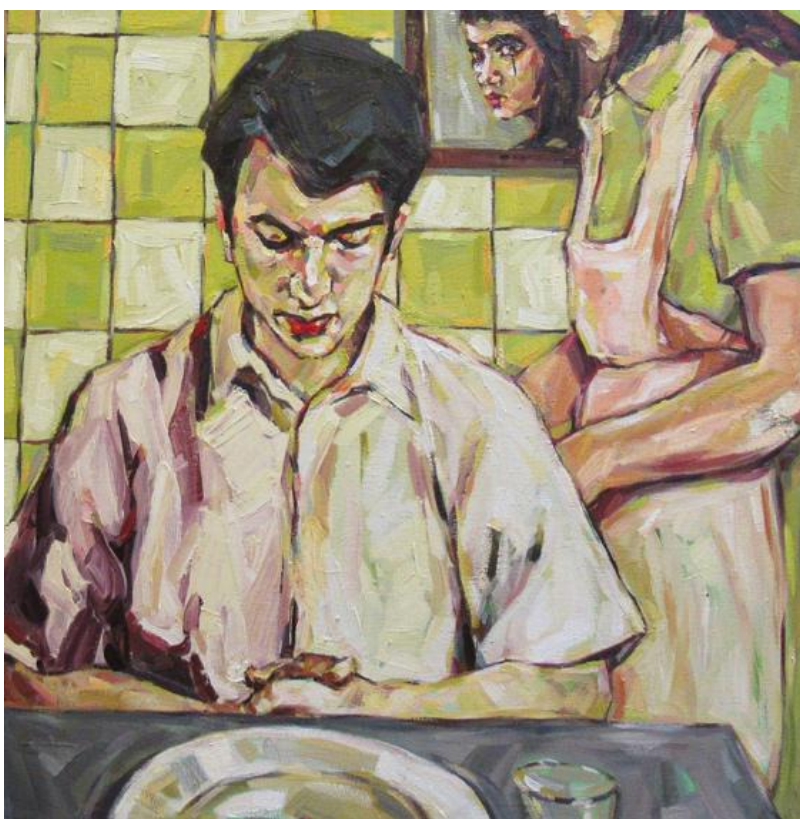


Fig. 11. Emma Yervandyan, *Breakfast*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 30” x 30”.

aesthetics of Fellini’s films and the theme of self-identity that runs throughout Bergman’s filmography were particularly impactful. I also often turn to films for compositional inspiration. The painting *Breakfast* (Fig. 11), for instance, displays a *mise en scène* inspired by stills from multiple French New Wave films. *Breakfast* was also inspired thematically by

French New Wave and other highbrow cinema, which, in general, focus on the stories of men and relegate women to the roles of mothers, daughters, wives, love interests, sexual conquests, emotional support systems, adversaries, and so forth.

The Wizard of Oz, the film adaptation of L. Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, has been part of the inspiration behind the red shoes motif that runs throughout many of my works such as *The Red Parade* (Fig. 5). These shoes allude to both the Mary Jane shoes worn by Alice in *Alice in Wonderland* (1951), the red ruby slippers worn by Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), and the red ballet slippers featured in the 1948 film *The Red Shoes*, an adaptation of the classic Hans Christian Anderson fairy tale. These shoes are important symbols in the films and their source materials which center around or touch upon the theme of identity. Thus, in my paintings, red shoes act as a sort of composite symbol that pays homage to all the stories of identity that I draw inspiration from.

The Belgian artist James Ensor, a forefather of Expressionism, has had a major



Fig. 12. James Ensor, *The Entry of Christ into Brussels*, 1889, Oil on canvas, 99.5" x 169.5", Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

influence on my work, particularly through his use of masks, lurid palettes, and his emphasis on subversion, transgression, and the macabre. A highly controversial

figure for his time, Ensor became famous early in his career for his irreverence and anti-



Fig. 13. Emma Yervandyan, *Hush*, 2021, Oil on canvas, 28'' x 24''.

Christ in the center of the crowd, while the rigid masks of the surrounding masses suggest their ignorant acceptance of conventional beliefs and attitudes (Khan Academy). Ensor's work is also notable for its depiction of light, saturated colors, and heavy use of white paint, which contrasted with the dark, macabre nature of many of his paintings. Like Ensor, my works explore the theme of artifice and identity with lurid colors, pasty white paint, and thick

establishment views (Brown). Masks became a significant motif in his work which often highlighted the artifice and hypocrisy of society. He stated, "Hounded by those on my trail, I joyfully took refuge in the solitary land of fools where the mask, with its violence, its brightness and brilliance, reigns supreme" (Mackenzie). In *The Entry of Christ into Brussels* (Fig. 12), Ensor portrays himself as the persecuted



Fig. 14. Emma Yervandyan, *Chimera*, 2022, Oil and embroidery on canvas, 22'' x 18''.

brushwork. Several of my paintings, such as *Hush* (Fig. 13) use masks as a symbol of performative identity, while paintings such as *Chimera* (Fig. 14) have a macabre atmosphere



Fig. 15. Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #193*, 1989, Color print, 48" x 41", The Broad, Los Angeles.

and criticize institutions of power. In *Hush*, I wear harlequin makeup while holding a bare face mask, covering its mouth with my hand. Just as Ensor uses the mask to represent artifice, *Hush* plays with the idea of multiple personas existing in one person by depicting the subject wearing more than one mask—a literal one she holds in her hands and the layer of theatrical white and red makeup on her real face.

Chimera follows Ensor's tradition of

questioning powerful institutions such as the church and critiquing their control over people. In this painting, young Catholic girls wear their white communion dresses, eerily similar to wedding dresses, as they stand in line waiting to take their first communion. *Chimera*, which contains elements of embroidery and collage, borrows from Ensor's macabre and subversive language by depicting a nun sewing onto a girl's face. The girl who stands in the foreground and gazes directly at the audience displays a disturbing visage of a patchwork of multiple faces sewn together. The painting illustrates how religious institutions and the archaic and often patriarchal notions they uphold, can have negative, disconcerting effects on one's sense of identity, particularly for young girls.

Another artist who has significantly influenced my thesis work is American artist Cindy Sherman who is known mainly for her transgressive and humorous photographic self-portraits. In them, she depicts herself as different personas and explores identity and artifice while emphasizing theatricality and subversion. Like Sherman who wears elaborate, transformative costumes in her self-portraits, such as in *Untitled #193* (Fig. 15), my early thesis paintings such as *Roses in February* (Fig. 16) are self-portraits in which I wear heavy, theatrical makeup and become some sort of imagined, harlequin character.



Fig. 16. Emma Yervandyan, *Roses in February* 2021, Oil on canvas, 28" x 24".

Authors Amelia Jones and Amanda Cruz state in their book *Cindy Sherman: Retrospective* (1997), “The myriad of masks and guises [Sherman] dons allow her to undergo transformations that explore the workings of representation. That Sherman uses herself or surrogates in all her work is significant, as we track her pursuit for a unified self-image, only to discover the futility of such a search” (Jones 15). Sherman’s desire to explore identity, uncover a true “self,” explore the possibility of there not being a true self, and her process of doing so in a way that is both transgressive and humorous fuel my creative process.

Lewis Carroll's iconic children's novels, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* have significantly shaped my work,



Fig. 17. Emma Yervandyan, *Welcome to the Dollhouse (Page 5)*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 18" x 18".

both visually and thematically. My first introduction to the tale of Alice and her misadventures was through the 1950 Disney movie adaptation, *Alice in Wonderland*. As a child, I was immediately drawn to Alice's chaotic nonsense world and felt a kinship with the central character who longed to leave reality governed by arbitrary rules and enter her own

imagined universe. As I grew older and finally read the source material, I recognized, like many critics and philosophers have, that Carroll's nonsense world is a provocative backdrop for a young girl's identity crisis as she navigates a world ruled by chaos (Mistry 147).

Throughout both novels, Alice is made to question both her identity and sanity as she faces multiple physical transformations and encounters increasingly impossible events. The other creatures of Wonderland, many of whom have unstable identities themselves, constantly order Alice to identify herself. As she delves deeper into the recesses of this illogical world, she strays further from her sense of self until she no longer knows who she is (Mistry 148).

The themes of loss of identity and grappling with one's identity that run throughout Carroll's

novels are significant concepts in my own work. Like both Alice novels, my paintings explore and question what identity is, how it's transformed, influenced, and destroyed.

Carroll's subversiveness and

the dark, whimsical

atmosphere he creates in his

stories have also influenced

my paintings, many of which

feature a similar kind of

unsettling atmosphere. Some

of my paintings directly

reference and interpret



Fig. 18. Jan Svankmajer, Scene from *Alice*, 1988.

Carroll's tale, such as *Welcome to the Dollhouse* (See Fig. 17 for an example). This series of

8 square paintings collaged together with stitching depicts different objects from the *Alice*

stories, such as the "Drink Me" bottle and "Eat Me" cookies. My *Welcome to the Dollhouse*

series was also heavily influenced by another adaptation of *Alice's Adventures in*

Wonderland—Jan Švankmajer's surrealist, art-house film *Alice* (Fig. 18). Furthermore, some

of the imagery associated with Carroll's stories pop up frequently in my work such as Alice's

Mary Jane shoes. Other motifs inspired by *Alice* include the color red, an important symbol

of power in the novels, and checker patterns which allude to the game of chess and act as a

metaphor for power and autonomy over one's fate (Feminism).

Beyond Carroll's books, literature in general plays a part in my creative process, namely with my narrative paintings that reference specific stories. William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, for example, has influenced much of my thoughts surrounding the concept of

identity. In the famous play, the introspective Hamlet grapples with concepts such as



Fig. 19. Emma Yervandyan, *Ophelia*, 2022, Oil and embroidery on canvas, 19" x 18".

mortality and duty while his ex-lover Ophelia is driven to insanity and a complete loss of identity through the multiple male figures that force their personal agendas upon her. My small painting *Ophelia* (Fig. 19) references Ophelia's tragic fate by depicting a puppet theater with a female puppet holding a bouquet of flowers. Ophelia carries a similar bunch of flowers as she drowns in Shakespeare's play. In my

painting, rather than drowning, Ophelia hangs by a noose on the puppeteer's stage. This theatrical painting also alludes to Shakespeare's popular notion of living as being some type of constant act or a performance in a never-ending play (Shakespeare 5.5, 16-27).

METHODOLOGY

At the end of my first semester at LCAD, I came to the troubling realization that I did not enjoy the art I was making. I had adopted an indirect painting technique, and my art was inching towards Realism. Although my peers and professors reacted positively to these paintings, I knew that unless there was a dramatic shift in my style and process, I would soon become completely disinterested in my own work and in painting itself. At the start of my

second semester, I began working with Michael Sitaras, whose mentorship came from a place of empathy and gentle encouragement. I shared my desire for a significant change in my paintings as well as my fears surrounding transformation and his response completely reshaped the way that I look at my process. He stated that my art should be like the Galapagos Islands—the island chain where Darwin developed his theory of evolution by observing slight changes in the beaks of finches. These minute transmutations that occurred over time had significant evolutionary consequences. The Galapagos metaphor helped me understand that like those finches, my art can transform gradually, and I could push myself just enough to be challenged but not overwhelmed.

The Galapagos metaphor not only became my philosophy in terms of evolving my



Fig. 20. Emma Yervandyan, *Between*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 28" x 24".

style and methods, but also regarding the multiple transformations each of my paintings go through. My creative process usually begins with a collection of inspirational reference images around which I develop a concept. Once an idea is there, I create a rough sketch that outlines the basics of the composition followed by a more detailed drawing that will be transferred to canvas.

Although I begin with a clear composition, I've found that no matter how thought out the final drawing is, my

images inevitably change, sometimes quite drastically, as I paint. Embracing the Galapagos metaphor has not only removed the debilitating pressure I once felt to take risks with my art but has also helped alleviate some of the frustration I feel about how often I alter my paintings. Now, whenever I feel dissatisfied or exasperated, either with the pace of my progress or with my constant modifications, I remember the image of Darwin’s finches that I have plastered on my studio door. That image reminds me to keep working, push a little bit each time, and to embrace my spontaneous and intuitive painting style and the challenges that come with it.

One example of the spontaneous nature of my painting process is *Between* (Fig. 20), a self-portrait depicting me wearing an ornate headscarf (a nod to my Armenian background) with my face partially obscured by thick white paint. *Between* falls into the realm of

“disrupted realism” and explores my feelings surrounding my cultural identity or the lack of it. The painting began with me holding a rooster, an homage to a faint childhood memory, and with my face fully intact (Fig. 21). I had no intention of removing any part of the face, and the focus of the painting was going to be the relationship between me and the rooster in my arms, a figure that symbolized my tenuous connection to my culture.

Somewhere along the painting process, I felt



Fig. 21. Emma Yervandyan, *Between (progress)*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 28” x 24”.

an impulse to take a large chunk of white paint and cake it over the left side of the face. I'm



Fig. 22. Emma Yervandyan, *Between (progress)*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 28'' x 24''.

not sure if this decision came out of frustration or a subconscious desire to recreate the chalky white masks that many of my previous painting subjects had donned, but I immediately felt that obscuring the face pushed the painting in a much more emotional and meaningful direction (Fig. 22). Following that, the new issue became the hand holding the rooster, which felt too posed and clumsy. I added a second hand at some point to balance out the composition (Fig. 23) but eventually had to make the difficult decision to completely remove the rooster and allow the haunting portrait to be the sole focus. *Between* started off as a rather stagnate and contrived composition of me and a rooster, however removing the animal and leaving a lone woman with half a face created a much more ambiguous, raw, and emotional image. *Between* exemplifies how my

not sure if this decision came out of frustration or a subconscious desire to recreate the chalky white masks that many of my previous painting subjects had donned, but I immediately felt that obscuring the face pushed the painting in a much more emotional and meaningful direction (Fig. 22). Following that, the new issue became the hand holding the rooster, which felt too posed and clumsy. I added a



Fig. 23. Emma Yervandyan, *Between (progress)*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 28'' x 24''.

painting process is reliant on intuition and constant problem solving. It is an incredibly



Fig. 24. Emma Yervandyan, *Fragment*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 30" x 24".

with a couple of chickens surrounding her (Fig. 25).

The dress worn by the subject in this composition was the same one I wore in the painting *Babydoll* (Fig. 26). Thus, *Fragment* was initially meant to be a sort of pendant to *Babydoll*, a painting that explored the theme of growing up and my fears surrounding it. The absence of the figure's head in

frustrating and exhausting way of working, but I have begrudgingly accepted that this constant evolution almost always results in a much more layered, engaging, and impactful painting.

A more recent example of my art process is *Fragment* (Fig. 24), a painting that transformed significantly multiple times since its conception. The first composition for *Fragment* featured a seated, headless figure (representing me)



Fig. 25. Emma Yervandyan, *Fragment*, 2022, Digital concept sketch.



Fig. 26. Emma Yervandyan, *Babydoll*, 2021, Oil on canvas, 40” x 30”.

became disenchanted with the composition when I started to paint. After one unsuccessful and exhausting painting session, I threw the piece out. Despite my frustration, I was still convinced that the “headless” idea was worth pursuing, thus I created a brand-new composition to explore the concept. I switched to a narrower canvas and placed a figure, who was intentionally elongated to the point where her head was cropped out of the frame, in the center (Fig. 27). The chickens

Fragment alluded to the feelings of aimlessness and indecision that have plagued me all year, while the chickens were an homage to my earliest childhood memory of seeing a decapitated chicken running around on my grandfather’s farm. In a way, I was comparing myself to that headless chicken, blindly running around. Although I was excited by the concept, I



Fig. 27. Emma Yervandyan, *Fragment (progress)*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 30” x 24”.

were replaced with closed doors to allude to the notion of indecision by suggesting that the subject is unable to open and walk through any doors, i.e., pathways in life. I also included two of my favorite visual motifs, the bright red shoes and checker pattern. As I worked on this new version, I found myself dissatisfied with the composition, which felt stagnant, safe, and boring overall. I thought of how I could further emphasize the idea of being pathless and lost and of how to make the painting more visually engaging, which for me usually involves adding dark or brutal elements. I ended up removing the figure's arms, which is in part a tribute to the armless female figures seen in paintings and statues throughout art history.



Fig. 28. Emma Yervandyan, *Fragment (progress)*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 30" x 24".

With no arms, the subject's dilemma of opening doors is now moot (Fig. 28). I skewed the doors the figure stands in between to be more visually dynamic. Although I felt strongly that removing the arms was the right decision, I was still displeased with the overall composition as well as the color palette, which was heavy in cool purples and pinks—colors I don't use very often. At that point, *Fragment* did not feel eerie enough for me and the fact that one of the doors looked open was contradictory to the concept behind the painting. Finally, through my mentor's

advice, I decided to emphasize the presence of multiple doors and the subject's inability to

open any of them by placing her in a space akin to a winding, warped hallway, with several closed doors. Partially inspired by colors and visuals from the horror film *The Shining* (1980), I contrasted lurid greens with the bright red of the checker pattern on the floor to create a jarring color palette. Because the floor was now a bright red, I decided to remove the subject's red shoes. This way, the black and white striped stockings stand out against the red of the floor, and the subject feels more vulnerable. Although it had to be restarted and reworked several times, I strongly feel that this final composition best highlights the notion of being lost and indecisive, while establishing the uneasy atmosphere that I try to create in almost of all my work.

CONCLUSION

My decision to pursue an MFA degree was almost entirely impulsive. The two years after my graduation from USC were creatively desolate, and I had no plans of pursuing fine art in any professional sense. Then the pandemic hit. With nothing better to do, I fell back into painting and with the world in freefall, made the rash decision to apply to graduate school. I had no real end goal for my MFA degree, and in all honesty, I still don't. The business world of galleries still perplexes me, and I've never felt the call for teaching as many MFA graduates seem to or are expected to. A degree is logically seen as a means to an end, however what I've gained from this experience goes beyond career paths. Carl Jung states, "Every human life contains a potential, if that potential is not fulfilled, then that life was wasted" (Hearon). I knew that the figurative work and illustrations that I started in undergrad had the potential to be so much stronger, both technically and thematically—a potential that I did not capitalize on after graduating. Pursuing an MFA gave me the license and environment to fully explore this potential. I've been able to experiment with materials,

painting styles, fuse illustration and fine art, and overall become a better and more confident artist and storyteller with a newfound ability to express and unpack my innermost feelings in ambiguous, dark, and sometimes even humorous ways.

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APPENDIX



Plate 1. Emma Yervandyan, *Hush*, 2021, Oil on canvas, 28 in. x 24 in.



Plate 2. Emma Yervandyan, *Roses in February*, 2021, Oil on canvas, 28 in. x 24 in.



Plate 3. Emma Yervandyan, *Smoke Break*, 2021, Oil on canvas, 28 in. x 24 in.



Plate 4. Emma Yervandyan, *Daughter*, 2021, Oil on canvas, 40 in. x 30 in.



Plate 5. Emma Yervandyan, *Babydoll*, 2021, Oil on canvas, 40 in. x 30 in.



Plate 6. Emma Yervandyan, *The Dream*, 2021, Oil on canvas, 30 in. x 30 in.



Plate 7. Emma Yervandyan, *Skin*, 2021, Oil on canvas, 40 in. x 30 in.



Plate 8. Emma Yervandyan, *Mother*, 2021, Oil on canvas, 40 in. x 28 in.

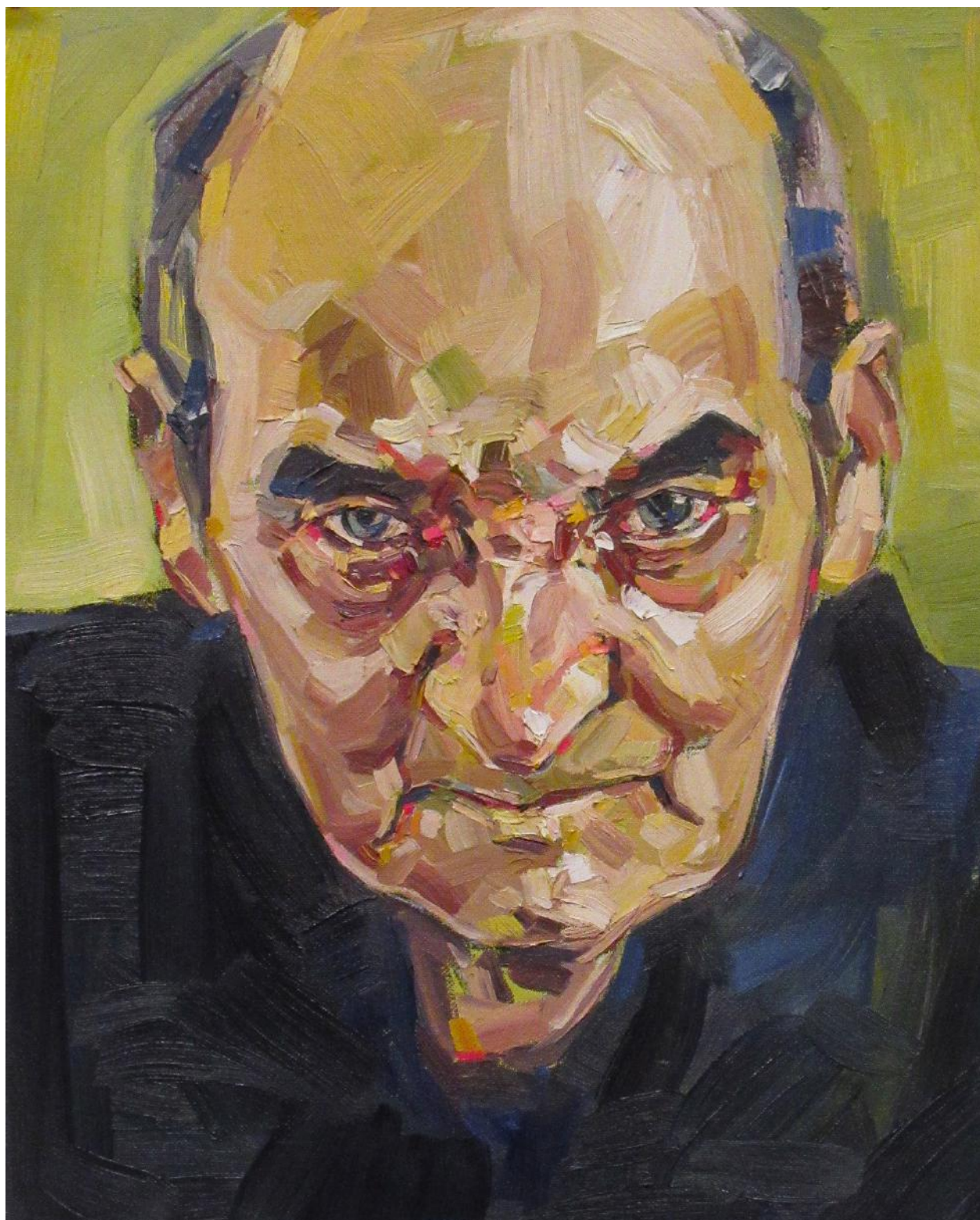


Plate 9. Emma Yervandyan, *Vanik Pt. 1*, 2021, Oil on canvas, 15 in. x 12 in.

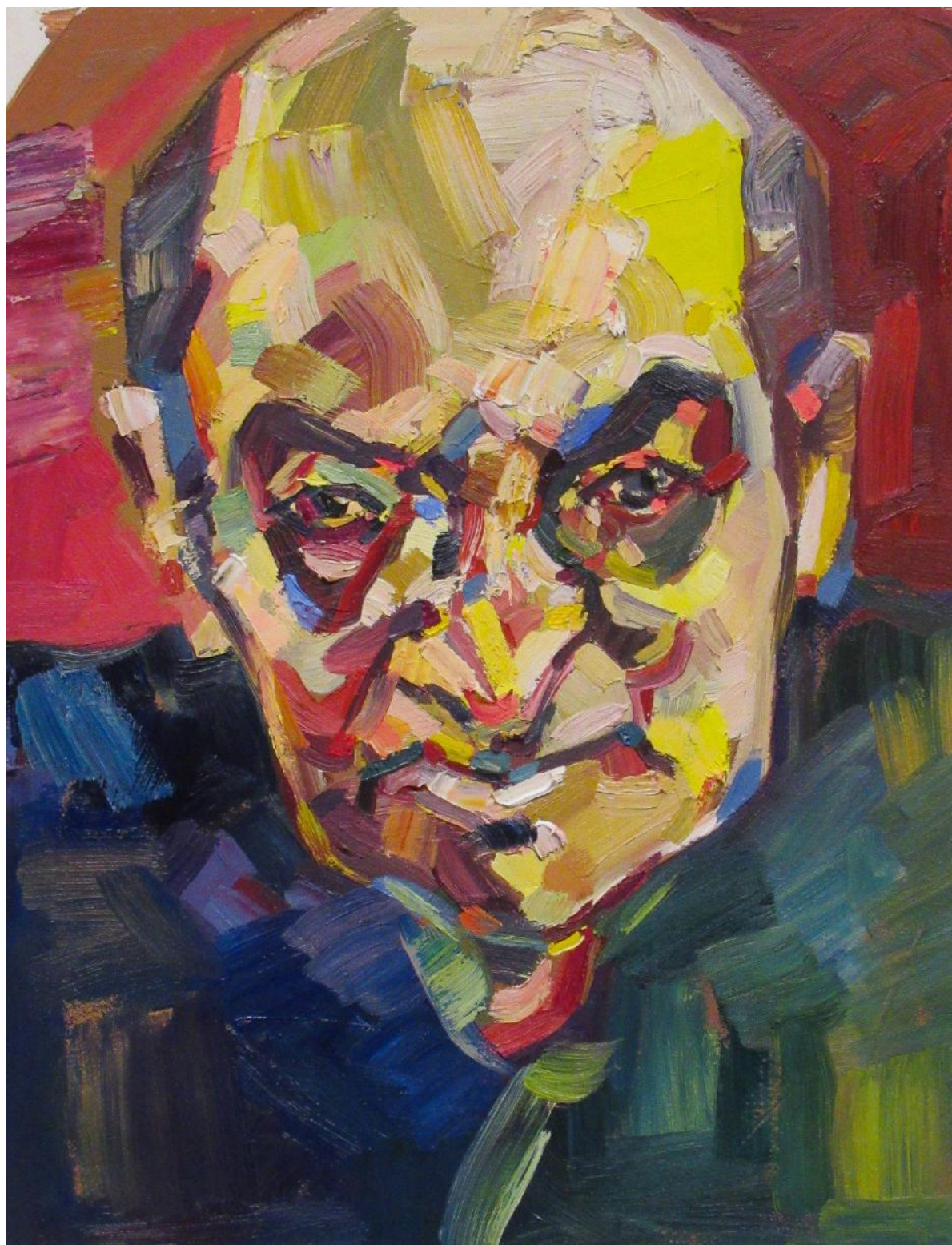


Plate 10. Emma Yervandyan, *Vanik Pt. 2*, 2021, Oil on oil paper, 15 in. x 12 in.



Plate 11. Emma Yervandyan, *Vanik Pt. 3*, 2021, Oil on canvas, 15 in. x 12 in.

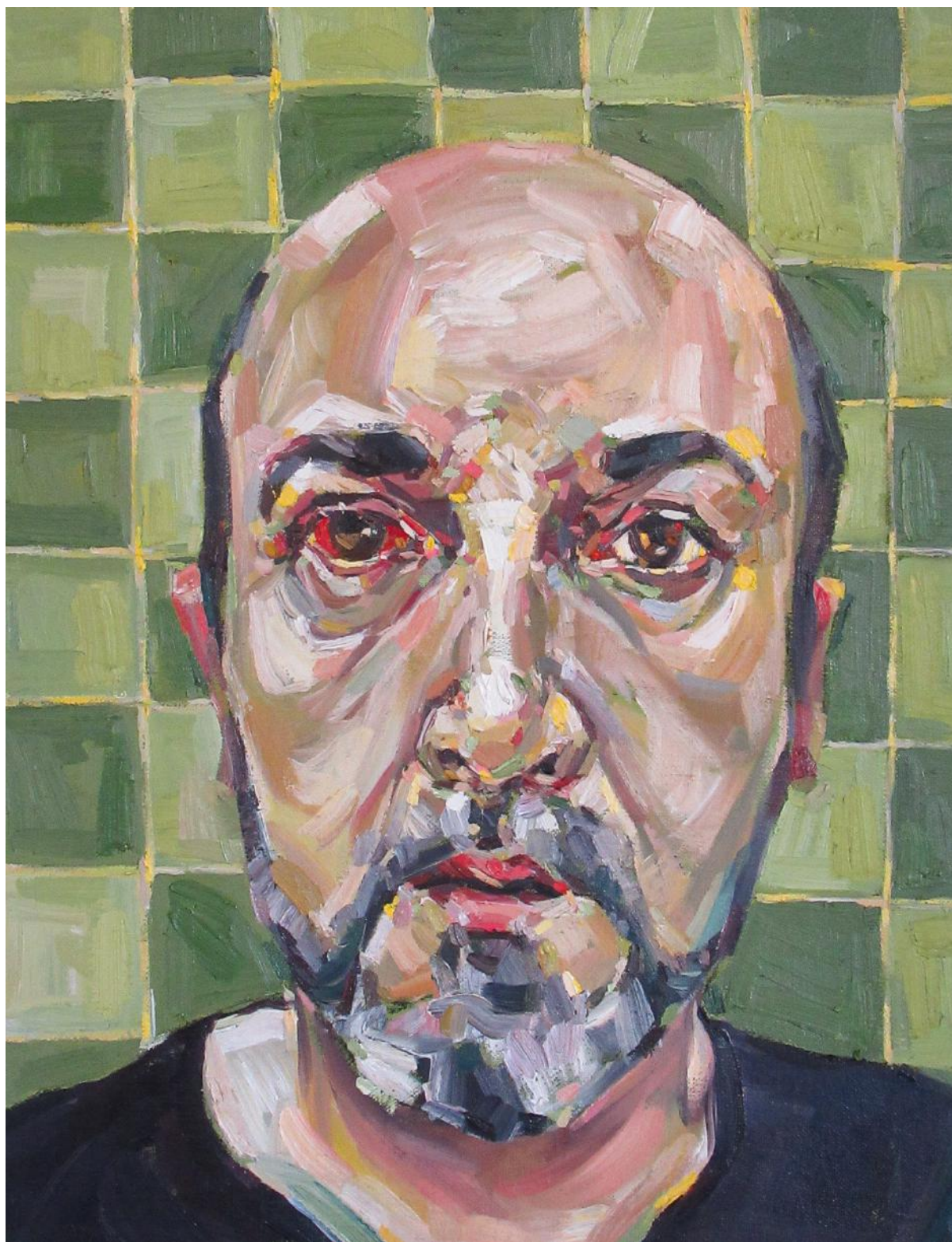


Plate 12. Emma Yervandyan, *Grandmaster*, 2021, Oil on panel, 24 in. x 18 in.

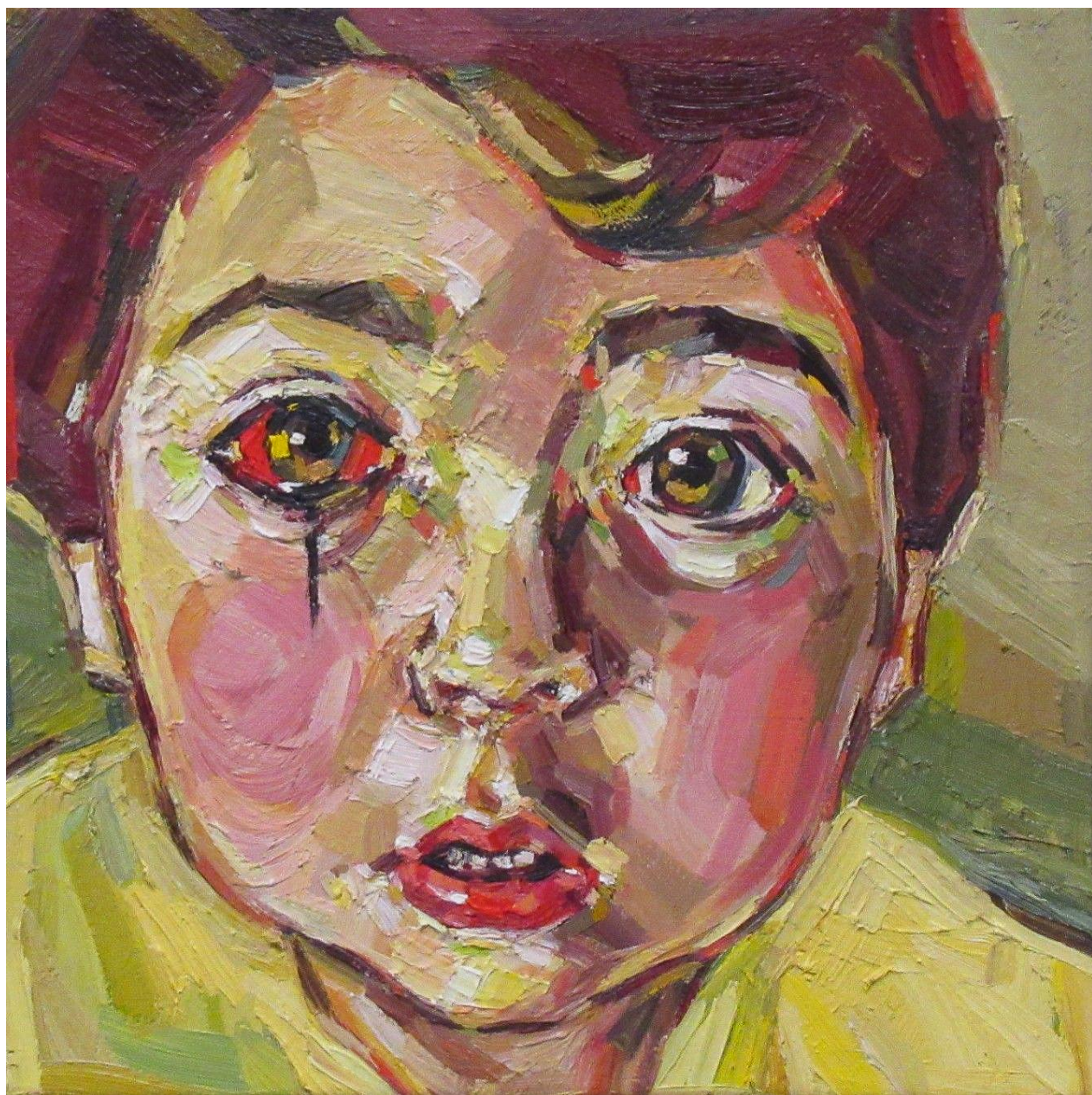


Plate 13. Emma Yervandyan, *Don't Wake Up*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 12 in. x 12 in.



Plate 14. Emma Yervandyan, *Lilies*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 30 in. x 30 in.



Plate 15. Emma Yervandyan, *Dancer*, 2022, Oil on panel, 24 in. x 18 in.



Plate 16. Emma Yervandyan, *Breakfast*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 30 in. x 30 in.



Plate 17. Emma Yervandyan, *Between*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 28 in. x 24 in.

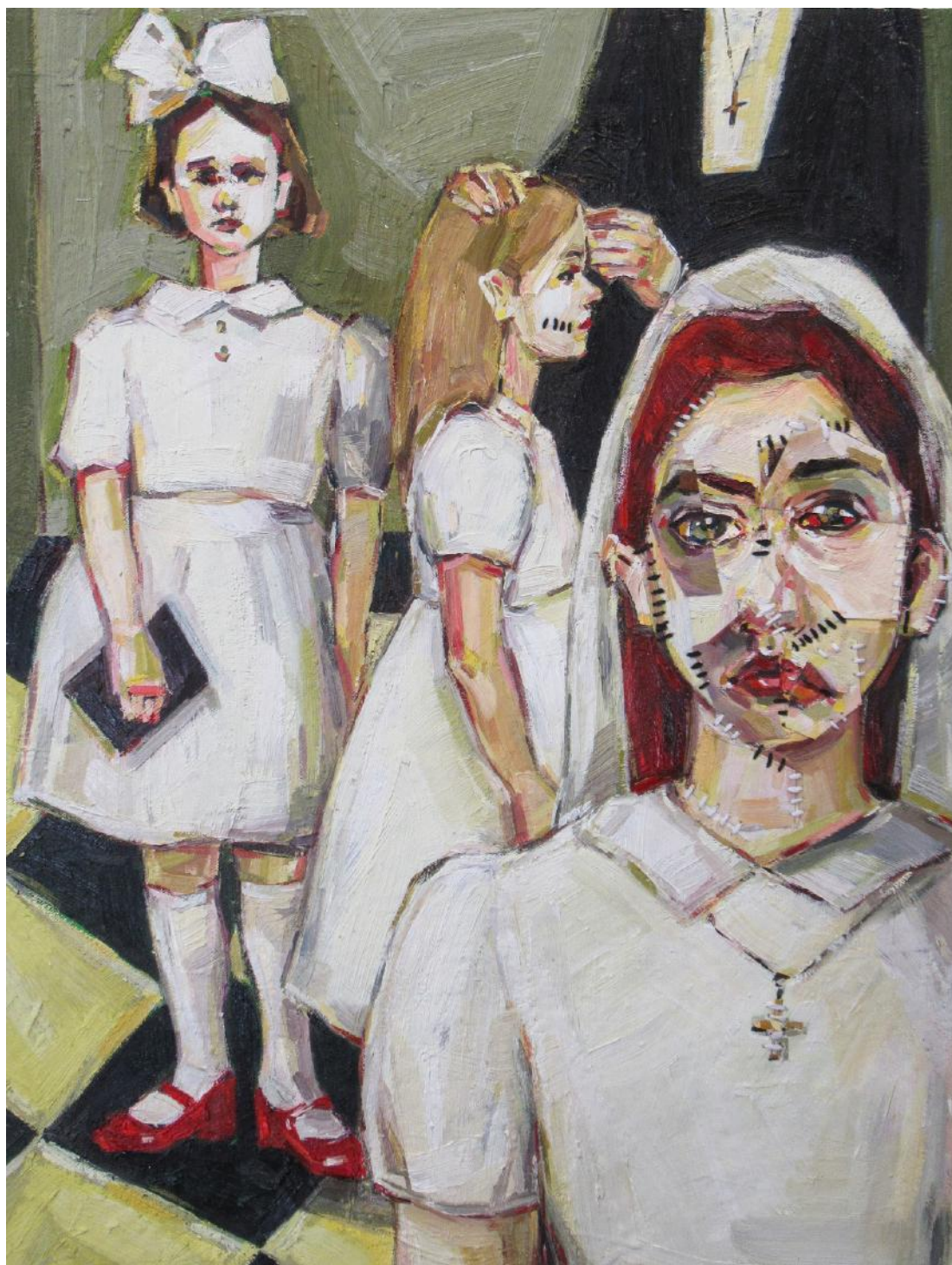


Plate 18. Emma Yervandyan, *Chimera*, 2022, Oil and embroidery on panel, 22 in. x 18 in.



Plate 19. Emma Yervandyan, *1970, 2022*, Oil on canvas, 40 in. x 30 in.



Plate 20. Emma Yervandyan, *The Artist and her Mother*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 48 in.

x 36 in.



Plate 21. Emma Yervandyan, *Together*, 2022, Oil and embroidery on canvas, 12 in. x 12 in.



Plate 22. Emma Yervandyan, *Welcome to the Dollhouse (Cover Page)*, 2022, Oil and embroidery on canvas, 18 in. x 18 in.



Plate 23. Emma Yervandyan, *Welcome to the Dollhouse (Page 1)*, 2022, Oil and embroidery on canvas, 18 in. x 18 in.



Plate 24. Emma Yervandyan, *Welcome to the Dollhouse (Page 2)*, 2022, Oil and embroidery on canvas, 18 in. x 18 in.



Plate 25. Emma Yervandyan, *Welcome to the Dollhouse (Page 3)*, 2022, Oil and embroidery on canvas, 18 in. x 18 in.



Plate 26. Emma Yervandyan, *Welcome to the Dollhouse (Page 4)*, 2022, Oil and embroidery on canvas, 18 in. x 18 in.



Plate 27. Emma Yervandyan, *Welcome to the Dollhouse (Page 5)*, 2022, Oil and embroidery on canvas, 18 in. x 18 in.



Plate 28. Emma Yervandyan, *Welcome to the Dollhouse (Page 6)*, 2022, Oil and embroidery on canvas, 18 in. x 18 in.



Plate 29. Emma Yervandyan, *Welcome to the Dollhouse (Page 7)*, 2022, Oil and embroidery on canvas, 18 in. x 18 in.



Plate 30. Emma Yervandyan, *Ophelia*, 2022, Oil and embroidery on canvas, 20 in. x 18 in.



Plate 31. Emma Yervandyan, *The Red Parade*, 2022, Oil and embroidery on canvas, 20 in. x 20 in.



Plate 32. Emma Yervandyan, *Make a Wish*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 28 in. x 24 in.



Plate 33. Emma Yervandyan, *Fragment*, 2022, Oil and embroidery on canvas, 30 in. x 24 in.



Plate 34. Emma Yervandyan, *The Puppet*, 2022, Oil on canvas, 24 in. x 28 in.



Plate 35. Emma Yervandyan, *Unravel*, 2023, Oil and embroidery on canvas, 35 in. x 20 in.



Plate 36. Emma Yervandyan, *Playing with Scissors*, 2023, Oil and embroidery on oil paper, 14 in. x 11 in.

ARTIST'S NOTE

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