

G101

GALLERY 101
OCTOBER 9- NOVEMBER 7 2020

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TEXT BY ANNA PALUCH

In Svetlana Swinimer's solo show *Unveiling The Goddess*, various aspects of memory and Slavic ancestral connections take place through interaction and contemplation. At Gallery 101, Svetlana's pieces create a sacred and welcoming space, not just for Slavic women, but as Svetlana pointed out in our interview, some form of the Divine Feminine or Earthly Mother is present in all cultures, and so friends and visitors from various cultural backgrounds can find connections to the Makosh imagery, whether in Her story or the symbols associated with Her. Makosh is a Slavic goddess, and linguistically, the title 'Mother-Wet-Earth' is associated with Makosh¹, but her name is also associated with Slavic root words pertaining to spinning, plaiting and moisture². Makosh is a life-giver, our Slavic Mother Earth.

The various materials, mediums and mythologies in the gallery space create a transnational topography, where Svetlana's cultural memory is not only displayed in a Canadian geography, but felt across multiple layers of cultural inheritance, time and diasporic migration. Svetlana has achieved a very specific ritualistic space through her contemporary expression of ancestral knowledge. When you enter the space, you are

“stepping through an imaginary threshold between the ‘real space’ and the ‘art space’ [which] can almost feel ritualistic.”³. In this way, the viewer is encouraged to participate in reconnecting with ancestors.

The contemporary materials she uses here are imbued with ancient symbolism that reference active rebirth and the strength of the Divine Feminine, which has survived in the households and spirits of Slavic women for generations. Slavic culture neither grounds itself in the studies of science, nor academic knowledge, but a stewed mix of blood memory, postmemory, prosthetic memory and collective memory.⁴ Each of these types of memory awakens at various points in their lives, whether it involves naturally knowing how to embroider, or taking on the stories of our parents, grandparents, great-grandparents as part of our own identities. Memory is a very physical experience, where “bodily experiences and sensations... [are] passed on and inherited in the same way genetic material is transmitted from one agent to another”⁵ and so working with certain materials, remembering specific histories and contexts, and being in touch with ancestral knowledge are examples of how memory is ingrained through our biology. The subtly textured linen works feature various elements of Old Slavic cultural symbolism and imagery that has been passed down over generations. As a folk arts teacher, when viewing the large painted linen *Unveiling The Goddess*, I recognized the central female figure, with her arms lifted, a bird in each hand (this motif featured prominently in both the sculptural and print works too). In my craft of Polish wycinanki (paper cutting) the imagery of a female figure (or many figures) lifting their arms to the sky holding birds has prevailed, even if the direct connection to Makosh has been lost.

Other Slavic artists, such as Russian Daria Pravda, also use textiles to address cultural connection and rebirth. In the *Supreme Alphabet*, Daria hand-embroidered glyphs that she imagined on antique fabrics, not only making a connection to Russian textile industry, but also traditional Slavic ornamentation techniques. Just like with Daria’s *Supreme Alphabet*, Svetlana’s *Unveiling the Goddess* digs “more deeply into the history of ornaments which would often be found embroidered into peasant clothing or decor.”⁶ Though decorative, the embroidered shapes have deeper meanings: “the diamond ornament with a dot in the center would stand for ‘field’; [a] diamond symbol with a cross inside: ‘a plowed field’; [a] circle design, or a cross inside a circle, would stand for the sun”⁷, and these symbols are found throughout various works in

Unveiling the Goddess such as *Makosh #3* (sculpture), *Comic Movement in Distaff* (acrylic and threads on linen) and *Goddess of Fertile Earth* (lithography, silkscreen). The diversity of mediums used to represent the Goddess and her symbols is itself emblematic of her resistance to erasure. Svetlana works with materials that her ancestors would have worked with, and combines her artistic, cultural, and scientific skills of visual learning and interpretation to recreate the work.

During our interview, Svetlana spoke about her grandmother's wool bundles, and there is a strong connection between her grandmother's wool bundles and the artist's own wood bundles. Her grandmother could create anything from wool just by seeing it once. Svetlana has not worked with wood but the instinct and observation of traditional relics allowed for some dormant knowledge to come out in the artist. Like her grandmother, Svetlana tapped into this blood memory of tactile creation. The roughness of the sculptural work calls back to ancestral connections that Svetlana has been searching for, as if she is jumping timelines (making the work to some degree, futuristic, following slipstream theories by Bruce Sterling, Richard Dorsett and Grace L. Dillon).

Often as youth, we do not seek guidance or knowledge from our Elders (although in many communities this has changed), and in some cases it is once we find ourselves as Elders that we seek our roots. Svetlana started to discover her roots later in life. But for Svetlana, all her ideas come to her when the moment is right; nothing is an accident. Applying a scientific lens to the mythological, Svetlana has spoken about quantum mechanics as that which inspires the manifestation of ideas and material in her practice; that there is a reason for the interconnected stories and moments of inspiration which have led to *Unveiling the Goddess*. For example, Svetlana would not have started the project if her neighbour had not donated the wood elements which she used in her sculptural series.

While thinking of Makosh, news of an ancient Slavic wooden sculpture (the Shigir Idol) being discovered in a bog, coincided with a radio program describing bacteria as a colour used in ancient stone paintings (which became the inspiration to use red alongside white and black). The aforementioned idol, one of the oldest monumental

art pieces in the world, is represented by a tall figure on cascading cloth in *Shigir, 11500 years old wood sculpture*, and honours the wooden ritual sculpture found in 1894. This genderless human-like artefact is restored through reinterpretation, with the artist adding colours, in contrast to the seemingly colourless original. It is unknown how the Shigir Idol looked in its heyday, but through the recycling of materials (linens which once held manhole covers) and artistic liberty, the idol is able to stand in its glory once more.

As an artist, Svetlana expresses how she feels on the topic through a mix of storytelling and plain curiosity. Using red paint, Svetlana takes information she has gathered from different sources, interpreting them in her own way and sharing this knowledge and interpretation with the public, as her own version of the story; not just the legend, the myth, but the contemporary connections and understanding that can come from interacting with ancestral elements. When ancestral knowledge is lost but various pieces of evidence remain, all we can do is interpret it to our best abilities. The Shigir Idol and other Slavic figures from that era may be abstract to the contemporary gaze, but they meant something to the ancient people. The artist, in this case, is acting as a translator and functioning as a bridge between gallery visitors and this lesser known cosmology. Most, if not all, such figures have rotted, lost to time, and yet this one idol has survived thousands of years to be unearthed and worshipped once more (albeit, as a cultural artifact rather than religious relic). The existence of such an idol mixed with the innovations of peasant crafts in Slavic societies has surpassed time (and geopolitical borders). Already by the 10th century, Makosh was excised from within social structures and became St. Paraskeva Pyatnitsa in Christianity. The erasure of the original icon and cult artifacts were a form of cultural self-censorship, but the symbolic imagery of swans, horses, the Sun, deer, and Makosh-affiliated elements (water, seeds, earth), lived on in embroidery and folk arts. Thus, resistance and survival of culture was carried out through symbolism. In Slavic society, we see it in Easter celebrations, especially in pysanky, where pagan symbols and rites were translated to fit Christian theology.

What both Svetlana and other Slavic artists and creators of the past and present are doing, in presenting these symbols through folk crafts or contemporary art, is the practice of blood memory, a type of memory that “we carry based on our familial connections.”⁸ As Svetlana told me, “us Slavs are creative by nature; we had to be to

survive our histories.” Slavs honoured and worshipped nature to survive, which is how of all the Slavic deities and symbols, those associated with Makosh have thrived the longest.

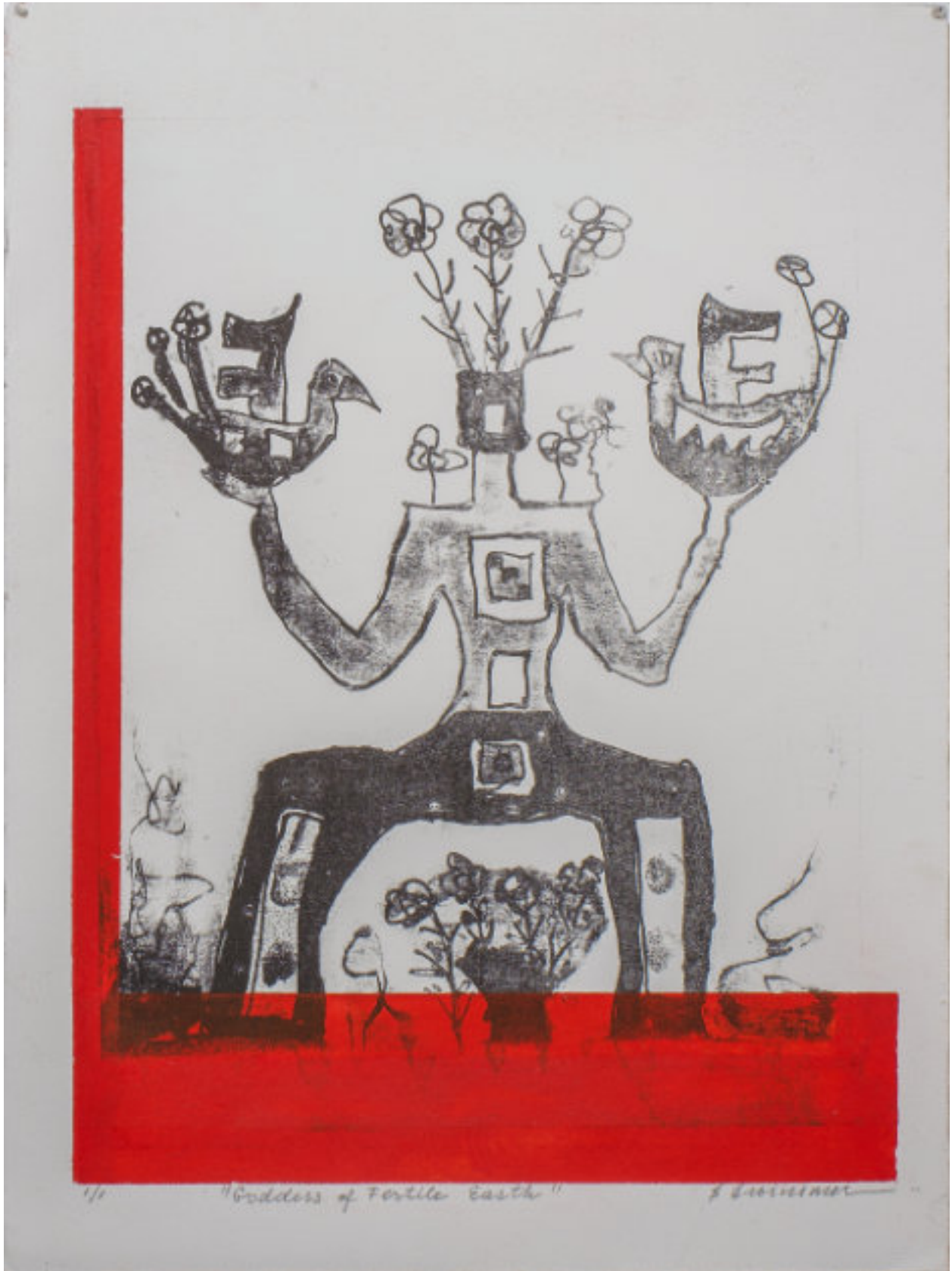
Svetlana’s prints, in their avant garde composition, also echo the abstraction of ancient Slavic symbolism and religious practices. The large painted linens, with their crisp painted lines, geometric ornamentation and monumental iconography, bridges the cult of Makosh from the realm of craft and peasant survival, to a space of contemporary, critically-engaged art. As such, one could argue her work is futuristic in nature, bringing the past into the present and the present into the past. And yet, the topic and work is transient; it existed in the gallery space and was specifically grounded to a particular moment in time, a particular sequence of experiences for the artist. The juxtaposition of pieces and meaning of the works as a whole was tied to the gallery space, and yet, the concept of the Divine Feminine within the show will always be available for reinterpretation and rebirth for the next generation, just like Makosh was in that particular reality.



Makosh 3. Acrylic on red oak.
Photo: Kristina Corre



Cosmic Movement in distaff Acrylic and threads on linen
Photo: David Barbour



Goddess of Fertile Earth. Lithograph and silkscreen
Photo: David Barbour



Shigir, 11500 years old wood sculpture. Acrylic on linen.
Photo: David Barbour

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EXHIBITION ESSAY BY ANNA PALUCH

Anna (Ania) Paluch is a PhD candidate in Cultural Mediations with a focus on Visual Culture at Carleton University’s Faculty of Arts and Social Science. Her research examines the connections between Indigenous Futurism and Slavic Futurism and the role of science fiction and popular culture in reclaiming traditional imagery and preserving oral stories.

ARTIST BIO

Svetlana Swinimer was born in Omsk, Siberia, USSR; (now known as Russia); and immigrated to Canada in 1975. For over forty years, her artistic practice has drawn upon the intersection of science and humanity through sculpture, installation, painting, video, digital photography and artistic collaboration. Swinimer's background in mathematics helps her create art based on investigative scientific phenomena.

www.svetlana-swinimer.ca



Installation view screenshot
3D walkthrough courtesy Joyce Westrop



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