

Ola Rondiak: *Identity, Interrupted*

The media-savvy political demonstrations of the Orange Revolution (2004) and Euromaidan (2013–14) that broke out in Kyiv, Ukraine led to a proliferation of public activities intended to focus national and international attention on the enormous contributions being made — often by women — in all walks of Ukrainian life. At home and abroad, this was accomplished partly through the formation of influential new organizations and publications, as well as the prominent roles played by individual women in such areas as public service, politics, business, education, and the literary and plastic arts.

Deeply connected to her heritage, Kyiv-based Ukrainian-American artist Ola Rondiak creates work that addresses the myths of her ancestors in the context of current issues facing Ukrainians, and particularly the Ukrainian woman. She works with paint, collage, and appropriated imagery, using a combination of representational and abstract images to confront diverse subjects from personal upbringing, womanhood, ethnic and national identity, politics, to street art and the pervasive illusions of Euro-American cultural hegemony. In stacking and reassembling these materials and images in figurative and totemic-like structures, Rondiak aims to explore the multiple histories, various beliefs, and at times contradictory notions of self that emerge.

Inspired by her primary motifs of the multi-meaning *motanka*¹ and *vinok*², Rondiak sees herself as a harbinger, a mediator and a bridge builder. Her art, her life experiences and her ethnic ties are thoroughly enmeshed in never-ending dialogue. She travels from one community with her messages to another, all the while enlightening all. Whereas strength and dignity characterize her art, Rondiak often embraces her own feminine spirit and feminine mysticism in her work, unapologetically, and with copious amounts of joy.

Taken together, these works offer a meditation on the nature of character. By focusing on the possibility of individual dignity in a society held in constant flux, Rondiak is able to move beyond the rigid dyads of East/West, male/female, and modern/traditional. As her gazing heroine becomes more fully rounded and begins to manifest an interior life, we begin to see the world through her eyes. In the process, she begins to suggest the commonality of human dreams and desires. She strives to shake up the nonchalance of people in ways that would provoke them to connect with each other more authentically, to understand that they are essentially one within humanity, and that identity is the supreme mother to all.

¹ *motanka* – a faceless handmade doll/talisman broadly signifying woman-goddess.

² *vinok* – a traditional Ukrainian floral crown representing the beauty and purity of womanhood.

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