





DENIS SARAZHIN

VISCERAL INVOCATIONS

sarazhin-denis.com // interview by Elizah Leigh

left
Pantomime 11 - Trapped In My Mind, 2017
Oil on canvas, 100 cm x 90 cm

top right
On A Ram, 2022
Oil on canvas, 101 cm x 101 cm

bottom right
Follow The Flow, 2021
Oil on canvas, 50 cm x 80 cm

opposite page, left
Knight, 2022
Oil on canvas, 158 cm x 163 cm

opposite page, right
All In One Shirt, 2018
Oil on canvas, 150 cm x 150 cm

previous spread
Amber Light, 2019
Oil on canvas, 100 cm x 100 cm



In his halcyon days, Denis Sarazhin claims that he had "no innate artistic abilities or extraordinary talent", but he spent so much of his free time hunched over his graphite drawings that his parents – who were very supportive of his creative output – still felt compelled to remind him that nature and fresh air beckoned beyond their front door. The Nikopol, Ukraine-born child's dreamy notions of becoming an artist were vitalised by the rhapsodised portrayal of a bohemian lifestyle that he encountered in books. The landscape paintings created by his hobbyist father and uncle further intensified his perspective of artistic alchemy, with each brushstroke gently yielding to the manifestation of a realistic nature scene as he slowly stepped away from the canvas. Whether through "tinkering, sculpting, cutting, glueing, soldering" or a foray into long exposure photography that really set his heart ablaze, Denis has long engaged in some form of creative output.

If only our dreams were a reliable predictor of what the future holds. "Pursuing the career of an artist was perceived as a ridiculous fantasy", Denis Sarazhin recalls. Balancing his family's hope that



he find a financially reliable occupation with his own literature-driven notions of grand sea adventures, he chose to be a ship chef. The now internationally renowned oil painter jests, "All children should read Charles Bukowski the moment they begin kindergarten, so they'll have no illusions about life." After three years of cooking, it simply wasn't the right fit for him. Since Denis always had an interest in computers and programming, he decided to enrol in a technological university. The foundational coursework was engaging, but what "completely swallowed" him up were his basic art classes. He could no longer deny the path that he was meant to tread.

In what Denis regards as a bit of a miracle, he passed Kharkiv State Academy of Design and Arts' entrance exam. From that point forward, every aspect of the artist lifestyle – the atelier atmosphere, mediums, techniques, interactions with fellow creatives, masterwork studies and exhibitions – filled him with such great exuberance that he finally realised, "this is what it truly means to live". Indeed, he is just as captivated by the stardust swirling around his studio to this day.

"PLEASE DO NOT BECOME DESENSITISED TO THE WAR IN UKRAINE"

IT'S IMPOSSIBLE TO LAUNCH THIS INTERVIEW WITHOUT FIRST LETTING YOU KNOW THAT OUR HEART IS WITH YOU AND THE PEOPLE OF UKRAINE. TO BEGIN, WHERE WERE YOU AT THE TIME THAT RUSSIA INVADED YOUR COUNTRY?

We travelled to America on the evening of February 23, 2022 (USA Eastern Time Zone) for the opening of my wife Victoria Kalaichi's solo show in Tennessee, only taking enough with us for a two-week trip. After landing in the states, we learned that Russia was invading our home country.

EVEN THE MOST EMPATHETIC PEOPLE AREN'T ABLE TO GRASP THE TRAUMA OF WAR UNLESS THEY EXPERIENCE IT FIRSHTHAND. COULD YOU HELP US TO GAIN A SLIGHTLY BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF YOUR PERSONAL EXPERIENCE?

I wish that nobody knew what war felt like. I remember trying to put myself in the shoes of Syrian civilians who were affected by war on their land. The photos, videos and "expert opinions" on news sites completely fail to capture the truth of how war affects others.

The entire life that Victoria and I built in Kharkiv, including our shared art studio, was 200 metres away from Russian missiles and artillery shells. Our lifeline was destroyed. Ukraine airspace is still

closed to civilian flights, so who knows when we can return. It's impossible to think about the future when you're worried about your relatives and how to help them from a distance.

THE UNCANNY TIMING OF YOUR FLIGHT TO AMERICA WAS A BLESSING SINCE IT ENSURED YOUR PHYSICAL SAFETY. HOWEVER, AT THAT EARLY STAGE IN THE WAR, IT SOUNDS LIKE IT WOULD HAVE BEEN NEARLY IMPOSSIBLE FOR YOU TO RELOCATE YOUR ARTWORK AND POSSESSIONS.

Victoria's 2020 solo show at Townsend Atelier in Chattanooga, Tennessee, was postponed until late February 2022 due to the pandemic. As the months passed, she sent all of her paintings to Chattanooga ahead of her opening. Since I was preparing for my April 2022 Galerie Thomas Fuchs solo show, I intended to send my work to Stuttgart in Germany once we returned from my wife's solo show, but that never happened. In that situation, physical items seemed like dust compared to the lives of our relatives.



WHILE THE RUSSIAN INVASION OF UKRAINE HAS REVEALED THE WORST OF HUMANITY, IT'S HEARTENING TO LEARN THAT TWO REAL LIFE GUARDIAN ANGELS DECIDED TO COME TO YOUR AID. PLEASE TELL US ABOUT THEIR REMARKABLY HEROIC EFFORTS.

Geo Leros, who is the People's Deputy of Ukraine and an art connoisseur, was aware of my situation due to Instagram. The first few months of the Russian invasion were especially dangerous in Kharkiv. In spite of the huge safety threat, his brother Gor – who is a surgeon – travelled all the way from Kyiv to Kharkiv just to remove all my paintings, important documents, money, some expensive electronic gadgets, and a big package of Ukraine-made brushes that Victoria and I can't live without.



this page

Weightless, 2018

Oil on canvas, 110 cm x 110 cm

opposite page, top left

Embodiment 10, 2017

Oil on canvas, 60 cm x 60 cm

opposite page, top right

Embodiment, 2018

Oil on canvas, 90 cm x 90 cm

opposite page, bottom

Prism, 2018

Oil on canvas, 140 cm x 150 cm

Under the whistling of rockets and bombs flying through the sky, Gor spent the next eight hours driving our car back to Kyiv, which we ended up donating to volunteers who help Ukraine. Then Geo travelled to Poland and sent all our personal items to Chattanooga, Tennessee, where we still are today. What Geo and Gor did for us could be turned into a Hollywood movie. It's a perfect example of the bravery of our Ukrainian people.

AS SOMEONE WHO MAKES A CAREER OUT OF ENGAGING THE CREATIVE ZONE OF YOUR MIND, HAS THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FALLOUT OF THE WAR ALTERED THE WAY THAT YOU APPROACH YOUR ART?

Yes, definitely. At this moment, I'm unable to draw bright boats on the pier of a southern sea town, but the really big changes for me



were during the first part of this war (2014 to 2022). That's when I decided to switch from landscape paintings to figurative painting.

Earlier this year, it was all such a terrible horror that focusing on art was impossible. Eventually, our friends gathered together so we could draw from a life model, and while we were engaged in the drawing process, we felt calm in that moment. It helped us to realise that we really needed to get back in front of the canvas.

BEING AWAY FROM YOUR COUNTRY, FAMILY AND FRIENDS FOR SUCH A LONG PERIOD OF TIME HAS SURELY COMPOUNDED THE EMOTIONAL TRAUMA OF THIS SITUATION. HOW HAVE YOU MANAGED TO COPE WITH THE UNCERTAINTY OF IT ALL?

We live with the reality that each day, another Overton window opens. Our morning begins – half awake – with us automatically starting the family chat on our phones so we can connect with our relatives in Ukraine. We speak with them every single day, offer financial assistance and anything else we can to help them. Every time I see Russians bombing the civilian cities where they live, I feel an emptiness inside. It's hard to find the strength to send a message asking if everybody is alive.



"I FIND IT MORE USEFUL AND INTERESTING TO USE BODY LANGUAGE TO VISUALLY COMMUNICATE IDEAS"



YOU'VE BEEN LIVING IN TENNESSEE SINCE LATE FEBRUARY. HAVE YOU ADAPTED TO THAT EXPERIENCE OR ARE YOU IN THE MIDST OF PROLONGED CULTURE SHOCK?

We travelled around the world quite a lot during our "landscape" period, so Victoria and I were vaccinated from culture shock. In Chattanooga, we've met great people and we continue to enjoy an amazing art community. Also, the natural environment there provides us with inspiration, hope, and a sense of calm. If anything, we've experienced "friendly" shock because we've received so much goodwill from people there.

HAS ANYTHING ABOUT YOUR TIME IN THE UNITED STATES PROVIDED YOU WITH AN OFFBEAT SOURCE OF COMFORT?

The huge amount of art materials that are available in America have given us a new world to discover, especially since so many are unavailable in Ukraine. That has been a positive distraction for us.

DESPITE THE DISTRESSING CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING YOUR EXTENDED STAY IN CHATTANOOGA, IT MUST HAVE LIFTED YOUR SPIRITS TO BE ON THE RECEIVING END OF SO MUCH LOVE AND SUPPORT. ARE YOU THINKING ABOUT PERMANENTLY RELOCATING THERE?

People in Chattanooga understood that life entirely changed for us, and they were kind enough to offer many types of support, which made a big difference. We're definitely interested in staying/working here legally, so we're currently looking into our options.

AT THIS MOMENT, WHAT IS THE MOST CHALLENGING ASPECT OF THE ART MAKING PROCESS?

Using new oil colour brands that I've never tried before is an interesting adventure, but the downside is that it brings unexpected results.

CULTURAL OUTINGS WERE AN IMPORTANT ASPECT OF YOUR UPBRINGING, SO IT MAKES SENSE THAT SOME OF YOUR PORTRAITURE CAPTURES THEATRICALY EXAGGERATED POSTURES. HOW DO YOU TAKE YOUR BODY/HAND GESTURES FROM IDEATION TO EXECUTION?

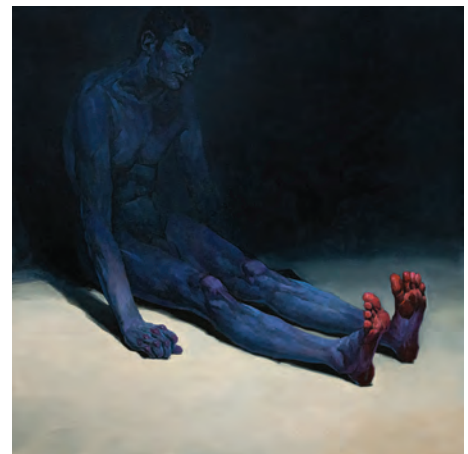
In the past, I asked models to pose, or sometimes I photographed myself posing since I knew exactly what I was trying to achieve. Now, once I come up with a composition, I look for a photo of a model so I can create a fully developed image. Sometimes I use a collage of various body parts from different people, which sounds like a horror movie.

YOUR PAINTINGS FOCUS HEAVILY ON TANGLED LIMBS, GESTICULATING HANDS AND SINEWY CONTORTED BODIES YET THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT IS COMPARABLE TO FACE-CENTRIC PORTRAITURE THAT SHOWCASES WINDOWS-TO-THE-SOUL EYES. DO YOU FAVOUR ONE OVER THE OTHER?

I find it more useful and interesting to use body language to visually communicate ideas. I try to work in the direction of evoking emotions in the viewer, so rather than focusing on portrait resemblance, my interest lies in capturing internal emotional tension and expressiveness through other means, which is more of a subconscious choice.

IT SEEMS AS THOUGH YOUR STUMBLING, LEAPING, SLUMPING FIGURES ENGAGE IN A TUG OF WAR BETWEEN ELEGANCE AND AWKWARDNESS. IS THAT A METAPHOR FOR HOW CHALLENGING IT CAN BE TO FIND OUR WAY IN THE WORLD?

Most of my ideas for paintings come to me in a moment, and then throughout the process of creation, the feelings often fluctuate – sometimes more than I want. The stumbling postures are a sincere representation of the uncertainty and fear that was previously in my life.



left
Rider With A Book, 2021
Oil on canvas, 150 cm x 150 cm

top right
Out Of Touch, 2019
Oil on canvas, 70 cm x 70 cm

bottom right
All I Have, 2018
Oil on canvas, 60 cm x 60 cm

opposite page, left
Atonement, 2021
Oil on canvas, 70 cm x 70 cm

opposite page, right
Gravity, 2018
Oil on canvas, 70 cm x 70 cm

AUTHENTICITY IS A DRIVING FORCE IN YOUR PORTRAITURE, AS IS CAPTURING THE VARIOUS LAYERS OF THE HUMAN CONDITION. ARE SOME OF YOUR PAINTINGS A PERMANENT RECORD OF YOUR EMOTIONAL STATE AT THE TIME THAT YOU CREATED THEM?

Thoughts and emotions give rise to the image of a person in a certain movement that I then visualise on the canvas. Since I am trying to be true in my paintings, they are like emotional self-portraits. I can experience and feel only my emotions. Even when I imagine other people's emotions, I still interpret them through the prism of my own unique experience.

WOULD YOU PREFER THAT THE VIEWER HAVE BACKGROUND INSIGHT INTO SELECT PAINTINGS IN YOUR PORTFOLIO BECAUSE IT COULD POTENTIALLY DEEPEN THEIR APPRECIATION OF THEM, OR DOES THAT MATTER?

I like visual art because it can be interpreted in a more interesting and complex way than even the artist intended. Sometimes, volumes of books must be written to explain the immense meaning, emotion, or ideas behind an artistically rendered object or narrative. I don't analyse

"I WISH THAT
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whether I've successfully expressed my original idea, and I don't convey specific messages to the beholder in my work. I'm more interested in the process of creation and the final result, which must satisfy me.

ARE YOU THE KIND OF ARTIST WHOSE ATTENTION TO DETAIL IS FAIRLY INTENSE?

The focus that I channel into my work has helped me to create the visual language of my art – which is positive – but I also think that it's connected to some neuroticism, which I am trying to overcome.

YOUR FIGURES OFTEN APPEAR TO BE RENDERED WITH HAND STITCHED EMBROIDERY. HOW DID TEXTURAL BRUSHSTROKES BECOME SO TIED TO YOUR AESTHETIC?

I enjoy thin, calm brushstrokes and wide, biting brushstrokes, both of which I was exposed to during my time at art school.

WITH 20 YEARS OF PAINTING UNDER YOUR BELT, IS DUPLICATING POSES, COLOUR PALETTES, OR EMOTIONS A CONCERN?

I considered this when my figurative works became quite numerous, but then I realised that it's okay if I repeat certain things.



left
Pantomime 19, 2017
Oil on canvas, 200 cm x 50 cm

right
Celestial Bodies, 2018
Oil on canvas, 130 cm x 130 cm

opposite page, left
Pantomime 16, 2017
Oil on canvas, 100 cm x 30 cm

opposite page, top right
Two Bears, 2022
Oil on canvas, 114 cm x 114 cm

opposite page, bottom right
Three Kings, 2022
Oil on canvas, 130 cm x 130 cm

ART IS SUBJECTIVE. ONE ART LOVER MIGHT BE STRUCK BY THE COLOURFUL BODIES IN YOUR PAINTINGS WHILE ANOTHER MIGHT FEEL THAT YOUR WORK IS POETRY IN MOTION. WHAT DO YOU HOPE FANS WILL EXPERIENCE WHILE VIEWING YOUR WORK?

I would like the viewer to see my paintings more like poetry in motion, but since that's my desire, I might be wrong. It is impossible to please everyone all the time. Creating art you love that comes straight from your heart is always the best judge. Of course, I am pleased when others respond positively to a painting. I may seem like an egoist for saying this but while working on a canvas, I try not to think about pleasing others.

WHAT ART STUDIO CHALLENGE DID YOU OVERCOME BY DISPENSING ALL OF YOUR PAINT WITH PLASTIC SYRINGES?

In Ukraine, it was impossible to find empty tubes to fill with my premixed colours. Syringes ended up working really well.



WHAT DOES IT FEEL LIKE TO SIT DOWN AT YOUR EASEL AFTER TWO DECADES AS A PAINTER?

As fresh as it was from the very beginning of my career.

HOW CAN THOSE WHO ARE READING THIS INTERVIEW MAKE THE MOST POSITIVE IMPACT ON UKRAINIANS?

I am proud to be among the Ukrainian people who show the best side of their humanity through their love, pride, and determination to be free from injustice and tyranny. Please do not become desensitised to the war that is happening in Ukraine. Putin justified his attack through deception,

propaganda, and disinformation. Russia is bombing peaceful cities. Ukrainians will fight this injustice to the end, but by offering support through official organisations, you'll help combat the obscurantism that threatens the entire civilised world.

IF YOU HAD THE POWER TO CREATE A SINGLE PAINTING THAT WOULD END THE WAR IN YOUR COUNTRY, WHAT IMAGE WOULD YOU COMMIT TO CANVAS?

This is the only appropriate response. A decapitated two-headed chicken.

EXHIBITION:

SOLO - December 2022
Arcadia Contemporary, New York, NY, USA