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Stas Orlovski's Moving Paintings

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Stas Orlovski, Chimera, Installation view, Don Milici

A fabrication of the mind... An unrealizable dream... A creature composed of incongruent parts...

These are some of the meanings of "chimera," and they well suit the newest moving image installation work of the same name by artist Stas Orlovski. Over the last few years, the artist has aspired to make his paintings and drawings do a very simple thing: move.

Orlovski's "Chimera," currently on view at the [Pasadena Museum of California Art](#), conjoins two animations projected onto two wall-based paintings, together creating a multi-layered collage centered on the outline of a woman's torso, a large mirror, plants and a waterfall all in muted colors of grays, yellows and blues. This dancing visual effusiveness is enhanced by a soundtrack by sound artist Steve Roden designed not to explain or narrate but rather to connect and comment, but only through chance and coincidence.

The images, culled from the artist's delightfully arcane collection of materials, including Russian children's books, botanical drawings, Victorian-era prints, actual plants and more, defy easy categorization. Orlovski has characterized them as an "iconography of nostalgia," noting that they're at once bittersweet and melancholic. Taken together, though, the images and sounds move in a magisterial orchestration of collaged bits and pieces; they conjure moments of wonder, fleeting experiences of uncanny synchronization and a felt sense that, in a world increasingly identified with disembodied information and inexorable logic, we desire embodied meaning and an ineffable awe, things perhaps more often experienced in the past than in our image-saturated present.



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"Chimera" is the seventh in a series of overlapping projects that began as experiments prompted by an invitation from the curators of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art who asked Orlovski to participate in the Drawing Surrealism show that opened in October of 2012. "They gave me two walls, and they wanted me to do wall drawings that would be contemporary interventions in a historical survey show," Orlovski explains, sitting in his darkened studio in

Culver City where a version of "Chimera" flickers on one wall. "When I met with the curators, and we looked at all the models for the show, I realized, oh my god, I'm supposed to create a drawing that will hang between Max Ernst and Joseph Cornell! There was no way! It was a total set-up!"

Orlovski, realizing that he couldn't simply make a drawing or two in that daunting context, saw an opportunity. "Can I propose something totally off the wall?" he asked. He knew that the show had no other media-based work, but he was interested in offering an intervention that moved. "It was a very quiet show, very intimate and everything was contained in a frame or in a case," he explains. "So I wanted to make something that wasn't contained, that didn't have a border, or a frame, and wasn't framed by a screen. So I thought if I project onto a wall, and make a moving drawing - not really a film or an animation, but a drawing that moved and wasn't contained by a frame - maybe that would be okay."

It was more than okay, and that first projection piece inaugurated the two-year continuing investigation into drawing, collage, projection and movement, as well thematic inquiries into the body, nature, imaging and magic.



Installation view, Drawing Surrealism, 2012 Museum Associates/LACMA

"My painting had been getting more and more cinematic," says Orlovski, who graduated from USC with an MFA from the Roski School of Art and Design. "I had these paintings of moonbeams that were already in a sense depicting projected light." He had also begun

grappling with the idea of projection as a form of memory or metaphor and was intrigued by early moving image technologies, such as the magic lantern and phantasmagoria from the birth of cinema; these devices made it possible to project one image, or two images, and even to make the images move a bit. Often used in séances and other pseudo-spiritual events in the 18th and 19th centuries, these projections were dedicated specifically to producing a sense of magical wonder that appealed to Orlovski.

Orlovski had also started making paintings that connected with each other, in triptychs and multiple panels. "They were very sequential. And then I started using a printing press, and that started to feel like frames in a film." Driven to take the next step, Orlovski wrote a proposal for the funding platform called Hatchfund seeking support for a very simple idea: "What would happen if I made the images in my paintings move? What would happen if the moonbeam started to project light? If something flew across the space? If the weather changed?"



Stas Orlovski, Chimera, Installation view courtesy of Don Milici

Orlovski's idea was funded, and he was able to purchase the basic equipment needed for animating his work. He realized very quickly, however, that he wasn't particularly interested in getting lost in the intricacies of software. Through friends, he was able to connect with incredibly talented collaborators, who now assist in the composition of his images. The process initially seems entirely primitive - Orlovski, standing in front of the camera against a wall, makes a mark; he steps out of the frame; the shutter is released; and this is repeated for hours. "It turns into a situation in which we're sitting in the studio, we're projecting images, I'm drawing on the wall, and then in real time, we're modifying or adjusting these animated pieces. So it's very loose, there's no narrative, at least not to begin with, and there are no preconceived ideas. It really just starts as these moments. And then we play. Until something -- hopefully -- coalesces into a whole."

Pointing to an image flickering on the wall, Orlovski says, "This one was done with a digital microscope and the movement that you see is my heart beating and my hand shaking." The image he's referring to is actually a tiny engraving, and the microscope shows the individual lines of the engraving. The image shudders a little.



Stas Orlovski studio view

"With those plants on the wall," he continues, pointing to some leaves taped to the wall on the far side of the studio, "I paste them to the wall in just a few spots, and then I put a fan underneath them and they start fluttering and I just click the shutter so it becomes more classically stop motion, objects that are moving in time and space. And then we put all of these

things together, and what's so interesting is that they're all in their own times and spaces, in their own different rhythms."

In reflecting on the main images that make up "Chimera" -- the silhouette outlines of a woman's body, the mirror, the waterfall -- Orlovski admits that he doesn't know yet why he's obsessed with this particular era and its enchanting, enigmatic imagery, but he definitely knows that it's a little suspect. "Whether it's irony or being hip, there's this total dismissal of a certain visual language, unless you're using it to comment," he says. "But to me, there are things buried in that imagery that are more complicated." He explains that part of his work now is figuring it all out. "Why am I looking at these waterfalls? Why am I obsessed with these moonlit things? I'm completely compelled and sucked into these images. So the current work is a mash-up where all these different things collide. What they make I don't know other than parts of my brain and my being that are basically out there interacting with each other and maybe generating something."

What they generate is an experience that hovers between watching a film and studying a painting or contemplating a drawing. Rather than watching a narrative - even an experimental or nonlinear narrative -- unfold, we instead contemplate the relationships between figure and ground, part and whole, projection and painting, stasis and movement, past and present, knowing and feeling, all of this in the context of movement. We inhabit a delightful in-between space, a dynamic field of possibility. And chance. And wonder.

"Chimera" will be on view at the Pasadena Museum of California Art through January 11, 2015.



About the Author

Holly Willis teaches in USC's School of Cinematic Arts and writes about new media art.