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Time, Space, Consciousness

Practical Doctoral Thesis

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Abstract

The practical doctoral thesis 'Time, Space, Consciousness' is a self-reflexive analysis of the thesis author's creative process and artistic practice. The thesis features an in-depth exploration of the various techniques, imagery and ideas the author has incorporated into his own works from various world-renowned artists, as well as the author's personal reflection on his approach to creating original and relevant works of art. All of these aspects are examined in a series of 12 paintings, which best showcase references to prominent artists both in terms of technique and assimilated visual elements.

Keywords: self-reflection, alphabet, painting, art language, artistic practice, reflection, art alphabet

Polish Abstract

Nauka języka malarstwa jest pierwszym krokiem do dalszego wykorzystania go w praktyce twórczej. Najpierw należy język malarstwa rozbić na podstawowe elementy i zrozumieć, jaki obraz lub istotę może stworzyć samo pociągnięcie pędzłem, jak bardzo różnorodny on może być oraz w jaki sposób użyty materiał lub jego cechy charakterystyczne (substancja, kolor, plastyczność) mogą tworzyć zarówno treść, jak i kontekst dzieła. Strukturę rzeczy można zrozumieć, rozkładając ją na części, ale potem następny krok – zbieranie tych części w nowej formie i kompozycji. Malarstwo jako medium ma zdolność tworzenia narracji.

Tworząc moje 12 dzieł, kierowałem się zasadami kuratora – by przemówić do widza, budowałem ciekawą i nasyconą encyklopedyczną opowieść. Wybrane fragmenty prac innych malarzy są jako litery alfabetu. Takie litery pożyczone z malarstwa wybrałem z bardzo szerokiego okresu czasowego - od starożytnego Egiptu po XX wiek. Odnawiając zainteresowanie widzów sztuką z różnych epok i badając moje możliwości podczas tego procesu, ekscytowałem się próbą pokonania znaczenia własnego ego malarza.

Słowa kluczowe: autorefleksja, alfabet, malarstwo, język sztuki, praktyka artystyczna, refleksja, alfabet artystyczny

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INTRODUCTION

Either consciously or not, I have always had a keen inclination to observe and examine the world around me. When teaching my students, I repeatedly emphasize that they need to 'look.' While studying at the Sorbonne University and the National School of Fine Arts in Paris, I made several paintings, one of which I named *Je Regarde* (French: I look). I did not paint a single cityscape during my stay in France; it did not even cross my mind to imitate the great artworks the Paris museums were so proud of. In my opinion, the landscape of Paris has been overly permeated with the penetrating and covetous gaze of artists. After one of my exhibitions, I found the following entry in the visitor's book: 'Thank you for your excellent and imaginative observation of Paris. At that moment, I understood that there was something more to my paintings apart from the figures and events I depicted: It was my particular way of seeing the world, expressed indirectly through the rhythm of the brushstroke, the choice of colours, the use of light and shadow, texture, etc. I have always held *Nicolas de Staël* (05.01.1914 –16.03.1955) in high regard for his skill and approach to painting. He applies paint in pastose layers to create richly detailed landscapes, which are a marvel to behold, especially when viewed at a distance. That is what I had to say about my eyes.

In terms of stature, I am slightly taller than Napoleon, which is why I chose to pursue a career in art rather than the military. However, I have not conquered the world just yet, and perhaps that is a good thing – the island of Elba still stands. My father was an artist, and I can remember the smell of paint from as far back as I can remember. I began my studies at the Riga French Lyceum, then moved on to study at the Jānis Rozentāls Riga Art School for seven years, and then another six years at the Art Academy of Latvia – altogether thirteen years of art studies. In the summer after the third semester at the academy, I took my study materials and burnt them as a sacrificial offering to the gods. As a painter, I have always steered clear from the twisting paths of mainstream trends in art and stayed true to my vision and the oil painting tradition. One might get the impression that I am a confident person, but I have to admit that I experience doubts and uncertainty when standing before a blank canvas, similar to how a newly enlisted troop feels anxious when waiting to hear what station he will be assigned to the submarine or tankist division.

After graduation, I started teaching at the Department of Drawing at the Art Academy of Latvia. Since then, I have made my way up through the ranks and become the rector of the academy. I am married; my wife – a fashion designer – is named Santa, and similar to how the strong bond between *Salvador Domingo Felipe Jacinto Dalí i Domènech* (11.05.1904 – 23.01.1989) and his spouse made him a better artist, so too has my relationship helped me become a better painter. Together we are a family of artists. I am a catholic who practices yoga. I think the most important character trait is honesty, which is a trait that, I believe, needs to be earned and comes with a price. I have travelled to many places in the globally and spent most of my time looking at art in museums – just like Mr. Bean in the film *Whistler's Mother*, who claimed his job was to sit and look at paintings.

Humans depicted other humans in cave paintings; they conveyed purposeful narratives, unaware that what they were doing was art.

Thematically, these stories were about the likeness of humans to Gods and humans as part of the world's energy flow. The (primary) purpose of these narratives was either to ask the gods for protection or to shield themselves from other forces.

Pyramids also have a specific compositional design where man, even though deceased, is the centrepiece of the structure. The study of figures entails sharpening one's sight through careful examination of how great artists depicted figures and understanding from where they drew their influences. The following section provides a free-form analysis of how I use various figures and imagery in specific contexts. The purpose of this preliminary exploration is to get a better understanding of my artistic thought process, as well as to recall and reflect upon my motivation for using particular visual elements and techniques for each work in this series of twelve paintings. I did not wish to impose a concrete structure from the very beginning, as I believed it would hinder this self-exploration. A large part of how I approach painting is that I trust my intuition and rely on spontaneous inspiration. Writing with a strict framework in my mind from the very outset would have made it difficult to access authentic emotions and thoughts. The principle I use is similar to that of free association used in psychoanalysis – one must express oneself freely and without censorship before a meaningful interpretation can be formulated. The findings of the initial analysis will be further elaborated upon in separate sections for each painting.

1. PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS

Chronos is the father of Zeus¹, which is why I included a *krona* (Latvian: battery) in the painting. I depicted a woman surrendering a child to Pinocchio, the long-nosed figure on the right. The exchange can also be interpreted as happening the other way around. The idea was to draw parallels with the exchange of the key in Diego Velázquez's *The Surrender of Breda* (1634-1635).² To make it even more banal, I painted a Christmas tree with a golden star. At the time when I made this painting, I thought the number of points on the star was a pertinent question. The woman reaching for oranges is inspired by a painting by Salvador Dali. In the upper-right corner, *François-Marie Arouet* (21.11.1694 – 30.05.1778) - Voltaire is covering up the world's asshole, as it would be rude to leave it visible in plain sight. Vonnegut thought differently; however, it took me three attempts to get the asshole right in my painting. The spears in the background are also from *Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez[a]* (06.06.1599 –06.08.1660) painting. The three ravens represent the Three Kings who knelt before the newborn baby Jesus. The thick purple line is meant to accentuate the mountain in the background – a reference to *Paul Cézanne* (19.01. 1839 – 22.10. 1906) *Mont Sainte-Victoire* (1904-1905). I deliberated whether to depict Nike, the Greek goddess of victory, as a white figure. The point I wished to emphasize was that victory can be achieved without using one's head. War is meaningless, but it drives the economy. The army helmets below the spears are based on the paintings by *Markus Lüpertz* (25.04.1941), which feature imagery and objects from World War II. The pants worn by Pinocchio are the same colour as Sisyphus' boulder – the embryo on Cézanne's mountain on the left side of the composition.³ Two lines are more lush than one, even if they are the same colour. The question is whether two different coloured lines have more impact than a single coloured line that emphasizes form? It depends on the composition of the painting – the central and marginal elements, similar to how infantry troops are supported by cavalry and artillery units on the battlefield. The sinister background serves a similar function as the acoustic elements of

¹ <https://www.theoi.com/Titan/TitanKronos.html> accessed 10 March, 2021.

² Velazquez, Diego. *The Surrender of Breda*. 1634 – 1635. Oil on canvas. 307cm x 367 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/diego-velazquez/the-surrender-of-breda-1635>, accessed 10 March, 2021.

³ Cezanne. Paul. *Mont Sainte-Victoire*. 1887. Oil on canvas. 67 cm x 92 cm. Courtauld Institute of Art, London, UK. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/paul-cezanne/mont-sainte-victoire-1887>, accessed 10 March, 2021.

battle; however, in this painting, it is more of a psychological battle than an actual armed conflict that is taking place. Making a line by squeezing paint directly from a tube is a technique that works best on large scale paintings; in a way, it creates a similar effect like calligraphy. A line provides emphasis and defines a shape that has been applied with colour. Black will not do – a black hole is the epicentre of all negative energy in the universe. However, without it, there would be no positive energy. In my view, painting encapsulates the positive energy of the universe, and humanity embodies negative energy. Through painting, people can become one with positive energy.

The rounded geometry of the Shiva lingam⁴ contrasts *Philip Guston's* (27.06.07.06 1980) clumsy depicted rectangular shapes. It is a play on simple and clear forms.

I painted the fire as a skull in order to create tension and clarity of form. At first, it might seem like nothing has been changed, but it evokes a different meaning, one that both the artist and viewer can understand even if the skull is not perceptible. It is no coincidence that in Latvian the word *galvaskauss* is a compound noun that consists of two parts: *galva* (Latvian: head) and *kauss* (Latvian: cup/goblet). In certain aspects, the skull embodies the characteristics, meanings and myths associated with goblets.

Colour is not that important; the old masters used colours both abundantly and sparsely. To further elaborate on this point, creating a painting entails a hierarchy of priorities, and colour was not a foremost priority for the old masters in that sense. Before the advent of mass manufacturing, paint was a sparse and expensive resource, hence more emphasis was put on other aspects. In view, what is important is the message – form can be as impactful as content. In his *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (1922), Ludwig Wittgenstein formulated the meaning of a picture as follows:

2.21 The picture agrees with reality or not; it is right or wrong, true or false.

2.221 What the picture represents is its sense.

2.222 In the agreement or disagreement of its meaning with reality, its truth or falsity consists.⁵

Choosing a large format for a painting depends on a number of factors. The brush stroke determines the choice of format. A large format is ideal if the artist wishes to create a composition

⁴ Johnson, W.J. (2009). [A dictionary of Hinduism](#) (1st ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press. accessed 15 March, 2021.

⁵ Wittgenstein, Ludwig, *Loģiski filozofiskais traktāts*, trans. Jānis Taurens (Riga: Liepnieks un Rītups, 2006), 2.21, 2.221, 2.222. Citation translated from Latvian to English by thesis author.

that conveys multiple layers of ideas. The artist's character and impulsivity are also important factors. There is also the question of patience, as certain painting techniques require a great deal of patience. Lastly, the choice of format depends on the artist's feel and understanding of space.

An idea for a composition can start with a feeling, such as sadness, joy, aggression, or lust. A feeling can be expressed through a variety of methods: using a distinct colour scheme; applying colour on the canvas in a specific fashion; using a certain rhythm to create boundaries between colours; using texture to manipulate the way the surface reflects light; varying the thickness of the colour. Moreover, colours can be applied with a brush, a palette knife or, for added effect, with one's fingers. The figure functions as the focal point of the painting. The viewer identifies himself with the painted figure and tries to find similarities with their own facial expressions, gender, figure, etc.

Once I painted 20,000 choir singers from a distance of 200 metres *The Latvian Song and Dance Festival (2008)*. During the intermission, singers came to look at the painting and they were able to recognise their faces, even though I could not paint them accurately from that distance. Finding and perceiving similarities evokes associations, memories and unrealised whims and fancies.

Pablo Picasso was walking down the street when he saw a children's tricycle. Billions of people have seen tricycles on the street. Picasso gave it a little push and the seat became the face of a bull, and the handlebar – its horns. Nobody before him had ever done that, but since that day every tricycle can be seen pointing its horns at us.⁶

Using imagery and characters from other artists' works can help evoke additional associations because these elements are already laden with a host of associations. Moreover, they bear reference to specific historical events. By incorporating other figures and elements into an existing composition, it is possible to create a different kind of tension. For example, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (27.01.1756 – 5.12. 1791)* can be depicted as an alcoholic or a bastard. It can be based on conjecture or, on the contrary, it can be deliberately provocative by challenging commonly accepted beliefs. In my experience, the latter approach is more exciting. You can take an existing character and change its gender, thus changing the meaning it carries. A figure can

⁶ Interview with George Steiner – 'Degunradža putniņa prieks,' Rīgas Laiks, March, 2021. Originally published in Paris Review, Winter 1995. Citation translated from Latvian to English by thesis author.

become an element of still life. In my opinion, the Lithuanian installation *Sun & Sea (Marina)*,⁷ which was featured at the 2019 Venice Art Biennale, can be regarded as an example of metaphysical still life. It was accompanied by opera music which evoked powerful associations about opera librettos, where each aria tells a whole life story.

The shadow is the fifth dimension. In the English watercolour painting tradition paint is applied in three layers, and the shadow is the last layer in terms of tonal hue and value. A shadow can convey the time of day and the season of the year. An artist can depict a cast shadow from all the figures in the composition or none at all. A shadow can be added as a complementary colour to create dissonance with the rest of the elements in a painting. A shadow can also be the main element of a composition.

The horizon and landscape can enrich the composition's main message by changing the overall feel and context. It is a powerful tool for manipulating associations at a deep and primal level. A landscape can also be used as a constructive element to create horizontal juxtaposition, as figures are often portrayed vertically. One can complement figures with different kinds of landscapes: a sea, a desert, forests, gardens, etc. For me, the sky is a significant element of landscape, as it can serve as a rich metaphor. I believe that the sky is the realm of God.

Joseph Aleksandrovich Brodsky (24.05.1940 – 28.01.1996) once said that an artist never knows what the end result will be when he sets out. There is no telling how deeply will the artist develop his ideas, and how well will they mesh on a conceptual level. The result can turn out simultaneously comedic and tragic, and most likely irritating and aggressive. Provocation. An artist should not fear drawing or painting the first line.

In the present day and age art for art's sake has disappeared. I believe art speaks and is created through dialogue, not monologue. The characters and imagery I depict from other artists' works function like letters that make up the words and text of my paintings. Painting techniques help breathe life into the text. An artist should endeavour to create a good comedy; in Plato's *Symposium* artists also competed with each other to write the best comedy.⁸ In my opinion, a good example to strive for would be Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, which is a perfect balance of equal parts tragedy and comedy.

⁷ An opera-performance by: Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė, Vaiva Grainytė and Lina Lapelytė <https://sunandsea.lt/en> accessed 15 March, 2021.

⁸ Plato, Seth Benardete, and Allan Bloom. 2001. *Plato's Symposium*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

One must overcome a sense of helplessness when standing before a blank canvas. An artist should focus all their mental resolve and tear the blank plane wide open with a line. Preferably, a colourful one. Like a kamikaze committing seppuku, however, the artist has to stay alive to finish the painting. Blood is the most intense colour. However, colour is not that significant, especially when an artist has reached maturity in his craft. Any colour (or even mud for that matter) can help develop a thread of ideas that can serve as a point of departure, which, in truth, is simultaneously an endpoint that leads back to the start. The Japanese novelist *Haruki Murakami* (12.01.1949) used this principle in his book *Killing Commendatore*. A creative person, like a blind man, holds on to that thread for guidance, similar to how Theseus used the ball of yarn, given to him by the princess Adriane, to find his way out of the labyrinth.

The story of how I became an artist starts with my grandfather from my father's side of the family. My grandfather Augusts was an entrepreneur by trade and fond of telling tall tales. I still remember the story of how he hoisted a social democrat flag at a factory in one of the Russian governorates in Latvia during the 1905 Revolution. Whether it truly happened, unfortunately, cannot be proven. His son, Indulis, who was part of the generation that returned from Siberia, became a well-known artist in Latvia. I am a second-generation artist, a fact I am not ashamed of. The countless challenges I have faced in life have rendered me almost numb. Admitting that I have become almost numb is my way of being honest with myself and the reader. If I had become completely numb, I would not have written this text.

In the following sections, I will describe twelve paintings in which I have incorporated elements from the works of several world renowned artists and sculptors. Each separate element embodies the culture and worldview of a particular artist, which I have absorbed and re-interpreted in my own artworks. I can recall being engulfed in art history since my earliest childhood years, and this experience has manifested itself in my compositions. In a way, I try to pass on the history of art through my paintings to the viewer. If *Haruki Murakami* can write about an artist, even though he is not one himself, then I can also endeavour to explain my works in this text so viewers can better understand my thought process behind every piece.

The literary critic *Francis George Steiner* (23.04.1929 – 03.02.2020) once gave an example in an interview on how *Robert Schumann* (8.06.1810 – 29.07.1856) approached explaining music:

This is why I often talk about an event from Schumann's life that I find very significant. He once played a difficult étude to one of his pupils who asked him afterwards if he could explain the piece. Schumann replied 'yes' and played the étude again.⁹

This is a view I subscribe to – painting is primarily a visual language that cannot fully be explained with words.

One of my paintings was inspired by an anecdotal story from Roman history about *Mara Sarmaticum* – a land where people live in trees and subsist on mushrooms. The pine trees occupy the vertical dimension of space while the other elements make up the horizon. Each element is a cliché of a renowned painter's work and style. The most uncomfortable symbols – the vagina or an erect phallus – become less uncomfortable once they have been put out in the open. Beauty is also uncomfortable.

When I visited the *Punta della Dogana* in Venice, I went to see *Lucas Tuymán's (1958)* exhibition. It was a true pleasure to see the masterfully painted works of art, each of which reflected the artist's ideas and world-view. I regard paintings as a microcosm you can enter and leave without harming yourself in the process. A viewer can observe a painting briefly or spend a long time analysing it in-depth. The language of a painting helps rein in its content; it helps it from becoming overbearing and less like a book overflowing with content. A painting is perceived in certain lighting conditions, and changing these conditions can change the overall impact of the artwork.

Each figure and element embodies an idea developed by a particular artist. However, when these elements are arranged in a specific composition, they form a dialogue with one another, thus conveying the artist's intended message. The impact of the message is determined by the artist's skill and talent. Art is the balance between an idea and its realisation, or expressive devices and the flow of ideas. Balance is crucial. The skillful use of expressive devices helps better convey an idea to the viewer. The viewer's mind plays with what he perceives and latches on to the most striking elements and, in so doing, creates his own balance.

⁹ Ibid.

2. PAINTING ANALYSIS

2.1. Monkey Party

The main idea of this painting is that if you do not take care of the path that leads to the temple, it will become overgrown. Nature is far superior than any man-made object. Nature is the realm of the Creator. Humans are responsible for their work. If you regard a temple as a repository of knowledge (as I intended in this painting), then the meaning of the monkey metaphor becomes clear. Of course, every monkey desires to engage in civilised activities. It can be seen in their faces. The temple is a reference to Giorgio Chirico's work¹⁰. I also used *Paul Delvaux's* (23.08.1897 – 20.07.1994) principles of composition – the foreground is dominated by figures that are complemented by an antique landscape in the background. The most efficient way to create depth and perspective in a painting is by depicting prominent geometric faces juxtaposed to figures with rounded outlines. The figures convey emotion, and the geometry creates an effect of restrained clarity. There is a sleeping guard in the left corner of the painting; this moment foreshadows the resurrection of Christ, depicted in the upper right corner. Below the scene of Christ's resurrection I painted Salome holding the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Next to her, Judith is throwing the head of Holofernes into a pile of skulls, a reference to *Vasily Vasilyevich Vereshchagin's* (26.10.1842 – 13.04.1904), *The Apotheosis of War* (1871).¹¹ In the foreground I have painted the young girl from *Balthasar Klossowski de Rola* (29.02.1908 – 18.02.2001) - Balthus's *The Guitar Lesson* (1934)¹² to incorporate monkeys into the action. Moreover, the girl's curved figure creates a distinct horizontal line. Since there are monkeys present, there should be bananas for them to feast on. Of course, the banana is a well-known object that carries a host of associations: an object of sexual play, as well as a comedy prop – the banana peel a protagonist accidentally slips on and falls over, bringing joy to the spectator. Nothing brings more joy than another person's misfortune.

¹⁰ Chirico, Giorgio. *The Nostalgia of the Infinite*. 1911 - 1913. Oil on canvas. 123.5 cm x 52.5 cm. Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York City, NY, US. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/giorgio-de-chirico>, accessed 15 March, 2021.

¹¹ Vereshchagin, Vasily. *The Apotheosis of War*. 1871. Oil on canvas. 127 cm x 197 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/vasily-vereshchagin/the-apotheosis-of-war-1871>, accessed 15 March, 2021.

¹² Balthus. *Guitar Lesson*. 1934. Oil on canvas. 161.3 cm x 138.4 cm. Private Collection. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/balthus/all-works#!#filterName:all-paintings-chronologically,resultType:masonry>, accessed 15 March, 2021.

The theory and essence of falling is best captured and brought to life on the stage by playwright Herbet Fristch Herbert Fritsch from the Schaubuhne Theatre in Berlin. Protagonists in his plays tend to fall both when spectators expect it and when they least expect it; they fall repeatedly and they keep falling for a long time. And then they get up, only to merrily tumble down yet again into a whole new unknown.¹³

Furthermore, I chose to paint bananas because they go together with the palm trees in the painting. I think palm trees are similar to pines, although, to be accurate, they have more in common with stone pines (*pinus pinea*). However, these trees grow pine cones instead of bananas, so I would have had to paint squirrels instead of monkeys for the inner-narrative coherence. The palms are depicted vertically so that they tie together with the rest of the horizontally stretched out composition.

The temple occupies the centre of the painting, and just below, I depicted Marat in a bathtub with a knife buried in his stomach *Jacques-Louis David (30.08.1748 – 29.12.1825) Marat's Death (1793)*. I was far more fascinated by the elegant form of the bathtub than by Marat himself. However, it is tempting to talk about Marat. The character whisks the viewer away to a completely different age; an imaginative viewer would conjure up the sounds of cannon fire and wails of people caught up in the French revolution. He would also imagine a conversation in the beautiful French language, a conversation that ends with *Marie-Anne Charlotte de Corday d'Armont (27.07.1768 – 17.07.1793)*, a Girondin, plunging a knife into the unprotected flesh of the *Jean-Paul Marat (24.05.1743 – 13.07.1793)*. Of course, while these characters have nothing in common with monkeys and bananas, certain parallels can be drawn between them and the temple. Above the scene of Christ's resurrection is a sculpture of the head of David by *Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni (06.03.1475 – 18.02.1564)*. Anyone who has ever attended academic drawing lectures knows that studying the head of David is a staple of the curriculum. However, few know that the statue was erected in Florence to deter invaders from attempting to conquer the city. The centre of the painting features two adjacent human pillars: men on the right and women on the left. It illustrates the order that prevailed in churches not so long ago. Thematically, the two pillars represent temptation; it is also a reference to the compositional arrangement I used in my series of paintings titled *Kvadrāts (Latvian: Square)*.

¹³ Interview with Herbert Fritsch – Margo Zālīte, 'Es spēju tikai krist,' *Rīgas Laiks*, March, 2021.

The path to the temple is overgrown with roses. It is a controversial solution; every gardener knows how easy it is to get scars while tending the majestic rose. Yet again all the elements are brought together using the crimson colour of blood. However, *Kazimir Severinovich Malevich* (23.02.1879 – 15.05.1935) might not agree with my observation, especially if you think about the point he was trying to make with his work *The Black Square* (1915).¹⁴ There are chess players amidst the festive monkeys. I envisioned a lethal outcome for the game, so that I could use nuances of red in depicting the throat of the man with the severed head.

¹⁴ Malevich, Kazimir. *Black Square*. 1915. Tempera on canvas. 106 cm x 131 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/kazimir-malevich/black-square-1915>, accessed 20 March, 2021.

2.2. Space, Time, Consciousness

The most compelling feature of this painting is its composition – the gigantic figures represent space, time, and consciousness. The yellow background evokes a sufficiently aggressive feel; moreover, it conveys the idea of an intermediate or liminal stage (if one thinks about red, yellow and green signal lights at an intersection). Space is represented by the woman's torso from *Jean Désiré Gustave Courbet (10.05.1819 – 31.12.1877), The Origin of the World (1866)*.¹⁵ I consider Gustav Courbet as one of the pioneers of contemporary art; painting a woman's lap in his day and age was regarded as a bold move. The nuanced portrayal of the lap – particularly that of the flesh – does an excellent job of drawing the viewer's attention. For the sake of composition, I 'multiplied' the woman's torso in my painting and created a continuation from the first body. The white zigzagged line creates a divide between the first torso and the following segments. The centre of this figure (or its entrance) is decorated with a medieval ornament. The decoration is also provocative in that it resembles a carrot. I did not attempt to depict an anatomically correct torso; it's primary purpose was to serve as a reference to Courbet's painting. The legs did not fit in the overall composition, so I 'cut them off' and covered up the joints with curtains on which I wrote the title of the painting. I also painted the curtains pink to draw parallels with the figure representing consciousness. Time is symbolized by the blue silhouette of a young male, which is similar, in certain aspects, to a Greek sculpture – there are no redundant details and, in terms of form, it bears similarity to appliqué works of *Henri Émile Benoît Matisse (31.12.1869 – 3.11.1954)*

Time creates a divide between space and consciousness. The blue colour acts as a contrast to the yellow background which represents an intermediate stage. It creates an overall sense of balance, which is important not only for one's mental well-being, but my composition as well. Consciousness is represented by a woman from *Petrus Christus' (1410/1420 – 1475/1476) A Portrait of a Young Girl (1470)*.¹⁶

¹⁵ Courbet, Gustave. *The Origin of the World*. 1866. Oil on canvas. 46 cm x 55 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/gustave-courbet/the-origin-of-the-world-1866>, accessed 22 March, 2021.

¹⁶ Christus, Petrus. *Portrait of a Young Woman*. 1470. Oil on oak wood. 22.5 cm x 29 cm. Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany. <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/portrait-of-a-young-woman-petrus-christus/UAGsuoFcmmRiTg>, accessed 22 March, 2021.

The painting was made on a panel of oakwood, and over time it developed a web of craquelure over the surface. The effect adds to the overall composition and also complements the figure representing time. Of course, the arrangement of figures can be best understood by viewers familiar with the portrait by Christus. It takes an educated connoisseur of art to fully appreciate the painting, similar to how a person learns to tell good wine from bad by gradually refining one's palette. By enlarging the woman's face in my small scale reproduction, I have made it disproportionate. However, it was important for me to make the reference to Christus' painting, the same as with Courbet's work. The nurse's hat illustrates the current situation in the world, as well as symbolizes the fragility of consciousness. The red cross is a full-blooded geometrical shape. Blood is a unifying motif that ties all the figures together. The composition is undeniably provocative because the figures are portrayed as if zoomed in from different distances, creating a similar effect as using manual focus on a camera. The zigzagged white line of the figure of space corresponds with the white jawline of the figure of consciousness.

After I finished this piece, I decided to name this series of twelve paintings *Time, Space, Consciousness*.

2.3. Arcadia

I painted the sky black even though it is the ground that is usually portrayed as black. The ground carries sombre connotations, as the expression goes – what has come from the earth returns to earth. To put it another way, sediment eventually settles at the bottom of the glass. The sky ought to be lighter. The black firmament creates the visual effect of turning the painting upside down, which can pique the viewer's mind, evoking associations about the trickle of sand in an hourglass. The composition is based on anecdotal information about the first known Roman historical account about the land in the North where people lived in trees and subsisted on mushrooms. If they were using hallucinogenic mushrooms, perhaps they really did live in trees. Perhaps they sought refuge in trees because the ground was covered with a thick layer of snow. Regardless, it is a beautiful motif that sparks the imagination. There is a hammock attached to the vertical trees that visually ties together several pines. The arrangement of figures presents an ideal opportunity to create a relief line by pressing paint directly from a tube onto the canvas; in a large-scale painting such as this, the line creates a similar effect like calligraphy. I deliberately depicted the human figures in the trees performing a rich (wide) variety of activities; it is reminiscent of a circus, or an erotic pole dance. The way the figures nimbly climb the trees gives them a striking resemblance to monkeys and squirrels.

At the centre of the painting, I depicted the skull from *Hans Holbein the Younger (1497 between 07.10. - 29.11.1543), The Ambassadors (1533)*,¹⁷ which looks like a stretched out digital reproduction in the original. The viewer's gaze is drawn into the composition by an antique statue with an erect phallus. Who can deny artists from reinterpreting a motif in their own way? Listening to discussions on classical radio, you often hear how composers drew inspiration from the works of other composers. *Arcadia* is the first work in my series of paintings for the practical doctoral thesis. While reflecting on *Arcadia*, I noticed the composition is fragile, perhaps even clumsy. However, as I have said before, an artist should never fear his initial idea and how it will develop.

On the right side of the painting, I depicted a blue-eyed Homer hiding behind pine trees and looking at the women in extravagant poses in the treetops. Below the figure of Homer, the

¹⁷ Holbein the Younger, Hans. *The Ambassadors*. 1533. Oil on panel. 209.5 cm x 207 cm. National Gallery, London, UK. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/hans-holbein-the-younger/the-ambassadors-1533> , accessed 26 March, 2021.

twelve apostles are rowing a boat down the largest meandering river in Latvia, and Jesus acts as the coxswain in charge of keeping rhythm with a megaphone. My version of the Ancient Valley of Gauja is based on *Jūlijs Feders' (19.06.1838 – 01.02.1909), Gaujas Leja (1891)*.¹⁸ The Gauja River is one of the most rapid rivers in Latvia; steep cliff-sides run along its banks, formed through years of erosion. The cliff-sides are ideal for winter sports, and they are visually similar to the cliffs in Switzerland. People express the beauty of nature, similar to artists, by drawing comparisons with examples of canonized beauty from other countries. The caves along the river are home to many folktales.

The horizontally depicted woman in the upper part of the painting is impaled on a storm-felled pine tree. She is lactating from her breasts; the figure represents the pain of giving birth to a child, a process which leads to the secretion of milk necessary for sustaining life. The image of the bride chasing a man with a chainsaw is a paraphrase about marital life (although I have not experienced anything like this myself). This is chronologically the first large-scale work in this series of paintings; it features far more references to my previous works (*In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower, Private and Plastic Greeks*) than any of the other paintings in this series. When I first made this painting, I never imagined I would later return to it and carry on adding embellishments. In the foreground, I depicted St. Sebastian pinned to a tree with orange arrows. Foresters would most likely ruin their saws against the sharp arrowheads. When I was going through the reproductions of Italian Renaissance paintings, there was a variety of *St. Sebastians* I could appropriate for my work.

Suffering is a very versatile motif. I could have depicted the nude figure of the male writhing in pain with arrows puncturing the most vulnerable parts of his body. I could have painted St. Sebastian leaning against a Dorian column. In the history of art, certain motifs have inspired artists more often while others have rarely been explored at all. In the bottom-right corner of the composition, I painted a reference to my series of works titled *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*. It conveys an indistinct moment in time – it might be seconds just before something happens, an event that has already passed, or maybe it has not yet occurred and will or will not take place in the future. People are plagued by thoughts. Thoughts of anger, madness, masochism and sadism. Of course, there are also benevolent thoughts, hysteria, and the madness

¹⁸ Feders, Jūlijs. *Gaujas leja*. 1891. Oil on canvas. 173 cm x 101 cm. Latvian National Museum of Art. Riga, Latvia. <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/the-gauja-valley/rwEWXESxCOmIwA?hl=lv>, accessed 26 March, 2021.

of infatuation. Imagining how to paint all of that is exhilarating. It is also a challenge to figure out how to paint all of it without becoming a storyteller in the process. How to paint authentically? How to paint well and measure up to the greats? This is my nightmarish struggle.

2.4. Anatomy Lesson

I painted the sky using the last amount of luminescent pink I purchased in a shop in Germany while attending The Rundgang - Open Days event held by the Berlin University of Arts in 2019. In a way, my purpose for attending the event was to 'spy' on students in order to better understand their way of thinking. I recall the conversations I had with prof. Pavel Novak and his subsequent visit to Riga to attend the 100th anniversary of the Art Academy of Latvia. It was my talks with him that inspired me to write a practical doctorate thesis. As I write this, I am not sure whether I will be able to convince my supervisor or anyone else for that matter. In a way, this is my attempt to better understand my thought process while I paint and what messages I am trying to convey. It is an attempt to weave together the language of colours with my flow of thoughts, similar to how I mix ginger root with coconut milk every morning for breakfast. It is healthy and delicious. Being able to look at my work critically is healthy as well. It is all the more important for me as a teacher, as you can only explain things to others once you have understood them yourself.

I painted the upper part of the painting pink. It can be thought of as a sky or not; I prefer to consider it the sky, as my imagination is more geared towards realism. Just below the pink rim is where the metaphysics unfold. On the left, there are headless female torsos mounted on top of simple Dorian columns. In a way, the torsos bear a resemblance to the statues of generals in the Forum of Augustus in Rome. Portraying a woman's back is an effective symbolic cliché in art. It is not so much due to its arousing appearance, but rather its beautiful geometry and clarity of form – the way the pear-shaped buttocks meld together with the back, forming a parallelepiped. The Greek temple behind the torsos creates a point of depth where the viewer can retreat his gaze to gain respite from the intensity of the other figures in the painting. I depicted the head of Aphrodite in a blueish-gray tone, which accentuates the disproportions in the composition (a reference to Neo Rauch's paintings).¹⁹ The women sitting on the left are a continuation of a scene from Paul Delvaux's *The Great Sirens* (1947).²⁰ The perspectival composition takes the viewer by the hand and guides him into a whirlpool of events. The characters conversing around the operating table in the centre of the painting are a reference to *Rembrandt's Harmenszoon van*

¹⁹ Rauch, Neo. 1960. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/neo-rauch>, accessed 28 March, 2021.

²⁰ Delvaux, Paul. *The Great Sirens*. 1947. Oil on Masonite. 228.6 × 335.3 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/481994>, accessed 28 March, 2021.

Rijn (15.07.1606 -04.10.1669) - *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (1632).²¹ The painting is my take on gender change; this also explains the peripheral elements of the composition – the men on the right and women on the left. Above the conversing doctors I painted a variation of *Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes* (30.03.1746 – 16.04.182), *Saturn Devouring his Son* (1819 – 1823).²² Goya's painting illustrates the ancient Greek myth of Chronos who devoured his children because he was fearful of losing his throne. In my version I have reversed the roles – the children devour the parent. The reversal highlights a different subject matter altogether, namely, the complex nature of present day parent-child relationships. In the foreground, a giant baby is connected to a pregnant woman via an umbilical cord, and a man can be seen kneeling before her. This scene is a play on the Oedipus complex, the complicated psychological relationship between parents and their child. The most prominent figure in the painting is the doctor based on *Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio's* (29.09.1571 - 18.07.1610), *Narcissus* (1597-1599).²³ He is looking at his reflection in a pool of blood on the tiled floor, dipping his hands in the fluid and marvelling at the sight of it. The blood on the tiled floor is meant to evoke the smell of disinfectant that lingers in the hallways of hospitals. The white tiled floor with its orderly geometrical pattern creates a striking juxtaposition with the indistinct and free-flowing shape of the red pool of blood. The toilet was inspired by a scene from the film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* by *Jan Tomáš "Miloš" Forman* (18.02.1932 - 13.04.2018). Back in 1984, it was forbidden to watch films from the West; however, my course mates and I would get together and watch them in secret. I remember the themes that were explored in Forman's film, as well as a scene with a toilet, so I decided to depict it in my painting. The tiled floor is an arena where the gender change operation takes place. You could also call it a chess board. Some would argue that these elements are very primitive and formulaic. However, I see no reason why I should not use them. I believe art is a game without rules.

²¹ Rembrandt. *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaes Tulp*. 1632. Oil on canvas. 216 cm x 169.5 cm. Mauritshuis, Hague, Netherlands. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/rembrandt/the-anatomy-lesson-of-dr-nicolaes-tulp-1632>, accessed 28 March, 2021.

²² Goya, Francisco. *Saturn Devouring One of His Sons*. 1819 - 1823. Oil on canvas. 83 cm x 146 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/francisco-goya/saturn-devouring-his-son-1823-1>, accessed 28 March, 2021.

²³ Caravaggio. *Narcissus*. 1599. Oil on canvas. 110 cm x 92 cm. National Gallery of Ancient Art (GNAA), Rome, Italy. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/caravaggio/narcissus>, accessed 28 March, 2021.

Behind the male figures, I depicted a rather provocative scene inspired by Balthus's works. I paid particular attention to accurately depict the sixty degree angle of the French parquet and the sofa upholstered with English Designer Guild fabric. These objects highlight the visual contrast between lightly-applied and pastosely-applied colour. Of course, the artist should not have to explain his thought process behind every stroke of his brush; otherwise the viewer would be deprived of a sense of mystery and intrigue, which, I believe, is an essential aspect of art that viewers yearn for. Viewers should embrace the freedom to examine every element in a painting that piques their curiosity, to choose how much they focus on a particular element, as well as come up with their own interpretations of the mystery that lies before them. They might choose to keep their insights to themselves, if they find them embarrassing, or they may choose to foster their imagination and share what they have uncovered with others.

2.5. Cézanne's Mountain

Cézanne spent days painting *Mont Sainte-Victoire*²⁴ using short and delicate brush strokes. He painted it from different angles, in different lighting conditions, as well as in different moods. I used the same brushstroke technique in my composition: I applied colour lightly and kept varying the rhythm and changing the direction of the stroke, as well as paid attention to the texture of the lines I made by pressing paint from a tube, particularly the way the lines reflected light. Step-by-step, I gradually expanded the plane on the eighteen square metre canvas and then started adding in figures one after another. At the foot of the mountain, I painted the Greek God Chronos. The figure was inspired by a joke based on wordplay: Chronos sounds like a homophone for *krona* (Latvian: battery), a type of battery that resembles a nipple. The Romans invented counterparts for Greek gods, and Chronos became known as Saturn, the very same God Francesco Goya depicted in his painting *Saturn Devours His Sons* (1819 - 1823).²⁵ A viewer familiar with this painting will imagine not only Saturn and his children, but also fragments from works by other artists who have depicted their own variations of Goya's Saturn in their art. In a way, the mind of an art connoisseur works similar to a mobile app - the click of a button expands one element and presents a variety of other elements that are linked to it.

Further up on the mountain, I depicted a scene from *Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez* (05.06.1599 – 06.08.1660), *The Surrender of Breda* (1634-1635).²⁶ In the original, a Dutch leader surrenders the key of Breda to the Spanish General who conquered the city. In my painting, I replaced the key with a baby, and the exchange takes place between a woman and Pinocchio. For me, the idea about Pinocchio and the key developed at an unconscious level, and I only became fully aware of it once the painting was done. When I paint, I am simultaneously tense and relaxed, and my hand works automatically. The result stems from trained movements and accumulated experience. The odd couple is standing next to a Christmas tree decorated with a star. The stature and proportions of the figures remind me of Neo Rauch's works that I saw at a

²⁴ Cézanne, Paul. *Mont Sainte-Victoire*. 1902-04. Oil on canvas. 73 cm x 91.9 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art. <https://smarthistory.org/cezanne-mont-sainte-victoire/>, accessed 28 March, 2021.

²⁵ Goya, Francisco. *Saturn Devouring One of His Sons*. 1819 - 1823. Oil on canvas. 83 cm x 146 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/francisco-goya/saturn-devouring-his-son-1823-1>, accessed 28 March, 2021.

²⁶ Velazquez, Diego. *The Surrender of Breda*. 1634 – 1635. Oil on canvas. 307cm x 367 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid, Spain. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/diego-velazquez/the-surrender-of-breda-1635>, accessed 28 March, 2021.

Hong Kong art gallery located between the 28th and the 25th floor. I have to admit that I made the painting during the Christmas holiday season while surrounded by images of Christmas trees and gift advertisements. In a sense, the woman can be thought of as giving the baby as a gift to Pinocchio. Similar to a theatre play, the scene piques one's interest and raises several questions in the viewer's mind. A work of literature is brought to life by a director and a cast of actors, and how well the play turns out largely depends on their interpretation and skill. The same principle applies to painting: In order to create thought provoking scenes, the artist must simultaneously be a writer, director, actor and scenographer. I wanted to further elaborate upon the theme of Christmas and the birth of Christ, hence I painted Bethlehem and the Three Kings, represented by three green ravens. The giant woman standing next to the spruce does not fit within the 18 square metre composition. She can be seen gathering fruits from an orange tree while a mysterious white figure, standing perched on a ladder in the left corner of the painting, observes her actions from afar. The headless figure of the Greek goddess Nike creates movement away from the centre. The Spanish general received the key of Breda after his victory in battle against the Dutch; however, the goddess of victory is depicted without her head. This is my commentary about armed conflicts: War is a last resort solution to political and economic disputes, one that comes at a heavy price in human lives. It matters not if those who are sent to battle follow orders blindly or have thoughts of their own because in the end everyone loses their heads. The spears on both sides of the painting indicate the presence of two armies – the 'plus' and 'minus' side.

Returning back to the image of the krona, the figures in the upper part of the painting are in conversation with those in the lower part, thus creating a triangular compositional arrangement. Mont St. Victoire forms an upward pointing triangle, while the triangle I described previously is facing downwards. I depicted figures from Caravaggio's works in both lower corners of the composition. On the left side, there is a young man who has punctured his finger on a thorn of a rose.²⁷ On the right side, a spreadwing Eros is holding an arrow in his hand.²⁸ The figures right above my signature are feasting on the flesh of their fallen steed. The torn open stomach presents the opportunity to experiment with the pastosity of colours by pressing them

²⁷ Caravaggio. *Boy Bitten by a Lizard*. 1596. Oil on canvas. 66 cm x 49.5 cm. National Gallery, London, UK. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/caravaggio/boy-bitten-by-a-lizard>, accessed 29 March, 2021.

²⁸ Caravaggio. *Amor Victorious*. 1602. Oil on canvas. 156 cm x 113cm. Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, Germany. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/caravaggio/amor-victorious-1602>, accessed 29 March, 2021.

from different sized tubes to create lines of varying thickness. It is my form of protest against colours applied in a thin and light fashion.

A train traverses the painting, speeding through the cultural space of Europe like a time machine or the Internet. Information accessible by a click of a button and images you do not need to look up in books. However, all of this machinery requires electricity to function, hence the krona. Diagonally from the figure of Voltaire with a red spot on his forehead, Sisyphus is rolling an embryo up the hill. The scene symbolizes the unrelenting and almost machine-like process of children being born and raised. Voltaire's *Candide, ou l'Optimisme* is one of the funniest books I have ever read in my life, and for some reason I found that *Kurt Vonnegut Jr. (11.11.1922 – 11.04.2007)* citation about the asshole of the universe and *Candide* go together quite nicely. I imagined Voltaire's forehead was a fitting location for this asshole.

I used thinly applied colour to depict the base of the mountain, and I accentuated the upwards pointing triangular shape with a thick purple line. Artists teach us to observe nature, and they often highlight things we tend to gloss over or do not want to see. An artist enlarges the micro-world by uncovering its hidden minute layers and details. The reverse is possible as well – an artist can shrink the macro-world to the size of a speck of dust that a passing janitor could easily whisk up with a vacuum cleaner. A viewer can leave their pressing problems behind and focus on what is important. Undoubtedly, art provides a safe sanctuary amidst the mountains of information and vitriol on social media.

2.6. Varanasi

An 8-hour trip from Helsinki to Mumbai. A thirty degree difference in temperature. A whole different world of smells and aromas. After spending countless hours driving in an overly air-conditioned taxi, I finally arrived in Varanasi. According to Hinduism, Varanasi is a place where people have the highest chance of escaping the cycle of rebirth and moving on to the next world. Of course, money is a prerequisite, as you need to buy wood for cremation. The air is full of different scents: the smoke from funeral pyres, the smell of food being cooked, the fragrance of evaporated milk in temples, the stench of excrement left by sacred cows, as well as the malodour of sewage seeping into the river. Altogether, an unforgettable cocktail that assaults one's nose.

In *Varanasi*, I wanted to capture this cocktail of smells. I thought that if the viewer could imagine the smells just by looking at my painting, then I could feel satisfied with my work. But enough about smells, I will move on to the visual elements of the composition. In the foreground, I painted a paraphrase of another painting of mine – *Lāčplēsis*²⁹ (Latvian: Bear Slayer) –, which was inspired by a reproduction of a 4th century Roman coin. The heroic figure on the coin did not have bear ears; however, every culture has their own notions of what makes a hero. The Latvian language is very old and has ties with Sanskrit (both languages have preserved features thought to be close to how the Indo-Europeans originally spoke). Since there are links between both cultures, I imagined that Bear Slayer would feel at home in Varanasi. The central figure with the erect phallus is based on one of *Odd Nerdrum (8.04.1944)* self-portraits³⁰ that I saw at a gallery in Oslo. The portrait was so provocative that the gallery had to keep windows covered. Nerdrum's style showcases influences from Rembrandt – particularly the way the artist uses texture and honeyed lights and shadows. The man in the boat is a reference to Peter Doig's *A Hundred Years Ago* (2001).³¹ Right next to him, I painted *Alessandro di Mariano di Vanni Filipepi (1445 – 17.05.1510) - Sandro Boticelli's Venus* standing on a giant scallop shell with a

²⁹ A. Pumpurs. Bearslayer. <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/17445> accessed 30 March, 2021.

³⁰ Nerdrum, Odd. *Self Portrait in Golden Cape*. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/odd-nerdrum/self-portrait-in-golden-cape>, accessed 30 March, 2021.

³¹ Doig, Peter. *100 Years Ago*. 2001. Oil on canvas. 229 cm × 359 cm. Centre Pompidou, Paris, France. <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/peter-doig-100-years-ago-carrera-5>, accessed 30 March, 2021.

silver inner surface.³² I also depicted myself immersed in the Ganges River; the image serves as a metaphor for immersion in personal memories. I added gently floating paper lanterns on the water's surface to add variegation to the composition. The majority of space is taken up by the wall of Varanasi, one of the most awe-inspiring structures in a city that counts among the oldest in the world. The burnt earth-coloured wall bears testimony to the might of the Ganges River during times of floods. The pyre – a cluttered heap of humans and firewood – serves as the focal point of the painting. The pyre is arranged in the shape of a skull; it might not be immediately perceptible, but upon careful examination it is possible to distinguish its outlines. I believe this specific arrangement best conveys the intensity of the smells I set out to portray. The skull stretches beyond the border of the canvas into the sky, where the spirits of the ascended convene. Beneath the firmament, the zig-zagged, snowy crest of the Himalayas serves as an ideal spot for meditation. I painted several Shiva lingams on the wall; Hinduism practitioners pour milk on these symbols in ceremonial rituals and decorate them with flower petals and fruits. The heat of the sun causes the milk to evaporate and emit a distinct scent into the air. It is easier to perceive the upper row of teeth of the skull due to the rhythmic repetition of forms. Repetition (Duplication) is crucial for large-scale compositions. As a realist painter, I decorated the skull/pyre with flame ornaments, which I made by pressing paint directly from a tube. It was an exhilarating experience – like pressing ketchup from a bottle on pieces of sausage I had no intention of eating. The giant palm on the left side of the painting and the smaller one behind the wall create the illusion of depth – the trees help viewers find their way from the Ganges River to the Himalayas. I painted references to Philip Guston's works on the right side of the painting.³³ The artist refined his early metaphysical figures into specific signs and focused on accentuating the interplay of colours. The visual language and techniques used to depict fullness of form have an altogether different impact; this is why I painted figures based on Botticelli style on the right-hand side and Guston's on the left. The two women on the right are based on *Gabrielle d'Estrées and her sister, the Duchess of Villars*,³⁴ made by an unknown artist of the French school of

³² Botticelli, Sandro. *The Birth of Venus*. 1483 - 1485. Tempera on canvas. 172.5 cm × 287.9 cm. Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/sandro-botticelli/the-birth-of-venus-1485>, accessed 1 April, 2021.

³³ Guston, Philip. 1913 – 1980. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/philip-guston>, accessed 1 April, 2021.

³⁴ French, School of Fontainebleau. *Gabrielle d'Estrées and One of Her Sisters*, 1594. Oil on canvas. 96 cm × 125 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris, France. <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/french-school-of-fontainebleau-last-quarter-of-16th-century-portrait-presume-de-gabrielle-destrees-et-de-sa-sur-la-duchesse-de-villars-gabrielle-destrees-and-one-of-her-sisters>, accessed 1 April, 2021.

Fontainebleau in 1594. The woman on the left with the face of *Magdalena Carmen Frida Kahlo y Calderón* (6.07.1907 – 13.07.1954) - *Frida Kahlo*³⁵ is depicted in an active position, and the one on the right is based on *Théodore Chassériau's* (20.09.1819 – 8.10. 1856, *The Toilette of Esther* (1841).³⁶ *Henri Émile Benoît Matisse* (31.12.1869 – 3.11.1954), the same as Chassériau, also painted female figures with arms raised behind the head. It has an aesthetically pleasing pose, which helps accentuate the form of the breasts.

At the foot of the wall, a crowd of Indians are standing by the river like a row of sparrows on an electric power line, seeking to make eye contact with the viewer. The middle-ground is what usually attracts the most attention and compels the viewer to examine the painting as a whole. It plays a vital function, similar to how a second cast shadow is darker than the first. To put it in other words, the academy award for best-supporting actor exists for a good reason: They provide crucial context that helps fully flesh out the lead actors. The same can be said about the middle-ground in paintings.

Last of all, I painted a sacred cow joyfully urinating in the river. It can no longer provide milk because it has stuffed its stomach with plastic bags and all manner of waste products of civilization. Of course, the cow's excrement can be mixed with fragrant substances to create incense. There are Latvian tales of orphans who stepped in cow dung to warm their feet. Perhaps Latvia and India really do have something in common.

³⁵ Kahlo, Frida. *Self Portrait with Necklace of Thorns*. 1940. Oil on canvas. 63.5 cm x 49.5 cm. Harry Ransom Center (University of Texas), Austin, TX, US. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/frida-kahlo/self-portrait-with-necklace-of-thorns-1940>, accessed 2 April, 2021.

³⁶ Chassériau, Theodore. *The Toilette of Esther*. 1841. Oil on canvas. 35.5 cm x 45.5 cm. Louvre, Paris, France. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/theodore-chasseriau/the-toilette-of-esther-1841>, accessed 2 April, 2021.

2.7. Colosseum

Knowing that the Colosseum could be filled with water to stage mock sea battles, one has to stand in awe of the skill of Roman architects and builders. The grand arena was a place where warships, beasts and gladiators fought for the entertainment of the roaring masses, and a single gesture by the emperor had the power to decide life or death. It is similar with (to) works of art – the audience can either give cheers of approval or throw hails of rotten tomatoes. The crowd demands blood, and the Colosseum is seeped with it. It is a perfect background that gives an aura of significance to all the other figures depicted in the painting. A man on the left and a woman on the right (they can be thought of as (like) Adam and Eve) are standing on the tip of their toes to get a glimpse of the action inside the Colosseum. The skeleton was inspired by Paul Delvaux; skeletons are a recurring motif that can be found in different variations in several of his paintings. The woman on the far left is my variation of *Janis Rozentāls (18.03.1866 – 26.12.1916) Princess with a Monkey (1913)*.³⁷ All the figures are standing on toilet bowls; I thought columns would come across as too noble in the context of the Colosseum. I depicted *Henri-Robert-Marcel Duchamp (28.07.1887 – 2.11.1968), Fountain (1917)*³⁸ as the centerpiece of the composition. For this series of works, I sought out artefacts, figures and characters that were not only visually compelling, but also helped evoke association about particular cultures and periods of history. To do this, I depicted prominent characters from antiquity in each piece. In this painting, it is the statue of *Marcus Aurelius* who can be seen beckoning the viewer with his hand to come to join the conversation.

The figure of Marcus Aurelius also functions as the starting point for a circular compositional arrangement; the figure helps establish a set-up with a low horizon. The elliptical Colosseum fills up the space of the composition; each window provides an opportunity to either expand upon the action or to close it off. *Paolo Uccello (1397 – 10.12.1475)* first made widespread use of this compositional approach. Even from a low vantage point, two vertical figures can compel the viewer to tilt his head back, or at least urge him to step back. I applied

³⁷ Rozentāls, Janis. *Princese ar pērtiķi*. 1913. Oil on canvas. 71 cm x 147.54 cm. Latvian National Museum of Art. Riga, Latvia. <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/princese-ar-p%C4%93rti%C4%B7i/5AGVkiI2OPVUSw>, accessed 10 April, 2021.

³⁸ Duchamp, Marcel. *Fountain*. 1917. Ready-made. 23.5 cm x 18 cm. Tate Modern, London, UK. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/marcel-duchamp/fountain-1917>, accessed 10 April, 2021.

colour lightly using a thin brush, a technique I learnt by studying *Henri Émile Benoît Matisse* (31.12.1869 – 3.11.1954) and *Giorgio Morandi* (20.07.1890 – 18.06.1964).

There is a world beyond the Colosseum, and there is life beyond our everyday indulgences. Nowadays, the violence of the Colosseum has been replaced by virtual violence in video games. You could call it progress; however, that is a subject for anthropologists to study. Artists primarily concern themselves with painting, which, I believe, is a far more in-depth and humane form of exploration and expression. In paintings, a form can unravel cheap philosophy, similar to how a composer can enhance a silly libretto by crafting a beautiful melody. I believe the essence of painting is the pursuit of mastering visual representation, not philosophical inquiry.

The medieval ornaments in the background tell a prolific story. The floating strawberries resemble faces. The ultramarine background acts as a contrast to the ripe fruits. The decorative beauty of medieval ornaments serves as a testament to the progress of civilization. In this painting, I used a 180 degree point-of-view, thus emulating the perspective used in video games. The viewer can explore the space within the painting whilst being aware of the tragic games taking place in the Colosseum. There will always be a demand for blood and violence in our society.

2.8. Gulliver

I once took part in a graduate evaluation committee in Vilnius, the capital city of Lithuania. After the proceedings were done, I stopped by an antique shop to purchase a few figurines and pieces of furniture. I often include these items in my works. For instance, in this 18-square metre painting, I depicted an early 19th century table with cast bronze legs and a top and columnar pedestal base made of glass. The top has a beautifully carved decorative edge, reminiscent of a ballerina's tutu. The dark cobalt blue and gold leaf fluted surface was restored in Murano. Needless to say, the bronze is gilded as well. It is a very picturesque table, the colours of which have inspired artists since the times of the Byzantine Empire up until the 20th century, most notably artists like *Francis Bacon* (22.01.1561 – 9.04.1626). The colours I speak of are ultramarine or dark cobalt blue combined with ochre gold. A very beautiful and expensive combination.

An open-work bronze table is a very intricate and detailed object, which makes it ideal for painting expressively. A headless Nike levitates above the table in a ballerina pose. She resembles the rotating figurine on a wind-up music box, the kind you often see in horror or detective films. The ultramarine sky acts as a contrast to Nike's wings; the scene is a reference to *Mikhail Vrublev* (17.03.1856 – 14.04.1910), *The Demon Seated*, in which a sitting demon surveys the Caucasus mountain pass. The upper part of the painting is full of winged angelic figures; they bring to mind a scene from Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, in which dancers accompany the entrance of the prima ballerina. *Maya Plisetskaya* (20.11.1925 – 2.05.2015) was an elegant prima long after the prime of her career. At that level of mastery, artists – be it painters or dancers – are capable of shedding their doubts and focusing solely on their craft. The angels on the right were depicted in a similar manner to that of *Andrea Mantegna* (1431 – 13.09.1506). The angels on the left were improvised, and I decided to paint them urinating off the edge of a pink cloud – the rain of angels, if you will. I applied gold leaf to one of the angels (Eros) to give it a similar visual effect like the gilded 19th century table. Eros has shot the Centaur³⁹ in the back with an arrow that causes the victim to fall madly in love. The poor centaur was completely unaware that I would paint him in this agonizing state using purple paint I received as a gift from one of my fellow doctorate students – *Ansis Rozentāls* (03.03.1989). This paint is so intense that it almost

³⁹ *"Definition of centaur by Merriam-Webster". merriam-webster.com. Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary. accessed 12 April, 2021.. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/centaur>*

seems like varnish. It is a rare find, as this type of paint was only manufactured during the USSR period. It has not even gone stale. A purple centaur on one side, and FC green (another type of paint produced in the USSR) spruces on the other – a clash of intensity versus intensity.

I depicted the head of Picasso with kaleidoscope eyes. To put it another way, I imagine the figure gazing at the viewer with the eyes of an artist that perceive the world with child-like wonder and creativity. If the soul of *Koschei the Immortal* (a character from Russian folk tales) was hidden in an egg, then *Pablo Ruiz Picasso (25.10.1881 – 8.04.1973)* talent dwelt in his eyes. One has to look and keep on looking and then, in three hundred years time, one can become an artist. Picasso has inspired many artists. This is evident in *David Hockney (9.07.1937)* style, especially the cactuses he painted in his panoramic landscape of the Grand Canyon (*A Bigger Grand Canyon (1990)*).⁴⁰ I first saw this painting at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, located thirty kilometers from Copenhagen and ten kilometers from Elsinore, the castle made famous by Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It is a wonderful and well-designed museum that does not disappoint. I was taken there for the first time by a group of Danish painters after participating in The Free Exhibition event in Copenhagen. The fact that the Queen of Denmark attended the exhibition bears testimony to how significant the event is for the Danish.

To add a tinge of surrealism to the composition, I painted a worm with the face Dali crawling out from Picasso's head. If I am not mistaken, it is possible to view a hundred of Dali's works in St. Petersburg, Florida. I had the pleasure of travelling to the city while visiting prof. Jacek J. Kolasinski at the Florida International University. I recall my journey there – I drove in a comfortable Ford on a typical American highway through the Everglade National Park while listening to country music on the radio. Salvador Dali was a masterful painter who could create an illusion without needlessly wasting materials. His small-scale works showcase the clarity and precision with which he executed his ideas. His paintings show no sign of hesitation. I have heard that microsurgeons can work up to the age of 40 on average. An artist can carry on painting even if he can no longer hold his hands steady. Although, at that point he would probably only be able to create abstract pieces.

⁴⁰ Hockney, David. *A Bigger Grand Canyon*. 1999. Oil on 60 canvases. 207.0 cm x 744.2 cm. National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. <https://www.thedavidhockneyfoundation.org/artwork/2055>, accessed 12 April, 2021.

I started off the composition with sunflowers inspired by the works of Van Gogh.⁴¹ I thought that even a viewer who does not know much about the flowers would be familiar with sunflowers and the famous story of the artist who cut off his ear. As I painted the sunflowers, my mind lingered in memories of the Van Gogh museum in Amsterdam. I remember the first thing I saw when I entered the exhibition was one of Van Gogh's sunflower paintings behind a glass barrier – an eloquent metaphor for the artist's life. In my painting, I depicted a cast shadow behind the sunflowers. It is worth noting that the shadow does not fall upon the gilded leg of the table. An artist decides where a cast shadow falls or not. It is his weapon. The box-like object in the foreground and the red bricks on the left-hand side are homages to *Philip Guston (27.06.1913 – 7.06 1980)*. I also depicted the figure of Narcissus gazing at his reflection in a pool of water. Self-admiration is a pleasant pastime, one that I am quite familiar with myself. I have purchased a dozen or so mirrors for my needs and purposes. Perhaps I am a bit of a Narcissus myself?

On the table next to Nike, there is a wooden man cut up into tiny segments like pieces of sausage. From the looks of it, the person who did the cutting did not care about the thickness of each piece or if the knife was sharp enough. When I painted this figure, I envisioned a work by René Magritte I once saw while riding a lift. I do not recall in which museum I saw it, but it was a series of paintings of a woman split into segments, and each separate segment was showcased on a different floor.

Behind the lovely couple, a group of blind angels led by a headless Nike are making their way towards the centre of the painting. It is quite a fitting metaphor. The scene is a reference to *Pieter Bruegel the Elder's (1525–1530 – 9.09.1569), Parable of the Blind (1568)*.⁴² To emphasize contrast, I only used white and ultramarine. Along the way, one of the angels has stopped to defecate; the scene is a variation of *Odd Nerdrum (8.04.1944), Twilight (2001)*,⁴³ in which the artist depicted, in a Rembrandtesque fashion, a woman relieving herself. This strenuous and physically demanding activity is a recurring motif in Nerdrum's art. In my painting, I depicted the excrement in a Royal blue, which I find to be a very reserved and

⁴¹ Vincent van Gogh. *Still Life - Vase with Fifteen Sunflowers*. 1888. Oil on canvas. 92.1 cm x 73 cm. National Gallery, London, UK. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/vincent-van-gogh/still-life-vase-with-fifteen-sunflowers-1888-1>, accessed 18 April, 2021.

⁴² Bruegel the Elder, Pieter. *Parable of the Blind*. 1568. Oil on canvas. 85.5 cm x 154 cm. National Museum of Capodimonte, Naples, Italy. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/pieter-bruegel-the-elder/parable-of-the-blind-1568>, accessed 18 April, 2021.

⁴³ Nerdrum, Odd. *Twilight*. 1981. Oil on canvas. 198 cm x 260 cm. Private collection. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/odd-nerdrum/twilight>, accessed 18 April, 2021.

aristocratic colour. There are a few more references to Nerdrum's paintings in the upper left corner of the composition. Gulliver has been tied to the ground by the inhabitants of Lilliput, and his gaze is turned towards the viewer. This scene is my variation on *Andrea Mantegna's (1431 – September 13, 1506), The Lamentation of Christ (1475 - 1478)*;⁴⁴ I chose to replace the figure of Christ with Gulliver. The figure of Antaeus lifting Achilles is the focal centre of painting. It is Antaeus's moment of victory: He knows the secret of Achilles's strength, which is why he has lifted him off the ground to expose his weakness. I depicted Antaeus wearing a ballerina's outfit, and, in truth, the battle takes place between two women. On the left-hand side, I painted Cain and Abel; however, I will refrain myself from describing this scene in further detail, otherwise I would have to write an epic.

⁴⁴ Mantegna, Andrea. *The Lamentation of Christ*. 1475 - 1478. Oil,tempera on canvas. 81 x 68 cm. Palazzo Brera, Milan, Italy. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/andrea-mantegna/the-dead-christ-1478>, accessed 19 April, 2021.

2.9. Go!

In my opinion, certain aspects of *Michaël Borremans (1963)* technique are similar to that of *El Greco (1.10.1541 – 7.04.1614)*. For example, the way the artist uses carmine in different gradations ranging from light to intense. The plasticity of the figures in Borremans's paintings point to Diego Velázquez's influence. My own reference to Borremans can be found in the lower right corner of the painting where I depicted a child Paul Delvaux sitting on a pillow. I painted a question mark and thought bubbles above Delvaux's curly-haired head. This is my attempt at emulating visual elements characteristic of comic books and *Roy Fox Lichtenstein (27.10.1923 – 29.09.1997)* art. Conceptually, my works are similar to comic books: I try to move around and combine different images in a witty fashion to create exciting scenes that keep the viewer's eyes locked on the painting. In this painting, my approach is best exemplified by the scene of the Rolls Royce ridden by the nobility of the art world – Paul Delvaux, Diego Velázquez, and others who at some point were knighted with the touch of sword on their shoulder. The child Delvaux is looking past the viewer with a questioning look in his eyes. One of the pigs is staring directly at the viewer; the pigs are actually Greek warriors that were transformed by Circe, a nymph from Homer's *Odyssey*. As the story goes, Odysseus seduces Circe and gets her to turn the swine back into humans. A true artist!

It was the Pre-Raphaelites who revived the principles of Italian Renaissance art and depicted the beauty of things in its purest form. The accuracy with which they represented figures and imagery embodies the kind of beauty Borremans once spoke of in an interview.

Beauty is important, but it is not the most important thing. In my paintings, elements of beauty are important because they fulfill specific functions. Firstly, to attract the viewer's attention, to make the work of art enticing. Beauty is not the end goal, it is more of a tool to draw in the viewer's attention.⁴⁵

I admire the patience with which Pre-Raphaelites painted minute details. Studying their works, I learnt how to be direct in my expression, as well as how impactful a solemn facial expression can be. To give a good example, the figure of Milda of the Monument of Freedom in Riga has such an expression.

⁴⁵ Rudzāte, Daiga. 'Balts audekls ir neglīts'. Arterritory.com https://artterritory.com/lv/vizuala_maksla/intervijas/25267-balts_audekls_ir_neglits/, accessed 19 April, 2021. Citation translated by thesis author.

A rose and pruning shears, tenderness and thorns, thinly applied paint and brutally pastose lines, which create the visual effect of stained glass (a technique used by R. Ruo). The Latvian painter *Imants Vecozols* (22.07.1933) posits that artists who contour with black are limiting themselves. When I contour, I refrain from using black, as it does not pique my interest; the same as *Kazimir Severinovich Malevich* (23.02.1879– 15.05.1935) black square fails to leave an impression on me. Speaking of Pre-Raphaelites, I vividly recall *Pierre Puvis de Chavannes* (14.12.1824 – 24.10.1898) compositions, which are permanently embedded in my memory. In my mind, I often return to the Symbolist art exhibition on the first floor of The Musée d'Orsay, where I saw his works. Returning to the scene with the pigs, I painted the one on the right as a piggy bank. A heroic figure stands on a pedestal in the centre of the painting. As governments and society's notions about the correct order of things change, monuments of previous heroes are torn down and replaced by new ones. Thanks to this never-ending cycle, sculptors will never run out of work. The Art Academy of Latvia once hosted a discussion in collaboration with Central Saint Martin's College of Art on the topic of art, activism, and politics. It is a complex topic that I will further elaborate on further in the text. From a practical point, a bronze statue can be melted down and used to make cannons, a fate often met by church bells during times of war.

One of the most striking features of *Daniel Richter's* (1962) art is his use of intense colours. To me, they have the intensity of neon light, the kind city dwellers can observe on dark autumn evenings emanating from the brightly lit shop windows and the various signs that laud world-famous fashion brands and brothels. Incidentally, brothels were a source of inspiration for many of *Henri Marie Raymond de Toulouse-Lautrec-Monfa* (24.11.1864 – 9.09.1901) paintings. Artists often lead contorted lifestyles, but everyone devotes themselves to art in their own way and however they can. A ballerina can also be regarded as a sacrificial figure that has been nailed to the cross for a reason. Bread crusts, beads of sweat from toiling away in the fields, and the feeling of treading into the unknown when pressing paint on a blank canvas. It all might seem pointless, but artists ceaselessly carry on doing what they do, wrapping the whole world in layers upon layers of painted canvas imbued with the souls of bright-eyed, mushy-haired, creative people yearning for recognition. We tear down statues for different reasons. In my painting, the deed is done by an army clad in lemon-yellow, whose headwear resembles the helmets worn by Spartans. The mighty Hercules stands leaning on his club next to a hole that leads to a subterranean world beneath the city. A traffic control officer can be seen standing on

one of the pipes in the hole, signalling 'Go' and 'Stop' to the blind and the seeing so they can find their way. The lemon-yellow New York taxi cabs are hurtling towards Ancient Egyptian characters and figures. The New York skyscrapers, which have become commonplace around the world, are a stark contrast to what I consider humane architecture. People gain a sense of pleasure from humane architecture because they are closer to the earth. In a way, it is the same situation Achilles finds himself in. This is why I painted Hercules – he lifts people off the ground and makes them live in skyscrapers. Of course, the view from up there is gorgeous.

The woman embracing a marble statue of a man (or half a statue to be exact) in Paul Delvaux's *Pygmalion* (1939)⁴⁶ can be regarded as a reversed take on the myth of Pygmalion, a sculptor who fell in love with a marble statue of a woman he had made. I also depicted containers with embryos in the sky – a metaphor for the human right to have a child. Conceptually, embryos in the sky go well with the image of heaven where angels live in carefree bliss. Next to the containers, there is a green apple without worms or bite marks. The green sky and orange clouds conjure up associations of songs by Frank Sinatra. As I write this, I am listening to a recording of Robbie Williams performing covers of Sinatra's tunes at the Royal Albert Hall. Why not cite beautiful things and stories?

⁴⁶ Delvaux, Paul. *Pygmalion*. 1939. Oil on canvas. 117 cm x 147.5 cm. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/paul-delvaux/pygmalion-1939>, accessed 24 April, 2021.

2.10. From Goya to Condo

As the title implies, the cannon shot hurtling from the left to the right side of the painting symbolizes a journey through the ages. The flaming cannonball illuminates the path of its trajectory, as well as the essence of conflict and the consequences it brings. In conflicts, both sides suffer casualties, both physically and spiritually. I have painted the most visually appealing aspect of conflict, but I left it to the viewer to formulate the meaning of conflict for themselves. Its essence lies hidden somewhere in the vast reservoir of historical accounts and testimonies that have been preserved in collective memory and the deepest recesses of individual minds, where the light of the sun never reaches. If a ray of sunlight would happen to penetrate this hidden part of the mind, I would have nothing to paint, nor would there be anything for you to see. Salome is loading up a cannon in Goya's fort with the head of John the Baptist. The head is placed on a plate with locusts crawling along its rim. Taken together, the image is meant to symbolize the life of a martyr. The cannon is lit by the heroine from *Ferdinand Victor Eugène Delacroix (26.04.1798 – 13.08.1863), Liberty Leading the People (1830)*.⁴⁷ She is holding an unknown flag; the message I wished to convey was that such fights break out regularly all across the world. To some, the reasons behind these fights are unfathomable and often unclear and unacceptable. What seems reasonable to one person might seem incomprehensible to another. If people cannot resolve their differences peacefully, disputes can lead to conflict and all consequences that come with it. In certain aspects, this process mirrors the evolution of art. The massive cannon is being pushed by two men based on *Piero della Francesca (1415 – 12.10.1492) frescoes*. I started off the composition with a man whose intestines are hanging out from his stomach, which is a reference to Odd Nerdrum's *Amputation (1968)*.⁴⁸ A woman lies on top of him; her flesh is depicted in a similar fashion to that of *Félix Edouard Vallotton (28.12.1865 – 29.12.1925)*. The materiality of Vallotton's works is very stimulating to the senses; it is an aspect of great art that, in my opinion, makes it a relevant contender to current-day digital art forms. Behind the figure of Salome, I depicted the fabled hill from Claude Monet's *The Cliff*

⁴⁷ Delacroix, Eugene. *Liberty Leading the People*. 1830. Oil on canvas. 260 x 325 cm. Louvre, Paris, France. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/eugene-delacroix/the-liberty-leading-the-people-1830>, accessed 5 May, 2021.

⁴⁸ Nerdrum, Odd. *Amputation*. 1968. Oil on canvas. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/odd-nerdrum/amputation-1968>, accessed 5 May, 2021.

Walk at Pourville (1882).⁴⁹ The plummeting figure of Icarus can be seen far in the background, which is a reference to Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1560).⁵⁰ I also used Pieter Bruegel's principle of composition for this painting: the main action unfolds in the background, while the characters in the foreground – inspired by *Lech Majewski's* (1953) film *The Mill and The Cross* (2011) – are engaged in ordinary everyday activities.

I often think of the challenging road one must take to rise above the ordinary; however, that is if one does not consider the ordinary as already a sufficiently challenging test of one's endurance. Again we return to the analysis of balance. The cannon is pointed at a figure resembling Jesus, which I based on George Condo's works. Another figure of interest is that of Superman, which I made by combining features of *George Condo's* (1957) style and poster art. To be more specific, I was particularly inspired by recruitment posters with slogans such as: 'Are you prepared to lay down your life in defence of your motherland?' In my painting, the ballerina creates a diagonal juxtaposition to the trajectory of the cannonball hurtling through the air. The ballerinas by *Edgar Degas* (19.07.1834 – 27.09.1917) are exemplary and an excellent source of reference, particularly his bronze cast sculpture of a dancer wearing a tutu (*Little Dancer of Fourteen Years* (1880)).⁵¹ It is an inspiring work of art, which, in my opinion, best embodies the ideal of balance. Looking at this tiny sculpture, I always feel a sense of harmony. The ballerinas in my work are performing a scene from *Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky* (7.05.1840 – 6.11.1893) *Swan Lake*. The figures create a counter movement, which is vital for the composition of the painting. The ballerinas transform into swans and fly off into the sky, their gaze cast on the scene below in efforts to see the outcome of the battle. If the viewer takes a step back, he will see that the arrangement of figures forms a large head of a bird with a cannonball in the place of its eye. The beak of the bird resembles a cliffside by the Southern Sea where Icarus fell. This is my homage to surrealist painting.

⁴⁹ Monet, Claude. *The Cliff Walk at Pourville*. 1882. Oil on canvas. 66.5 × 82.3 cm. <https://www.artic.edu/artworks/14620/cliff-walk-at-pourville>, accessed 5 May, 2021.

⁵⁰ Bruegel the Elder, Pieter. *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. 1560. Oil on canvas. 73.5 cm x 112 cm. Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels, Belgium. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/pieter-bruegel-the-elder/landscape-with-the-fall-of-icarus-1560>, accessed 5 May, 2021.

⁵¹ Degas, Edgar. *Little Dancer, Fourteen Year Old*. 1881. 98 cm. Washington, National Gallery of Art. <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.110292.html>, accessed 5 May, 2021.

2.11. Greenery

Archaeologists recently unearthed an ancient fast food restaurant in Pompei. It is an odd custom that has survived through the ages and is widely practised today. Nutrition specialists theorize there is a link between weight gain and our fast and unconscious eating habits. As I painted the nude female figure from *Édouard Manet (23.01.1832 – 30.04.1883) Luncheon on the Grass (1863)*,⁵² I could not help but admire how masterfully Manet has painted the flesh of the well-nourished woman. The artist plays with warm and cool colours to bring to life the softness of an elegant and well-groomed female body. Thirty years ago, I was commissioned by a wealthy client to paint a reproduction of this particular painting. I remember that back then I did not focus on analysing the fat layer on the body of the painting's central figure, because I did not find it important. To emphasise the weight of the bodies in my painting, I borrowed two portly women from Paul Peter Rubens' works.⁵³ The figures can be seen falling from the neck of a giraffe as if they were living proof of the theory of gravity. I depicted a giraffe to commemorate the giraffes that recently passed away at the Riga Zoo. Composition-wise, the giraffe plays an important role by connecting the lower part of the painting with the upper part. The choice to paint the giraffe red was inspired by *Kuzma Sergeevich Petrov-Vodkin (5.11.1878 – 15.02.1939) Bathing of the Red Horse (1912)*.⁵⁴ When thinking of Vodkin's clearly constructed compositions, one cannot help but also think of *Ferdinand Hodler (14.03.1853 – 19.05.1918)* equally masterful compositions. Turning back to *Sir Peter Paul Rubens (28.05.1577 – 30.05.1640)* female figures, I admire how the artist could paint such life-like flesh with colours that are typically used to depict something altogether different – to give an example, shades of blue that are usually used for painting the sky. Since the reference to the *Luncheon on the Grass (1863)* was central to this composition, I could not depict a sky – that is why I stuck to the green background contrasted by a red giraffe. As the viewer may tell, I am quite a cunning artist: Since I could not paint a sky, I depicted a blue river in the lower part of the painting. In the river, there is a man from antiquity who has lost his extremities in the archaeological dig site. Painting feet and hands are tiring and

⁵² Manet, Édouard. *Luncheon on the Grass*. 1863. Oil on canvas. 208 x 265.5 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris, France. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/edouard-manet/the-luncheon-on-the-grass-1863>, accessed 7 May, 2021.

⁵³ Rubens, Peter Paul. *Bacchanalia*. 1615. 1070 cm x 910 cm. Originally oil on panel, transferred to canvas by A. Sidorov. The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow, Russia. https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/bacchanalia-peter-paul-rubens/_QELtplHmQIveg, accessed 7 May, 2021.

⁵⁴ Vodkin-Petrov, Kuzma. *Bathing of the Red Horse*. 1912. Oil on canvas. 160 x 186 cm. Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia. <https://www.wikiart.org/en/kuzma-petrov-vodkin/bathing-the-red-horse-1912>, accessed 7 May, 2021.

complicated; it was for this reason that artists who made large frescos often used templates to paint hand gestures. Edgar Degas's ballerina figurine⁵⁵ is a worthy contender to the majestic form of the giraffe – together the two figures help create a balanced composition. The lush greenery brings to mind a garden, and following this train of thought one cannot help but think of the Garden of Eden. In the left corner of the painting, I painted the banishment of Adam and Eve, based on *Fra Angelico's (1395–18.02.1455), The Annunciation (1435)*.⁵⁶ The figures help centre the composition by creating diagonal movement; Adam and Eve's path leads to the Mecca of fast food – a Mac Donald's restaurant. The green background brings to mind the naive and expressive jungle scenes in Henri Rousseau's paintings.⁵⁷ It also makes me think of the French artist Raoul Dufy who could enrich a local primary colour by elaborating it with a colourful, ornamental drawing. In a way, it is similar to the process of uranium enrichment, which results in the explosive release of energy known as art. I painted the famous cartoon character Homer Simpson as a replacement for the figure of the man in Édouard Manet's composition, thus introducing an element that brings viewers closer to what they are accustomed to seeing on TV and computer screens. To add to my rich tapestry of renowned artist references, I painted a Rembrandtesque figure – in a similar fashion to that of *Glenn Brown (1966)* – with a purple moustache and a straw hat of unknown origin, decorated with a bird feather of equally unknown origin. Taken together, the figure conveys the heat of a hot summer's day. Perfect weather for expelling Adam and Eve from paradise. The consequences of their banishment can be seen depicted in the works of artists.

⁵⁵ Degas, Edgar. Little Dancer, Fourteen Year Old. 1560. 98 cm. Washington, National Gallery of Art. <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.110292.html>, accessed 7 May, 2021.

⁵⁶ Angelico, Fra. The Annunciation. 1435. Tempera on panel. 154 cm × 194 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-annunciation/f8e45a6f-7645-4e53-9fd5-cbdae7e8faac> (accessed 06.05.2021)

⁵⁷ Rousseau, Henri. The Dream. 1910. Oil on canvas. 204.5 cm x 298.5 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/the-dream/LwEt57AOdD6SGA?hl=en>, accessed 7 May, 2021.

2.12. Beavers

The economic redistribution of wealth creates ripples that circulate the globe, both before and after the fact. The effects of the latter tend to be more enduring. The river in my painting is a reference to *Arnold Böcklin (16.10.1827 – 16.01.1901), The Isle of the Dead (1901)*.⁵⁸ Contemplating the moment of death has been regarded as the purview of martyrs and great thinkers. However, I believe everyone is interested in understanding the unknown. Painters also explore the unknown or, to be more precise, a painter perceives and depicts things others cannot see within the limits of his or her understanding.

The pink cone-shaped mountain can be thought of as the mountain of Babel, an often depicted motif in art. In the centre of the painting, a figure from Caravaggio's piece is levitating right above the floating figure of Ophelia, based on the heart-rending painting by the Pre-Raphaelite artist *Sir John Everett Millais (8.06.1829 – 13.08.1896)*. In my composition, she serves to illustrate the rapid flow of the river. Where does the river from the Isle of the Dead flow? Perhaps it leads to an ocean of life and the beginning of all things? I depicted a man from *Georges-Pierre Seurat's (02.12.1859 – 29.03.1891), Bathers at Asnieres (1883)*⁵⁹ leisurely sitting at the bank of the mythical river. Seurat is a master of form; the artist simplifies small details of the body and integrates them within the larger body parts. Seurat's drawings serve as excellent study materials for explaining different aspects of drawing. On the left-hand side, I depicted a woman in a similar manner to that of Christian Schade's works during his New Objectivity phase, which was a prominent art movement in Germany during the 1920s. The artist's ability to portray minute details is something that lingers in my mind even while I study the works of 15th-century Dutch painters, most notably Hans Holbein the Younger. I depicted a piano from Salvador Dali's on the left to create contrast with the right side of the composition. Each ivory key is decorated with a glimmering head of Lenin, *Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (22.04.1870 – 21.01.1924)*. And since I had depicted Lenin, I thought I should incorporate Hitler into the composition as a paraphrase of *Gustav Klimt (14.07.1862 – 06.02.1918)* work. The curved figure of the pregnant woman combined with the geometry of her red dress was a

⁵⁸ Böcklin, Arnold. *The Isle of the Dead*. 1901. Oil on wood. 150 cm x 80 cm. Nationalgalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/435683>, accessed 13 May, 2021.

⁵⁹ Georges-Pierre Seurat. *Bathers at Asnieres*. 1884. Oil on canvas. 201 cm × 301 cm. National Gallery, London <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/georges-seurat-bathers-at-asnieres>, accessed 13 May, 2021.

deliberately thought out compositional solution, which helps highlight the diagonal flow of the river.

The mountains in the background are a reference to the British artist David Hockney's *A Bigger Grand Canyon* (1990). I deliberately made the mountains red in order to create contrast with the bright green seaweed, inspired by the art of Jean Everett Millais. As I write this, I still have not decided whether the pure dark ultramarine background is a sky or an ocean. I leave this for the viewer to decide. *Raoul Dufy* (03.06.1877 –23.03.1953) would have most likely provided the viewer with a hint by painting a cargo ship or an ornamental plant motif. I forgot to mention the flying witch. She is flying in the opposite direction to the flow of the river. The figure of the witch creates a sense of dynamics, as well as gives a sense of the direction the wind is blowing. Moreover, the figure also serves as a multi-layered reference to the works of various renowned artists. While examining the figure, one can reflect on the topic of 'witch hunts' and the Inquisition. It is worth mentioning that there were also male witches that were hunted and persecuted during those times.

In the background, I painted beavers peacefully gnawing on trees and building dams. If a beaver stops gnawing on wood, its teeth overgrow. If an artist stops painting, does anything change?

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The language of painting is rich and woven throughout the ages. I am a fan of painting and I have spoken its language since the day I first started studying art. Learning the language of painting is the first step on the path to one day creating one's own original works. However, the language has to be first broken down into its constituent elements in order to understand what can be made with the stroke of a brush, the different variations of figures and images, their defining attributes (material, colour, plasticity), as well as how they can be used to create content and context in a work of art. The essence of things can be understood by taking them apart, but there comes a time when an artist has to take the next step and give form to these separate elements by bringing them together in a composition. Painting as a medium possesses the capacity to weave together narratives.

My approach to creating this series of twelve paintings was that of a curator putting together a rich, compelling, and encyclopedic story that would speak to the viewer. The fragments I picked out from other artists' works are like the letters of an alphabet. I have chosen 'letters' from as far back as the times of Ancient Egypt up to the 20th century. The aim was to pique the viewer's interest about painting throughout history, as well as to discover what new opportunities this exploration would open up for me. I find that not suppressing one's artistic ego is exhilarating.

I realise similar attempts to mine have been made before and most likely there will be others who will do the same. My approach is grounded in honesty – I play with things with which I feel proficient and for which I have developed a good understanding and feel.

Why do I choose to make large scale paintings? I feel at ease painting on a large canvas; I get a sense of joy arranging my artistic 'letters' on an eighteen square metre canvas, which also happens to be the perfect format for my studio.

I vary between applying colour lightly (almost transparently) and using pastose, brutal, and expressive brush strokes. I combine, both spontaneously and with deliberation, different artefacts of art to create narratives, which convey my reflections about important world events, relevant topics, and different theoretical perspectives. My art could be viewed as a reflection of my personal view on the order of things. I feel most happy and free when I paint in my studio.

The practical doctoral thesis provides an ideal format for not only explaining my artistic practice to others, but also to gain a better understanding of it myself. This process of self-analysis is all the more important for me as a teacher, as you can only explain something to a student once you have understood it yourself.

There are points I reiterate that I made in the previous sections. Firstly, an artist often does not know at the outset how their work will turn out. Ideas may change and new elements may be introduced along the way, thus changing the overall impact of the painting conceptually. Especially in the case of including references, where each figure and image embodies a particular artist's approach and worldview. In my perspective, art is the balance between an artist's ideas and their realisation. The latter depends on the artist's talent and skill in using various expressive devices, which are crucial for conveying one's message to a viewer. However, I firmly believe that an artist should not become a storyteller in the process by making everything too explicit. A work of art has to retain a degree of mystery that viewers can interpret for themselves. A viewer ought to have the freedom to explore a work of art and to let their gaze latch on to the elements that seem most striking to them individually. In so doing, the viewer can create their own balance. I discover myself through painting, and this is something I wish for my viewers to do as well – to discover aspects about themselves through my paintings.

I like to think of my works as associative collages filled with provocative elements. The references to works of prominent artists in my paintings are like pieces of firewood stacked on top of one another – each builds upon the next and feeds the flame. The message of the painting thus becomes limitless – as the viewer examines the work of art, other forgotten artefacts emerge from memory, continuously evoking one association after another. In a way, it is similar to how a person can fill their stomach with a hearty meal, yet carry on feasting on cheese, dessert, and finish everything off with a cigar and glass VSOP Cognac.

When I paint, I use a stream of consciousness approach. Similar to how *James Augustine, Aloysius Joyce (02.02.1882 – 13.01.1941)* used stream-of-consciousness writing for his masterpiece *Ulysses*, my way of painting entails creating a stream of associations through depicting elements from works by other artists in unique combinations. This principle not only guides my creative process – how I decide what elements to paint when working on a particular painting –, it is also an experience I wish to create for viewers who look at my paintings. Examining one reference leads to the discovery of another, and the whole process becomes like

an endless tunnel that leads closer and closer to the point of origin. Mind you, I believe there is a light at the end of the tunnel.

However, the language of painting has its limits, namely, professionalism. Mastery is not the opposite of professionalism – it is a necessary component, like an ingredient in a delicious meal. Mastery can also be called talent or God's gift; it is like a rough diamond that can be polished.

For me, creating large scale paintings is liberating. However, the journey to reach this point has been Sisyphean. Looking at what I have accomplished, I see that I am able to create art because I obtained a suitably sized room, filled it with my energy, and procured enough resources to purchase paint, canvases and other materials. On top of all that, I developed a specific mindset and convictions that helped guide my artistic practice. Firstly, I believe that nobody really cares about anything apart from their own well-being and suffering; secondly, that one cannot think of an idea for painting – the idea needs to be there *a priori* as if it had existed before the Big Bang.

The idea or message of a painting, as I have mentioned previously, is conveyed through both narrative and the stroke of the brush, which reflects the mastery of the artist.

Mastery can manifest itself without thinking, whether one holds a weapon or uses their bare hands (preferably both of them). Is mastery an illusion in the minds of other people? Does it have no form of its own?

I like to view the human mind as that of an art connoisseur. In my opinion, an art critic is something altogether different – their ambition to achieve mastery borders with unconditional surrender. In this series of twelve paintings, I depicted references to works by other artists, subjecting their ideas to the limits of my understanding and ability. By ability I also mean physical ability, as I would often use the brush with such vigour that nothing but the metal handle would remain. I would stand for hours on an unsteady ladder, knowing that stepping back is not an option – only a fall awaits. And that is highly unrecommended for someone over the age of fifty. Can the experience of art provide – as people like to say nowadays – innovative solutions? Can it help an artist not become boring, a list of encyclopedic references on the bottom of a page? I incidentally chose the number 12 and devised a work plan – each new painting meant facing uncertainty. One has to overcome the despair of not knowing what to paint; an artist has to trust him or herself and paint without thinking about earthly and spiritual

consequences. Desperation creates a spark of inspiration that can set even drenched firewood ablaze (I am seriously considering burning all my paintings before I become one with the universe).

I felt a sense of freedom and satisfaction while making these paintings. Time stops for me when I paint. Space, time and consciousness. The title for this series of twelve paintings. The space is my studio, the time was one-and-a-half years, and consciousness – it is my head, driven by human flaws and a never-ending struggle to understand the true essence of a static moment frozen in time.

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