

WHITEHOT MAGAZINE TM



*Stas Orlovski, Chimera [detail], 2014. Wall drawing, collage, stop-motion animation, and sound.
Courtesy of the Artist. Sound by Steve Roden. Post-production by Beau Leduc.*

Stas Orlovski: Chimera
Pasadena Museum of California Art
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By **MEGAN ABRAHAMS**, DEC. 2014

Conceived from a magical fusion of Old World sensibilities and new age technology, Stas Orlovski's dreamlike multi-media installation, *Chimera*, transports the viewer to a world of enchantment. In this work, the artist has invented a fantasy alternate universe that transcends the conventions of space and time. Within its borders, lights flicker with delicacy and fade to darkness, shapes shift and evolve, and the specter of danger lurks in the background. Defined by its own dimensions, *Chimera* is inhabited by the elusive silhouettes of nuanced figures that appear for a moment, only to dissolve in mysterious shadows.

The piece, an animated montage projected and reflected on two walls, is comprised of collages, stencils and paintings inspired by arcane sources such as images from 19th century postcards, illustrations in old Russian children's books recalled from the artist's own early childhood, Japanese prints and Chinese landscape paintings -- a mash-up as Orlovski calls it -- found in places like flea markets and archives. *Chimera*, as the name suggests, is a series of illusory sequences infused with a sense of nostalgia

sentimentality and mystery. Interconnected, although without a central storyline, seductive wisps of haunting narrative surface intermittently out of the flow of imagery on the wall.

Confining himself to a soft earthy palette, primarily sepias, blues, greens and black, Orlovski has rendered birds, leaves, trees, moonlit mountains and other fragmented landscapes, figures and other subjects, drawn, collaged and projected on the wall. All these exquisitely expressed elements combine to create a streaming succession of imagery. As an undercurrent, in the way that fairy tales are steeped in darkness, *Chimera* too, is filled with dark brooding references.

Like choreography, through animation, the images shift. Leaves grow on a branch, birds flutter, water tumbles down a waterfall and a figure jumps to an ominous end. The unfolding sequences comprise a 30-minute loop of animated paintings. There was no script, no pre-conceived idea. The piece has no beginning, middle, or end. Inspired by *Phantasmagoria* shows, *Chimera* blends state of the art technology with the antiquated feel of the magic-lantern slide projectors used by magicians and entertainers in 18th and early 19th century Europe, from which it is somewhat derived.



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On another level, more than straightforward animation, the installation is a complex multi-layered collaborative work involving sound and innovative computer programming, not to mention a serendipitous synergy of creative instincts. The flow of scenes, or sequences, are married in an organic way to a non-synchronized soundtrack of acoustic Victorian-era musical instruments composed by Steve Roden. A harmonium from India, a Gibson banjolele, a long neck banjo, a strohviol and Rodin's voice, produce evocative atmospheric accompaniment, which Roden refers to as sound rather than music.

Deliberate, dramatic pauses in the animation are filled with this abstract soundtrack, which weaves a moody essence around and through the visual composition. The entire series of images was programmed into 37,000 frames of stop-motion animation by Beau Leduc. Orlovski played the role of director, bringing his vision to life.

In a panel discussion with Orlovski, Roden and Leduc at PMCA, the artist discussed the genesis of the concept. "It started with the idea of not doing anything in animation, but making a drawing that happened to move. So it was a very basic question: How do I take the images in my paintings and activate them?" Chimera evolved out of this question. In order to activate the drawings outside the parameters of a conventional film, one of the things the artist determined was that the projections would not have typical borders. Instead of presenting the images in the context of a rectangular frame, the ambient light in the gallery is controlled to a prescribed degree of dimness, so the illuminated areas of the image emerge from the background of the darkened wall. The resulting projected shapes are reminiscent of Matisse cutouts, or puzzle pieces.



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"The idea of having images dance on the wall independently, uncontained, was really where the whole project started," Orlovski said. "A very simple question: What if these images move? What will happen? And so that led us down the path of creating the technology to meet that purpose." The actual collaboration was not planned either, but evolved into more of a conversation, according to Orlovski. Regarding the nature of such collaborations as this, he said, "If you're lucky, they yield something fabulous and unpredictable."

The creative process behind *Chimera* had a low-tech component as well. The artist would paint a life-size image on the wall, then photograph the image, repeating that process thousands of times to reflect every change and movement it enacted. Leduc compiled the data, and together they broke apart and assembled fragments and pieces of imagery to produce the ultimate animated sequences. "It's definitely a combination of taking the most traditional form of hand-drawn animation and then using editing to modify the image in some way, and still being true to it," Orlovski said.

The technology, while obviously painstakingly complex, appears seamless in the final presentation, consistent with the artist's intention. "When you look at the animation you don't really look at the piece and think about the technology. You're really looking at the imagery, and looking at things unfold, shift, and change over time," he said. The effect is that of a mirage, a nuanced vision on the horizon that changes into something new just as the brain attempts to interpret what the eyes last saw. *Chimera* is a magical realm, conjured from the depths of the artist's imagination. Even if we cannot enter, we are captured. **WM**



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