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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
School of Art
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS IN FINE ARTS STUDIO

Infinite Reflections of Transition

By

Ellina Chetverikova

This thesis work I dedicate to the woman who raised me and kept my creative fire burning—my Grandmother; to my adoptive parents in the United States, my aunt and uncle, who showed me this other world and supported me throughout all my education; and to my dear husband Michael, who always has been by my side with sincere and endless love, and who guards and guides my heart.

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Thesis Approval

Thesis Title: Infinite Reflections of Transition

Thesis Author: Ellina Chtverikova

Chief Advisor: Luvon Sheppard

Associate Advisor: Tom Lightfoot

Associate Advisor: Sarah Thompson

Chair, School of Art: Glen Hintz

Abstract

Coming from an international background, I often reflect on my transitional era coming to the United States from the Ukraine and finding a way to adapt. Creating the series of work *In Between*, I came up with the realization that I did not belong completely to either of the cultures. Instead, I was a child of the world. Change in life educates us by letting us to adapt to new situations and people. By changing the place where we live, the bigger picture opens up for us and we are able to see the world from many perspectives at the same time, creating a three-dimensional representation of life. Creating the series *Infinite Reflections of Transition* helped me to cope and reflect upon the adaptation that I went through by learning a new language. This series of five paintings helped me to share my experiences as a foreigner, while making it easier for many people to relate by translating it into a metaphorical story about a girl.

Let everything that's been planned come true. Let them believe. And let them have a laugh at their passions. Because what they call passion actually is not some emotional energy, but just the friction between their souls and the outside world. And most important, let them believe in themselves. Let them be helpless like children, because weakness is a great thing, and strength is nothing. When a man is just born, he is weak and flexible. When he dies, he is hard and insensitive. When a tree is growing, it's tender and pliant. But when it's dry and hard, it dies. Hardness and strength are death's companions. Pliancy and weakness are expressions of the freshness of being because what has hardened will never win.¹

Andrei Tarkovsky

What is it like to be a creator? How do people see us from the outside? Could we ever look at our own creative work from an outside perspective and as completely uninvolved individuals? How does the audience perceive the paintings on the wall? How involved are they in the topic or the technique? These are questions that never crossed my mind when I was young, innocent, and did not take anything for granted. I was born in the Ukraine. I had a difficult life as a child, growing up without a father, and with an emotionally unstable mother who was overwhelmed by alcoholism. My only support and hope was my grandmother.

My grandmother, Tamara, lived with my little brother, my mother and me. She was our savior. She always made sure we were fed and cared for, and also helped us follow our passions. I have loved painting since I was very young, and I would often stay very late at my art school.

My home felt like a toxic place. I could not stand how lazy and mean my mother was, so I spent most of my time escaping into my own reality, just so I would not have to see and talk to her. It was a very painful experience, and difficult to describe how I felt there. I had always wanted to leave.

¹ Andrei Tarkovsky, *Stalker* (film), 1979.

I lived in the Ukraine until I was seventeen years old. When I graduated from my high school and art school, I had an opportunity to study in the United States with the help of my aunt and uncle who lived there. I didn't think twice before deciding to go. I loved my grandmother, my brother, my friends, and all the connections I had made in the Ukrainian art community, but I knew that this was my chance to pursue my dreams and I needed to take it. I spent many sleepless nights preparing for my English exam. It was not until I failed the exam three times that I realized that my English classes in public school did not prepare me for this. But miracles happen. I eventually was able to pass.

I was an excellent student in art school, and won many competitions for my technical artistic abilities. Most of the schools in Europe at the time were still supportive of classical traditional training. This often included still lifes and plaster busts, and teaching students about compositional studies. The students were not at all involved with the conceptual parts of creation. It was not until college that I was able to use my technical skills to convey concepts.

Becoming an artist does not merely mean learning something, acquiring professional techniques and methods. Indeed, as someone has said, in order to write, well you have to forget about grammar. Though, of course, in order to forget it you have first to know it.²

Moving to the United States turned me into a little child. This was not only because I could not say and understand many things that a young English-speaking child could, but also because the world of creating art had been flipped upside down. I learned the importance and necessity of executing concepts through my art:

A concept is a mental integration of two or more units, which are isolated by a process of abstraction and united by a specific definition. By organizing his perceptual material into concepts, and his concepts into wider and still wider concepts, man is able to grasp and retain, to identify and integrate an unlimited amount of knowledge, a knowledge

² Andrei Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time* (University of Texas Press, 1986), 38.

extending beyond the immediate concretes of any given, immediate moment...³

I could not speak with anyone. I could not express even the simplest thoughts. It was hard to try to compose even one sentence without making mistakes, or at least so that others would understand me. I was very scared. My biggest fear was that I would never be able to learn the English language and understand anyone.

Man retains his concepts by means of language. With the exception of proper names, every word we use is a concept that stands for an unlimited number of concretes of a certain kind. A concept is like a mathematical series of specifically defined units, going off in both directions, open at both ends and including all units of that particular kind.⁴

It was overwhelming. I was lost in a labyrinth of words and expressions. It was a traumatic experience, because of how emotionally sensitive I am. It was during this period that I wrote a story that inspired my MFA thesis work, *Infinite Reflections of Transition*. This story was about a girl who jumped into the waters of a great sea without knowing how to swim. She had to adapt or drown. The girl turned into a mermaid at the end of the story. However, I did not complete the story for the audience of my thesis work; I left it open ended, so the viewers could create an ending themselves.

This period of my life remains vivid in my mind, and I find myself reflecting upon it often in my work. When I studied in high school and could not communicate properly using English, realized that the language I could use was my art. I didn't know if people would understand everything I was saying through my paintings, but there was one thing I knew for sure: that I was expressing myself as fully as possible through my art.

³ Ayn Rand, *The Romantic Manifesto* (New York: Penguin, 1971), 5.

⁴ *Ibid.* 5.

There is another kind of Language, another form of communication: by means of feelings, and images. That is the contact that stops people being separated from each other that brings down barriers. Will, feeling, emotion, these remote obstacles from between people who otherwise stand on opposite sides of a mirror, on opposite sides of a door...The frames of the screen move out and the world which used to be partitioned off comes into us, becomes something real...⁵

The transitional state was so overwhelming. I felt as though I was fighting for my life emotionally the whole year, trying not to drown. I needed to keep reflecting on that topic, to keep thinking. I created the series of work *In Between* during the senior year of my undergraduate program.

In Between was a reflection of who I was as a person during that period of time, and who I had become since I immigrated to the United States. It was a realization that I was not a Ukrainian anymore. I had been living in the United States for almost five years without leaving the country. I wasn't a Ukrainian but I was not an American either, and it was impossible for me to ever truly become one, because of all my life experiences growing up in the Ukraine. I was in between two places. One of the pieces from *In Between*, entitled *Swimming in Each Other's Minds*, is a twenty-four by thirty-two inches done on wooden panel with oil paint. This painting is about duality, having your perception, your mind divided in two. It is a duality in the thought process, in the ability to analyze the surrounding reality. I was divided between being Ukrainian and American, but in the end I was neither. Before creating the series *In Between*, I tried painting with oil paint on aluminum pie pans. I wanted to find a convenient surface on which to paint that I did not have to prime or prepare in any way, and the reflection and shine of aluminum allured me into trying the material as a painting surface.

As a result, during the *In Between* exhibit, most of my paintings were on aluminum, but

⁵ Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time*, 40.

some were still on traditional wooden panels. The work consisted of portraits of different people partially submerged in water. I chose the models strictly by the aesthetic qualities of their appearance that I was most drawn to. I used the line of the water, where the model was above and also beneath it, to represent the feelings of my existence being divided into two separate worlds. The colors of the paintings were very saturated and bright, and I used methods such as direct painting with some glazing applications. The biggest inspiration for this work came to me from John Everett Millais (1829-1896). Millais was a romantic artist who belonged to the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. His paintings have a mystical feeling to them. Usually the main figure and the center of his compositions are women. I was bewitched by his outstanding work *Ophelia* (1852). This painting depicts the literary character Ophelia, from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, floating down a river and singing before she drowns. Pre-Raphaelites were very radical for their time, rejecting some of the academic rules of the traditional painting, by painting on the white ground instead of on the toned canvas. They also completed some of their work *en plein aire* rather than making a sketch outside and finishing the painting in the studio. All of that made me rethink the use of traditional painting surfaces, such as canvas or wooden panels. Instead, I used traditional painting techniques on more contemporary, lightweight metal.

After completing my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Cincinnati, Ohio, and coming to Rochester to complete my Master of Fine Arts degree, I spent some time experimenting with different materials, going back to the basics of using canvas and wooden panels as supports. I felt lonely and incomplete when I moved to Rochester. I had to leave everything in Cincinnati like I did when I left the Ukraine: all of my close friends, the landscapes and the city. I love the challenge of trying to adapt. It makes us stronger and much more fluent in communicating with different types of people, though it is not an easy journey. I began creating pieces inspired by all the people who are important to me, but were physically far from me. I wanted to start painting

from photographs to paint the absence of them in my life. It brought me comfort to paint them, and that is where the series *Close but Far* was born. I was bringing them to life, and in a sense, I was bringing them closer to me in the physical realm.

One of the portraits from *Close and Far* was a portrait of my grandmother: *My Mind Blizzard Swept*. It is twenty-four by thirty-two inches, painted with oil on a wooden panel. There is a human figure walking away in a big winter landscape, during a winter storm. At the time that I painted it, I couldn't explain why I had chosen to depict my grandmother walking away. But one month after completing it, my grandmother passed away.

After finishing the series of work *Close but Far*, I felt that I needed to come back to reflecting upon my state of being between two countries. I felt that there were more ideas to express than what I had explored in my undergraduate program.

I dedicated my last year of graduate school to diving into the depths of my journey as a foreigner. I have created a very personal series of work, but it is also very universal. I am reflecting on the specific kind of transition that came from my own personal experience, but that does not have to be the only thing that viewers can see in my work. It is much more open and translucent than that. It does not matter who we are, we are constantly changing and transitioning in life. As one of the greatest writers and philosophers said:

*The greater a work of art, the more profoundly universal its theme.*⁶

Two of my biggest inspirations are Ayn Rand (1905 - 1982) and Andrei Tarkovsky (1932 - 1986). Both were forced to leave the Russia in their youth. They struggled being away from home, but knew that being in their own country was dangerous. Rand got a visa to visit her

⁶ Rand, *Romantic Manifesto*, 11.

American relatives not long after the October Revolution, and never came back to Russia. Andrei

*Tarkovsky submitted a script that was different from the original script, omitting several scenes that were critical of the official atheism in the Soviet Union. After shooting roughly half of the film the project was stopped by Goskino after it became apparent that the film differed from the script submitted to the censors. Tarkovsky was reportedly infuriated by this interruption and destroyed most of the film.*⁷

Tarkovsky is my biggest visual inspiration and influence. He created a new language in cinematography and in art in general. His films are filled with self-reflection and deep thought through metaphysical representation. He gives the audience an opportunity to look inside themselves as they watch his films. His conversation with the viewer is directed toward introspection, the same way my conversations with my viewers begin with my own reflections on my experiences, giving them an opportunity to be able to relate and sympathize.

When I first started making the work for my MFA thesis exhibition, I knew that I still greatly enjoyed representing the human figure overwhelmed by a body of water. I also wanted to work on aluminum, but instead of creating smaller pieces I wanted to have a variety in the dimension. I wanted to show the contrast between each piece and experience. I wanted them to feel like they were stills from a bigger picture. I had the story line swimming in my head from the very beginning of the year. I kept remembering little details of the story that I wrote when I had just come to the United States. It was a metaphor of me jumping in the water and realizing that I am not a fish, so I cannot breathe or swim in the water. Slowly I started to learn how to swim and after a while I started growing my own gills.

I tend to translate most of my experiences into metaphors. I have always done that. When I translate my experiences, it gives me an opportunity to see them from a different

⁷ "The Life of Andrei Tarkovsky," accessed May 19, 2014, <http://www.wright.edu/~wagner.116/life.html>

perspective and it shows me why certain things might have happened, what I should learn, and what I should forget and forgive. Moreover, some of the translated experiences help others to better understand, and they give us a universal thread that everybody could recognize and hold on to. In other words, the metaphor makes it easier for people to relate to each other and connect to each other.

In my thesis work, *Infinite Reflections of Transition*, I have five paintings. Each of them represents different stages of transition that I went through when I came to the United States.

The first piece in the series is *Separation*, which is thirty-six by thirty-six inches, and was painted with oil on aluminum. It is a portrait of a young woman (me), looking straight at the viewer with a three-quarter view of her face. She is standing in front of the sea with the sun setting on the horizon in the background. Her shoulders and the upper part of her body are disappearing and turning into birds, which are flying away into the distance. This representation of the figure is naturalistic with an abstracted representation of the disappearing body and transformation into the flying birds. Much of the surface is exposed, revealing the aluminum. The reflective shimmering surface is similar to the surface of water. The colors are very dramatic but slightly desaturated. The woman's expression is meant to show a quiet and tired sadness. The expressive brushwork suggests innocence, naivety and purity of the mind by the expressiveness and freshness of application of brave textural brush strokes. The metaphor represents the girl who decided to leave her native land to see what the life in the sea would bring her. I wanted the painting to be quiet and still, but also filled with the movement of that time when we all must say goodbye to people who we might never see again. The girl is looking at the viewers, but her presence in the shoulders and upper body is slowly evaporating and vanishing in the opposite direction from where the viewer stands. Nothing in the picture is

equally treated in terms of painting, so some parts of the figure are merely suggested simple brush strokes, while some parts are more fully developed. With such a depiction, it takes a little bit of time for the viewer to study the work, and different parts of it reveal themselves as he or she looks. Eventually the whole image appears slowly from the background. During the creation of this painting I used direct painting methods with some glazes. I used a lot of sander, to help me remove some of the paint on the surface of the aluminum. In fact, I was so dissatisfied with my own work that sanding away parts of the painting to expose different layers of the paint became therapeutic. By doing that I discovered a different language, one I hadn't been speaking yet.

Joseph Mallard William Turner (1775 – 1851) used a similar approach by taking off the surface of many layers previously applied, leaving just a glimpse of the luminous transparent hint of colors. Turner was a British Romantic landscape painter. He is considered to be the father of the romantic impressionism, and is very well known for his later abstracted seascapes. We can see the atmospheric and metaphysical representation of one of the seascapes in his painting *Whalers (Boiling Blubber) Entangled in Flaw Ice* (1846). Free, loose brushstrokes filled with light. Although most of his paintings were done on canvas and panels, I borrowed some of his deconstruction techniques and applied them to painting on aluminum. While being attracted to the silver surface, I found a contemporary artist who also had a big influence on me—Brad Kunkle (b. 1978). This New York City-based naturalistic artist uses linen covered with silver or gold leaf as his painting surface. In works such as *The Bee Healer*, he creates portraits on top, exposing most of the silver or gold leaf. The characters of his paintings are overwhelmed by certain parts of nature, showing that humans are equal to all other creatures on earth and the power of nature exceeds all human creations. His work has a deep conceptual meaning and is equally strong in the physical technical representation. He uses a very traditional academic

painting style on his human figures, and combines that with abstracted, surreal backgrounds. Getting to know this artist really inspired me to keep working with the silver surfaces.

Aluminum is a great painting surface, but it is very hard to preserve work done on metal. In order for the paint to adhere better to the surface, I would sand the aluminum down. I also coated all my paintings with a protective matte varnish, which helps to preserve them from scratches and dust. I haven't found many artists working on metals or reflective surfaces in contemporary art except Anselm Kiefer and Michelangelo Pistoletto. Anselm Kiefer (b.1945) uses many different surfaces, but especially gives preference to iron and lead. His monumental pieces are filled with different objects made of different materials. Some of the metals stay exposed in the painting, for instance, the painting's frame in *Beyond Landscape*. I am also very interested in the early work of Michelangelo Pistoletto (b. 1933), which consists of human figures painted on mirrors. When pieces are in the gallery, the viewer's reflection is automatically included in the finished painting, since most of the painting surface stays exposed. The artist gives viewers the opportunity to directly interact with the painting and transfers them into a different reality behind the glass.

The second piece in my series is *The Jump*, which is forty-eight by seventy-two inches, painted with oil on aluminum. This piece is the largest oil painting that I have ever done. The scale of the piece reflects my biggest "jump" over the ocean. It is mostly an abstract representation, with some of the aluminum surface exposed. It is very monochromatic and chaotic. The composition of the painting is very circular, because of the motion created by the human body getting lost in some parts and appearing in other parts of the picture. The dominant colors are dark turquoise blues with some desaturated yellows, and different silver tones of the aluminum. The empty, sanded-out parts of aluminum suggest bubbles of air

created by the jump, and also light from the sun shining through the water. Before this I wanted to paint reflections to show them, but now I am just exposing the metal, so the viewers can see the color and light reflecting around them.

The narrative mentioned previously continues in the second piece. When the girl jumped, all of her preconceived notions of the world were suddenly challenged or broken. Nothing was concrete. Everything dissolved into the water, including the girl herself. When taking a longer look at this piece, you will realize that in the cloud of the abstracted water explosion is the girl from the narrative, battling with the world around her. This symbolizes my first moment in the United States, when I finally could see how different everything was. Because I could not understand what anyone was saying, or why people dressed the way that they did, this became a period in my life that seem to dissolve my prior identity. I was questioning the existence of what was good and bad, and I was trying to fit in in the community that I just became part of. It was a real struggle for me from both sides. While I was creating the piece, I wanted to let go of everything, especially my need to be in control of what the piece would look like in the end. It was very difficult for me to just let the paint flow expressively, and to keep all the control out of the process. It made me feel completely vulnerable because I did not know what the result would be.

It was hard to bring to the surface all of the feelings about how I had to cope and adapt during that time, and to remember what it felt like to stand in front of the high school doors, paralyzed by my fears. I was afraid to go inside every day because I was so scared of not being able to understand what anybody was saying when they talked to me. I was certain that they all thought I was stupid, and I was embarrassed that I could not express myself in English like I did in my own language. My head felt big. It hurt every day.

The third piece in my series is *Immersed*, which is thirteen by nineteen inches, made from glass and aluminum. It is a sculptural piece with an oval shape cast in glass with a resin layer sitting on top of the thin aluminum painting. The glass works as a big lens that distorts some of the image underneath. The painting is of a blurred-out portrait of a person who is coming closer to the surface of the water but is still completely submerged. All the beautiful “frozen” bubbles inside the glass suggest that the piece is frozen and suspended in the space, quietly waiting for the right moment to explode and fill the room with its presence. The shape of the sculptural piece looks like an egg, and is meant to show rebirth. The aluminum painting underneath has monochromatic brown colors. When walking beside the sculpture, the human portrait is not noticeable right away, only from certain angles. It forces the viewer to move around the piece and see it from different perspectives. It is the next stage of my story, where the main character is in the blur, trying to adjust and come up to the surface. The surroundings are blurred and nothing is clear. In the process of creating the glass, I had to cold work it for a long time to make it transparent and smooth. The whole cold-working process consists of repetitive hand movements, where you make the tool go around the glass surface, switching the tools as you go to get the finest polish. When I created this object, I felt so many similarities to learning the English language. The process of making this glass smooth reminded me of all those repetitive actions of speaking and pronouncing words. It was so extremely tiring, but it was necessary to bring results. During the process, it felt like I would never be able to make that glass surface smooth; in the same way, I felt that I would never be able to learn and speak this language fluently. I don't mind using mixed media materials if it makes sense for a work and is relevant to what I am trying to express, similar to the philosophy of Anselm Kiefer, the genius of mixed media creations.

I couldn't find anything more transparent or heavier than glass to express the complete

submergence, and the feeling of being suppressed by the weight of all the things that were going on. Even though the glass made this piece heavy, I wanted it to also be transparent and clear, because this pathway was my hope, my salvation and opportunity to be more than I was.

The fourth painting in my series is *Integrity*, which is forty by forty-eight inches, and was painted with oil on stainless steel. Integrity –the quality of being honest and having strong moral principles, moral uprightness. It is a painting of a woman (me) surfacing with one hand on her chest. The division line between the water and air is very pronounced. The part of her that is depicted, from her head to her knees, has a very desaturated and limited palette. Her body is disappearing and reappearing in places where it has been sanded down. After the big “Jump” everything falls apart and is dissolved in the water. Slowly, the human figure is coming back into the picture plane, by rebuilding, reanalyzing and relearning. I often felt like I had to relearn many things in addition to the language barrier. There was so much that I couldn't understand, so I had to relearn the same information that I already knew. For instance, history, biology, it seemed to be useless, because I knew some of it in Russian. In order to be able to express myself and talk to others, I had to slowly rebuild my knowledge. Something very similar is happening in the *Integrity* painting. The figure is reappearing, rebuilding itself. All the fragments are coming together and finally starting to make sense. When I was writing in Russian and then translating my essays into English, they still didn't make sense, because the languages are so different. I had been told that I need to start thinking in English; just translating everything was not going to help me to learn.

This is the only painting done on the stainless steel and it projects persistence and durability of emotions. I didn't purposely choose steel for this painting; it was a pure accident when I bought the rest of the pieces of aluminum. But I fell in love with the gray smooth surface

right away, although for an oil paint it was not the best raw surface. Each layer of paint was reacting to the surface in a negative way, and it was very unpredictable. Each time I came back to continue painting, the portrait would look different.

My last piece in the series is *Serenity*, measuring twenty by twenty-five inches, and done with oil on aluminum. Millis's Ophelia especially influenced this piece. Serenity: the state of being calm, peaceful, and untroubled. *Serenity* is about finding peace, finally feeling that my heart could belong to many places at the same time. It is painting about enjoying the present, embracing it and hopefully looking at the future; about not forgetting the past, but not letting it control present. *Serenity* is about finding a human happiness and balance, healing all my sores with the appropriate balm. It is the painting that I completed first in the series. The balance and peacefulness and mindfulness of the figure are very obvious. The space where the figure is swimming is very unclear; it could be happening anywhere. It is not on the identified sea-land, she is swimming in the expanse of the universal understanding of the metaphysical world. This painting is done with thin oil glazes. The sander appears to be less present, less obvious; where in this particular piece, the sander had been used mostly on the outside world rather than on the figure itself.

Even with all these paintings from the series, the story remains incomplete and will continue its life in the eyes of the viewers. After completing the work, I did not get the full satisfaction of the whole story being told. It is just a small piece of the bigger picture. I will continue working on aluminum surfaces, and from time to time I will revisit the traditional approach and surfaces. It all goes around the full circle, just as everything in the nature. In my future work, I want to paint mostly from life with natural lighting. I hope to continue to teach and exchange ideas and reflections with my current and future colleagues and teachers.



Swimming in Each Others Minds, 24X32" Oil on Panel, 2012



My Mind Blizzard Swept, 24X32" Oil on Panel



Separation, 36X36 ", Oil on Aluminum, 2014



The Jump, 48X72 ", Oil on Aluminum, 2014



Immersed, Oval 13X19", Glass and oil on Aluminum, 2014



Integrity, 40X48", Oil on Stainless Steel, 2014



Serenity, 20X25", Oil on Aluminum, 2014

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