

DISCOVERING An Interview UKRAINIAN with NEW YORK: Ola Rondiak



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I had the chance to sit down with Ola Rondiak, a contemporary Ukrainian-American artist, who had a solo show titled “Metempsychosis”, curated by Juan Puentes, at the WhiteBox Harlem Art Space in New York City this year. The show also had a parallel



■ Ola Rondiak

exhibition presented by The Revolution of Dignity Museum in Kyiv at the Museum of Kyiv History, as well as an international (NYC - Kyiv) online panel discussion hosted by the Ukrainian Congress Committee of America. I visited Ola at her exhibition, which featured her collage icons, her *motanka* sculptures, and her Neo-pop sculptures.

Ola walked me through the show, explaining the significance of the three components. The *motanka* sculptures, made out of plaster, represent our ancestors, trauma passed from generation to generation, and the healing process. The Neo-Pop sculptures, inspired by her children’s clothing, represent the future generation, as well as being reminiscent of things left behind. And the collages depict the past but foreshadow the future, a merging of the two in contemporary female portraits. Ola’s work has been described as “contemporary art with a historical conscience” by curator Juan Puentes, as well as that which “merges history with contemporary art, to protest injustice, race, social consciousness, and civic rejuvenation” by curator Kathrine Page. I felt that the show sat at an intersection of the tangible and intangible. The works carried a physicality, and yet were also rich in story and context: a present reminder of our moment in time, and in history, mirrored in our connection to the past. Our conversation enlightened parts of the work, and the artist behind them.



■ *Metempsychosis*. Ola’s straight jacket hangs from a *Motanka*. Transgenerational pain and freedom, or its deprivation, are main pillars of *Metempsychosis*

Q

Tell me about growing up, did you always know you wanted to be an artist?

A I grew up in Ohio. I had Ukrainian immigrant parents, and they gave us a very practical perspective for the future. Like, you can be a doctor, lawyer, or engineer. I don’t think I really considered being an artist as an option. At first, I was interested in psychology; it was what I majored in. I had American-Ukrainian friends in New York, and when I started college at Ohio State, I kept thinking “How do I get to New York? How do I get to New York?” After my second year, I had a lightbulb moment – I could live with my grandmother in New York and go to Hunter College! So I transferred and I graduated from Hunter. Then I was a social worker for a few years in Brooklyn. The bureaucracy was very limiting, and I didn’t feel like I was helping as much as I wanted to. I went to graduate school and became a psychotherapist. Later, my husband got a job offer in Kyiv, and we moved to Ukraine. So, basically, we have



■ *My Dear*. Acrylic collage on canvas, 2018

been there the bulk of the last 25 years. We came back to America because I really wanted kids, and we had three kids in three years in Delaware, and then we moved back to Ukraine with essentially three babies.

How do you find living in Ukraine versus living in America, and moving between the two?

A I think it’s just my fate, because as I grew up in Ohio, I felt very Ukrainian. I was always kind of split, I had my American friends and then I had my Ukrainian friends. So I think this is kind of like that, but on a larger scale. It just makes sense, I guess, because my husband is still working in Ukraine full-time, and we raised



Ola Rondiak's neo-pop sculptures are interspersed throughout the exhibit among *motankas*, symbols of the ancient talisman. The juxtaposition of the modern and the ancient is the main theme of *Metempsychosis*



Collages of Ukrainian female portraits gaze on neo-pop sculpture of child's dress made of schoolwork collage. Ola Rondiak, artist

three kids there, but now all three of them have graduated high school and are in the States with school and work. I really enjoy working in Kyiv; it's a connection for me to my roots. And it was very special for the kids to grow up there, to meet family, and sort of have a different way of growing up. But I think you get the best of both worlds out of it, without sounding too stereotypical. I think that in Ukraine we get more of a cultural fulfilment because culture is more respected there, and in Europe as well, especially compared to America. But in America, there's a familiarity and a respect for the freedoms that are given to the individual. I think that the change between locations also helps keep me fresh and inspired in my work.

How do you find the art scene in Kyiv?

If you want to find it, you can find it. And a lot of artists are open to it as well, in terms of connecting. In Ukraine, there are a plethora of cultural activities in a wide variety of areas and it's so wonderful. The problem, for me at least, is having enough time to connect with all of the interesting projects and things to do.

When would you say you became an artist?

In retrospect, I've always been an artist, because as a kid I was always making homemade gifts for everybody. But when I started having kids, in

■ *What's the Difference.* Acrylic collage on canvas, 2017



■ The *Motankas*, suspended from the ceiling, take on an ethereal presence and cast mini eclipses on the floor of the exhibit

Delaware, I was going to stay home, you know, to raise them. I really wanted to raise them myself. And so, automatically, just turned our dining room into a studio and I started painting furniture for the kids. It was a practical approach, but my need for artistic expression was already showing itself.

When we moved to Ukraine, I was really busy, raising three children and taking care of our home. But then I slowly started creating. I started first with fashion and modifying clothing. There's always so many things in our closets that we don't want to wear but we don't want to get rid of. I was just changing people's clothes, and then it moved into fabric collage, and then it entered into canvases.

When the Orange Revolution happened in 2004 in Kyiv, it was such an emotional time period that I started painting, as an emotional release. But, I guess you could say it really started in the spring of 2013, with the kids in school, when I made the conscious decision to make our garage into a studio and to work there for as many hours as possible. That's when it became a significant commitment. In many ways, it has been a natural transition.

In 2013, I was mostly painting on paper and old cardboard boxes from our moves, because canvas was just so intimidating and expensive. Within a few months, I had 50 portraits of contemporary female faces, and when a friend

of mine came over, and they were sort of all over the house, she said you have to exhibit these. She had a beautiful rose garden, and she suggested we do the show there, and just about all of them sold. So that's when I decided, Okay, I'm buying canvases. Let's do this for real.

That winter, the Revolution of Dignity started, and one of the first things I did was collect newspapers and magazines. I created a contemporary icon, which was inspired by my grandmother's story. After World War II, my grandfather and my mother, who was 11 at the time, had to flee from the Stalinist regime. My grandmother had to stay behind to care for my sick aunt. But as the front line kept moving further west, they couldn't return, so they became displaced people, and were sent to Austria for four years. Meanwhile my aunt had died, and they arrested and sent my grandmother to a female labor camp in Russia. She was there for about 10 years or so. And while she was there, she was secretly creating embroideries using fish

bones for needles, potato sacks for canvas, and thread from clothing. When they released her she smuggled those out, by sewing them into her clothing. She then gave them to a clandestine priest who smuggled them to Chicago. When the embroideries arrived, the Chicago Tribune wrote a big article about them. The Ukrainian diaspora figured out it was my mother's mother, and they sent us the embroideries, one of which was an unfinished icon. So that's what I created when the Revolution of Dignity started. She has had a profound impact on me just because of her strength in navigating life. She used art to heal and process. She had lost everything, she didn't know who was alive or not. Yet somehow, after exhausting days of hard physical labor, she found the strength to embroider at night. It has definitely impacted my life and given me a lot of strength, and where I think the name for this exhibit comes from: *Metempsychosis*. Because that's the transferring of a soul from one body to another, and I have no doubt that her soul has touched mine.



■ *Sisters.* Acrylic collage on canvas, 2018



■ *Straight Jacket*, by Ola Rondiak. Transgenerational pain and freedom, or its deprivation, are main pillars of *Metempsychosis*

Q And where do you get your materials for the collages, like the newspaper clippings?

I get historical newspaper clippings from various sources, from Kyiv Posts I find lying around the house to a man on Andriyivsky Descent in Kyiv, who was selling old Soviet newspapers. I grabbed those! It's the same thing with the letters between my mother and my grandmother. They never saw each other again, but they wrote letters. I use copies of these. And, of course, there are the newspapers and magazines that I collected because I've been living in Ukraine, like the ones about the revolution and the war. I've been collecting them every week from the kiosks.

Q How did you transition to sculpture?

Again, that was also just a natural progression. After the revolution broke out, I was first creating a lot of collages, like a whole series on the Revolution of Dignity, and they were contemporary female portraits with a lot of the news inside the *vinok* [traditional Ukrainian head-wreath worn by women and girls – Editor]. And I knew about the *motanka* dolls, which are ancient Ukrainian ragdolls that were passed down from mother to daughter as a talisman for good health and fortune. I had created some in workshops in Kyiv, and they just struck me. But I also got curious about using plaster,

because it's what we use to heal broken bones. And I thought, "What if I made some *motanka* sculptures out of this?" The plaster, in addition to being a talisman, has a healing element to it. I guess that's the psychotherapist in me, combining it all together and adding the element of healing, and connecting Ukrainians in this difficult time.

Q I know this is different for every artist: how do you feel about the process of creating?

What I love about creating is that it's limitless, and that it keeps my soul connected to a spiritual place. Even when I'm doing more of this kind of stuff, like exhibiting, I get glimpses of a lot of creative ideas. But they are only realized when I give them the respect, the time, the space, and the studio, and when I believe in my creative process and let that magic happen. For me, that's very exciting, and you can't really put your finger on it. You really have to believe in it, and allow it to happen.

■ *WhiteBox Harlem*



Q What's on the horizon for you, creatively?

Since I got into creating the straightjackets for this show, I want to do some kind of fashion show, maybe just one time, an art kind of fashion show. As I mentioned earlier, I've always had a fascination with fashion, as well. I think it would be a cool way to combine the two. I was invited to do a wearable art soiree, and

that sort of sent me back into the fashion side of things, with the straightjackets and the mannequins. I feel like they are going to another level, and I have many ideas about some art-infused clothing and clothing sculptures.

Q Ola also shared with me her perspective on the significance of art within culture, something that I agreed with wholeheartedly, and believe we should all remember:

I think that, by definition, art is a very necessary part of culture, because culture is the combination of the arts and the intellect that humans realize for their societies. I strongly believe that if we lose creative expression, then we lose culture; and without culture, we are lost, or at best at a standstill of human growth and development. I've learned that art is so much greater than I am, because I've seen how it connects people, which I think is a beautiful and necessary thing.

■ *Only Ukraine*. Acrylic collage on canvas, 2018

