If I Could Have Opened My Heart

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IF I COULD HAVE OPENED MY HEART

by

ALLA PARSONS

(Under the Direction of Bruce Little)

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the paintings included in my MFA thesis exhibition. The body of work presented in my thesis show is figurative and imaginative. I place figures in an imaginary landscape or interior to explore my physical, psychological and spiritual self as well as my memories, family history and my Russian heritage.

I discuss several aspects of my work in this thesis. In Chapter One I discuss the autobiographical origins of my artwork, its philosophical foundations, and the creative process I developed during my graduate studies. Chapter Two explores artistic influences on my work and historical context in which my work developed. I discuss works by such artists as Silvia Sleigh, Sherry Short, Katherine Ace, Odd Nerdrum, Susan Hauptman, Andrew Wyeth, Michelangelo, Van Eyck and Hans Holbein. Chapter Three focuses on individual artworks presented in the thesis exhibition, their subject and content. Chapter Three also examines my artistic process which varies from more loose and intuitive use of color and brushstrokes to a more deliberate, indirect process of painting influenced by Old Masters.

INDEX WORDS: MFA, Thesis, College of Graduate Studies, Georgia Southern University, Betty Foy Sanders Department of Art, Painting, Memories, Old masters, Odd Nerdrum, Katherine Ace, Magic realism, Surrealism, Figurative humanism
IF I COULD HAVE OPENED MY HEART

by

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A treasure lies in my soul,
And the key belongs to me alone

A. Blok

CHAPTER 1

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to provide a critical analysis of my paintings included in the MFA thesis exhibition. The thesis will discuss the autobiographical origins of my artwork, its content and subject, philosophical foundations, artistic influences and the creative process I developed during my graduate studies. In writing this thesis, I have come to a better understanding of who I am as an artist.

Statement of Artistic Problem

The body of work presented in my thesis show is figurative and imaginative. I use figures in imaginary landscapes or interiors to explore human emotions and my memories. I use life models as well as photos of myself and old family photos for reference. My paintings explore my physical, psychological and spiritual self as well as my memories, family history and my Russian heritage. The title of the thesis originates from the title of one of my paintings, If I Could Have Opened My Heart. For me the expression "Open Your Heart" means to share your emotions, feelings, life memories and meanings with other people. Like many other artists, I wish to share my inner world with the viewers of my art. The term "inner world" can also have many meanings. For some it means psychoanalytical review of the artwork. Surrealists took this path as they
sought to express the meaning of their dreams and hallucinations in their work. While I am influenced to some extent by their approach, this is not the path I am following.

My approach to art is closer to that expressed by John Dewey in his book, *Art as Experience*. Dewey suggests that what we learn from art depends on our aims, situations, and purposes. Art takes its meaning from our lived experiences. Like science, art can be a source of knowledge. Art becomes my way of exploring and making meaning of a life that has been lived across three continents, three nations, three citizenships, and has years to go before the adventure is complete.

For centuries artists have struggled with expressing their emotions through art. The process of communicating emotions through art is not direct. The more one is removed from the artist as a living person, the more difficult it becomes to grasp fully what the artist strives to communicate. We often begin to interpret art based on our knowledge of the artist's life. Even when one does not know the artist, the artwork evokes emotions. The observer will respond to the art based on their own life experiences. Long after the artist opened her heart, we continue to use the artistic creation "to perceive, manipulate, or otherwise grapple with reality". In my work I seek to share my own life's meaning while giving the viewer a starting point for their own exploration. The meanings I create out of my life, through my art, may not reach the viewer in the same form I intended. People might add meanings and experiences from their own lives to interpret my work.

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2 Ibid.
Making this series of work for my thesis provided me with a platform for revisiting my life experiences and memories that span continents, nations and citizenships. In these works I am making my memories visually concrete, storing them and then recombining them to attain new self-understanding. My artwork does not always tell specific stories from my life and I am not always the main character of my own narratives. Nevertheless, my artwork can be called autobiographical because it helps explain who I am, what I have experienced, who I might become.

**Autobiographical Origins of the Artwork**

I grew up surrounded by surrealism or complete confusion. I was born in the middle of dualities, including a geographic duality. The city where I was born is located in the Ural Mountains, which are on the border of Europe and Asia, in the middle of a complex ethnic mix of Russians, Jews, Tatars, Kazakhs, Mordvins and many other nationalities. My family and I frequently crossed the Europe-Asia border when we went to visit my grandmother. I did not think about it during those days but, technically, I was born in Asia. My father was Jewish and my mother Russian. Neither of them was religious. Their parents had been forced to forget their religions. There was only one religion in Russia at that time - Communism.

Atheism was the official paradigm. Some people I knew as a young girl attended church, but the church reported to the KGB, the Soviet Secret Police. Becoming a member of the Young Pioneers and then Komsomol, obligatory political youth organizations, at first was inspiring, but I soon discovered that the main purpose of
being a political leader was to be closer to the distribution of goods, which were not available to "commoners". The disingenuity and hypocrisy of Soviet society made me sad and angry.

Amy Bryzgel, a specialist in Russian and Eastern European art, suggests that "for artists living in the former Soviet Union, daily life itself was often surreal. Although state propaganda proclaimed that the nation's citizenry was living in a socialist utopia, the facts of everyday existence belied that assertion: store shelves were empty, basic necessities were unavailable and luxury goods virtually nonexistent, and one often had to queue for hours to make simple purchases". The situation described by Bryzgel is consistent with my own experience and might well explain my later interest in Surrealism, which will be discussed in more depth in Chapter II.

My family history was also surreal and full of "black holes". My mother's parents were afraid to tell their children their own family history. Some members of the family were in prison camps and the parents feared for their children's lives. They hid facts about the family from the children as a way of protecting them. That is how my mother's family came to live in the middle of the Ural Mountains, between Europe and Asia, a relatively safe place where Stalin's repressions were not so severe. My father's family was Jewish, which I only found out when I was ten years old. During the 1970s and 1980s, it was politically beneficial to be of Russian nationality. When my brother turned sixteen it was time for him to obtain his passport. The family council gathered in the

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kitchen discussing which ethnicity would be better to put on his new passport. The
answer was not too hard to predict.

I always wanted to be an artist. My grandmother gave me a book from which I
taught myself to draw. Then at the age of thirteen I enrolled myself in a four year
course of study at an Art School which held classes after the regular secondary school
day ended. This was a great system of Art Schools and Music Schools that still exists
in Russia. After the end of my regular classes I would run to my second school every
day to study art history, painting, drawing, sculpture and composition. I was absolutely
unaware that in the rest of the world Abstract Expressionism was the mainstream. In my
world the mainstream was Rembrandt, Raphael and Leonardo da Vinci, all the "Old
Masters" and some contemporary "masters", like the social realists. I can say that I had
a classical training in art. Although the "Old Masters" were considered to be "gods of
the past", the present day "masters" had to create in the style of "social realism" to be
approved by the ruling Communist Party. In addition, I observed that all “great artists” of
both present and the past were men, especially those who chose to join the Communist
Party. I heard negative remarks about "women's art" which was often considered
unimportant and limited to flowers and such. Someone said to me that "there had never
been any great women artists". At first I tried to argue but I had no facts to prove the
opposite. During the 1970s in Russia no one knew about Artemisia Gentileschi,
Georgia O'Keefe, or Lee Miller. At the same time in the United States Linda Nochlin's
1971 article, "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" was published. It is
ironic that the same words that empowered women artists in the United States made
me give up my dream of becoming an artist in the USSR.
Drawing always remained my way to express my emotions and feelings. I drew to express myself and it made my life more bearable. But I gave up on the idea of becoming an artist because I did not want to be a mediocre artist. Mediocrity as an artist seemed to be predetermined just by the fact that I was a female. I became what I later learned was a "shadow artist".

I learned the term "shadow artist" much later, while living in the US and reading Julia Cameron's book, *The Artist's Way*. "Shadow Artist", according to Cameron, is a person whose "inner artist" or "artist within" was suppressed for a number of reasons. Such people do not believe they can be "real artists". They love art, try to be around artists, sometimes they become models, muses, or supporters of artists. Sometimes they marry artists.\(^4\) Cameron did not go so far in her book as to state that being a "shadow artist" is much more typical for women than for men, but that seems to be the case.

**Music**

Music always played a major role in my life and I believe there is an intrinsic relationship between music and my art. Music is always playing when I am painting in my studio. Some of my artwork reflects some specific musical pieces, which I will discuss in Chapter III. My mother was a talented pianist. She did not go to college to study music because it involved moving to a different city at a young age and her mother, my grandmother, would not allow that. My mother cried for three days but her

mother would not agree. I believe my mother was born to become a musician. Instead she became an engineer and had a boring job. Suppressing her career she cared for her husband, my father, first helping him earn an engineering degree, then a PhD, and finally moving far from her family and friends to support him in getting a better job. He was very unappreciative of her and was unfaithful to her. She earned her PhD much later in life after she was divorced.

My mother always expressed her emotions through music. As a child listening to her playing piano, I could feel her pain, drama and anger. To this day I cannot listen to some of Beethoven's music that my mother often played; it just makes me too sad. She played some beautiful music that was not so dramatic, like Debussy or Rachmaninov. Now, when I listen to this type music, beautiful memories come back to me and I can see beautiful images in my mind, like sunsets over the far seas, and landscapes shrouded in a mystical fog. These mental images were very likely inspired by the small prints hanging in our home when I was a child. They reappear now in some of my paintings.

My own training in music was neither long nor successful, I played violin, piano, and now I play guitar from time to time. I play and sing with my daughter, Maria, who I named after my grandmother. We live far apart, so the times we can get together and sing are precious. I have tried to pass on to her my favorite music like Russian folk songs and music by Russian Bards. In medieval Gaelic and British culture a bard was a professional poet, paid by the monarch to praise the sovereign's activities. However a bard in the former USSR was an unpaid poet, often an underground poet, playing music that was far from praising the Communist Party. Although only a few songs by bards
were openly critical of existing society and politics, even quite innocent songs were not well accepted by the officials. I grew up discovering these songs, finding myself increasingly opposed to the ruling regime. It seems strange now, but the Soviet Government was against anything that had slight half-notes, any deviations from mainstream propaganda, even harmless songs like those by Evgeny Bachurin, my favorite bard and personal friend. He wrote:

"Алеют птицы на заре
И нет к прошедшему возврата
И утром верится всегда,
Что не сбылось вчера должно случиться завтра...

"Birds are scarlet in the sky,
There is no return to the past
And in the morning we always hope,
That something will happen tomorrow, that did not happen yesterday."5

When I translate these words into English they seem to lose their meaning. They are full of meaning for me, but their meaning is significant for much more than the words of the song. Even for Russian speakers the song would have different meanings. For Soviet officials the song was a threat, a disapproval of the existing regime. It would have a completely different meaning for young people today, including my daughter. For me, it is not the political meaning of the song that matters, but rather the whole array of memories and feelings that I had while growing up; first listening to such songs, make them important to me. It is not enough to be a Russian speaker to understand what these songs mean. One has to be a Russian speaker, who grew up in the 60s and 70s in the USSR, in a big city, in a rich cultural environment. The audience for these songs is small. My other favorite Russian bards include Zemphira, Boris

Grebenshikov, and Bulat Okudzhava, who were and still are much more popular in Russia today. I often listen to their songs while I am painting. The effect this music creates on me is unique to me. This music is something I cannot share with my American artist friends because it will mean something completely different to them and quite possibly they would not like or understand it.

Music is very much connected with painting for me probably because in Russian culture all the arts are interconnected. If one wishes to be a cultured person, one is expected to go to the museums, as well as to the concert halls and theatres. One is expected to know the "Old Masters" as well as the regarded contemporary artists, theatre actors and ballet dancers. Kandinsky in his book, Concerning the Spiritual in Art, makes this connection very clear when he compares music with painting. Kandinsky writes about different types of art freely comparing them one with another. Matisse (painting) and Debussy (music), Maeterlinck (poetry) with Wagner (music), Schonberg (music) and Impressionists (painting), and so on. Kandinsky believed that various expressions of arts are drawn together as a result of them striving towards the abstract. Music, according to Kandinsky is the art that has been devoted to the "expression of the artist's soul in musical sound":

A painter, who finds no satisfaction in mere representation, however artistic, in his longing to express his inner life, cannot but envy the ease with which music, the most non-material of the arts today, achieves this end. She naturally seeks to apply the methods of music to her own art. And from this results that modern desire for rhythm in painting, for mathematical, abstract construction, for repeated notes of colour, for setting colour in motion.  

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6 W. Kandinsky, Concerning the Spiritual in Art. (NY, 1977), 14-18.
7 Ibid. 19.
As a young person living in Russia it was natural for me to think of all the arts being unified in what Kandinsky called "a spiritual pyramid." This explains why I do not think of visual art, such as painting, being separate from music. On the other hand, music serves to me as a powerful source of connection with memories of my family, my past and my childhood.

My childhood and early youth development were the times when my artistic aesthetic strongly established its roots and basic structure. My early artistic tastes were influenced by my appreciation of classical art and the rejection of social realism as an art style imposed on artists by the ruling regime in the USSR. I saw art as my way of living and as a way to express emotions, inseparable from music. Later my interests in art expanded to Surrealism, which as noted earlier was very much predetermined by surreal qualities of one's life in the USSR. Chapter Two will explore in more depth how my interests expanded to Expressionism, Symbolism and how I discovered works by female surrealists.

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8 Ibid. 20.
Chapter 2

Historical Review of the Artistic Problem

In this Chapter, I will discuss how the natural environment of my formative years in the Soviet Union and then Russia influenced my interest in Expressionism, Symbolism, Surrealism (especially works by female surrealist artists), and Magic Realism. I will discuss my interest in the question of Kitsch, posed by the contemporary artist, Odd Nerdrum, who has influenced my thinking about art. These influences will serve also to contextualize the works of my thesis.

Expressionism

As a young girl in the USSR, I often wandered in the large galleries of the Hermitage. I admired Renaissance and Baroque paintings, but my favorite artist was Vincent Van Gogh with his explosion of emotions. I read and was deeply affected by Irving Stone’s book, Lust for Life. I was fascinated by Van Gogh's devotion to art and to what he believed was true. There were several drawings and paintings by Van Gogh in the Hermitage and I also had several books with reproductions. I was fascinated with the way he drew trees and people. In his art, trees were like living creatures trying to reach the sun with their crooked, gnarly branches. His people were like trees, deeply rooted into the earth. Van Gogh believed in the connection between the people and the land where they lived. When I read about the many disappointments in Van Gogh's life, I began to see the raw emotional pain he had shown in his art. That is when I started to believe that art's main purpose is to show human emotions. This also made me think that learning more about an artist's life allows one to see more in his or her art and
understand it better. Another attractive aspect of Van Gogh's work was that it was far removed from the works by the social realists who were identified for me with the oppressive ruling regime.

**Symbolism**

Symbolism was another art style attractive to me from an early age. This was an influence that came from my mother. In Russia many symbolist artists were members of "Mir Iskusstva" (World of Art), an artistic group founded in 1898 by such artists as Konstantin Somov, Alexander Benois, Léon Bakst, Rerih, Petrov-Vodkin, Zinaida Serebryakova and others. The group was founded in opposition to the anti-aesthetic nature of modern industrial society and Positivism in art. "Miriskussniki" were not well accepted by the government during the Soviet period but were not prohibited. My mother loved "Mir Iskusstva" art and as I remember we had an album with the works of Konstantin Somov in our house. When I was five years old, I learned how to draw a human face by looking at Somov's work, *Lady in Blue* (Fig.1). That was my introduction to Symbolism. At that time I did not understand what attracted me to Somov's art and art by other Russian symbolists such as Vrubel, Kozma Petrov-Vodkin, Pavel Filonov, Mikolajus Ciurlionis, and Zinaida Serebryakova, or to European symbolists such as Puvis de Chavannes,

*Figure 1. Konstantin Somov. Lady in Blue. 1897-1900. oil on canvas. 103x103 cm*
Gustave Moreau, Odilon Redon, and Gustav Klimt. Perhaps it was that symbolist artists "strove to represent something other than self-evident physical reality."\(^9\)

It was probably from my interest in Symbolist figurative painting that I became interested in representing the human figure. It was not a pure academic approach to the figure that interested me but rather the figure as a representation of emotions and of the inner, emotional world of a person. Stories about people's lives always fascinated me. The portrait likeness for me was less important than the likeness of the inner world, of the soul of a person. I was not familiar with the Polish symbolist artist, Przybyszewski, until I took an Art History class on Symbolism in 2007. Then I read his expression of something that was always in my own mind: "Art is a reflection of the absolute, and it is artist's duty to reveal the "naked soul" (naga dusza) and to give utterance to the "cry" of the individual".\(^10\)

**My interest in works by female artists**

I always believed that to reveal the "naked soul" an artist needs to master drawing skills first. I have been interested in the human figure as a representation of the emotions and inner world of a person for a long time. But I believed that before I could express an inner world, I should learn to render the figure realistically and be in control of drawing a verisimilitude. Studying the figure was important to me as a way to portray that "inner likeness".

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10 Ibid. 159.
I have been involved in Life Drawing studies since 2005 - 2007 when I lived in Minnesota. In addition to the academic Life Drawing classes I took at the university, I also was a coordinator for a Life Drawing Co-op. When I moved to South Carolina in 2008 I became a member of a Hilton Head artists group that met to draw live models each Monday and a member of an artists’ group in Savannah that did the same on Wednesdays. In 2009 my MFA program schedule became so intense that I could not attend the figure drawing groups. That is when I started a Life Drawing Co-op at Georgia Southern University. It was necessary for my own artistic development to continue drawing the human body from observation. I believe it is an important technical skill for the figurative artist I was striving to be.

In Minnesota, Professor Sherry Short, my academic advisor, a figurative artist and a feminist, encouraged me to start research on female artists who had used nude male models. I found very few female artists using nude male models. Silvia Sleigh was

Figure 2. Silvia Sleigh. Turkish Bath. 1973. oil on canvas, 76"x100"
one of the few. I was disappointed with the technical side of her work, but she had a
great idea. In her paintings men were laying or sitting in traditional poses that female
models held for male artists. There was something unsettling about that. One of her
paintings, *The Turkish Bath* (Fig.2), is a direct parallel to the famous painting by Ingres
(Fig.3) but with the reversal of the roles of men and women.

![Image](image_url)

*Figure 3. Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres. Turkish Bath. 1862.*

*oil on canvas. 108 cm diam.*

In 2007 I wrote a paper titled: "Why there are so few female artists painting the
male figure". At that time I considered concentrating my own art on representing the
nude male figure. But the more I learned about female artists the more interested I
became in how many of them were exploring their own bodies. Eventually, I turned to
consciously exploring my own body in my art as well, through photographs of myself or
imaginary figures. One of my favorite female artists, Katherine Ace, once said that as a
woman she should be careful about what she chooses to paint. She said: "painting
flowers is politically dangerous for a female artist, playing right into cultural stereotypes."
It sets you up to be dismissed”. But she painted flowers anyway, as well as other subjects, as I will discuss later in this chapter. I believe self-representation, like painting flowers, risks being stereotyped as "feminine." I do it because it places me within the mainstream of contemporary female artists who took themselves as subjects. Most of the work included in my thesis show is based on some form of self-representation. My works titled: Caged (Fig.15), In a Room With Memories (Fig.21), If I Could Have Opened My Heart (Fig.22), Healing (Fig.23) and Self-Portrait in the Red Turban (Fig.24) are self-portraits. In Kristina's World (Fig.15) there are imaginary figures of a man and a woman. To paint them I posed for both figures, photographed myself and used my representation as a reference for both figures. In There Was a Boy (Fig.11), Man Peeling Potato (Fig.12), Nightmares (Fig.13) I did not use myself, but life models, although I identified myself with the models and their feelings. In Nightmares it is a female model whose pose reminded me of some sleepless nights I have had. In Man Peeling Potato, and There Was a Boy I was identifying with the feeling of loneliness, which the figures expressed. It was a feeling which was difficult to express in words. A solitude that one actually needs and enjoys, but which makes one sad. In these paintings self-representation was symbolic and the models became symbols for my own feelings.

**Surrealism and Magic Realism**

As I explained earlier, my surreal life in the Soviet Union predetermined my interest in surrealism. I knew some surrealist artists such as Dali and Magritte. But only when I came to the USA did I learn about surrealist artists, such as Frida Kahlo,

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Dorothea Tanning, Leonora Carrington, and Leonor Fini. I found that I was very attracted to the works of these surrealist female artists. It was their way of representing themselves in their art that attracted me the most. Chadwick argues that "surrealism established new parameters within which women artists might begin to explore the complex and ambiguous relationship between the female body and female identity"...
"They left a collective body of self-portraits and other self-representations... which has no parallels in the works of male surrealists who were more inclined to project their desires outward." The influence of the female surrealist artists probably explains my interest in self-representation.

Works by female surrealist artists display some similar qualities, including, according to Chadwick, "the affinity for the structures of fabulist narrative, and a tendency towards the phantasmic and oneiric." One can see fabulist narrative, as well as phantasmic and oneiric qualities in some of my work where I include imaginary surroundings, landscapes or animals. Other qualities shared by female surrealist artists, according to Chadwick, include embrace of doubling, masking, and masquerade as defenses against fears of non-identity. Chadwick pointed out the following representational strategies that continue to resonate in the works of female surrealists: Self as Other; Self as Body; Self as Masquerade or Absence. Many women adopted practices of "self-othering" - identifying with moments prior to historical time and/or outside the civilized cultural spaces identified with patriarchy. Chadwick sees these categories as broad frames "within which it is possible to enact dialogs between

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13 Ibid. 6.
contemporary women artists and Surrealism.” I see these characteristics in my work as identifying with models or imaginary figures and their feelings or identifying myself with Van Eyck in *Self-Portrait in the Red Turban* (Fig.23).

Although I enjoy works by early women surrealists such as Frida Kahlo, Leonora Carrington, Leonor Fini, and Dorothea Tanning, I was influenced more by contemporary female surrealists. One of them is Sherry Short, my former professor. She was a Figure Drawing Instructor with very high technical skills in rendering the human body. Short is a surrealist artist. In many of her works she is serving as her own model through the use of photographs. Some of the images imply violence, as in *Beautiful Hat* (Fig.4), where we see a knife, hidden in the box. We also see a mouth covered as if she is unable to speak. In other images we see fragmented body parts suggesting violence, which according Chadwick is a

![Figure 4. Sherry Short. Beautiful Hat. 2007. mixed media.](image)

\[^{14}\text{Ibid. 7.}\]
common theme for contemporary surrealist women.\textsuperscript{15} In *Ramifications* (Fig. 5) we see hands separated from the body and living their own life. Short's depiction of a fragmented body fascinated me. Later while visiting museums in Italy in 2007 I saw a painting by Maestro della Madonna Straus, "Christ as the Man of Sorrows with Symbols of the Passion", 1405 in the Florence Accademia in the second floor icon collection. The icon showed many separated hands surrounding Christ, showing different gestures and strangely reminded me of a Short's work and reinforced my idea of placing a disconnected hand in my painting.

*Figure 5. Sherry Short. Ramifications. 2007. mixed media.*

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. 6.
Katherine Ace is another contemporary surrealist artist whose work I found accidentally while browsing artists links on the Internet. I was attracted by her incorporation of bright colors, display of emotion, mysticism and her high technical skills. Ace denied that her art could be defined as surrealism. She wrote in her statement:

"I do not derive my imagery from sleeping dreams but from my eyes, imagination, memory, as well as photography, historical references and chance".\(^{16}\) In spite of that statement I still believe that her art, especially her art of the 1990s, fits perfectly in the framework of surrealism. In her earlier paintings Ace concentrates on exploring universal states of human emotions such as: Life and Death, Dreams and Religion. In her work one finds suggestions of the Virgin Mary, many dolls and both contemporary and antique statues. She often uses birds, fish and flowers in her images. Ace is interested in Rebirth and Transformations. We see people taking off or repairing holes in their own skin. Odd juxtapositions of objects and surroundings are to be found everywhere in her paintings. According to her artist statement, she is

\(^{16}\) K. Ace, Artist Statement, entry posted in 2010: http://www.katherineace.com/?cid=312.
"expressing energy through the coupling of opposites."\textsuperscript{17} I have been indirectly influenced by her work. The juxtaposition of elements was something I had been doing subconsciously. It was learning about the works of surrealisists that I realized what I was doing. While looking at Ace's work and reading her artist statements I started thinking of the reasons I juxtapose diverse elements in my own work and the way in which this makes my work more expressive.

In Ace’s recent work we see strange compilations of cut out pages from art history books. The purpose of these cut out pages is not revealed. In her statement for a 2008 solo exhibition, Ace said that she is trying to represent the chaos of the contemporary world.\textsuperscript{18} The use of traditional techniques such as Trompe l'oeil makes her paintings very effective.

Like Ace I am interested in learning traditional techniques. I attended workshops on traditional ways of painting, using underpainting, glazing and Trompe l'oeil, and I am using elements of Trompe l'oeil in my paintings. For example, in \textit{Healing} (Fig.23) and \textit{In the Room With Memories} (Fig.21) I painted papers spread on the floor using Trompe l'oeil technique, although trying to keep it from being too illusionistic, because I still wanted to show physical characteristics of paint as a medium. I see it as a "contemporary Trompe l'oeil" when you achieve the illusion of reality, but still use some physicality of paint as it was developed by Abstract Expressionists.

Ace also tells us in her statement that although stylistically she incorporates representation, "paradoxically, I approach the canvas abstractly and employ gesture

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} K. Ace, Artist Statement, entry posted in 2008: http://www.katherineace.com/?cid=1032.
founded in Abstract Expressionism. I throw paint at the canvas and sculpt the surface using painting knives, nails, pins, bottle brushes, gold leaf, plastic, anything that is lying around. Into the surface I incorporate paper collage, feathers, beans, tacks, sticks, glass and more."¹⁹ I will discuss later how at the beginning of the process of painting my work too is developed very much as a gestural abstract expressionist painting. I do throw paint on canvas and dance with my brushes, without thinking about what the future image will look like. I see similarity between my work and Ace’s in the way I include some collaged objects in my paintings. I see it as a continuation of my desire for juxtaposing elements, which I see as part of Surrealism’s influence.

I see how some of Ace’s work connect to surrealism. But I also found reference to her work on the website www.tendreams.org devoted to Magic Realism. The term "Magic Realism" was coined by the writer, Franz Roh, in his book written in 1925, Nach-expressionismus (Post-Expressionism). He later used the same term in his book German Art in the 20th Century. He also called this new development in art "The New Objectivity".²⁰ Roh does not use the word "magic" in terms of religious-psychological sense of ethnology. He is referring to works within Post-Expressionistic art in which some mystery or a secret seemed to be hidden within the subject matter. As the opposite to Expressionism, Magic Realism emphasizes the object and the everyday life in new and unfamiliar ways. Juxtapositions of sharply rendered and detailed elements, both in the foreground and back ground, are used to develop an air of mystery or ambiguity. They remind us that there are still many mysteries in life.

Roh uses the following dichotomies to contrast the differences between Expressionism and Magic Realism:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expressionism:</th>
<th>Magic Realism:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ecstatic subjects</td>
<td>Sober objects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rhythmical</td>
<td>Representational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extravagant</td>
<td>Puristically severe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dynamic</td>
<td>Static</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loud</td>
<td>Quiet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close-up view</td>
<td>Close and far view</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monumental</td>
<td>Miniature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thick color texture</td>
<td>Thin paint surface</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rough</td>
<td>Smooth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on the visibility of the painting process</td>
<td>Effacement of the painting process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centrifugal</td>
<td>Centripetal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expressive deformation</td>
<td>External purification of the object(^{21})</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I find more similarities with my artwork among the attributes of Magic Realism than Expressionism. I believe that, during the period of my MFA program, my style developed more towards representational, quiet, static images in painting, turning daily life into eerie form, with the thin paint surface, although I experimented with the opposite qualities. Magic Realism acted as a portal to Surrealism, and many artists shifted back and forth from one to another, especially Magritte.\(^{22}\) My work also shifts back and forth across the boundaries with some of my work more being more Surrealistic while other pieces fit more into the Magic Realism framework. *Caged* (Fig. 15) and *If I Could Have Opened My Heart* (Fig. 22) are my most surrealistic works of those included in the thesis exhibition, while others can be referred to as Magic Realism. I am not alone in crossing these boundaries. Many artists represented on the website *ww.tendreams.org*

\(^{21}\) Ibid. 113.  
\(^{22}\) Ibid. 138.
cross the boundaries between Surrealism, Symbolism and Magic Realism. I found many artists on that website who have influenced me including Andrew Wyeth, George Tooker, and Katherine Ace. I also discovered a number of artists on this website who are represented as Magic Realists, but in fact, in my opinion, they are making Kitsch art.

Kitsch and Odd Nerdrum

The word "Kitsch" has a negative meaning for me. To me Kitsch is a "fake art", a work created with the intention of pleasing a large number of people. There are different views on Kitsch. Clement Greenberg addressed Kitsch in his article "Avant-Garde and Kitsch". Greenberg explained the appearance of Kitsch as "the product of the industrial revolution" when with the urbanization of the masses of Western Europe and America established "what is called universal literacy". Greenberg stated that new urban masses, whose background was in the countryside, were losing their "taste for the folk culture". They placed "pressure on society to provide them with a kind of culture fit for their own consumption". That is how kitsch was born: " a new commodity... designed for those who, insensible for the values of genuine culture, are hungry ... for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide." Greenberg gives us some attributes of Kitsch: mechanical and operates by formulas; vicarious experience and faked sensations. I agree with his analysis, but not with his claim that "all kitsch is academic and... all that's academic is kitsch". Greenberg goes so far as to state that in Soviet Russia kitsch "become the official, dominant and most popular culture". In this light I grew up being conditioned to like Kitsch.

24 Ibid. 5.
In fact, Kitsch is "one of the most bewildering and elusive categories of modern aesthetics"\(^{25}\), says Matei Calinescu, professor of comparative literature at Indiana University, in Bloomington, Indiana. Tomas Kulka, the major specialist in Kitsch art, devoted the whole first chapter of his book *Kitsch and Art*, to the definition of Kitsch. In short, Kitsch "breeds on universal images, the emotional charge of which appeals to everyone."\(^{26}\)

The question of Kitsch has close connection to the name of another artist who has had a significant influence on me. Odd Nerdrum, a contemporary painter from Iceland claims to be a "Kitsch Artist", which from my perspective he is not. In 2007, Nerdrum had a show of his recent works at the Forum Gallery in New York. I traveled to New York to view the show. I studied Nerdrum's technique through these paintings trying to remember as much as I could. To keep learning his technique and philosophy I bought Richard Vine’s book on Nerdrum. From this book I learned that Nerdrum's traditional way of painting was not well accepted in the art world of the 1960s and 70s. He taught himself Renaissance-style composition and painterly technique creating work in the style of "narrative figurative realism" at a time when abstraction and conceptualism were considered not only "advanced" but the only acceptable art forms.\(^{27}\) Nerdrum believes that while modernists long ago "won the battle against classical tradition", they now dominate schools, museums, galleries and publications worldwide, "exact ing adherence to their artistic doctrine with all the fierceness of high priests or commissars." The Salon des Refuses has become, in effect, the new global Academy.


Moreover, these elite few have, to his mind, completely divested art of any connection to the real emotions or everyday people, devoting their work instead to abstraction, victim-group protest, or mockery.\textsuperscript{28} In 1967, Nerdrum’s first solo show in Oslo attracted immediate attention “both for its “retrograde” figuration and for its exceptional painterly quality. He quickly became a controversial celebrity.

Part of his rebellion against the modern art world was to claim he is not an artist, but rather a "kitsch painter". In 1998 on the opening of his exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art in Oslo he delivered a speech "praising kitsch as the antidote to a calcified modernism", and declaring that “as a champion and practitioner of this despised genre – he is not now and had never been, an “artist” in the contemporary sense”. He gave similar speeches in 1999 in Tonsberg Art Museum, again in 2000 at the Tonsberg Art Museum and in 2000 at the House of Culture in Stockholm.\textsuperscript{29} He published his definition on Kitsch in \textit{Art News} in 2000:

\begin{quote}
Kitsch is the opposite of the public space, of the public conversation, of the demand for objectivity and functionality. Kitsch is the intimate space, our selves, our love and our congeniality, our yearnings and our hopes, and our tears, joys and passion. Kitsch comes from the creative person’s private space, and speaks to other private spaces. Kitsch deals therefore with giving intimacy dignity.\textsuperscript{30}

In the 2007 exhibition in New York I saw Nerdrum’s huge paintings revealing deep spaces, with large, very realistically painted human figures floating and glowing in the dark among the stars in mysterious light. He created these mysterious figures floating in space by removing all earthly connections: clothing, gravity, and landscape. His use of Old Master’s technique also creates a feeling of mystery. As in Rembrandt’s paintings the background of his paintings is black or very dark. The figures are painted
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid. 18.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid. 78.
\textsuperscript{30} O. Nerdrum, "Kitsch and Art", \textit{ArtNews}. April 2000. 55.
very three-dimensionally with the use of chiaroscuro. An interesting difference between Nerdrum’s chiaroscuro and Rembrandt’s chiaroscuro is that in Nerdrum’s work we see figures lighted like there are two light sources: one is warm and another is cool. We see one part of the figure lighted with blue light, very monochromatic with blue tones. Another part of the body would be lit with "warm" light, the light seen in Rembrandt’s paintings. In fact, Nerdrum spent much time studying Old Master’s techniques, especially Rembrandt’s. Many similar characteristics can be found in the way Nerdrum applies paint and methods used by the Old Masters. He is exploring different qualities of paint: thick, vivid, spontaneous brushstrokes in the light areas and thin, flat in the dark. It is interesting that in some ways Nerdrum’s use of paint, like Rembrandt’s use of paint, is similar to Abstract Expressionists use of paint. The difference is that Rembrandt and Nerdrum are using what seems to be uncontrollable brushstrokes in a very controlled manner in order to create a high level of verisimilitude and for Abstract Expressionists this was not important. They valued brushstrokes for themselves trying to avoid any subject matter. While developing my technique I had been trying to imitate these brushstrokes while creating texture. I was

*Figure 7. Odd Nerdrum. Drifting. 2001. oil on canvas. 66”x86”*
impressed and influenced by Nerdrum’s way of showing light on the body. I am learning to do the same in my paintings.

Another contemporary artist, Susan Hauptman has influenced my work in terms of self-representation. I would not consider representing myself as nude or opening private parts of my body until I saw works by Hauptman. In her self-portraits she appears naked or semi-naked, surrounded with objects that seem to have some symbolic personal meaning. She is looking directly at the viewer which excludes for the viewer the opportunity of a gaze. One knows that this woman has her purpose and she is looking at you. You do not know what her purpose might mean for you, so you do not find yourself in control. The viewer feels uncomfortable. Hauptman is in control. In *If I Could Have Opened My Heart* (Fig. 21) one can see Hauptman’s influence where I take control of the surreal situation depicted through looking directly at the viewer, as parts of my body are exposed. Another element I find in my work that makes a connection with the works by Hauptman is the juxtaposition of figure and personal symbols and her use of gold leaf and decorative ornamental elements. In my works I use gold leaf and decorative elements found in wooden Russian churches and houses.

*Figure 8. Susan Hauptman. Self-portrait. 2003. graphite and gold leaf on paper. 52”x38”*
As I mentioned earlier, I was influenced by the Old Master’s works. Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* serves as an indirect reference for my painting *If I Could Have Opened My Heart*. *Last Judgment* by Michelangelo is an extremely impressive fresco painting,

![Michelangelo. Last Judgment, detail. 1536-1541. Fresco.](image)

but the most interesting part of it for me is a figure of Saint Bartholomeo, holding his own skin. It was fascinating for me to learn that Michelangelo gave his own face to the flayed skin. This was an indirect influence on me for depicting myself with my own chest open and the skin hanging down.

Another influence on my work is Jan Van Eyck with his extreme interest in details and the quiet, intimate mood of his portraits. His self-portrait *The Man in the Red Turban* serves as a reference for my *Self-Portrait in a Red Turban*, where I see myself as "other", or as Van Eyck, the artist. Self-representation in my self-portrait is closer to those of female surrealists of the 20th century. I represent myself in this painting as a
male. This is my way of reflection on my role as a woman artist in contemporary art world and on the way contemporary art world still treats women artists differently than male.

![Image](image.jpg)

*Figure 10. Van Eyck. The Man in a Red Turban. 1433.*

*oil on canvas. 10"x7.5"

**Russian Icons**

As I stated previously my art has been influenced by my whole experience of living in Russia and seeing art in Russia. While many artists who influenced me belonged to the 19th and 20th centuries, I have also been influenced by Russian icons. I started studying Russian icons as a first year student in Petrozavodsk State University in 1984. My research focused on a group of icons from the 16th century, now in the collection of the Museum Kizhi. While conducting my research I learned about different
characteristics of orthodox icons, their symbolism and their way of representation. The representation in orthodox icons is very symbolic. Everything is flat, because for icon painters it is not important to show the world as it is, but rather it is important to show the inner meaning, the spiritual side of the world. Golden leaf is often used in icons as a symbol of Divine. The application of golden leaf is a complex process resulting in layering the flat surface. The reflective qualities of gold transform the flatness of the background and add both mystery and preciousness to the icon. When the viewer moves, the background changes, thus creating an interaction between the viewer and the artwork.

Figure 11. Boris and Gleb. 15 century. Novgorod Icon.

I had been fascinated by icons since I started studying them. The use of gold leaf in icons seemed to me something mysterious, perhaps, this feeling was enhanced by the religion being excluded from life in the USSR. Because of my personal experience with icons, I felt compelled to use some aspects of icons in my thesis work. When I was in my undergraduate program I already was experimenting with gold leaf application in my paintings. I always would pay attention in museums to how artists were using gold leaf in different ways. I was trying to find my own approach. In doing so I tried to learn as much as I could about a traditional technique used by icon painters.
in Russia and Eastern Europe. I was talking to my friends, professional icon restorators from Bulgaria and Russia, and learning from them. My first attempts to apply gold leaf were clumsy and the leaf was not applied evenly, which unexpectedly resulted in some beautiful patterns of texture on the surface. Later I learned how to apply golden leaf in a more precise and accurate way, but I preferred to make some "mistakes" on purpose to achieve that "accidental" texture that allows the color of the underpainting to show through.

As I have reflected upon my influences such as Expressionism, Symbolism, Surrealism, Magic Realism, Renaissance art and Russian Icons, I have noticed that the one thing they all seem to have in common is the desire to use "the figure as a vehicle through which their work can express emotions or some measure of the human condition" which defines figurative humanists.31 I believe that the figurative humanist approach characterizes the paintings presented in my thesis exhibition, which I am going to discuss in the next chapter.

Chapter 3

Representation of Works by the Artist

This chapter will examine my early graduate level efforts as well as later work that was created specifically for my MFA Thesis show. Discussion will focus on how the thesis work developed throughout my studies in the MFA program, how it progressed both technically and conceptually, and on how it places me in the contemporary art world.

Early Efforts

The paintings: *There Was a Boy* (Fig.11), *Man Peeling Potato* (Fig.12) and *Nightmares* (Fig.13) all started in life drawing sessions as oil sketches using live models. These three paintings seemed to convey a certain mood I felt was important to my self-expression. There was always some sort of sadness present in my work, probably influenced by the sadness of the whole Russian culture. There is a sweet sadness in the autumn landscapes by Isaac Levitan, deep sadness in the novels by Dostoevsky or Chekhov, and there is sadness in the Russian songs, especially those describing the feelings and destiny of women. In these three paintings the models' poses spoke to my emotions and called to be finished further. I kept these earlier oil sketches and wanted to finished them during my MFA program. I am glad that I had been encouraged to experiment and try different things and approaches during my first year in the MFA program. After creating a series of work in a surrealistic style, playing with different color schemes and exploring different ways to create the illusion of light in my work, I added imaginary backgrounds to these early paintings. Such background
enhanced the mood I saw in that particular model's pose. Although the mood came from observing the model, it was based on my own experiences. I assumed the emotions and hidden thoughts of the models and made them my own. Through the body of the model I was expressing my emotions. In *There was a Boy*, the pose of the young male model reminded me of a song I listened to in Russia:

![Figure 12. There Was a Boy. 2009. oil on canvas. 20"x24".](image)

*There was a boy*
*A very strange enchanted boy*
*They say he wandered very far, very far*
*Over land and sea*
*A little shy*
*And sad of eye*
*But very wise*
*Was he*

*And then one day*
*A magic day he passed my way*
*And while we spoke of many things, fools and kings*
*This he said to me*
*"The greatest thing you'll ever learn*
*Is just to love*
*And be loved*
*In return”*

While I was working on this painting I was, in fact, playing this song, dancing and singing it myself. The song reminded me of both sweet and sad things in my life. When I heard this song for the first time on the radio I was in love with my husband to be, Michael. But at that time we were far away from each other, he in America, and I in Russia. The simultaneous feeling of loneliness and the sweet feeling of being loved
were both associated with this song. The image of a dog is symbolic of unconditional love. Loneliness was a feeling that I felt very often when I was a young child. For some time I had a dog who was my best friend. This is also an explanation of why the image of a dog is present in my other paintings. The landscape in *There Was a Boy* and *Man Peeling Potatoes* is from memories of my childhood spent on the forest covered shores of the lakes in Northern Russia. *Man Peeling Potatoes* reflects the loneliness of growing old alone.

![Man Peeling Potato](image)

*Figure 13. Man Peeling Potato. 2009. oil on canvas. 20"x24"*

In *Nightmares* I added an imaginary background of the interior of a room with a window. The owl looking into the window is a symbol of a frightening dream.
In this work I reflect on my own sleepless nights. Unfortunately, I have had too many of those. In addition, I am reflecting on feelings from my past which had been triggered by the pose of the model. I have embedded in the models my own feelings, memories and dreams. Through the bodies of other people painted on canvas or drawn on paper I was speaking about myself.

The color in these early paintings was muted and subdued, and the backgrounds were almost monochromatic. This was unsatisfying to me and I knew I wanted to move towards a fuller, richer palette in my paintings.

I struggled with color when I first entered the MFA program. I have some twenty years of experience working with watercolors. It was easy for me to handle the color in that fluid medium. I felt free with it. I did not begin exploring oil paint until 2001. I went
back and forth between oil and watercolor. I felt it was necessary for me to paint with oil to be a "real artist". I believed that all of the insecurities of being a woman artist would remain with me unless I learned to handle oil paint. At first my progress was slow with oils. For some reason I could not achieve the same luminosity of color that I admired in paintings by my favorite artists. I could not achieve the brightness of the colors that was easy for me in watercolor application.

After studying with Pat Walker at Georgia Southern University I gradually improved my skills in working with a fuller palette of colors in oils. It was not a lack of theory that prevented me from achieving the results I sought. Instead, it was the habit of calculating my every step in advance that I developed while working with watercolors. In oil painting this method of thinking was not working for me. Soon I learned to move one step at the time, re-evaluate my results and then plan for the next step. This new process gave me more freedom.

The work Caged (Fig.14) is another early work. It is about lack of freedom, particularly the freedom of a woman in a male-dominated society. In this work I reflected on my own experiences as a woman artist and also on experiences of other women whose stories I had either read or heard. I did not realize that my limitations were associated with living in a male-dominated society in Russia until I moved to America and started studying art history here. Ironically, in this piece I first overcame my own limitations and achieved freedom in handling color in oil. I completely repainted the whole image and I felt confident because I knew what I did not like in the previous color scheme and what I was trying to achieve in the revision.
Most women artists in Russia do not realize that their opportunities are limited by their gender, as was well documented in the book *Peeling Potatoes, Painting Pictures*, a study of contemporary women painters in post-Soviet Russia, Latvia and Estonia by Renee Baigell and Matthew Baigel. *Caged* expresses a visual understanding of the immobility and disruption of the body that Russian women artists feel, but do not always

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understand. My way of expressing this feeling was influenced by Sherry Short's work, as well as by the Italian icon painting discussed in Chapter II.

The three works: *Kristina's World* (Fig.16), *In a Room With Memories* (Fig.21) and *Healing* (Fig.23) were created after I had defined the theme or style for my thesis: imaginative and figurative work based on my own memories and experiences. These works started in the same way using the same process which I discuss in the following section.

**My Process**

Sometimes when I start a painting I have no clear idea other than a feeling, an emotion that I cannot express in words. At the beginning of a new painting I might be found dancing with my brushes, listening to vibrant, rhythmic music like African drums Flamenco, ethnic Russian ritual folk songs, or contemporary Russian rock. This process became my own ritual. I find that it gives me energy to fill a big canvas with random marks. As I am filling my canvas I start seeing certain images among those random marks. My emotions are finding their way on to the canvas and I am able to visualize them before I can express them in words. Later I begin to slow down and concentrate on the idea that came to mind while dancing. At this stage I choose different music, a music that helps me concentrate. My favorite music for this slower stage is Bach and Vivaldi. I think I love their music because it is so well organized. The order of such music gives me the power to create in the midst of the chaos of life. I believe the music I listen to, whether it is dynamic or sad, transforms through my fingers and finds its place in my paintings. The best thing I have heard people say about my art is that they can hear music while looking at my paintings.
Susan Langer wrote that Dance is the "Play of Powers made visible". Dance, she states, creates an image of a nameless and even bodiless presentation of the world as a "realm of mystic forces." Dance in her words is:

the most serious intellectual business of savage life: it is the envisagement of a world beyond the spot and the moment of one’s animal existence, the first conception of life as a whole - continuous, superpersonal life, punctuated by birth and death surrounded and fed by the rest of nature. In the World History of Dance the oldest dance form is called a circle dance - a heritage from animal ancestors...In the ecstasy of the dance man bridges the chasm between this and the other world, to the realm of demons, spirits, and God...

No matter what the dance is supposed to achieve... its first move is always the creation of a realm of virtual Power. Whirling and circling, gliding and skipping and balancing are such basic gestures that seem to spring from the deepest sources of feeling, the rhythms of physical life as such.

Music and dancing help to bring images from the depths of my memory. The process of doing without thinking at first is active and intuitive. It is my ritualistic way of self-exploration and expression through painting.

Critical Analysis of Selected Thesis Works

The work Kristina’s World (Fig.16) started during the Ossabaw Island course. Ossabaw Island is an undeveloped barrier island in Southern Georgia. Our class spent a week on Ossabaw Island in the Summer of 2009 taking pictures, enjoying long walks and just being in the midst of nature. After leaving the island and returning to campus, we created works based on our memories, sketches and photos of the island. I created a series of small watercolor and oil paintings during that week on the island, made some pastel and ink drawings and took a number of photos. Back in the studio I

34 Ibid. 190.
35 Ibid. 191.
36 Ibid. 192.
first continued drawing and painting with chalk and watercolor, but wanted to create a larger image. The large size was dictated by the vision of the island as something as powerful as Nature itself. I purchased the largest canvas I had ever worked on - 48"x60" to create an epic image of Ossabaw Island. I began the process with a dance in my studio with brushes in my hands, without a clear idea about what to put on the large canvas. It took a lot of dancing to cover the surface with random marks of paint. After a few days of dancing I started seeing the image of a lonely woman sitting on the

*Figure 16. Kristina's World. 2009-2010. oil on canvas. 48"x60"*
lonely beach of the island looking into the distance. This reminded me of the famous painting by Andrew Wyeth, *Christina's World*.

![Image of Christina's World](image)

*Figure 17. Andrew Wyeth. Christina's World. 1948. tempera on gessoed panel. 32"x47"

I decided that in my painting there would be a woman named Kristina, based on the name of a classmate (different spelling) and she would be a Woman Artist. She is holding a brush in her hand as a symbol. Although Kristina is an imaginary figure, at the beginning I asked her namesake, my classmate Kristina, to pose for me for the figure in this painting. For some reason I could not take a good photograph of her and it appeared easier for me to take a photo of myself. I could put lighting on myself in a way I wanted and I did not hesitate to pose over and over without worry of exhausting the model. So in fact the figure of "Kristina the Artist" is my self-representation, or seeing myself as the Other. As my dancing progressed additional figures emerged on the canvas. At Kristina's feet was standing a nude man, ready to kneel, perhaps posing for her or presenting her a flower. I believe this was Andrew Wyeth, himself. I posed for his figure myself too and took a photograph. Later, I found a profile portrait of the artist and copied his ear exactly to achieve the likeness of two personages.
Many animals filled the spaces between my two main characters. These animals were observed and photographed by me on the island. Donkeys, armadillos, horses, wild pigs and alligators are all familiar creatures of the South Georgia coast and Ossabaw Island. One animal, a dog, which lived on the Island, was especially dear to me. The dog on the left of the painting was almost an exact replica of the beloved dog from my childhood in Russia. The dog on Ossabaw Island seemed to like me and followed me around. I believe it was a reincarnation of my childhood friend.

All of the figures have their eyes closed except for the pig. I could not immediately figure out why I was painting them this way. The next semester I took a class on Surrealism. I realized that representing all the characters with their eyes closed actually had a very deep meaning but I was doing it without knowing this. Surrealists believed that you cannot see the true meaning of anything with your eyes opened. They believed that real truth is in our dreams and hallucinations. There is a famous group portrait of the surrealist group - a photomontage of a photograph by Man Ray and a painting by Magritte (Fig.18). In this photograph all the members of the surrealist group have their eyes closed. It reflects on the philosophy of surrealism that things are not really what we see with our eyes. To see the real truth we have to turn to our dreams. In my paintings I represent my figures with the closed eyes because they are living in their dreams. The wild boar is the only figure that has open eyes. Pigs have often been used as a symbol of evil in paintings by symbolist artists. I wanted to use that symbolism in my painting and express the idea that evil never rests. My reason for doing this is similar to the reason used by Renaissance artists for placing a skull
in a still life. Painters during the Renaissance often included skulls, a fly or other symbols of death in their still life paintings. This was intended to remind the viewer of the temporal nature of this world, about the fragility of life and human mortality. The figure of the pig in this painting is a transitional figure between the romanticized world and the Underworld - the world of Life and the world of Death.

Remnants of the Pigs (Fig. 19) is a new addition to my Kristina’s World painting. It creates a vision of that Underworld. The idea did not come to me all at once. At first, I had thought about incorporating the skull of a pig or some bones in Kristina’s World, as another way to make a connection to the Renaissance. While walking on Ossabaw island I discovered an area where the ground was covered with partially skinned and boned remains of the pigs. There is a large number of wild pigs on the island and some hunting is allowed. I guess some hunters skinned their kills and left what they did not need leaving a gruesome site. I took photos that look very scary.
My initial idea had expanded as I worked on the Kristina’s World painting. While working on this piece, many unfortunate things happened in my life including the deaths of relatives and friends. I recorded these events on the back of the painting as if in a diary. I felt compelled to extend the piece by adding a separate panel under it. In doing this I was following the Renaissance tradition of juxtaposing images of life and death.

*Figure 19. Remnants of the Pigs. 2011. oil on canvas. 20”x48”*

Remnants of the Pigs has a long and narrow landscape format, which was inspired by the Renaissance painting by Hans Holbein *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb.*

*Figure 20. Hans Holbein. The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb.1521, oil on wood, 30¹/₂x200 cm*
Combining these two paintings *Kristina's World* and *Remnants of the Pigs* creates a juxtaposition of the dualities of human life. It reflects on life and death, beauty and ugliness and how we often see it in our lives side by side.

At last, in *Kristina's World* I am reflecting on the position of a female artist in a contemporary world. There is a reversal of traditional roles - artist and a model - in this painting. The woman, Kristina, becomes the more important, dominant figure because of the fact that she is represented as clothed. Showing a clothed man besides a nude woman in the traditional painting was a way to portray a man as a more powerful and active figure, a creator, an artist. In my painting there is a figure of a man, kneeling, nude, presenting a flower to Kristina. His pose is subordinate; he is a secondary character, an object of our gaze in this painting. By doing so I am not trying to make fun of a male figure or make it look submissive. My idea for this painting is a representation of a true Love. When people are in love they become vulnerable and may be funny. I was trying to show a romantic scene, with a sunset and the animals came to adore the beauty of the moment. I was trying to show love with warm colors as they come out of the man's chest and brighten the world around him. This is another painting that has a specific music I was playing while working on it - Mahler, *Symphony #5, Part IV Adagietto*. The music is so beautiful, I can listen to it for hours without ceasing. I was listening to it while working on this painting.

The painting *In a Room With Memories* also started with a ritual dance and building up large amounts of blue paint on the canvas. Eventually, a figure emerged in the center, the figure of a little girl. Something about this girl was so sad that I cried when I painted it. It was probably me as a child and I felt so sad for her. The lonely
The figure was surrounded by circles. The circles were correlating with my dance, appearing subconsciously without thinking. For me it represented a magic circle surrounding the figure, perhaps protecting her. Later, when I started working more deliberately, developing my idea and composition, the circles disappeared, as I painted the room walls, the wallpaper and the wooden floor.

This painting is the only one in the thesis show where I am actually using one of my own dreams. There have only been a few dreams in my life that I will remember for a long time. This particular dream was about my grandmother’s apartment. This was the apartment where I spent the earliest years of my life. I come into it and see everything broken. Even the stove is laying broken on its side. The whole apartment is ruined. I pick up my old toys and flower pots and bring everything back to order. For me this dream is about the death of my grandmother who I loved dearly and who raised me as a child. The painting, however, became more about me becoming an adult but still dealing with all my childhood memories and emotions. I added and removed toys to and from the interior of the room in the painting. After some time spent on this painting, most of the toys were removed. The space was filled with old papers representing my memories of the past. The circular lines from the first layer of paint representing the toy railroad are still visible and help create a circular eye movement around the figure through the composition. The figure of the girl was replaced by a figure of a grown woman, which is my own self-portrait viewed from the back. The toys that I felt compelled to leave in the painting are the brightly colored building blocks that symbolize my most pleasant childhood memories. Another toy, a doll, is lying under the curtain in the right lower corner of the painting. It symbolizes violence that I observed in the life
around me and the negative memories that are almost forgotten. The crow in the painting is another memory from my childhood. My mother had a pet crow. Her name was Vika, she hated me and sometimes tried to bite me. I was only 4 years old, I was fascinated with the crow and was trying to gain her trust. In doing so, I learned to speak like a crow, but that just seemed to annoy her. In this painting I am finally becoming friends with the crow and making peace with my memories.

*Figure 21. In a Room With Memories. 2009 - 2011. oil on canvas, 48"x36"*
The building blocks are also a connection between my past and my present. This was the way I learned to work with color, as advised by Pat Walker. I made my own wooden blocks, sanded them, gessoed them and painted them with bright colors. I enjoyed the process of making them almost as much as I enjoyed the process of painting them outside in the sunshine. Painting brightly colored wooden blocks outdoors in the bright sun is an excellent way to learn how to work with colors in oil. By doing this simple exercise every day for a couple of weeks I learned a lot about working with color and it helped me tremendously at the very beginning of my graduate program at Georgia Southern University. On the other hand, the wooden blocks were my favorite toy while I was a child. I vividly remember their colors: red, yellow, and blue. I could sit and play with them for hours. The wooden blocks in my painting have these bright colors as symbols of bright memories from my childhood.

The idea for the painting, *If I Could Have Opened My Heart* (Fig. 22), was first born when I made a presentation about Russian culture to a women’s club in Fargo, North Dakota. I was enjoying my presentation so much that it was almost like a rapturous experience for me. What I enjoyed most was sharing my knowledge of Russian culture and the memories that were dear to me. The expression "Open Your Heart" came to my mind. Although I enjoyed my own presentation I understood that there are always boundaries between you as an artist or presenter and the audience. The boundaries include misunderstanding based on cultural differences or biases. Also I was thinking: Why can I not repeat this wonderful act of sharing in other places, such as my school? Why is no one in my Art Program asking me to share my heart with them? Is it because everybody has their own lives, their own problems and their own
memories and they are too busy to be interested in mine? Some insight into this question might be found in an experiment performed by The Washington Post. An outstanding musician Joshua Bell played his violin at a metro station in Washington DC. People moved quickly through the station but did not slow down to listen to his performance. They did not know that the person playing at the dirty metro station was someone famous, someone for whom they would normally stand in line for tickets to his concert. Joshua Bell played at the metro station just as well as he would play in Carnegie Hall. As a true artist he was opening his heart to people through his music. But since people were busy, they did not accept it as something they should stop and enjoy. I believe this was also an experiment about how many people, in fact, are unable to slow down and appreciate an artist opening his/her heart to the public. In my own case, bringing my memories and photographs to school to share would be considered something inappropriate, something too intimate. Something like exhibitionism, or, perhaps, as violent as ripping your heart out and showing it to people.

When I hear remarks about this painting, people sometimes see the bare ribs and opening of the body as a symbol of violence. But the calm expression of the face neutralizes this impression. This painting is not about violence. It is about sharing, although sharing your inner soul might be painful, especially if people reject it.

People in many cultures believe that the heart is the symbolic organ of a human body responsible for love. If someone is disappointed with a loved one, they say "their heart is broken." In Hindi philosophy the heart chakra, one of seven chakras, is located at the center of the chest, and it is the chakra of compassion and love. Those who

practice Yoga, believe that if you open your heart chakra, then you will be able to handle in a more positive way such issues as: love, grief, hatred, anger, jealousy, fears of betrayal, and loneliness. Opening my heart in this painting is a magical process that gives the viewer the opportunity to participate in this surreal event. But the title of the painting reflects an aspect of the impossibility of such an event. *If I Could Have Opened My Heart* implies that in fact I cannot really do it. This painting serves as expression of my view on art. I believe that art should reflect the inner world of the artist. In this painting I wanted to share with the viewer the most beautiful thing from my inner world, from my heart. The most beautiful thing that I keep in my heart is probably Kizhi Island. This is a small island in Onego Lake near the city of Petrozavodsk, where my family lives. There is a museum of wooden architecture on the Island where I worked as a guide while a student at Petrozavodsk University. There are wooden churches, some of which are more than 500 years old, wooden houses and other traditional Russian buildings. The memories of this beautiful place combine with my memories of being a young, happy adult during this time. My daughter learned to take her first steps while living on the Island. Kizhi provides a connection between my most personal memories and my Russian cultural heritage. The silhouette of the main complex of churches on the Island is in the middle of my heart in the painting. This painting reflects on what is in my heart, what I would call my most beautiful memories. Aspects of this painting are self-reflective and self-representative. This is accomplished by combining three approaches. One is realistic which can be seen in my self-portrait. The second is fantastic which is represented by the open chest and placing architecture inside the body. The third is symbolic. Domes are iconic symbols of Russian culture.
In addition, the Kizhi architecture is a personal symbol of my connection to Russian Culture. I myself serve as a container for these symbols and, therefore, become a symbol as well. The use of gold leaf in this painting is directly influenced by Russian icons. The flatness of gold leaf background reflects the flatness of the icons and the representation of the saints. The representation of my body in this painting is not flat, which is influenced by a post-modernist concept of combining more than one style in one painting. I believe that the combination of two different approaches in one painting creates that effect of "phantasmic" and "oneiric" image that Chadwick was writing about. In other words, it

*Figure 22. If I Could Have Opened My Heart.*

2010-2011. oil on canvas. 84"x36"
gives mysterious, dream-like qualities to the painting. There is also a mythical component in my painting. According to a Russian myth, a mystical city, Kitezh, disappeared under the water when enemies threatened to occupy it. From that time on, it is only visible to those who are pure in their heart and soul.

During the Soviet era the myth about Kitezh acquired a special meaning. It meant that although religion was expelled from Soviet life, Russia still kept its spiritual identity in a secret mystical storage-lake. In the legend Kitezh represented the Spirit of Russia, that had disappeared but which could not be destroyed. To me this myth has also another, personal meaning. It means that although I have moved away from the beautiful place I used to live, I still have it in my memories and in my heart. I can share it with others through my art. My cultural heritage will always be with me, regardless of where I will live. So, again, I act like a storage container of my memories and cultural heritage.

According to the myth of Kitezh, the crosses over the domes were the last thing that people could see when the city was disappearing under the water. In my painting I did not put crosses on the domes of the churches. I decided not to include crosses for two reasons. First, I did not want my work to be seen as having any religious message. Second, I wanted to depict domes the way I remembered seeing them as a child with the crosses broken off. After the Russian Revolution of 1917, many churches were destroyed, while others were converted to storage places, offices, schools or museums. Their crosses and sometimes even domes were broken off. There are still many ruined churches in Russia today, especially in the remote regions, although many have been recently restored.
The painting *Healing* continues a theme of a lone figure, a woman, sitting in a room. The room is painted in subtle subdued grey colors. In the hands of the woman is a brightly lit ball sending reflections to the face of the woman. Similar to *In the Room With Memories*, some papers are laying on the floor of the room. These papers represent memories that have been sorted out and thrown away. The process of getting rid of some memories is similar to cleansing the soul, or healing. Some memories might be negative and we do not need them for the future life. The figure, in this case, is my direct self-portrait. I posed for the photographs in different poses and finally chose one that I used for painting. In this work I used another process, different from the one described above. I had an idea, a sketch that I had been changing and developing for about a year. Then I collected some necessary objects: a "magic ball" and crumpled paper. I took photos of myself holding the ball, setting the lights as if the source of light was coming from the ball. The "magic ball" is the center point of this painting. It is an imaginary ball which heals your soul, and brings happy memories when you look through it. The purpose of the ball is also divination: it tells your future. I personally do not believe in any sorts of divination, yet it is a part of my Russian heritage. In Russia people believe in all kinds of fortune-telling devices like cards or coffee grounds. I do pay attention to horoscopes and have my own personal superstitions. Sometimes, in times of major uncertainty, even a very realistic person might become superstitious and rely on fortune-telling devices. One of those devices might be a "magic ball" such as the one shown on my painting. In this painting I tried to represent some uncertainty I am going through in my life at the moment and my emotions while dealing with this uncertainty. The "magic ball" is in fact a magic power
that is contained within us. Concentrating on your future, getting rid of negative memories of the past and negative emotions of the present takes conscious efforts and it is hard work, but it creates magic. The approach I used in this painting is different from what I described earlier in this chapter. This process is not so much intuitive, but deliberate from the beginning. It started from my underpainting which was done in brown tones (Burnt Umber and Burnt Sienna). I painted in layers, letting one layer dry completely before covering my painting with another, more colorful layer. This painting process is based on the traditional technique of underpainting used by Old Masters. My outer layers of paint are loose resembling contemporary painting. While working on the first and last layers of this painting, I used similar dancing moves as in the process I described before. I started with creating a loosely painted surface, then I slowed down and painted very deliberately, rather like drawing with my brush. Then I started painting loosely again, but only in a few designated areas, while avoiding the areas that needed more detailed work. This method gives me both more freedom and control in painting at the same
time, allowing me to change some areas while keeping some areas unchanged. I use this method in my work when I have a set idea to convey and it is important for me not to change it too much. This does not mean that the painting remains static. I still change details by adding or removing some objects and changing colors on objects.

The same method was used for *Self-Portrait in Red Turban* (Fig. 24) and in the *Remnants of the Pigs* (Fig. 19). The reason I wanted to keep my original design in both images is obvious. I used photographs and I first arranged photographs in Photoshop to create my sketch. By the time I was applying paint on canvas, I already knew how my painting would be structured. Even then, there were many ways to change the direction of the painting. For example, in *Self-Portrait in Red Turban* I did not know right away, that I would include images of the crows.

The *Self-Portrait in a Red Turban* is my self-portrait where I use a famous painting by Jan Van Eyck as a reference. *Portrait of a Man in the Red Turban* (Fig. 10) is believed to be a self-portrait by Van Eyck. I always admired this portrait in reproduction and loved it when I saw it in person in the National Gallery in London. It was appealing to me with its quiet pensive mood expressed by the artist and strangely made me think of myself and my own self-representation. I found one of my photo self-portraits and made it fit into this painting in Photoshop on computer. At first it was just a playful juxtaposition of two images. But in the corner of my mind I had the thought that representing myself as an artist and as a male has significance other than just playfulness. I admire Van Eyck greatly as an artist, as one of the first who learned how to paint with oils. I admire his modesty - when he signed on his *Portrait of a Man in the Red Turban*: "I paint as I can" (AIC IXH XAN).
For me, representing myself as Van Eyck means asserting his qualities - being an Artist, feeling confident in my skills while still admitting and accepting my flaws. This is also a reflection on me being a woman artist in an art world still run by male, as discussed in the Chapter Two. By using an approach of representing myself as the Other, also employed by other female artists, I make a place for myself in this art world.

The idea for including crows in the Self-Portrait in a Red Turban came suddenly, and had several reasons. One is that my Self-Portrait had a very intimate feeling about it and made me think about my childhood memories, and brought the associations with the crow again. Next, I was looking at Katherine Ace’s artwork that often included birds and people holding birds in hands. Finally, I thought of my feelings being hurt in childhood by being rejected by a crow (as I described in the story earlier), and how it is similar to me being rejected by the art world later in life when I heard "There had never been great women artists." The image of the crows in this work represents great artists whom I envied and wanted to join but was rejected. Just like being rejected by the

Figure 24. Self-Portrait in the Red Turban. 2010-2011. Mixed media.
crow in my childhood with whom I wanted to be friends. There is a statement in this work that I do belong to the art world. I state this by representing myself in Van Eyck's famous red turban and by painting crow feathers on my coat. This connects me to the art world as well as to the crows' world.

Formally, my artwork represented in my MFA thesis exhibit can be described as self-representation using juxtaposition. I use self representation in different ways, utilizing both self-portraiture as well as representing Self as Other. Images of myself are often juxtaposed with images of interiors of the rooms, images of people and animals, interior objects and plants found in my imagination as well as representing the images found in my past. Then too, I juxtapose various brush marks in one canvas: from very loose to very precise, from almost abstract gestural marks and to the elements of Tromp l’oeil. Each of the juxtapositions I use are created through an intuitive process. Utilizing this intuitive process of creating art helps me to acquire my art's meaning. The formal elements of my paintings serve as means to achieve the goal of expressing emotions and memories from the different stages in my life. Music and poetry help to bring these emotions alive. I re-live my emotions again and capture them in a painting to share with the viewers of my artwork. This process is both liberating and painful. But it helps me to re-live certain stages in my life, to re-sort my memories, and clear space for new emotions and new surprises that the future holds.
Chapter 4

Conclusion

My reason for creating this body of work was to attain better understanding of myself as an artist. My work evolved and developed as my subject, use of the media and preferences for the use of color were changing. Through the period of my MFA studies I was able to determine what was most important to me as an artist. The most important theme became depicting my memories, emotions, family history and Russian heritage through self-representation. Exploring these subjects became my way to explore my physical, psychological and spiritual self.

I gained a lot of experience while working on these thesis works, both conceptually and technically. Working on the body of work represented in my thesis show helped provide an insight into why my artistic aesthetics developed in a certain way, based on who I am. I attained a more clear vision of my artistic influences and developed my own ritualistic process of painting. I gained more freedom in handling the color and attempted creating multi-figure composition on a large canvas, something that I had never done before. I also created a cohesive body of work that addresses my life, my memories and my emotions.

I learned how to make my memories visually concrete through the process of painting, storing and recombining them to create a new understanding of the past as well as the future. Music plays an important role in this process. I realized that through music, just as through painting, I can re-live most of my memories, sort them out, and clear myself of the negative emotions that were held in the past.
I see further development of my art heading toward creating images that are mysterious and dream-like, a style sometimes called Magic Realism. I want to include more references to my favorite artists, particularly artists of the Renaissance. I will keep honing my skills in representing the human figure and using color. I will continue using my memories and family history as a major source of inspiration. Willingness to share my life and stories with others will remain the major impulse for me to create artwork.


