

The Search For My Own

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I turned to hand-woven tapestries in search of a fresh visual language and a distinct process I could call my own. I enjoy the energy and spontaneity of the process of drawing, and I want to carry the same element of excitement into my tapestries.

I was born in Moldova, which was at that time a part of the former Soviet Union. As a child, I loved to read and draw. I read the classics and fairy tales, adventures and myths and drew what I read about.

I was fourteen when I attended the Art School in Kishinev. In the '70s Soviet Union art education was dominated by the Soviet Realism Doctrine. We were all taught what colors were right, how to construct a picture, and what to draw and paint and how. At some moment in school I became overwhelmed and bored. It felt as if an army of new artists were out there marching and producing the same painting over and over and over. I was lost. I decided to give up and become an engineer.

Accepted at Moscow State Technological University, I planned to build robots and live in a world of machines, cubicles and drafting tables. It was an exciting experience being a student, and I met my future husband at that University, but after graduation I never worked as an engineer. I went back to study Art at Moscow Art Institute and tried to figure out what to do with this. I just knew I wanted to be an artist and needed to know how to make it my own.

In the '80s Moscow was changing dramatically, opening it's museums and galleries for the new contemporary art from Europe and America. There were shows of German Constructivist and Russian artists who emigrated from the USSR and who were working in contemporary styles. These exhibitions presented an array of fresh and exciting ideas about form, color, and materials for Moscow's public.

I wandered through museums and galleries, puzzled by the problem: "how to make it work?" I spent my time in ancient and contemporary galleries, searching in history and wondering, "What was happening now?" The answer came from a book about medieval tapestries. Tapestry weaving sounded romantic and connected with all the adventures and fairy tales that I was so fond of. It had costumes, characters, stories, brilliant colors and I wanted to know more about it.

To learn about tapestry weaving, I enrolled in classes of the Moscow Textile Institute. My teachers offered not only knowledge of the ancient craft, but also a new way to design and experiment with form and color.

In 1989 my husband and I moved to the United States and settled in Michigan. We worked hard to learn about life here: language, communication, rules. It was an avalanche of information. My dream was to be an artist in the US and I needed to figure out: "what does it mean to be an artist here and what kind of artist do I want to be?" I asked other artists and weavers, visited Scheuer Tapestry Studio in New York, and looked for artists' places in Michigan.

At the same time, I discovered for myself a world of Contemporary American Art, and fell in love with Abstract Expressionism. The intuitive process of painting of Franz Kline, vibrancy and depth of the overlapping brush strokes of Joan Mitchell, the floating shapes of Marc Rothko and Helen Frankenthaler were a revelation to me. I was taken by the grandiose and strong emotions of these artists and wanted to bring that energy and directness of application to my tapestries.

Today, I look for narrative throughout my memories and draw and weave what it makes me feel about the story: kings and queens and witches and magic, castles and trees, chairs and carriages. And birds. I started to do birds some years ago and their images are still in my every work. I probably just like their shapes. Black birds are inquisitive and smart and their shapes are beautiful and sometimes sad. I draw with shapes, very softly at the beginning and define them as the design develops.

I tried to plan in details, draw small and enlarge with photocopies and even tried to go without a cartoon, it was all good intentions. Now I make a lot of small drawings for tapestry with crayons or pen, and draw with black ink the full scale shapes for a cartoon. And after that all decisions are made on the loom. I do believe in the power of the limited pallet, but at the same time during the weaving I add more color because "it works."

I do not want to create a "perfect" weaving. Those make tapestries cold, boring, and predictable. I concentrate on the softness and imperfection of shapes, connecting with each other and creating a surface with a variety of textures. The rhythm of weaving and the process of making choices give me a feeling of challenge and curiosity to work in this media.

