

THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

# Reflections

A Written Accompaniment to the Thesis Exhibition

by

Anna Alexandra Loseva

A PAPER

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF ART

CALGARY, ALBERTA

SEPTEMBER, 1994

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September 17, 1994

To whom it may concern

Re: illustrations on pp. 32-35 of Anna Alexandra Loseva's  
Thesis Support Paper "*Reflections*"

The type and character of illustrations in my thesis support paper serve the suit the points made in the text in the best way possible.

The paper discusses my work, i.e. oil (colour) paintings. Having the *colour* images on pages 32 and 33 (Fig. 1 & 2) is important to support the argument on preceding pages.

Fig. 3 on page 34 reproduces an *artistic pencil drawing*; it is not aimed at and *should not* be expected to present itself with the "clarity" of a graph or a technical drawing.

Fig. 4 on page 35 illustrates the tonal organisation of the painting. It is *meant* to look *exactly as it is* : it reveals the tonal and compositional aspects of the artwork while ignoring such aspects as detailing, colour, etc.

While these illustrations may somewhat lose in microfilm, they present my argument to the Examination Committee and to future readers in the Art Department better than any possible alternatives.

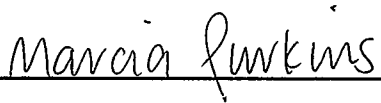
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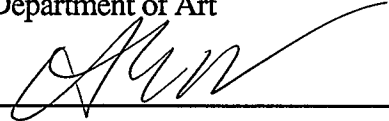
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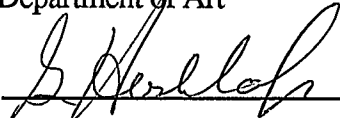
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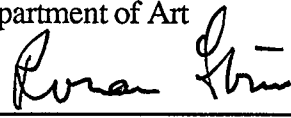
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## ABSTRACT

This paper consists of two parts. Section One examines the theoretical position on art that evolved out of my experience as viewer and artist, and compares this with the postmodern perspective. Section Two is a discussion of my work.

Writing about art inevitably leads a painter outside his or her area of specialisation, with a choice to be made between methods developed in art theory, art history, and aesthetics. As I find aspects of art theory and aesthetics to be more relevant to my studio research than art history, I limit my discussion in this paper to the former.

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## INTRODUCTION

Culture, in examining itself, selects for close scrutiny a few threads from its tightly woven and continuously changing fabric. Almost inevitably, such intense concentration on the selected items leads to a loss of perspective on their place in the overall structure. A near-sacred status is thus awarded to a few ideas and yet another tale, a myth, of “how culture views itself” comes to occupy centre stage. While it lasts, it inspires followers to march beneath its banners; but as society and culture change, their focus changes too, and in the process the old myth becomes irrelevant. The rise and fall of modernism illustrates how theories once used to assess art objects are later discarded as arbitrary and invalid.

At the same time, embedded within any system of beliefs is some agreement on fundamental points; this consensus is also essential to debate. Here, obviously, I face a major challenge: raised within one system, I must define my views and my art in relation to another. Had I found contemporary Western art theory convincing, I would have been happy to employ it within my argument. But although some postmodern ideas are fruitful, I question the general applicability to the visual arts of a number of its premises, I disagree with its emphasis on certain elements, and I disfavour attempts to include sociopolitical concerns within discussions of the value of artworks. Overall, I find the postmodern view of art very different from my own; I am not a convert. Since the widespread acceptance of postmodern ideas does not allow me to ignore them, I quite inevitably find myself involved in polemics. My position on the meaning of visual language, formulated in constant opposition to the tenets of postmodernism, is presented in Section One of this paper.

I discuss my work in Section Two. My art practice is not theory based: I hold the view that abstract modelling, reductive by definition, is an insufficient tool for pondering art and is even less suitable as art's foundation. Artmaking is so complex and closely integrated with yet more complex aspects of life, society, and culture that attempting to discriminate

significant and insignificant elements -- a procedure essential in the act of conceptualisation -- always runs a risk of throwing out the baby with the water. As Petra von Morstein put it, "art has constituents which necessarily elude conceptualisation."<sup>1</sup> Like most of us, I was raised with a belief in the all-pervading powers of the intellect, and I made several attempts to use it in managing creativity. However, these attempts resulted in images that I felt to be inferior. These failures made me reflect on the nature of intellect and art; and I now believe that, unlike technology and very much like life, society, and culture, art does not evolve through the practical application of theory: to base creative practice in theory is to violate art.

For this reason, it is difficult to draw a straightforward connection between my work and my theory, as well as to make a smooth transition between the two parts of this paper. While my concepts reflect my experience and my art is largely affected by my views, there is no simple link between one and the other. The connection between the two lies in their origin within a single source: the work and the theory are the embodiment of the intuitive and the intellectual as these reflect, in their specific ways, one personal sensibility. Analysis of this sensibility forms the basis, the subject, and the final authority of my argument in this paper.

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<sup>1</sup> Morstein, 5

## SECTION ONE: CONSTRUCTING A THEORY

### Chapter I: The Iconic Sign

The terms “sign,” “symbol,” “signifier,” and “meaning” are continuously used in discussions of the visual arts. Employing the ideas developed in semiotics -- a relatively new theory of signs and symbols -- and its subfields of pragmatics (dealing with causal and other relationships between symbols and their users), semantics (dealing with the relationship between signs and what they denote), and syntactics (dealing with the formal properties of systems of signs), art theory explores the world of representations. My feeling is, though, that application of semantic ideas to the representational arts often involves a good deal of stretching. Although the very word “to represent” is defined as “to ... express, designate, stand for, denote, as a word, symbol, or like does, to symbolise,”<sup>2</sup> I always wondered if bold parallels drawn between verbal and visual representations were well founded. My suspicion that the representational image’s “standing for” is quite dissimilar from that of a word made me take a closer look at this problem.

Let us examine the difference between the two using a famous example of a four-legged animal that barks denoted by the word “dog.” There are two models describing the relation between language and the world. One, suggested by Saussure,<sup>3</sup> posits a signifier (the sound or inscription of the word), a signified (its meaning, or content) -- these combined make a verbal sign -- and a referent (a real-world object). The other, a more primitive model, is a two-element system of words and their referents: words somehow “latch on” to their referents in the world. Whatever model we use, the connection between the signs/signifiers “dog,” “chien,” and “cane” and a four-legged animal that barks is impossible to establish without knowing what these words stand for in English, French, and Italian. The nature of verbal representation-sign implies that linguistic meaning is

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<sup>2</sup> Webster’s, 1217

<sup>3</sup> Culler, 31

meaning-by-convention, i.e., designative meaning.

In my observation, visual representation-depiction works in a different manner: within the limits of the medium, it imitates the appearance of the referent. While understanding a verbal sign entails familiarity with codification and decodification, “understanding” a depiction relies on the universal ability of the human mind to **recognise similarity of visual organisation** in the object and its depiction, or, for that matter, similarity in the arrangement of elements in any sensory stimuli. It is true, as Heintz points out, that people who have never seen photographs do not readily identify them as representations of their subjects. But once a person has learned to recognise a few kinds of things in photographs, he or she will be able to recognise a photograph of just about anything recognisable via eyesight. Having learned “the basic rules of a pictorial system we can understand any symbol in the system. We do not have to learn the meaning of each new ‘word.’ ”<sup>4</sup> Images, as characters in a symbol system, thus trade on our **recognitional** capacities in a way that verbal language cannot.

In addition, each verbal signifier has a number of meanings: context plays the role of filter, sorting out the “right” one. For example, in “The dog barks” the contextual variable “animal” common to “dog” and to “barks” allows us to eliminate the meaning of “dog” that would pertain to an adjective and, likewise, the meaning of “barks” that might, for example, apply to a tree trunk. Within a depiction, however, the quantity and order of the visual elements create a self-sufficient context. Once the formal elements necessary to a depiction of a dog (however schematic) are in place, no external modifiers are necessary to help us recognise that depiction as of a dog.

To further widen the chasm between representation-depiction and verbal sign, the latter is always nonspecific in the sense that, for example, the signifier “dog” refers to the concept of dog and would for different people evoke different dogs of different breeds and colours, while a depiction of a dog is always (more or less) specific. For -- though we

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<sup>4</sup> Heintz, 2-4

tend to overlook this fact -- even a very schematic representation of a dog cannot help presenting its subject from a certain angle, as sitting, standing, or otherwise, and as of specific proportions. In other words, there is no drawing of a dog which is as general as the word “dog.”

These are some of the most obvious differences between verbal signs and visual depictions that come to mind. Without going further into the specifics of this matter, I will simply note that the abilities utilised in reading verbal signs and visual depictions are so different that they are situated in separate parts of the brain: the left hemisphere is responsible for linguistic and other discrete-symbol/analytic-categories functioning, while the right hemisphere dominates spatial functioning involved in the process of recognising depictions.

Let me also set aside one fertile source of misunderstanding: I do not dispute that depictions are more than mere imitations. Most objects in the real world are saturated with cultural meanings even before their appropriation into artwork takes place. I choose to work with representational art partially because I want to allow viewers to relate to my paintings on different levels and in different ways, including “recognising a story” and “playing with meanings”. At the same time, I would suggest that the above-discussed depiction’s meaning-by-recognition is the primary nondesignative pictorial meaning and that its designative meanings-by-convention are secondary. It seems rather obvious that an image, if it is to function as an allegory of justice, must firstly be identifiable as a female figure of a specific type. Once the identification has taken place, and there are no doubts left as to whether one is viewing a representation of a housewife with a scale or -- to stretch the point further -- a veiled figure with a scythe, the viewer can link the image with its allegorical designation. In other words, connotational/symbolic communication through a representational image cannot take place if the primary meaning of that image is unclear.

This example of an allegory of justice is not as whimsical as it may seem, for it routinely

happens that an artist who has not mastered the skill of artistic representation arrives at images whose meaning has little to do with what was intended. Although nowadays these errors can be smoothed over by talk about “textuality,” mastering the skills of depiction and visual “grammar” remains a prerequisite to effective communication via representational art.

What I call “visual representation-depiction” was identified by one of the founders of semiotics, Charles Pierce, who gave it the name “iconic.” Unfortunately, the peculiarities of the iconic sign receive virtually no attention in postmodern theory, which derives most of its conclusions from the examination of the verbal sign and then proceeds on the assumption that all systems of signs, including the visual arts, function in a similar manner. Precisely for this reason, when postmodern theory is applied to visual arts it is forced to limit itself to the secondary level of symbolism -- the level of connotation -- while ignoring discussing visual “grammar” and neglecting the emotional impact made on the viewer by the work’s formal organisation. This highly selective approach not only overlooks important facts about visual imagery but also undermines the very awareness of their existence.

When one is using “sign” and “language” in their general rather than narrow sense, it is important to be clear on the distinctions between the different types of signs and languages, so that unfounded conclusions and unsubstantiated parallels do not creep in. Thus, among the languages of arts, those of abstract art, architecture, and music need not and often do not refer to anything outside themselves. In the absence of signifieds, do they operate with signs? Do they communicate? If not, why would we call them languages? If yes, what is it that they communicate to us? I will attempt to suggest some answers to these questions later in this paper.

## Chapter II: Visual “Thinking”

The apparent fact that we all think in words leads many to conclude that verbal language must be “the language of languages,” superior to all others. In relation to art, especially narrative realist art, this translates into the notion that art represents verbal ideas in visual form. In other words, this view has it that ideas first manifest themselves in words and that visual images are derivatives of verbal concepts. I see it as very unfortunate that artists themselves did a lot to reinforce such a view: long ago Plato characterised artists as imitators of imitations and therefore inferior to philosophers, who deal with nothing less than reality itself (the Forms).<sup>5</sup> This perspective has been passed down to our culture. Naturally, in an attempt to legitimise their vocation, a vast number of artists have claimed that they are not simple imitators because philosophy informs their images. This, however, only strengthens the notion of the derivative nature of visual language: if it is not imitation of imitations, it is interpretation of concepts. In my view, the very idea of the superiority of verbal concepts should be challenged.

We regard consciousness highly because it sets us apart from other living beings. But would it be true to claim that writing symphonies is not as conscious a human activity as constructing abstract verbal concepts? When I conceive of even the plainest musical tune and am conscious of it, this is a conscious activity. Why should I believe that this is inferior to a process of verbal thinking? Moreover, I can communicate the tune by singing it or playing it on an instrument; this will do what communication is supposed to do -- allow another individual to acquire (musical) information. Analogously, conceiving of a visual image, I can express it in painting, and this will communicate (visual) information to another individual. Verbal language is clearly inept in communicating visual -- or musical -- information: the most detailed description is of little help in communicating an image, and no amount of words describing colours and shapes will allow one to envision them “as they are.” As Hirsch points out, “one cannot, for example, adequately convey through words many of my visual perceptions -- though these perceptions are ... objects of our

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<sup>5</sup> Plato, 24



consciousness.”<sup>6</sup> These observations lead me to suggest that: (1) **not all information that the human mind registers can be verbalised** and (2) **visual images contain and convey information that can be expressed in words only with difficulty, if at all.**

In support of my argument I appeal to psychologist Howard Gardner, who defends the idea of “multiple intelligences” in his book *Frames of Mind*. He offers vast data to support his claim that there are at least four distinct and independent intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spacial, and musical. According to Gardner, spatial/visual intelligence “entails a number of loosely related capacities such as: the ability to transform and to recognise a transformation of one element into another, the capacity to conjure up mental imagery and to transform that imagery, [and] the capacity to produce a graphic likeness of special information.” These abilities, he suggests, should be considered “equal in importance to linguistic intelligence.”<sup>7</sup> He writes:

Many of the problems in which scientists and engineers are engaged cannot be described in verbal form. ... The scientific progress in the Renaissance may have been ultimately tied to the recording and conveying of a vast body of knowledge in drawings ... Instead of memorising lists of objects or parts (as mediaeval workers often had to do), aspiring scientists could now study the actual organisation of the machines and organisms that were not available for inspection. ... perhaps McFarland is right when he suggests that, after individuals have attained a certain minimal verbal facility, it is skill in spacial ability which determines how far one will progress in sciences.”<sup>8</sup>

This quotation confirms that the spacial/visual mode of thought finds important applications outside the visual arts -- the realm whose intellectual credentials are often questioned -- and

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<sup>6</sup> Hirsch, 353

<sup>7</sup> Gardner, 176 -177

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 177-192

is equally important to the sciences. Gardner thus supports the proposition that visual thinking is as “intelligent” an activity as thinking in words.

Gardner observes that a primary characteristic of human intelligence is its tendency to become embodied in a specific symbolic system.<sup>9</sup> Echoing him, psychologist Larry Gross identifies several modes of communication: lexical, logico-mathematical, musical, and iconic/(visual).<sup>10</sup> My argument appeals to their work and conclusions in suggesting that visual art is a specific symbolic form expressing spacial/visual intelligence.

### Chapter III: Artistic vs. Scientific Conceptualisation

Verbal language, however, remains the primary focus of postmodern research. Not surprisingly, postmodernism pushes its view of verbal language as the sole vehicle of consciousness so far as to suggest that it mediates our experience. Lacan uses the term “symbolic order” to describe the individual’s awareness of the world around him or her: according to him, unlike the at-one-with-the-world state endemic to a child’s awareness, the symbolic order is distinguished by the fact that an individual within it does not have access to experience that is not mediated by the language.<sup>11</sup>

I could not disagree more with this position. In my view, it is the **intellectual act of conceptualisation** which employs various symbolic forms, thus suggesting the term “symbolic order.” To state that experience is mediated by the language, one has not only to prove that the primary mode of conceptualisation is verbal (my reasons for rejecting this approach were discussed in Chapter II) but also to demonstrate that consciousness is limited to acts of conceptualisation.

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<sup>9</sup> Gardner, 57

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 61

<sup>11</sup> Lacan, 3

It is not at all surprising that we should encounter this latter suggestion, since Western tradition quite commonly equates the conscious and the intellectual, maintaining that the former is developed and honed through verbalisation/logic/understanding. “Western man ... has constructed an ideal for trustworthy knowledge which ... he has determined, must be intersubjectively testable, quantitatively measurable, and linguistically expressible.”<sup>12</sup> This approach puts artists at a tremendous disadvantage. Art that does not view itself as the messenger of intellectual ideas is branded by it as therapeutic, an intellectually empty activity of relieving the subconscious, while art that comments on issues fails to communicate its message with the clarity of a verbal statement. Either way, such a perspective on consciousness sees the vocation of artist as not particularly demanding intellectually, though it might require some special, “artistic,” talents. To expand their understanding of what they engage in in their studios, artists are encouraged to turn to philosophy, literary theory, and the like.

My view is not only that “arrangement of imagery requires as much intellectual ability as arrangement of an argument”<sup>13</sup> -- the position I expressed in Chapter II -- but that we should reconsider the very idea that the rational method of science and philosophy yields the best, most “accurate” picture of reality. Although our world-view today is largely defined by scientific methodologies, these cannot entirely overshadow another important faculty of consciousness, which is inherent to artistic practice and is as characteristic of the human condition as is the intellect. To introduce this concept, which plays an important role in my later argument, I will first explore the limitations of conceptualising/understanding in relation to experience.

Conceptualisation seems to be a requirement for achieving “understanding”; we are said to “understand” a phenomenon if we can construct a mental concept of it and thereby grasp its meaning/essence. This implies that there is a hidden truth to be discovered if we dig beneath the debris of the phenomenon’s appearance. Characteristically, Levi-Strauss wrote

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<sup>12</sup> Organ, 36

<sup>13</sup> Gardner, 76

that “understanding consists of reducing one type of reality to another, that true reality is never the most obvious.”<sup>14</sup> Such a method is the foundation of analytical knowledge; but although we tend to place deep trust in it, it seems inept when applied to human experience. Experience consists of encountering or undergoing something in its specific, individualised form. At the same time, the nature and purpose of intellectual constructs (including language) is to reduce an infinite reality to a limited number of concepts. This process of sorting out the “significant” features inherent within a phenomenon invariably discards the specific, subjective component of an experience as “unessential.. But is it not the subjective, lived quality of the experience which makes it meaningful? Seemingly, experience can be neither conceptualised adequately nor “understood” in its totality. Understanding and experience are not interchangeable. Language is understood, life is experienced. One cannot “understand” grief or love any more than one can “experience” a sign.

Hence we face the following choice: either we insist that becoming conscious necessarily implies intellectual dissection (and thus we submit to inevitable impoverishment) or we question the notion that the intellectual is the only means of conscious apprehension of the world. I choose to do the second, taking the view that consciousness encompasses yet another faculty, that of subjective “bodily” knowledge of feelings, sensations, and emotions which entails the awareness of experience, but does not involve conceptualisation. In the end, we cannot seek to understand something unless we are first conscious of it, if only vaguely.

Though formulation, never mind communication, can take place only within language, I disagree that becoming conscious of experience necessarily implies formulation. I am aware that this postulate of the independence of consciousness from language will be met with skepticism: not only does it conflict with the traditional view, but it cannot be defended by appeal to the tools of logic. Here it should be remembered that **any** philosophical construct is based on “first principles” that are not arrived at via the exercise

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<sup>14</sup> Culler, 27

of logic and cannot be defended. It is sometimes thought that basic premises need no logical defence because their truth can be **intuited** by everyone. I make this claim for my premise: it is consistent with my experience and I suggest that others, looking into the depth of their consciousness, will find moments of clear and sharp awareness of the “experience of the body” or emotional experiences which do not lend themselves to formulation. At any rate, casting a glance back upon the history of ideas reminds us that we should not view a practice as invalid if there is no adequate theory to “support” it: terms, constructs, and other theoretical apparatus are introduced **after** the phenomenon has been recognised. And finally, my (statistically) “weird” postulate is a commonplace within the Eastern spiritual tradition, which holds that large areas of consciousness lie beyond the reach of the intellectual and verbal strata. I therefore invite readers to accept my foundational idea and follow my argument to see where it leads.

Dismissal of deconstructionism’s postulate that signs include an infinite number of meanings<sup>15</sup> -- which, were this true, would not allow any form of viable communication -- allows us also to reject its implication that it is “textuality” which is responsible for artwork’s infinite number of interpretations. Agreement on the meaning of terms -- i.e., symbols/signs -- is an indispensable condition of any analytical discussion, which can proceed only when there is as little space for “play of signs” as possible, never mind “infinite interpretations.” Successful intellectual discourse demonstrates that textuality can, when necessary, be largely eliminated. This allows me to suggest that the different effects on the reader of imaginative literature and analytic writing are the results of a major difference in the objectives of the two kinds of prose. While intellectual statements should be **understood**, artworks primarily seek to provide **experience**. The verbal arts play with a number of meanings, attached to the sign because it has been established in practice that such play (along with other devices) elicits emotions; and, having acquired mastery, the writer can hope to elicit the emotions that lie “within the range” of his or her intentions. But even within this range experiences and emotions are always subjective; and multiplicity of experiences invites multiplicity of interpretations.

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<sup>15</sup> Ellis, 116

Similarly, the languages of visual arts are aimed at ends different from a “logical” expression of visual/spatial intelligence such as in technical drawings or anatomical charts: while charts and graphs deliver information in an objective manner, eliminating ambiguity and misinterpretation if we are familiar with their conventions, creative drawings attempt to provide aesthetic/emotional experience, though they may be also informative in an objective way.

Spender wrote:

Memory exercised in a particular way is the natural gift of poetic genius. The poet, above all else, is a person who never forgets certain sense impressions he has experienced and which he can relive again and again as though with their original freshness ...<sup>16</sup>

Why human beings seek to share experiences is beyond the province of this paper. But a central element of my concept of art is the idea that the purpose of art is to **provide a kind of truth that differs from that of the analytical disciplines -- the truth of subjective experience.**

In their specific way arts perform most of the fundamental operations inherent in the analytical approach to the world: realisation, formulation, exploration, communication, and education. Obviously, in doing so arts also operate through symbolic forms. Returning to the starting point of this chapter’s discussion, I want to make it clear that I realise that art is a form of conceptualisation. Any language, whether artistic or scientific, is mediative. Referring to the mediative limitations of literature, Tolstoy agonised that attempts to capture experience in writing distort it.<sup>17</sup> On a related point, Russian literary critic Eihenbaum noted that verbal expressions of emotional/spiritual life “style” it: only

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<sup>16</sup> quoted in Gardner, 89

<sup>17</sup> quoted in Eihenbaum, 25

selected sides are reflected, and the literary form they take is not at all identical to the reality of experience.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the specifics and the uniqueness of artistic conceptualisations lies in their ability to preserve the subjective quality of the experience.

#### Chapter IV: On the Universality of Artistic Conceptualisation

It is my view that art is a means of manipulating the audience into experiencing the particular emotional/spiritual mood intended by an artist. A piece cannot be considered successful if it evokes in recipients a response diametrically opposite to the one which was anticipated. Being an artist implies being able to elicit in the audience a response “within the range of the artist’s intentions”; and this skill is acquired by trial and error. My own method has been to work on a painting until I feel that an emotion which I tried to put into it is coming back at me. Over the years, consistent use of this approach has allowed me to discover the emotional impact of many visual devices, and so I have become relatively efficient in achieving my ends. Since, to the best of my knowledge, no consistent research is available on this subject, to support my argument in this chapter I propose an imaginative experiment.

To illustrate some of the most obvious expressive possibilities of colour, I will use Botticelli’s “Birth of Venus.” Suppose that Botticelli himself or a skilled copyist made a version of the painting using dark-blue instead of light-blue tones for the sky. Relying on my experience with colours, I predict we would then have a very dramatic, even ominous version of Venus’s journey on a seashell, with pale figures appearing against a dark background as if in a very sharp, dramatic light. Why this type of lighting would be perceived as dramatic I do not claim to know; apparently, certain combinations of highly contrasted colours and tones convey emotions with a particular resonance denoted by the word “dramatic.” Now, if we render the figures of the same painting darker and with deep

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<sup>18</sup> Eihenbaum, 20

shadows we end up with a very mysterious, “Rembrandtesque” scene: environments in which objects do not appear obvious but are guessed/intuited tend to be perceived as “mysterious.” This experiment can go on, rendering the image in cool or very hot colours, “painting” the figures *contre ajure* against light background, and *ad infinitum*; each new image will be emotionally “charged” in a noticeably different way.

The infinite combinations and juxtapositions of light and dark, dull, subdued, and vibrant, and warm and cool colours suggest an inexhaustible pool of options to elicit emotional responses of particular tones. At the same time, the colours and hues and their relations are only one part of a larger aesthetic arsenal. A painter has at his or her disposal a complex dialectic of two-dimensional (actual) and three-dimensional (illusory) spacial organisation. Both offer numerous avenues for evoking feeling, since humans react differently to open and closed, square and circular, curving and angular pockets and patterns. Also, rhythmical organisation entails the arrangement of colour patterns, value patterns, and linear patterns; proportion can be viewed as in itself a tool; and the effect of the painterly surfaces should not be overlooked:

Painting is poetry ... Plastic rhythms are forms that rhyme with one another or supply assonances either with other forms or with the space that surrounds them.

Picasso<sup>19</sup>

A symbol invites particular emotions only within a specific community that chooses to interpret it in a specific way. It seems not unreasonable to suggest that flag images by Jasper Johns might evoke a very different response in an American national and in a citizen of any other country, and may provoke no response at all five hundred years from now or whenever political divisions shift in a significant way. Indeed, who except for Rubens scholars is interested in or affected by the subtleties of his political symbolism? Yet his paintings continue to impress audiences, for most painting devices prove more durable than cultural symbolism, because organisation of shapes, forms, and colours has an impact

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<sup>19</sup> quoted in Gardner, 198



with a wider margin of effectiveness.

Appreciation of art at the formal, aesthetic, and emotional levels demands little other than aesthetic sensitivity. On this level one can appreciate the art of a culture one is completely unfamiliar with. Such was my own encounter with Chinese painting. At the age of nineteen I was completely ignorant about Far Eastern art, and my acquaintance with Chinese history was marginal. But once a slide fell into a slot on the projector in an art history class, I was instantaneously and forever captivated by the power of the tradition. That ink painting of the Tang period, representing two figures on a snowy mountain slope, seemed to incorporate everything I sought in aesthetic experience -- laconic, but emotionally charged, it was straightforward and audacious but at the same time highly accurate in its technique.

I have a short memory for facts, and soon after the final examination, I forgot the names of the Chinese artists, the circumstances of their lives, and the titles of their paintings. But the love of Chinese art went on. On occasion I bought several first-rate albums on Tang and Sung painting. These were published in China and contained not a single word I could understand, which did not prevent me from immensely enjoying the paintings. Since I tend to relate to art on the aesthetic/emotional level, factual knowledge adds little to my appreciation. Comparing my experiences of Chinese and Russian art -- I know the history of the latter in detail -- I have few doubts in saying along with Petra von Morstein that "it is possible ... to understand a work of art in historical ignorance, and immediately."<sup>20</sup>

I also find myself in sympathy with a body of research which claims that some formal elements of art address such deeply ingrained characteristics of human nature that their effects transcend all cultural and temporal barriers. Gardner points to evidence that "infants seem to be born with the capacity to notice similarities across sensory domains -- such as parallels in intensity or in rhythms -- which are detectable in auditory and visual

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<sup>20</sup> Morstein, 3

realms.”<sup>21</sup> The studies of the golden ratio claim that compositions based on it, such as the architecture of ancient Greece, tend to be perceived as particularly harmonious across centuries and cultures.<sup>22</sup> Australian neuro scientist Manfred Klynes suggests a universal basis to emotional language. In his study several hundred white subjects in Australia and America were asked to press a button to express different emotions. A set of graphs was compiled, based on the responses of these subjects. Testing these graphs, Klynes discovered that people unfamiliar with them had no difficulty identifying the emotions underlying the shapes. He then converted these shapes into sounds -- the harder the push, the higher and louder the sound -- and sped off into the Australian outback to test them with Aborigine subjects. He found essentially no difference in how Aborigine and Western subjects identify emotions underlying his set of shapes and sounds.<sup>23</sup>

The purpose of this chapter was to stress the importance of the nondesignative aspects of the visual language of art, contributing to the old debate between the “referentialists” and the “absolutists”<sup>24</sup> in support of the latter. I have no doubts whatsoever concerning the significant role designative meanings play in the overall impact produced by the artwork; to me artwork is a blend of the designative and the nondesignative. At the same time, I feel that “because most meanings which arise in human communication are of designative type ... many scholars nowadays fail to realise that this is not exclusively the case.”<sup>25</sup> It seems to me that nowadays the emphasis has shifted towards the referentialist’s position, and so I wanted to draw more attention to nondesignative aspects of art.

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<sup>21</sup> Gardner, 291

<sup>22</sup> Shmelev

<sup>23</sup> What Is Music? 9-10

<sup>24</sup> Meyer, 465

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 467

## Chapter V: The Meaning of an Artwork

Finally, I want to sketch my position on a problem of “meaning.” The question I address seems to be least intelligible in contemporary theory and criticism, for no other term is misused and abused more than “meaning.” The verb “to mean” and its derivatives have a great many different applications and, as if to complicate the problem, acolytes of postmodern theory and criticism tend to use it in a sense even broader than those assigned by the dictionaries. Thus, Hirsch in his *Validity in Interpretation* writes that visual perceptions are meanings, “which is to say, objects of consciousness.”<sup>26</sup> I neither employ nor admit such broad usage. To my mind, “meaning” (1) applies to symbolic entities such as words, signs, representations; or (2) is used interchangeably with “significance”, as in the “meaning of life.”

Though for an outside observer like myself, ruminating over “meaning” offers little insight into the matter, two definite patterns seem to evolve out of the general noise: One is common to criticism and presents a blend of some formal analysis, some exploration of symbolic meanings, and some “verbal magic,” in effect replacing the authentic experience of visual art with an experience of literal art inspired by it. This mixture is then spiced with information from the artist’s personal and historical background and the product is offered as an exploration of meaning. Another approach, typical of hard-edged postmodern criticism, tends to present the social/ideological message and/or significance of an artwork seen from the postmodern perspective as **the** meaning of that piece.

This latter perspective tends to overlook the fact that “meanings,” in the sense of “significance,” are acquired only within value structures, and that depending on the structure, art will take on different meanings. Also, with time any structure reviews its values, and meanings shift accordingly. Of all meanings, the ones suggested from an ideological perspective seem to be the most arbitrary. History illustrates, for example, how representational and abstract art have been simultaneously labelled “elitist” and

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<sup>26</sup> Hirsch, 353

“democratic” by different ideological systems; the communist one also performed a complete turnaround, first granting the title “progressive” to abstract art only to later label it “bourgeois.” This fact alone is enough to make me wary of ideological meanings, particularly when these are used as a basis for evaluating the merit of a work of art. I advocate viewing art as experience and suggest that the most reliable way of discovering a work’s significance is through one’s personal encounter with it.

Aside from significance, I fail to see what general meanings artworks can have. As symbols, most representational images lend themselves to interpretations, but it would be wrong to think that learning their meanings reveals **the** meaning of the work. The quest for the general meaning of a work of art stems from the misconception I discussed above: art as an opaque form of intellectual statement which interprets (verbal) ideas in visual form and thus offers itself for backwards translation. Paintings and sculptures are not ancient religious texts rendered obscure to contemporary audiences by the passage of centuries and therefore in need of interpretation -- which is the reason interpretations appeared in the first place.<sup>27</sup> Neither are they a form of intellectual puzzle. My view is that the belief that the essence of art can be distilled from a work and that one can penetrate its appearance in search of some kind of veiled essence leads into a blind alley. Artworks are out there to be experienced, and there is no other way of laying hold of the meaning of a work of art than in the unique form of the work. I am in agreement with L. Tolstoy, who remarked, on the array of interpretations of *Anna Karenina*, that critics seemed to know better than him what the meaning of his novel was: “As for me,” Tolstoy added, “if I were asked what *Anna Karenina* was all about, I would have to write the book all over again.”<sup>28</sup> The resonance of the term “meaning” provides livelihood to a large “priesthood of interpreters,”<sup>29</sup> but I doubt if it can really extend our ability to relate to and interact with art. It is my view that the “search for meaning” only leads us away from an authentic experience of art. It seems that the proliferation of interpretations of artworks is symptomatic of the prominence of the

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<sup>27</sup> Sontag, 7-12

<sup>28</sup> Erlich, 209

<sup>29</sup> Davie, 45

verbal mode of expression in the contemporary world; it also results from neglecting other mental abilities, for as people rely more and more on words, they become less and less capable of digesting information presented in other forms. To me, this represents an unfortunate handicap rather than evidence of mental advance. As Susan Sontag put it:

Like fumes of the automobile and of heavy industry which befoul the urban atmosphere, the effusion of interpretations of art today poisons our sensibilities. In a culture whose already classical dilemma is the hypertrophy of the intellect at the expense of energy and sensual capacity, interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art.<sup>30</sup>

### Conclusion

The capacity to understand and express oneself in more than one type of language is inherent in every human being. Most of us are literate and are somewhat proficient in the language of mathematics, some also master the language of music, and some combine proficiency in several artistic languages with proficiency in verbal language. The coexistence of these distinct modes of expression in individuals testifies that the mental abilities they mediate are distinct, for would it not be a waste to have two languages if information in language *A* is exactly congruent with information in language *B*? Thus, I have tried to support two major ideas: (1) that thinking in visual images is an independent activity of the human mind; and (2) that art is a vehicle for expressing subjective knowledge and that it reveals itself through experience (as opposed to the rational, objective knowledge of science, which reveals itself through understanding). The logical conclusion of this logical part of my paper is that **translating one mode of thinking into the language of another cannot take place without a major, most fundamental, loss of information.**

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<sup>30</sup> Sontag, 7

Art, as I understand it, is a way of developing and cherishing a unique potential of the human mind, and I consciously abstain from involvement in “art talk.” In this key, I will not lead my audience into the overgrazed field of intellectual interpretations: I will limit Part Two to a discussion of fundamental experiences that triggered the formation of my images and an analysis of some basic formal devices which, I thought, might evoke relevant responses in the viewers.

## SECTION TWO : THE WORK

My sole motive in taking up a brush is to express an emotional state. Whether or not a piece is intended as political commentary or narrative, it invariably stems from and aims at evoking resonant experience. As I tried to show, the relevance of attempts to access experience intellectually is, to use a term from deconstructivism, “problematic”. Though I would not go as far as George Braque, who claimed that “the only value in visual arts is that which cannot be described in words,”<sup>31</sup> I firmly believe that intellectual verbal analysis can access only **some aspects** of art. I also cherish no illusions of having any talent for “verbal magic” and will not attempt to complement my artwork with a written text conveying the same experience which I strive to communicate through the language of painting. My work is out there, available for viewers to interact with, and every reader is invited to become a viewer, to consider and evaluate the experience that the work provides.

Before speaking of individual works, I should address some general matters, namely, my choice to work representationally and my choice of style within the representational tradition. While I believe that my claim that art is a manifestation of visual intelligence expressing subjective experience has some right to claim objectivity, that is, to be considered a proposition capable of being true or false, my preference for representational art over the abstract is based entirely in my sensibility and is not formulated as a concept. The visual expressiveness of the world fascinates me; this fascination with the multiplicity of its manifestations motivates my work. Visual perceptions and the emotional life are my inexhaustible sources of material. Not only do representational images convey information on levels that abstract art fails to address, but natural and cultural images offer a never-exhausted pool of formal elements which not even the most ingenious mind could ever invent.

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<sup>31</sup> quoted in Painters on Painting, 209

As to my stylistic preferences within the representational tradition, I was born in St-Petersburg, one of the most fascinating cities of neoclassicism, into a family of architects with extensive artistic training in the tradition of “academic realism.” At the age of seven I started taking art classes with an instructor passionately devoted to the “Repin school” of painting; at ten I went to an evening art school for children, at fourteen entered the Ioganson Secondary Art School, and at eighteen attended the St-Petersburg Academy of Arts. All these concentrated on perfecting students’ skills within the realist tradition. This was fine by me; though “obedient” is hardly the adjective most descriptive of my character, during my school years I never felt that something was forced upon me. I later put effort into overcoming those aspects of my training which, over the years, I came to see as obstacles to my creativity, but I never thought of breaking with the tradition entirely. My sensibility and the tradition turned out to be a good match. In its amended version, the latter provides all means necessary for me to express myself.

### “NIGHT”

“Night” is the earliest of my paintings produced in Canada. The image evolved as an expression of our emotional torment on the eve of our departure from Russia. The mood at the dusk of perestroika was grim: the greatly anticipated change was turning out to be a catastrophe. The historical circumstances generated a deep rift between our goals and the direction in which events were taking us. As in a bad dream, we felt we had no control over our situation; desperate efforts to steer the course of our lives only generated aimless motion that took us nowhere. Anything that had previously happened in our lives -- growing up, learning, achieving personal goals -- could be perceived as progressive movement; the new feeling of powerless revolving around an invisible and inescapable gravitational point was terrifying.



Out of these feelings came the image. It depicts myself and my husband in a dreamlike state revolving around the empty centre of the painting. The figures are presented in such a way as to allow the most complex movement associated with sleep which at the same time would not evolve into distortion. Given the obvious technical challenge of capturing motion in a still image, I tried to organise the work's rhythms to guide the viewer's eye along the lines of the male body towards the female figure and -- via successive movements in and out of the canvas -- eventually to slide from her toes back to the man's body.

The building in the upper-right corner is a representation of an early-nineteenth-century mansion located next to the place where I was born, raised, and lived my twenty-seven years in Russia; its side view looked quite mysterious at night. This structure establishes the vertical lines which I felt it necessary to juxtapose to the circular motion of the figures. Representing the building from the outside also helps to avoid associations that sleeping nudes have with warmth, interior, bed, security, and so forth, and invites the opposite feelings of cold, exposure, and vulnerability. For the same reasons, the figures are rendered in blue.

I consider this painting important for my professional development: this was the first image in which I could escape dependence on such stifling limitations as adhering to the laws of physicality (figures, I was taught, never float but **always** rest firmly on the surface), the rationality of space perspective, and the local character of colour, which limited my options in formal/expressive organisation.

## “SUNDAY”

“Sunday” also sprang from my Russian experience, but in creating this image I was inspired by very different, nostalgic emotions, namely, childhood memories of the pet market. Russian outdoor markets in which puppies, kittens, birds, and aquarium fish were sold alongside pet food, wool, and furs were popular with the public for Sunday visits, as they presented a unique kind of experience. Scattered in groups around bushes, dressed in thick fur coats to keep warm through the day, the vendors kept puppies in bid bags or inside their coats, which they opened on request to allow potential buyers to see the animal. This setting from childhood memories is a metaphor for my understanding of human interaction. Interacting with animals, especially puppies, people experience genuine and positive emotions, and their real, gentler selves -- normally carefully shielded -- rise to the surface. The crouched dark figures on white snow looked like strange, huge bugs, while faces and hands emerging from under heavy shell-like clothes communicated. The unreal semicircular perspective and unrealistic light convey the dream-like character of this strange but meaningful ritual of human interaction “through the medium of puppies.”

This painting (like “Perestroika,” which followed it) uses a very specific story as its point of departure. It is small wonder that I have been asked whether I consider my subject matter with respect to Canadian viewers. I suggest that this question could be addressed to artists all over the world and throughout history whose subject matter deals with specific incidents rather than universal happenings like birth or death. The value of art, as I understand it, does not reside in the accessibility of its narrative content; but hopefully, local incidents reflect universal experiences. This is what I tried to achieve by this image: I wanted the generalizable experience to come through and allow viewers to relate to the image.

### “PERESTROIKA”/“BIG SOVIET DREAM”

Perestroika reflects the overwhelming desire to capture the turmoil in Russia which inspired “Night,” but this time I was keen on giving more objectivity to the image. Witnessing the dramatic and significant change in the life and the spirit of the nation which perestroika brought about, I turned to historical realism, the tradition in which I was trained.

The idea of construction was fundamental to the Soviet myth. Communist theory stressed that socialist, never mind communist, society would not evolve from capitalism like the latter evolved from feudalism, but would be constructed according to the blueprint laid out in Marxist-Leninist theory. Construction terminology dominated not only propaganda and the mass media; daily life itself was overwhelmed by images of construction and industry. On its way about its daily errands the population traversed trenches left open for months awaiting pipelines; ownerless road-building equipment could be seen abandoned in children’s playgrounds and parks; agricultural machines sat inert along country roads for lack of spare parts; constant migration from the countryside fuelled the booming industry of government-subsidised construction; and people moved into new apartments before landscaping could be done to adjacent territory. All of us, including myself, were required to take part in “productive labour” on collective farms and sort out rotten potatoes from decent ones in state storage facilities. To use the propagandists’ figure of speech, “The entire country was a single construction site.”

For us, Gorbachev’s perestroika was a continuation of the same brand of construction propaganda. We were told that what had been built so far had unfortunately deviated from Lenin’s original concept. Now we had to start a new cycle of construction, called “perestroika” -- in Russian, “reconstruction” -- arriving in “the bright future” as soon as we undid what had gone wrong, reconstructed it, and continued construction according to the newly amended plan. At first, Gorbachev’s initiatives met with a certain degree of enthusiasm, as they were perceived as a movement in the direction of common sense. But

very soon enthusiasm flagged, and the inability of Russian society to regulate itself efficiently without a “firm hand” became evident: every sector of the population went about its business in complete disregard of the havoc it might wreak on the rest of society. The end of perestroika and of the grandiose project of communist construction was marked by the disintegration of the social fabric, economic collapse, and social chaos.

The original idea of the painting was to commemorate the end of the construction era in a piece representing construction imagery on disintegrating canvas: shreds of burlap loosely joined together with the rope inside a “construction-like” stretcher-frame; the very fabric should convey the sense of disintegration. Each shred would contain a group of people typical to perestroika-time Russia going about their business unaware of the presence of others. The groups would be loosely tied together by scale and perspective.

However, upon making the studies I realised that preparation of the support alone might take weeks of work and an indefinite amount of money. I wondered if I would be able to stretch the huge patchwork so that it would safely support the paint. At the same time, having never worked with canvas as an expressive element, I was concerned that the image would be too “obvious” and “poster-like.” These qualities were greatly disapproved in the Academy; clearly, I had not yet escaped the limitations of my training. In other words, my concerns prevailed and I reduced the project to a single piece of canvas stretched partly on the ropes. To this day I feel that I should have followed the original idea and that conceding to my doubts led me to produce an image of largely diminished power. This failure was a good lesson to me, to trust my sensibility and my vision.

“Big Soviet Dream” stems from the same urge to commemorate a significant historical experience I was a part of that pursued me around that time. The specific concept grew out of my longstanding desire to paint a “lobsters and pineapple” still life. Images of food and wine were so lavishly and abundantly found in the works of Russian painters of the turn of the century that I was for many years haunted by the desire to try to paint something of

the kind. Unfortunately, while their representations teased us from the walls of Soviet museums, the objects themselves were done away with after 1917, preventing me from materialising my desire. Only on coming to Canada did I begin to seriously entertain the idea of painting a “lobster still life.” Wrestling with the concept, I discovered that while it reflected my attraction to unselfconscious celebration of material things -- a kind of experience we were not allowed in Russia -- on that topic I had little of original value to say: to paint a lobster and a bottle of wine in the way I had previously envisioned would be to borrow emotions from someone else. So I reviewed my concept: in the final version a colourful still life of a lobster, a pineapple, and a bottle of wine as a never-realised dream of material enjoyment floats in front of a black-and-white collage illustrating life in contemporary Russia.

Like “Perestroika,” this work uses the shape of the canvas and the frame as expressive elements, reinforcing the emotional resonance of the image. The unstable diamond shape and incoherence between the axes of the still life and the background were intended to evoke an uncomfortable and unsettling feeling, which is what Soviet life was all about. Painted a year later than “Perestroika,” “Big Soviet Dream” employs a different formal device: collaging, allowed me to tell the story of life in communist Russia in an eloquent but concise manner without compromising the clarity of the overall image.

### “NAKED TRUTH”

This painting was brought into being by the same historical circumstances discussed above. Having lived in Canada for about a year and a half by that time, I felt no less emotionally evolved with my native land; however, the circumstances of our lives in Calgary gave me a very different perspective on Soviet events and our relation to them. The painting was conceived as a monument to all those for whom the collapse of

communism brought full realisation of how unscrupulously they had been cheated. Since 1917 people had endured hardships to realise the dream of a just and prosperous society. Down went the regime without apologies, offering no rewards for the hard work of the past; in its free fall it took with it whatever prosperity, dignity, and well-being people had managed to secure. Seventy years of sacrifice were erased at one stroke; the significance of the past, the dignity of the present, and prospects for the future all crumbled. But one thing persisted, firm as a rock - oppression. The new order was as effective in humbling its citizens as the old one. Its grip on us, now living in the West, was as tight as ever, for everything was a reminder of our stigma: obtaining a student visa, applying to a university, crossing the border into the U.S. -- simple everyday situations grew to the proportions of major challenges, draining our emotions, energy, and finances. As we felt that nothing was particularly wrong with us as human beings, we came to connect the “abnormality” of our situation with the pieces of identification that we carried. The Soviet passport became a symbol of unfreedom, embarrassment, and unhappiness. This was true not only for us but for those in Russia as well: Once the Iron Curtain lifted and people grew aware of the world beyond Soviet borders, the red passports once glorified by the Soviet myth became emblems of humiliation. But the end of the cold war also meant the end of the chance to escape misery by giving those red passports up via political asylum: they obstinately stuck to their owners, like a ball and chain.

A naked young man with a fig-leaf passport over his genitals is represented against the background of the main communist newspaper *Pravda* -- in Russian, “truth” -- which brainwashed us throughout Soviet history about the glories of living in the “best country in the world.” The thick black title “TRUTH” is repeated four times: above the head, vertically on the right side, vertically on the left, and upside down at the bottom. In combination with a human image stripped of all clothing but the red fig leaf, these elements play on the Russian expression “naked truth”, meaning an honest and painfully down-to-earth account of a situation. All inscriptions, carefully chosen to invert communist headlines, are meaningful: the one below the right hand of the man reads, “Another

Attempt to Suffocate the Truth”; the big sign behind the man’s bent arm says, “Do Not Wait! Act! Get Rich!”; the headline behind the left ankle reads, “Already Not Home, Not Yet a Foreign Land”; and so on. Picking inscriptions was a lot of fun; it gave me an emotional tickle in two ways. On the one hand, I was challenging the still-dangerous communist machine; on the other hand, by rendering these obviously meaningful inscriptions in Russian, I could tease Westerners about their preoccupation with verbal language in visual arts and point to the gross limitations of language-based visual imagery.

This painting manifested my new-found ability to overcome the restrictions of my training and to find appropriate ways of expressing myself in a visually successful image. “Naked Truth” marked the beginning of my gradual progression towards images that tell the story in layers: newspapers reveal the story of the country in pictures and letters without interfering with the sign-like clarity of the male image. Allowing some canvas to remain unpainted was also a new element in my visual vocabulary; taught by the failure of “Perestroika,” this time I went as far as my vision led me. Just as it opens a new step in my professional development, “Naked Truth” also opens (chronologically) this exhibition. Here I will employ it to describe some subtle considerations of the art process.

From the very beginning I envisioned a large-scale image of a man with a passport, positioned against a background of newspapers and looking somewhat awkward at finding himself exposed. I did not want anything to compromise the clarity of the message and so limited the work to a few elements: the figure, the passport, and the newspaper. This concept suggested a canvas format in a shape of an extended vertical rectangle. Because the curving organic lines of the human body do not work well with the straight “mechanical” lines of the canvas edges, drawing the figure within such a format so that it looks integrated, rather than cut and pasted, presents some difficulties. My sparse choice of formal elements dictated that I make use of the newspaper’s edge. Straight in some places and curving in others, a newspaper’s “torn” borders work as an transitional/integrating device. It is also known that the areas of a work most looked at lie

within a region mapped by the golden ratio, which almost always leaves the head of a solitary figure well above those areas. This problem can be overcome by positioning the head within an arch. The arch is a visual device which naturally draws attention to the centre of its gravity point: not accidentally, most sculptures are placed in arched rather than rectangular niches. My irregular arch, tilted so that its centre line follows the axes of the head, allows me to draw attention to the head at the same time as it reinforces the rhythm of the left hand and the torso.

To achieve the illusion of the newspaper's edge, I had to treat the corners of the painting differently in tone and/or colour from the value of the newspaper; the most obvious solution was to paint something like a wall in those corners. I do not know of a way to paint a "wall in general": each wall is made of plaster, brick, wood, and the like, not easily allowing an artist to avoid this detailing. But the fact of the matter is that every detail introduced into a painting particularizes the image concerning its scale and location (in either the interior or the exterior), thus narrowing down its significance. As well, each element tends to take on cultural meanings and to invite interpretations, and I wanted no interpretations of the symbolism of the brick or wooden or other corners. So, I left the corners exposed. They do not invite any associations, they exclude interpretations, and they have a nice neutral colour and an attractive surface, thus adding to the variety of textures in the painting.

That the naked image is slightly turned to the viewer's left is not accidental: the eye of a European viewer explores the image from left to right. Let us consider the mirror image, with the man turned to the right (see Figs. 1 and 2). Here, the relations of shapes, lines, and rhythms are identical with those of the original image, but our gaze examines them in a different sequence. The resulting impression is quite different: the image is less inviting, less open, and less "exposed," for now the viewer encounters a hard bony structure, whereas the original image meets the viewer's eye with his vulnerable, soft "guts".



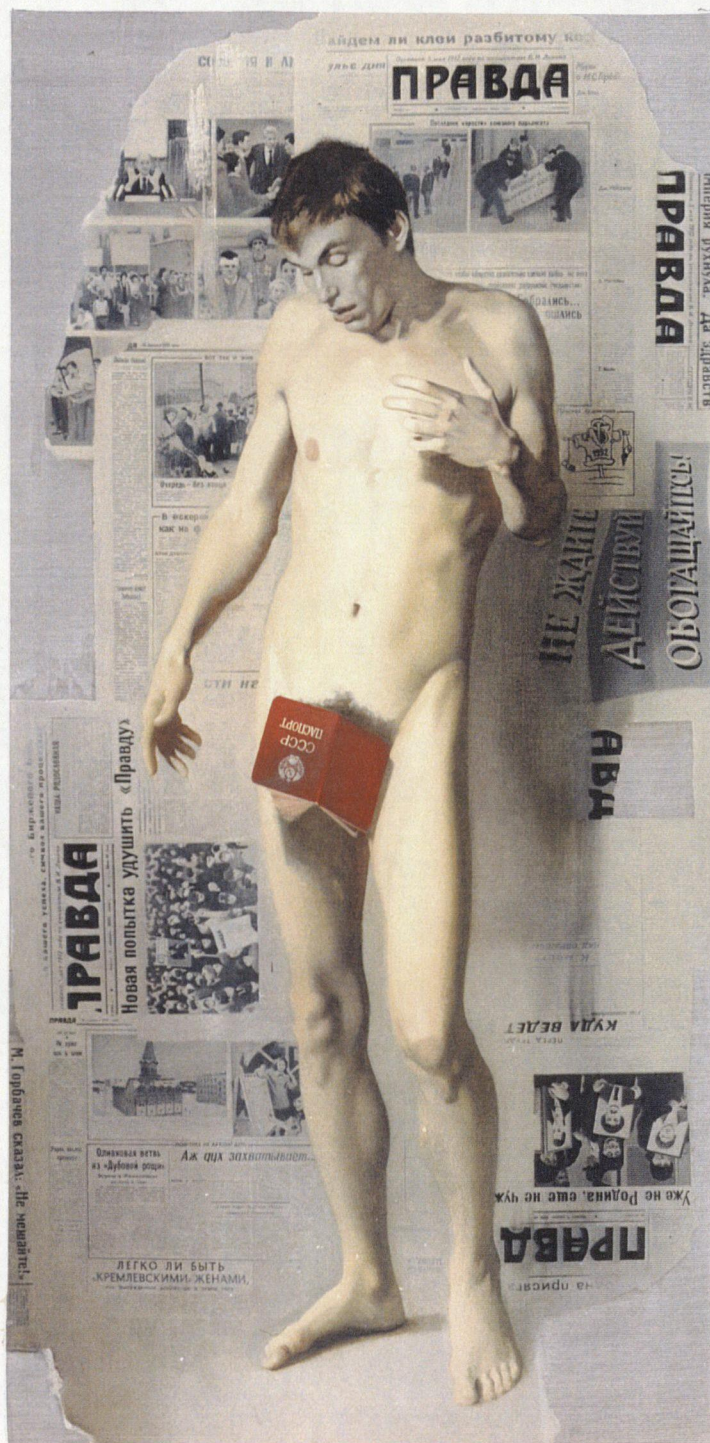


Fig. 1: ORIGINAL COMPOSITION



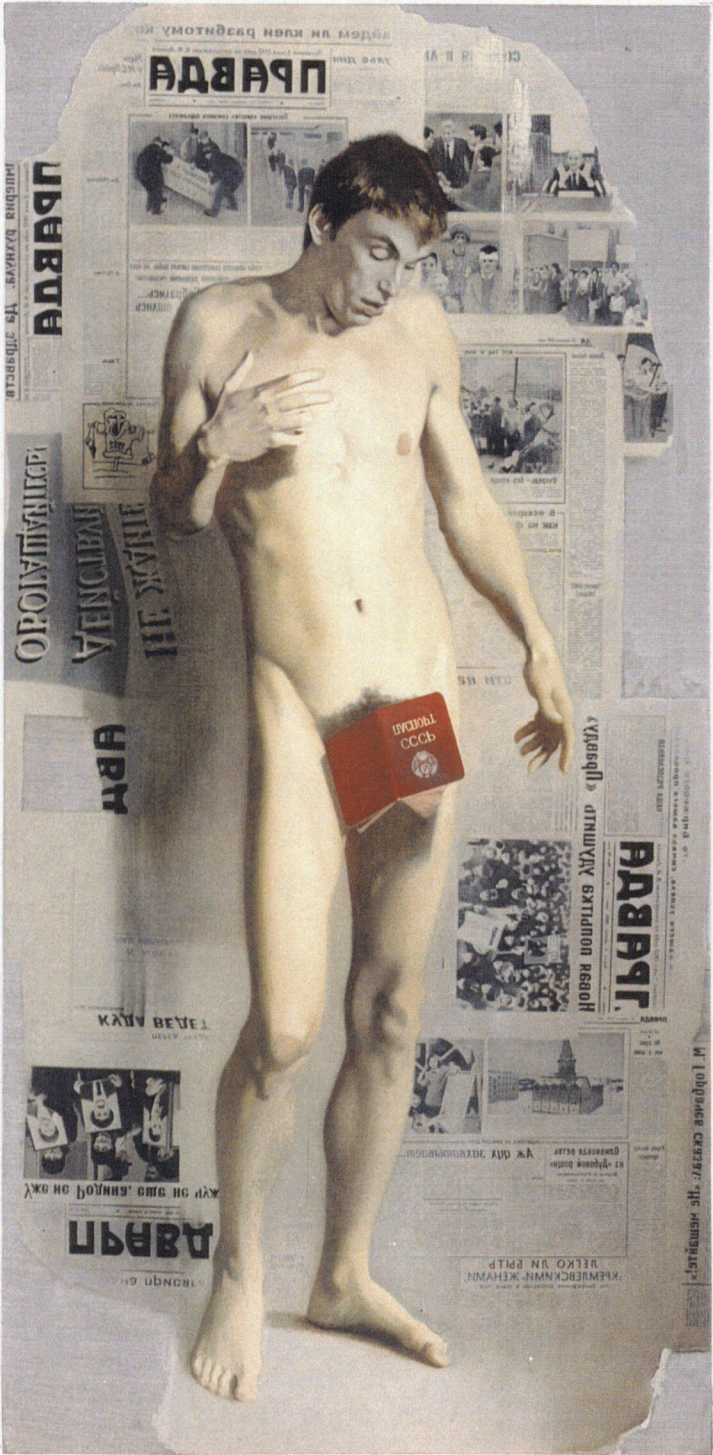


Fig. 2: REVERSED IMAGE



Also, I strove to make the image as rhythmically expressive as I could.

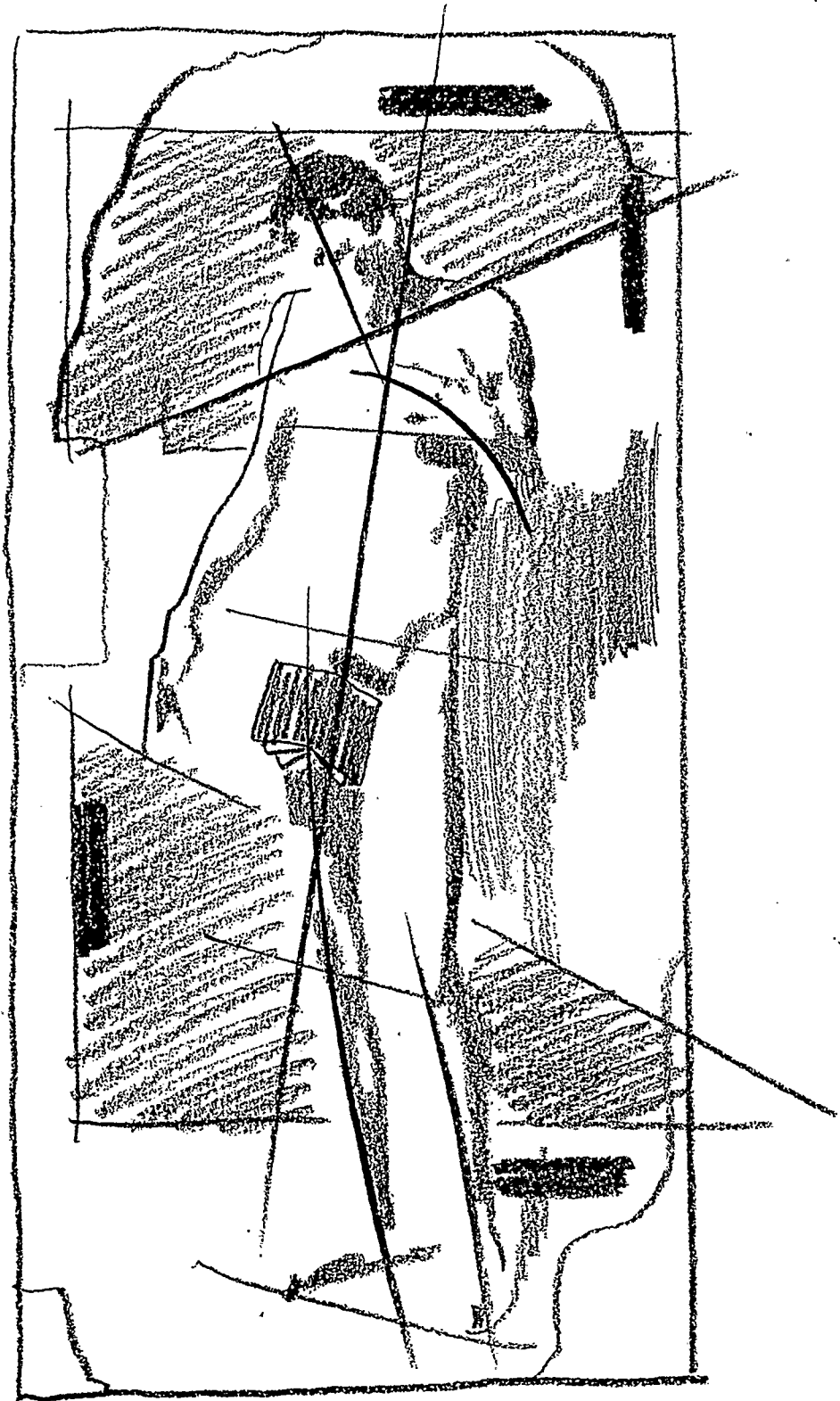


Fig. 3: MAJOR RHYTHMICAL COMPONENTS



Fig. 4: *TONAL COMPOSITION*

The newspapers and photographs, which may seem mere imitations of the originals, in fact used the latter only as a point of departure. To create patterns that would be aesthetically engaging, each newspaper was composed of at least five original ones, and each photograph and inscription was altered and moved until I was content with the balance of black and white, its general rhythmic pattern. My process was to follow the guidance of what felt right or wrong, selecting formal devices based on whether they resonated as desired.

### “BIG STUDIO KETTLE”

“Big Studio Kettle” developed the same formal approach, although it was based on my Canadian experience. My first attempt to paint the reflection in the chrome surface of my electric kettle was made as soon as I brought the kettle into my studio, in the first days of my residence at the U of C. The work was never finished, but it allowed me to anticipate and deal with some technical difficulties, making a careful drawing of the reflected interior before embarking on the painting.

The painting further develops the formal and conceptual idea, suggested in “Naked Truth,” of bringing several levels of representation of reality together in one image. Though the normal hierarchy of the scale would be interior/object (kettle), the reflection allowed me to place these in reverse order. This time I gave clear preference to the studio, blowing up the kettle’s chrome surface and ignoring the background. However, the kettle is suggested in the title and its outlines can be guessed from the shape of the painted image.

### “SELF PORTRAIT”/“THE DOUBLE PORTRAIT”

By this time my interest in presenting reflections had become strong. Reflections had fascinated me since I started to paint landscapes on the spot at the age of twelve. Then, trees and skies reversed in rain pools and ponds always seemed more exciting than the actual trees and skies. As a teenager in an art school I dreamed of using reflected images for my narrative compositions, but I dared to use these as the materials for my paintings only when I had matured technically and conceptually.

Reflections are visual metaphors: two literally unconnected meanings allow fascinating interplay. A pool that reflects the sky is no longer just a pool, it is a pool and the sky at the same time; it is the sky brought down into the pool. Reflections also satisfy my desire to find representational imagery not very intensely explored in the centuries-old representational tradition: although employed in various paintings, reflections were hardly dominant images until the last thirty years. As well, reflections and shadows allow an unusual perspective (in both the plain and the metaphorical sense) on familiar objects. As Shklovski put it:

We look at each other, but we do not see each other any more. Our perception of the world has withered away, what has remained is mere recognition ... The act of creative deformation restores sharpness of our perception.<sup>32</sup>

But most important, using reflections allows me to regain some of the freedom which realist conventions take away from me. Objects in the real world are dominated by two important axes: the vertical gravity line and the horizontal surface plane. These dominant axes assume a tremendous role in the formal organisation of representational space: in a sense, any realist image implies a surface on which the objects rest and a space above towards which these objects spread. When God, spirits, and angels fell into disfavour, the domain of the laws of the material universe expanded to encompass all elements of representational painting. In addition, representational space presents a box in which objects are governed by the same perspective receding in a very orderly, predictable fashion.

I call the restrictions enforced by our perceptions the “tyranny of imitation.” Since the purpose of my images is not “accurate” representation of the world but communication of how I feel about it, I find these restrictions stifling. At the same time, I give fair consideration to the conservatism of the human mind, which, when the image is not perceived as “the correct view of reality,” effectively switches from contemplation to

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<sup>32</sup> Shklovski, 13-14

questioning the perceived challenge to convention. For me the challenge has no value of its own: I challenge only when I find that the resulting tension helps to achieve the desired emotional resonance. In all cases, I seek a workable compromise between respect for the accepted modes of space perception, laws of perspective, atmospheric effects, and so on, and my freedom to elicit emotions. All works presented in the exhibition illustrate my attempts to achieve a reconciliation between the “correctness” of the images and my feelings and imagination. Employing reflection allows me to juxtapose the images in such a way that they achieve a maximum of formal and conceptual expressiveness without being perceptually confusing to viewers.

All of these tenets were put to use in “Self Portrait.” Overlaying the night landscape with a reflection of the studio allowed a metaphorical and visually expressive juxtaposition of interior and exterior images: in a sense, the interior “contains” images of the nightscape. “The Double Portrait” plays on the same idea of overlaying, but instead of reflections I used shadows. The western windows of our apartment allowed me to observe shadows on the room’s walls nearly every evening. Photographs of our friends and their children were taped nearby, and all I had to do was to put the photos and the shadows together, add the mirrors, and arrange everything into a coherent image. This painting, which is about family life, my relationship with my husband, and our separation from our friends, is also about the self-conscious nature of painting, which through the illusion of reality creates real feelings.

### “OPENING”

“Opening” pushed the idea of juxtaposition of illusions “of different order” to its limit: with the help of mirrors, reflections of real people are introduced into the painting. The image was inspired by my impressions of the ritual of art openings in North America. Art

openings and gallery spaces in Russia were nothing like those in Canada: in Russia big windows were a must to allow in as much daylight as possible, and walls were broken by columns and perpendicular stands. Their colour varied from shades of grey to terra cotta, but I do not recall any white walls. Floors were of hardwood or -- in prestigious places -- hardwood mosaics, marble, or granite; carpeted flooring is not known in Russia. The ceilings, depending on the space's rating, were plain white stucco to fresco, but in no spaces were elements of roofing and plumbing allowed in sight. At Russian openings people never eat or drink: consumption of food or beverages was deemed inappropriate in places devoted to appreciation of the arts.

Not surprisingly, my first encounter with an exhibition space in Canada was a shock: the carpet ran indefinitely towards low, white, windowless walls, and the centrepieces of activity were tables laden with food. Directed light broke space into pockets: some groups of people were modelled sculpturally while others read as dark silhouettes against white walls. My amazement and fascination pushed me to express the experience in a painting, but I had no interest in simply recording the scene. Then, a lino tile suggested a conceptual solution: to introduce another layer of reality by placing rows of mirrors on top of a painted surface. I knew that my graduation exhibition would be in the Nickle Arts, and so that became the site of my painting. One day soon the mirrors will introduce a real opening at the Nickle into my painted Nickle.



## NOT-A-CONCLUSION

As Part Two of this paper puts forth no theoretical proposition and thus no argument to support it, there is no theoretical conclusion to be drawn from its discussion. During the years that I worked on the paintings submitted as my thesis, I was able to make a transition from images largely defined by the conventions of my training towards images that reflect who I am as a person and an artist in a more direct way. There still are avenues to explore in integrating freedom and directness with precision, and I have not yet exhausted the formal and contextual possibilities of playing with reflections. So, I hope, this is not the conclusion. Not yet.

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**Anna Loseva**  
"Night" oil on canvas 1991



48." x 62.5" (129 x 159 cm)

**Anna Loseva**  
"Sunday", oil on canvas 1991

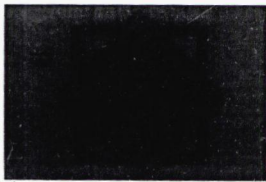


44" x 47.5" (112 cm x 121 cm)

**Anna Loseva**  
"Perestroika" oil on burlap 1992  
110" x 117" (256 cm x 297 cm)

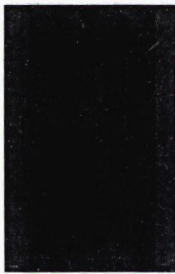


**Anna Loseva**  
"Big Soviet Dream" 1992



oil on linen 48" x 48"

**Anna Losseva** ▲  
"Naked Truth" oil on canvas 1992  
79" x 39" 199 x 99 cm



**Anna Loseva**  
"Big Studio Kettle"



**Anna Loseva**  
"Double Portrait" 1993



oil on burlap 51"x 36"

**Anna Loseva**  
"Self Portrait" oil on burlap



1993 55" x 67"

**Anna Losseva** ▲  
"Opening" 1993  
oil and mirrors on board 61" x 121"



**Anna Loseva**  
"Window" 1994  
oil on linen 48" x 64"



*Anna Loseva*



*"Sunday Morning"*

**Anna Loseva**  
"Gift", oil on canvas



32" x 25"

**Anna Loseva**



*"Sunday Morning", drawing*

*Anna Loseva*



*"Sunday Morning", drawing*