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Journey to My Roots

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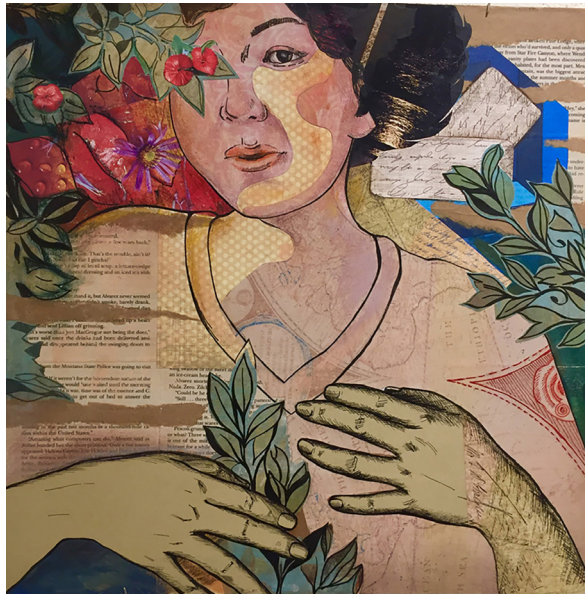
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AINURA A. BARRON

JOURNEY TO MY ROOTS



1. *Self-portrait*, 2017. Collage, Mixed Media, 15" x 15".

JOURNEY TO MY ROOTS

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Springfield Art Museum, Springfield, Missouri

May 3 - 26, 2019

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JOURNEY TO MY ROOTS

Art & Design Department

Missouri State University, May 2019

Master of Fine Arts

Ainura A. Barron

ABSTRACT

This autobiographical body of work is a visual journey that involved the investigation of my personal identity and roots as well as the exploration of my cultural history through a process that relied on photographs, stories and family traditions, such as crafting. I consider this process and practice to be my passage into a globalized society while simultaneously finding my niche in my newly adopted country of America.

KEYWORDS: journey, travel, collage, mixed-media, painting, printmaking, identity, globalization, tradition, Kazakhstan.

This abstract is approved as to form and content

Eric Pervukhin, MFA
Chairperson, Advisory Committee
Missouri State University

JOURNEY TO MY ROOTS

By

Ainura A. Barron

A Master's Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College
Of Missouri State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Visual Studies

May 2019

INTRODUCTION

My current body of work references my childhood memories and gives me a place to investigate my roots. I'm finding ways to expose the spirit and history of my family. In a way, the work communicates my life passage from the perspective of a person who grew up during the era of the Soviet Union, experiencing Perestroika and Glasnost' under Gorbachev's leadership, and who came of age when the Iron Curtain was demolished, bringing an end to the Cold War and giving all of us young people at that time a way to approach adulthood. It was challenging and exciting at the same time. The spirit of freedom was in the air and we all believed that we could change the world. Those transformations of ideology and our reality made us stronger and flexible. We all witnessed how the ideology and Soviet regime and values collapsed and our lifestyle was breaking apart before our eyes.

As an undergraduate student, I studied arts. However, the dramatic changes that took place during the early years of Kazakhstan independence (my home country), caused me to shift my career aspirations in the direction of art administration and management. I was thus able to gain new perspectives when the borders of my country opened. I had a chance to travel, see the world, and learn more. I developed a broad understanding of arts and culture, obtaining more knowledge that I would not have gotten had I remained working as an artist in a studio.

The experience of seeing international art and working with contemporary artists eventually lead me back to my creative skills and I started making art again. I returned to my practice and in my work I have attempted to use the knowledge I gained for a specific investigation that illuminates not only my personal identity but also my personal history and cultural meaning.

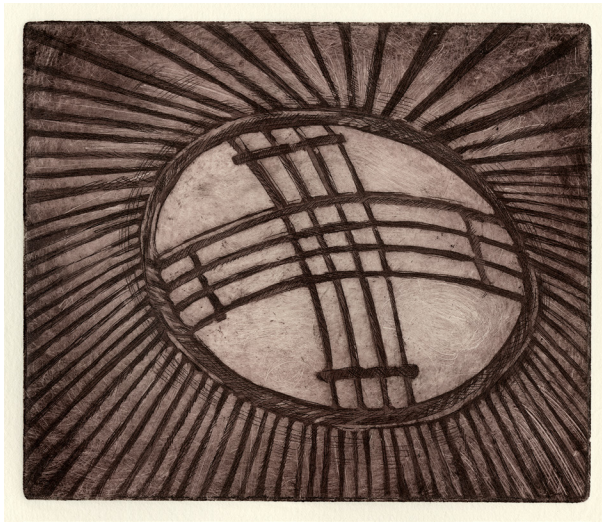
I am particularly invested in examining my artistic instincts and how they connect to my cultural heritage. The influence of my cultural background can be seen in the materials used. As we all are products of our life experience I include my personal stories into my works using a range of media including paintings, graphics, collages, digital works and illustrations. Incorporating elements of crafts into my paintings, due to their association with women and femininity, is also important to me. I consider these processes and practices to be my passage into a globalized society while simultaneously finding my niche within this society.

CULTURAL BACKGROUND

As Kazakhstan emerges from the post-Soviet era to take its place in the international community, the world is now getting to see the artistic expressions generated by artists who grew up in this multicultural country influenced by both East and West. Kazakhstan recently celebrated its 25th anniversary of independence — independence from colonialism and from the Soviet regime. The issue of cultural and national identity is an important focal point for many Kazakh artists.

Although Kazakhstan is a modern country today, it is still "post-Soviet". The traditional Kazakh lifestyle has blended with influences from Western societies as well as from its former Soviet Union neighbors. Kazakhstan's culture was largely influenced by a nomadic lifestyle, even till the end of the 19th century. Through being forced to settle, Kazakh people began losing their traditions, which were preserved in some ways by artists, particularly women artists reproducing textiles, traditional crafts, and costumes. Their artistic language was symbolically expressed through ornaments, patterns and colors. Each ornament had its own meaning, while colors were part of the system of symbols. This kind of iconography was a tool to express themselves and even to send hidden messages in such forms as carpets. I always had a particular interest in ornaments and textiles and in the meanings hidden in them. In many of my current works I borrow the elements of decorative and applied art and intuitively use the color palette that reflects the colors in folk textiles.

One of my first printmaking pieces illustrates the top of a yurt, called the shanyrak, which is the circular opening. The traditional Kazakh house is the yurt, a tent consisting of a flexible framework of willow wood covered with felt carpets. A properly constructed yurt can be cooled in summer and warmed in winter, and it can be set up or disassembled in less than an hour. Such housing was easy for a nomadic lifestyle and practical for the climate of Kazakhstan. Despite the fact that yurts are constructed without a single nail, they are sturdy, waterproof and quite cozy. I wanted to use this very symbolic image in my work. The shanyrak has a practical value, being a round window to the sky and the roof of the yurt. It is also a very sacred object with multiple meanings symbolizing the strength and unity of a family. I implemented this symbol using the intaglio technique. I also used this image in other work. I often go back to my visual collection of related objects and ephemera in order to search deeper and find additional meanings in them. In my series of collages *Melody of the Steppe*, I incorporated an image from an earlier painting, adding layers of different paper sources and mixed media to reference traditional patchwork.



2. *Shanyrak*, 2017. Intaglio, 5" x 6".



3. *Melody of the Steppe*, 2017. Collage, Mixed Media, 8" x 8".

In this new millennium, a fresh wave of bright artists is building on the traditions of older generations of Kazakh artists. I find myself investigating how Kazakh's national identity is constructed and I am discovering that Kazakh artists often center their work around the history, traditions, and crafts. These emerging artists are also questioning ethnology and ethnicities.

Part of my practice involves going through family photos, archival photos, and memories, all of which are good sources of inspiration. The family photographs of my ancestors allow me to see them as both historic evidence and as exotic reality. I carefully peer into them little by little, trying to understand their life experiences, feelings, and possible emotions. Some things that used to appear so distant and unreal now have come alive to me. While growing up in the city with a multicultural environment, I used to look at family photographs with fascination at how different that life was. As a traveler and current immigrant with my son in tow, I am now interested in learning more about the life experiences of my nomadic ancestors. I want to understand how they survived their journeys in the rough climate of the Kazakh steppe, hoping to establish meaning and purpose as a nomad.

As I pored over the old archival photos, I saw how women and families lived, what they experienced and how they managed to fulfill their lives with the minimum while raising children and finding meaning in everyday life. I began to see myself in a woman spinning thread or working on her crafts, a woman with a soft and troubled face; in a mother next to her sleeping baby; in a woman busy with her chores, or in a woman who is happy or maybe unhappy in her marriage. These images became part of my memories, things that had never happened to me but that I felt a connection to. I never had the experience of living in a yurt under the roof of a shanyrak, or the experience of living a nomadic life, but I do know that it is in my blood and in my heritage. There are things that I had never seen or felt, but having them in my visual archive gave me the power and authority to explore and use them to inform my paintings. My work is a tribute to those simple stories of everyday life, everyday chores and everyday routines, which in the end built the life story of a whole generation. That moved me to take up a brush and a pen. A few of my recent paintings, such as *Crafting at Night*, *Spinning the Thread*, *Journey I*, *Journey II*, resulted from that part of my research.



4. Triptych *Time For Tea*, 2017. Collage, Mixed Media, 24" x 12".

I am currently engaged in exploring colors, textures, personal items and my own imaginative resources. Various household items that I brought from my home country give me inspiration for my paintings. These items, such as clothes, textiles, ceramics and carpets, are part of my domestic environment. I use them in order to understand the domestic sphere as emblematic of both personal and collective experience.

In my collage triptych *Time for Tea*, I illustrated myself, my son and my mother. We are depicted in our daily routine of drinking tea together after a long day, talking to each other, describing our day and sharing stories. Drinking tea is a good Kazakh tradition which my family still continues, even after moving to the United States. My mother and I are depicted with the customary way of pouring tea, not having eye contact with others, the traditional way for Kazakh women. By not looking into the eyes of a guest, women are focused on their duties and at the same time it shows respect to elder guests. But my son, being a part of a new generation, is looking at the viewer, open to his new life.

TELLING A STORY THROUGH THE LAYERS OF IMAGES AND BRUSHSTROKES

While recently studying some contemporary artists, such as Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago I found that I'm drawn to works that reference feelings and memories. I then started working in mixed-media, creating multiple layers using paper, drawings, acrylic and oil paint, or ink. My series of mixed-media collages explore a variety of themes, all poignant in their reference to both individual and universal experience. They touch on notions of life in everyday moments and in a general context, generated through observations of my personal relationships and experiences. Myself and my family members are included in most of this work, inserting them in different compositions in order to portray converging versions of reality. I depict my family in their daily life or in a way that reveals their inner world. So, though it is enjoyable to illustrate my loved ones, there is also a compelling psychological factor incorporated into the work.

The triptych *Shanyrak – Roof of My House*, is one of the digital collages I made recently. These digital collages have elements and motifs of my other works made using other techniques. By rearranging the layers, a different result is created with the same objects. Some of my own and my son's drawings and images are also incorporated into my digital compositions. This mix of images exposes a meaningful combination of feelings I have about my family. Digital media gives me the freedom to experiment and add layers of different types of images and sources, as though including small stories or different elements of life allows me to compose a new reality. Much of my work explores the passage of my life. They reflect my past experiences, while adding and weaving intricate narratives of my current journey throughout.

Many years ago, when I was planning to study in art college, I applied to become a textile artist. However, due to circumstances, I was transferred to the Set Design course, learning instead how to create set designs for theater performances or operas, and to make costumes and props. Stage design was a different discipline, but I found it fascinating. I still make some of my compositions as if they are sets for a stage performance. I also like to include rich and decorative costumes or props as part of my narrative. In some of my works, such as *Little Life*, *Still-Life with Apples*, *Couple at Night* I almost design sets of still-life materials as if they were staged and part of a scene. The viewer of my paintings might consider bowls with fruits on the tables, chairs or windows with curtains as part of the interior design and the main characters being part of a set.



5. *Shanyrak - Roof of My House (I)*, 2017. Digital Collage, 24" x 36".



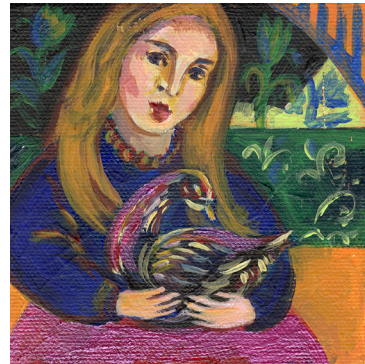
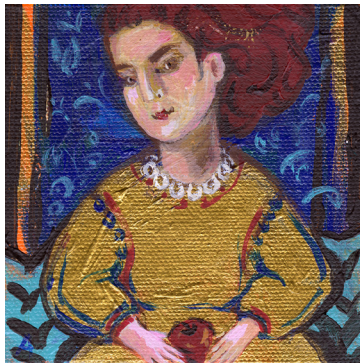
6. *Shanyrak - Roof of My House (II)*, 2017. Digital Collage, 24" x 36".



7. *Shanyrak - Roof of My House (III)*, 2017. Digital Collage, 24" x 36".



8. *Holding an Apple*, 2017. Collage, Mixed Media, 12" x 12".



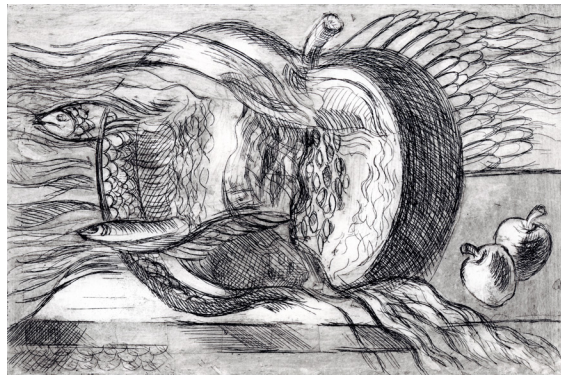
9. *Little Life*, 2018. Acrylic on Canvas, 4" x 4".



10. *My Apple*. 2017. Intaglio, 9" x 6".



11. *Still-life With Apples*, 2018. Acrylic on Canvas, 16” x 20”.



12. *The Apple*, 2018. Intaglio, 4,5” x 6”.



13. *In the Apple Garden*, 2019. Oil on Canvas, 20" x 20".

“The canvas-mirror, as a reflective surface, also held out hope for the future – the hope that by looking “over and over into the mirror” she might be able to uncover her story”¹

Miriam Schapiro

My graduate studies led me to cultivate an interest in feminist art around the world. I see myself as a participant who can contribute to the international art scene by unveiling my personal journey and sharing my experience. The feminist art movement challenged mainstream modernism and laid the foundation for women to gain entry into the art world. This made me think that I could contribute to contemporary art by presenting the history of my nation and my roots through visual narratives.

Miriam Schapiro was an American painter, sculptor, printmaker, and pioneer of feminist art in the 70's and 80's. She became the main influence in my artistic research. Considered to be one of the founders of the Pattern and Decoration movement, Schapiro's work blurs the line between fine art and craft. Schapiro challenged the idea of “high” art, works which were done predominantly by male artists. She introduced the use of the term known as “decorative” art to refer to women and folk artists. The fact that she explored her personal identity in her work was another facet of my research about her life.

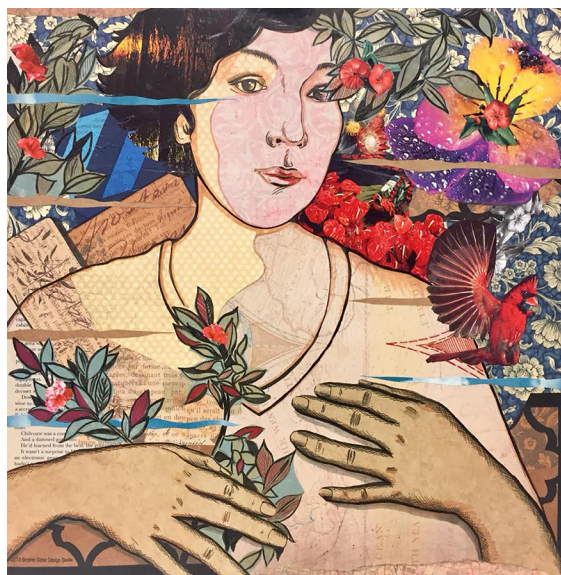
Schapiro had an interesting practice, collecting artifacts and mementos of other women as a way of piecing together their missing autobiographies. Through those materials she was able to feel, see, and touch other women's lives. Their life stories enabled her to indirectly access her own story. This was fascinating to me as I have always felt that such exchanges of stories and energies between women are crucial for them to unite and appreciate each other's uniqueness. I believe that these exchanges give women enormous support. In some of my works I depict imaginary women telling their stories through moments of their daily routines or bigger life events.

One of the goals of the Pattern and Decoration movement was to break down the traditional boundaries between art and craft. Using patterns in collages and other mixed-media work called into question the whole idea of fine art at that time. I found that this approach was a big step for Schapiro and she faced a certain level of self-resistance to mingling pieces of textiles and paper on canvas. Schapiro led the way with this unique form of feminist expression, mixing fabrics and patterns, quilt blocks and laces on canvas, and presenting the results to museums and galleries. As I began to experiment with collage, I recognized similar feelings of resistance to working with non-traditional materials, and trying out new, often found materials was a challenge that pushed me forward in my practice.

1 Gouma-Peterson, Thalia. “Miriam Schapiro: An Art of Becoming.” *American Art* 11, no.1 (1997), p 20.

The whole process of collaging, layering cut pieces and composing a narrative from them was a new experience. I felt the need to transform my visions and memories into visual renderings, which first and foremost became the language with which to express my evolving identity. These images evoke a magical world of a thousand colors, making me wonder about my influences and my choices.

“Where is the mirror in the world to reveal who I am?” - Miriam Schapiro, 1970.



14. *Self-portrait with Bird*, 2017. Collage, Mixed Media, 15” x 15”.

I use self-portraits to communicate and reflect to the viewer the nature of my character. When I depict myself, I appear somewhat hesitant and guarded, as if debating how much of myself to reveal. In those portraits I focus on the face and hands. I also like to focus on faces and hands in other works as well, the gestures serving as a greeting that welcomes the viewer and invites them to join in the moment.



15. *Portrait of Danai*, 2017. Collage, Mixed Media on Board, 16” x 23”.

One of the most significant factors that influenced my decision to move to the US was my son Danai. His presence in my life pushes me to expand my notion of what could be and because of him I am a better person. After he was diagnosed with autism, I realized that without those moments when he was “different” and “difficult” I would not have been brave enough to travel, to move to a new country, and to grow as a person. He has been and continues to be an important aspect of my journey.



16. *Night Dream*, 2019. Digital Collage, 22,5" x 34".



17. *Still-life*, 2017. Intaglio, 6" x 8".



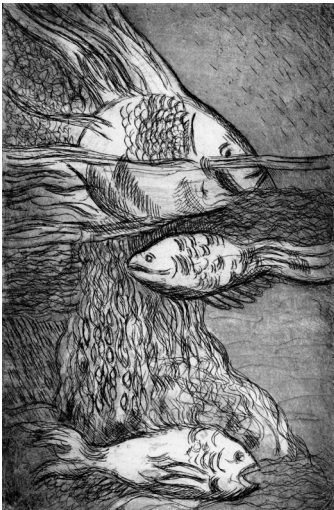
18. *Pomegranates*, 2018. Lithography, 16" x 20".



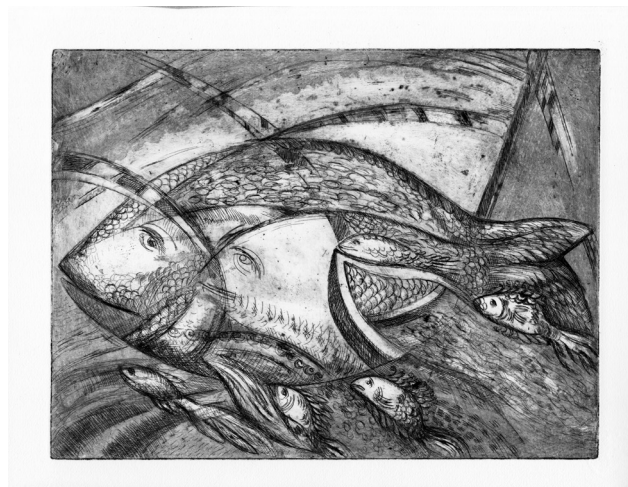
19. *Red Pomegranates*, 2018. Oil on Canvas, 18" x 24".



20. *A Fish*, 2018. Monotype, 18" x 24".



21. *Fishes*, 2018. Intaglio, 4,5" x 6".



22. *Fishes in a Flow*, 2019. Intaglio, 8" x 12".



23. *Journey I*, 2019. Digital Collage, 26" x 28".



24. *Journey II*, 2019. Digital Collage, 26" x 28".



25. *Spinning the Thread*, 2019. Oil and Acrylic on Canvas, 16" x 20".



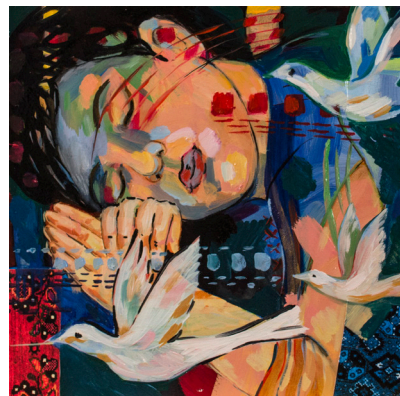
26. *Couple at Night*, 2019. Oil on Canvas, 22" x 28".



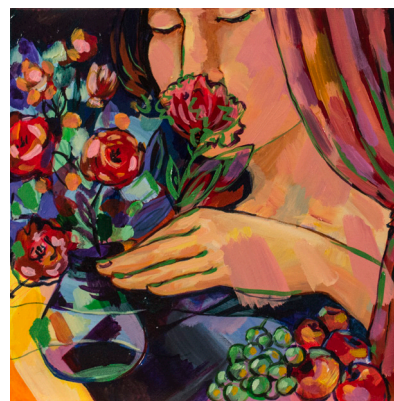
27. *The Dinner Party*, 2019. Oil on Canvas, 24" x 30".



28. *Crafting at Night*, 2019. Oil and Acrylic on Canvas, 18" x 24".



29. *Quilt of My Life I*, 2019. Oil, Acrylic, Collage on Canvas.
6 canvases of 12" x 12".



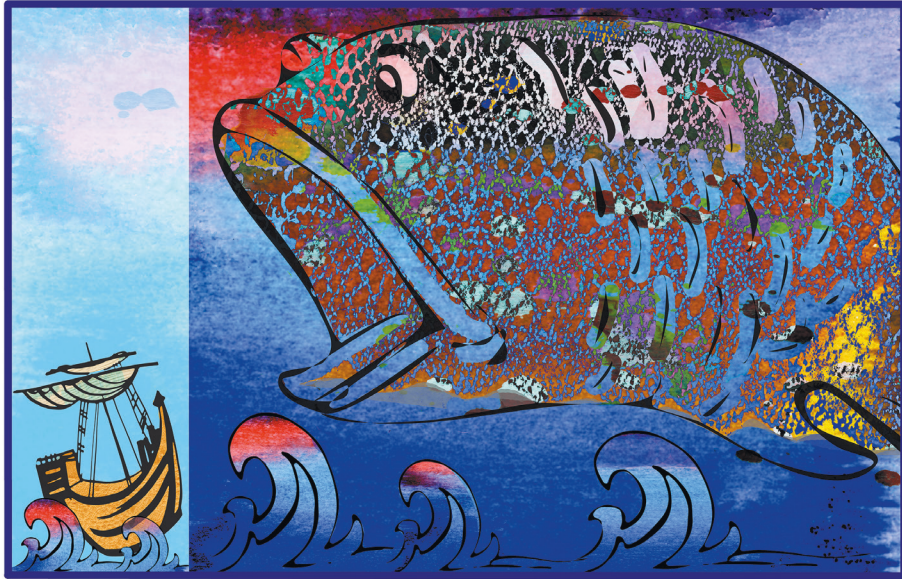
30. *Quilt of My Life II*, 2019. Oil, Acrylic, Collage on Canvas.
6 canvases of 12" x 12".

I believe, as artists, we need to prepare for the creative process by honoring our own feelings and landscapes — our mind, body and soul. Most of what goes into my paintings happens before I place brushstrokes or draw marks on a canvas. This is why creating has been a transformative and memory-recovering experience for me. My process necessitated a self-care experience on physical, emotional and spiritual levels.

In nomadic cultures, all memories were transmitted from one generation to another through oral traditions. The history was shared through myths, stories, legends, and epic tales, but not through visual arts. Storytelling traditions vary all over the world. They still exist in Kazakhstan and have different forms, like reciting poems and stories, or telling a story while singing and taking part in a battle with another storyteller. The stories of Sinbad the Sailor from the Arabian Nights inspired me to create images to accompany them. The Seven Voyages, or Seven Stories, are fantastic tales of a merchant named Sinbad who embarks on incredible journeys. Throughout his stories, Sinbad mentions the assorted obstacles that he faced, how he survived and how after many dangerous and life-threatening moments he returned home. Sinbad is not a classical hero and probably could be respected only for his courage to travel and his exotic stories. However, I decided to illustrate them and create colorful imagery to show his love of travel and other cultures, despite all the hazardous situations. He survived all of them and was able to return home. In all stories, returning home for me means returning to your roots and family.

In my illustrations, there are images of monstrous sea creatures, gigantic birds, deadly snakes and dazzling cities. For the colorful backgrounds, I used scanned fabrics from the countries of my region, as it was mentioned in the stories of the Arabian Nights. Some of those are familiar to me from the fairytales I read when I was a child.

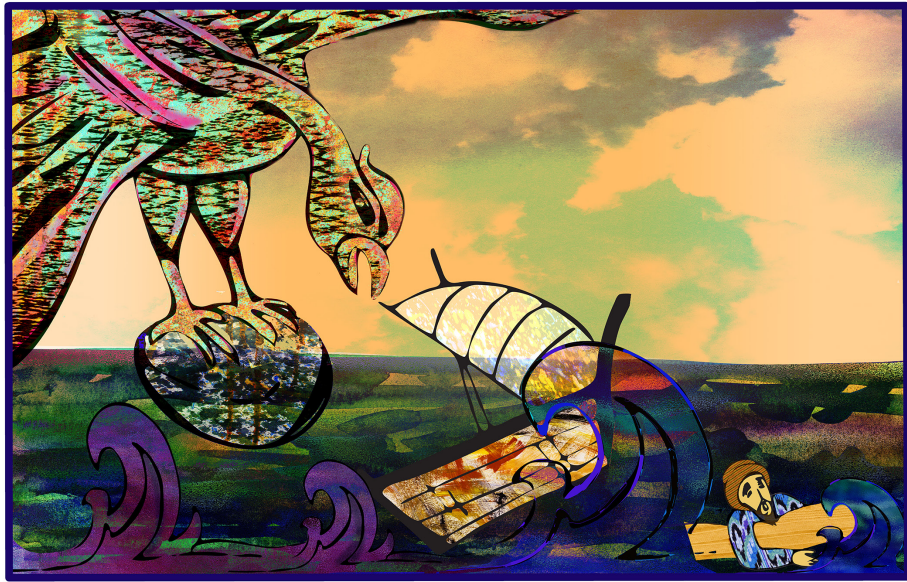
As I continue my life's journey and experience the challenges of living in a new country, the plot of this book resonated with my current circumstances and my personal adventures. Growing up in a country which had the "Iron Wall" and borders closed to the West, I always wanted to get that feeling of freedom by travelling and experiencing the spirit of Sinbad's journeys. Thus, the character of Sinbad the Sailor is especially meaningful to me and was my first choice for a book to illustrate.



31. *Sinbad the Sailor*, 2018. Digital Illustration, 12" x 18".



32. *Sinbad the Sailor*, 2018. Digital Illustration, 12" x 18".



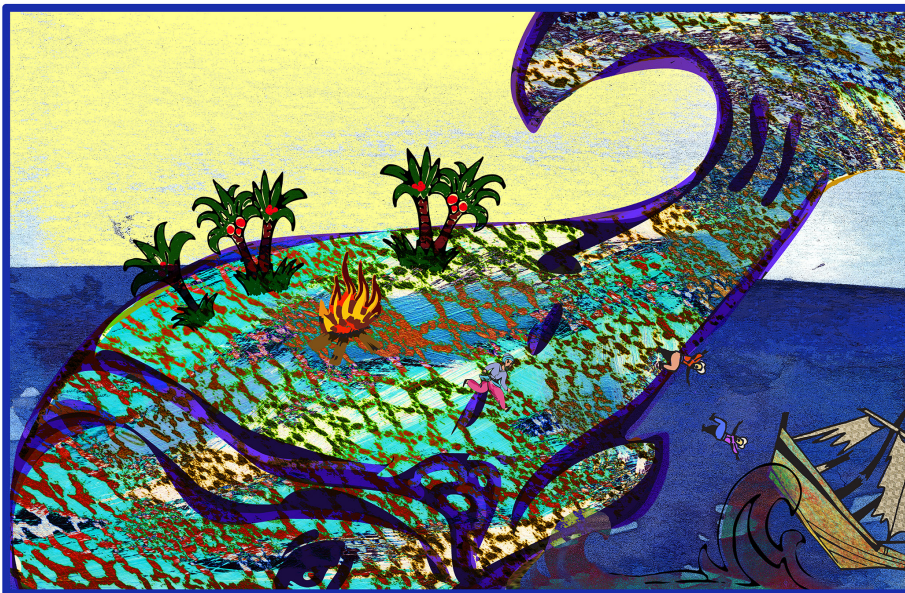
33. *Sinbad the Sailor*, 2018. Digital Illustration, 12" x 18".



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35. *Sinbad the Sailor*, 2018. Digital Illustration, 12" x 18".



36. *Sinbad the Sailor*, 2018. Digital Illustration, 12" x 18".



37. *Melody of the Steppe (II)*, 2017. Paper Collage, Mixed Media on Board, 15” x 15”.

CONCLUSION

I know that artists constantly try to develop new ideas and create new artworks that will become the new standard of modernity. I think that creativity begins with the freedom to look backward as well as forward. Reinterpretation of my past through memories, feelings and thoughts define who I am today and who I was in the past. They also provide clues as to who I may be in the future. This approach is challenging me to generate new subjects for my creative projects. The idea of memory is central to my art. The visual arts have long served the purpose of helping people remember important places, events and people. Time gives each of us a storehouse of memories — a storehouse that we add to as life marches forward. We also accumulate objects, documents, photographs, clothes, and mementos that stimulate our memory. That storehouse of memories and images provided great inspiration for my current body of work.

I believe that art can be a powerful catalyst for understanding a wide range of subjects. Now as I begin a new chapter in my life, I am open to new opportunities, finding out more about myself and how I can contribute to the global art community. I am certain to find more inspiration in upcoming life adventures and my storehouse of mementos will be filled with new ideas.

Bibliography

1. Gouma-Peterson, Thalia. "Miriam Schapiro: An Art of Becoming." *American Art* 11, no.1 (1997), p 20.

Image List:

1. *Self-portrait*, 2017. Collage, Mixed Media, 15" x 15" 0
2. *Shanyrak*, 2017. Intaglio, 5" x 6" 3
3. *Melody of the Steppe*, 2017. Collage, Mixed Media, 8" x 8" 3
4. *Triptych Time For Tea*, 2017. Collage, Mixed Media, 24" x 12" 5
5. *Shanyrak - Roof of My House (I)*, 2017. Digital Collage, 24" x 36" 7
6. *Shanyrak - Roof of My House (II)*, 2017. Digital Collage, 24" x 36" 8
7. *Shanyrak - Roof of My House (III)*, 2017. Digital Collage, 24" x 36" 9
8. *Holding an Apple*, 2017. Collage, Mixed Media, 12" x 12" 10
9. *Little Life*, 2018. Acrylic on Canvas, 4" x 4" 11
10. *My Apple*. 2017. Intaglio, 9" x 6" 11
11. *Still-life With Apples*, 2018. Acrylic on Canvas, 16" x 20" 12
12. *The Apple*, 2018. Intaglio, 4,5" x 6" 12
13. *In the Apple Garden*, 2019. Oil on Canvas, 20" x 20" 13
14. *Self-portrait with Bird*, 2017. Collage, Mixed Media, 15" x 15" 15
15. *Portrait of Danai*, 2017. Collage, Mixed Media on Board, 16" x 23" 16
16. *Night Dream*, 2019. Digital Collage, 22,5" x 34" 17
17. *Still-life*, 2017. Intaglio, 6" x 8" 17
18. *Pomegranates*, 2018. Lithography, 16" x 20" 18
19. *Red Pomegranates*, 2018. Oil on Canvas, 18" x 24" 18
20. *A Fish*, 2018. Monotype, 18" x 24" 19
21. *Fishes*, 2018. Intaglio, 4,5" x 6" 19
22. *Fishes in a Flow*, 2019. Intaglio, 8" x 12" 19
23. *Journey I*, 2019. Digital Collage, 26" x 28" 20
24. *Journey II*, 2019. Digital Collage, 26" x 28" 21
25. *Spinning the Thread*, 2019. Oil and Acrylic on Canvas, 16" x 20" 22
26. *Couple at Night*, 2019. Oil on Canvas, 22" x 28" 23

27. <i>The Dinner Party</i> , 2019. Oil on Canvas, 24" x 30"	24
28. <i>Crafting at Night</i> , 2019. Oil and Acrylic on Canvas, 18" x 24"	25
29. <i>Quilt of My Life I</i> , 2019. Oil, Acrylic, Collage on Canvas, 12" x 12"	26
30. <i>Quilt of My Life II</i> , 2019. Oil, Acrylic, Collage on Canvas, 12" x 12"	27
31-36. <i>Sinbad the Sailor</i> , 2018. Digital Illustration, 12" x 18"	29-31
37. <i>Melody of the Steppe (II)</i> , 2017. Paper Collage, Mixed Media on Board, 15" x 15"	32

