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Interview with Olga Sushkova-Hunyadi

Yulia Stakhnevich

After graduating with honors from Kazan Art College in Russia, Olga Sushkova-Hunyadi has been painting for over 15 years. Before her move to the United States, she had studied at the High School of Arts in Dresden, Germany, and joined the Union of Artists in Russia. Since 2018, she lives and works with her young family in Lowell, Massachusetts. Olga's works are in private collections in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Germany, Switzerland, France, Italy, Australia, Estonia, China, Israel, Canada, and the USA.

A couple of years ago, I ran across Olga's Facebook page and became fascinated with her art. Her paintings have both fantastical and realistic elements and contain a unique combination of textural and graphic features that swiftly pull viewers into the artist's world. The graphic elements of the paintings often include letters, numbers, signs, and elaborate line work, all of which add dream-like intricate layers and invite viewers' interpretations. Having admired her works virtually, I wanted to see them in person, but with the start of the pandemic Olga's public exhibits in Boston were closed indefinitely. I had to wait until the Covid shots became available to travel to Lowell in order to attend a private art show in her Lowell condo in the fall of 2021. In her recent paintings, she seems to draw most of her inspiration from her New England surroundings, the city of Lowell, the ocean, local styles of architecture, and Massachusetts natural landscapes. At the same time, Olga stays connected to her roots and often incorporates images and symbols that she had been referencing earlier in her art; thus, enriching her visual language with

the elements of her new surroundings, rethinking her previous experiences, style, and subject matter, and experimenting with new color combinations, textures, and symbols.

One of the paintings that caught my eye at Olga's studio was entitled *Hobbies* (2019). The painting depicts a scene in which a woman and a young girl (potentially, mother and daughter) are relaxing surrounded by various objects that signify their interests and hobbies, including a vase with flowers, a chess figure, cups of coffee, random puzzle

pieces, a string of beads, a hula hoop, cookie jar, etc.

Yet, the painting goes beyond a mere depiction of personal hobbies and contains references to American and Russian cultures, in which the mother and daughter are participants. It takes some effort to notice these references, but they are there for a careful viewer to grasp. For example, the ornament on the wall features Sirin, a folkloric Russian bird of paradise, as well as Russia-inspired floral elements, both of which allude to the Russian style of embroidery and point out the mother and daughter's love for this style of Russian folk art. Mother is seen reading a book in Russian about Sirin. On the table, we can see additional objects, which, based on my conversation with Olga, she connects to either of the cultures based on her own personal experiences; for instance, there are Russian-style blintzes (blini), yet there is also a cookie jar in a form of a house that Olga associates with American cookies; the lily flower in the vase is thematically connected to the ornament on the wall and is Russian in style. The window in the emerald-colored frame is American or, to be more precise, a New England architectural feature that Olga often refers to in her recent paintings.

As a whole, the painting is bright and vivid, and depicts a world of leisurely pursuits representing both cultures of

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Hobbies, 2019, oil on canvas (image courtesy of the artist).

the painter and her family. As a Russian American, I was immediately drawn to *Hobbies* and felt a connection to the transcultural world that it depicts with such affection and joie de vivre. The luminous palette of yellows, blues, oranges, and gold suggests the crispness of air and brings forward a sense of solace, comfort, and simple joys of everyday life. The painting gives a jolt of good humor by actively engaging its

viewers in the process of savoring little pleasures of family life and depicting connections across cultures.

Since our initial meeting, I was lucky to speak with Olga on several occasions, both in person and online. Below are some of my questions and the answers that Olga kindly shared with me. I hope that these notes provide a brief glance into the painter's creative process and encourage viewers to search for

and experience the inspiring works of this talented artist. The interviews were conducted in Russian, and later translated into English for this publication.

YS: *How does the geography around you impact your creativity?*

OS-H: Usually, I paint what I see around me. Very often my subjects are real places, landscapes, and objects. Because of this I call myself a realist painter; however, I also stylize

my subjects and often add surrealist elements that add the unexpected elements to my art. I don't like copying from real life; I consider photographically realistic images more like exercises, studies for future works that will most certainly have additional elements from my own creative vision. And that's what art is for me.

In Kazan, I liked old things, sometimes even abandoned places. Those old-time references gave my pictures a warm coloring of yellows and oranges: for those who know about them, just think of Kazan's yellow plaster huts of incarcerated German soldiers from World War II; I lived among such buildings. In that life, there were lots of wooden objects, grass, earth, ancient trees and old plastered houses, not brick buildings. Because of that, everything seemed to be permeated with a sense of warmth. Massachusetts for me has a very different energy and mysticism around it. It's hard to argue, but in Russia I feel its mysticism at a deeper level. No matter how much renovators try, Kazan for me will stay in nuances, half-tones, hidden places, water

signs. The same applies to the nature; in Russia there seem to be more hues and tints in the landscape. I remember how it was akin to a hunting expedition when we went on plein-air assignments during my five years at the art college in Kazan, searching for beauty and style. Sometimes, it required to dive deep and hard. Since then, I can always find a subject, a plot, and an inspiration for my eyes.

In my past life, my visual impressions were sort of blurred. And here, the brightness of colors and design, all hits you at once; for example, in the past I used to add typeface elements to my pictorial representations of my reality, but here typefaces abound. On the one hand, I moved closer to my own intuitive esthetics, and I don't need to dig so deep to get to that beauty because it is now right at eye level. You simply take it in and ladle it out with a huge spoon from this enormous cauldron of beauty.

YS: *What has changed in your art in the last couple of years and in which way might these changes be connected to your move to Massachusetts?*

OS-H: Some folks say that my color palette has changed, that there are more blues, and that the tones became darker. I thought a couple of times about it, and I think it's more mechanic rather than out of choice: here the color palette, hues, and values are drastically different from what I'm used to in Kazan. Here in Lowell, formerly an industrial city, red bricks and emerald-colored window frames, and black lanterns dominate the place. I connect to these structural elements by adding more ultramarine to my color palette. Sort of "Once Upon in Time in America" type of aesthetics is how I see it. I connect blues with the depth, with the mysterious dark, even with something arcane, with wisdom.

I also find myself wanting to add additional layers of meaning to my paintings that they didn't have before. If in the past, I painted with ease and right away, now I spend more time with each painting, filling it with curious objects, unexpected textures, or somewhat strange elements. And I want to make the convergence of these elements, objects, and textures, be they exterior or interior, unique and carrying some sort of meaning.

In addition, I believe the changes in my painting style can be explained by the difference in light. Here in Massachusetts, the light has a lot of contrast. Seasons change quicker, and there is hardly any spring. Summers are longer, often with a lot of humidity, and with more light. The ocean is close by, the air is fresh and transparent. For me, this means that the air is sort of ringing as if made out of glass. How to express this sentiment in a painting? I do this by adding more ultramarine. Bright light, red brick buildings, black structural elements, and emerald-colored window frames urge me to juxtapose them all with lots and lots of ultramarine.

Another reason for these changes in my painting style is the newness, the freshness of everything that I still experience here every day. Although I live in a historic city center of Lowell, it feels differently from living in a historic center of Kazan, my home town. Here, from my Russian standpoint, everything is



Magnolia, 2021, oil on canvas (image courtesy of the artist).



Autumn in Massachusetts, 2019, oil on canvas (image courtesy of the artist).

brand new, even the mill buildings. And how can I express this impression of palpable newness of everything around me? I do it by using ultramarine.

YS: *Could you share more about the role of Lowell in your recent works and the typical current challenges that you face when painting?*

OS-H: For me, American cities in general have a certain mystical quality. The architecture is full of details, that to my eyes seems somewhat surreal. Lowell, which used to be and still recognizes itself as an industrial city, could be perceived as somewhat monotonous with its red and brown brick buildings, repeated patterns of dark doors and windows of its textile mills and factories, black lanterns, and lots and lots of signs with street names, numbers, and ads. Interestingly, these elements create a visual unity within the cityscape, resulting in a particular style that somehow speaks directly to me and engages my senses in a new way. I love walking around

in downtown Lowell and perusing through all the fonts and sizes of its street signs and ads. I'm especially attracted for some reason to numbers. And in this context, natural landscape becomes a background to the city's graphic elements and emerges as its own enormous piece of graphic art. In Lowell, while looking at the buildings' facades, I often only see their graphic elements: fonts or posters, and, of course, I want to include this vision in my own art. Sometimes, I insert a different graphic element in my cityscape paintings; for example, I might add graphic representations of flowers to the existing city background. This creates an interesting rhythm of the straight geometry of humanly created architectural elements supplemented by the curved and twisted patterns of nature.

For example, I painted *Autumn in Massachusetts* from a street in Lowell next to my house. For me, *Autumn in Massachusetts* is synonymous with clear air and huge splashes of reds and browns of trees intercepted with

the orange hues and reds of brick buildings. For this painting, I didn't mix much; instead, I used open colors from the tubes: ultramarine, alizarin crimson, emerald green, cobalt blue, violet deep... all to express this brightness that came from real life. The graphic elements are everywhere in this piece as well: fabric patterns, repetitions of bricks in the walls, arrangements of dried flowers, silhouettes of trees, the design on the girl's blouse, and multiple contour drawings of pomegranates, the graphics of letters in the sign... These graphic elements serve as a tribute to the fall, a season when everything becomes bare and one can see clearly the patterns of leaves, grasses, and branches that emerge at the forefront.

In the past, I learned how to find inspiration on the inside, but my new fresh environment that surrounds me helps me bring these creative ideas to the surface. I always try to notice interesting things around me, which help me create new plot lines for my pieces. For me, the creation of a painting is similar to that of a mosaic in that I organize each piece by adding and subtracting various details in an effort to strengthen my overall composition and expressiveness. I try not to hurry my creative process and allow my ideas sufficient time to mature and develop further directly on the easel. This process is ongoing in my brain even when I'm not physically painting. It is important for me to trust my own senses and instincts, not to hurry and not to be afraid to improvise and try new things. To paint, one needs to be courageous.



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