# NOL 8: SRING 2019

## FEATURING:

ROBERT MCNEILL OLGA & LIZA VOLGINA



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SPOTLIGHT • **ARTISTS** 







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## Olga and Liza VOLGUNATION DE LA COMPANSA VOLGUNATION DE LA COMPANSA DE LA COMPANS

Identical and conjoined twins are fascinating and magical in both fiction and real life: Remus and Romulus, Snow-White and Rose-Red, Ronnie and Reggie Kray, Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen, wrestlers Nikki and Brie Bella, Chang and Eng, Masha and Dasha, Violet and Daisy Hilton, Abigail and Brittany Hensel. What intensifies this uniqueness, at least for me, is a talent and/or career shared between mirror-image siblings, so the first time I saw Russia's Olga and Liza Volgina and their respective art, I became a smitten fan. Not only am I pleased to have received clever, astute interview answers from them, but I appreciate their schooling me on my apparent overemphasis on their genetic good fortune. I hope that the Volginas (t)win you over as well – and that I can be forgiven for such an inexcusable pun someday.





A Girl with a Dinosaur 75x75 watercolor on paper





**David:** As identical sisters you two seem to capitalize on the fascination, magic and weird allure of twins – as well as your delightful physical beauty, like America's Allie and Lexi Kaplan and the celebrity doll-making Popovy Sisters (who also live in Saint Petersburg, where you live). How have your twinship and sex-appeal affected your art and your lives in general?

**Volginas:** It may sound strange, but our being twins is basically the same as others not being twins. For us it is so ordinary that we do not consciously derive any kind of advantage whatsoever, because we cannot wrap our minds around it, just as some people cannot realize their loneliness. Everyone has a different perception of beauty and the same goes for perception of twins. For example, there are people who are somewhat scared by us and feel uncomfortable around us; and there are others who overflow with joy. I suppose that we would be happier if people found our works more interesting than our similar faces, which start to look less and less similar with age.

Maybe our faces will soon cease being beautiful at all. We might as well add that we have never taken notice of any particular fascination with our beauty. We have never made the so-called "good-looker" list, neither in school nor during our time in university. We wouldn't mind learning how to utilize our "advantages," but we're not getting anywhere [on them] for the time being. On the other hand, we are being interviewed, which is pretty much heartwarming. Maybe we have made some progress in this department after all!

**David:** Olga, in a somewhat Abstract Expressionist style you produce intense, anguished emotionalist portraiture that slightly reminds me of, say, Francis Bacon's faces. And there's a sense of mortality, such as in a non-portrait painting in which a red apple rests on the ground above an ominous buried human skull. In another piece multiple apples resembling violent blood spatter gush from a disturbing (dying, dead?) eye. Tell us about the fruit's symbolism and about death. Also, since it's headlined on your webpage, what are your thoughts on psychoanalysis and how do you apply it to your art?

**Olga:** I've always been interested in portraiture. Usually when I begin a fresh watercolor, I never start with a sketch. I take wash and generally start with an eye. Then I see a face, and quite often I find myself displeased with it. I feel like it is lying to me, and I begin to "deface" it by peeling the paint off with sharp objects or, the other way around, by throwing paint at it. I want to see what I seek. Maybe that is why [the faces] look so unsettled: they have to endure agony and pain before I can see that I got it right.

As for the painting with the skull and the apple, and the painting with the eye in the sky, I would say that the two share a connection. The first one depicts the skull of Adam, the second one contains Eden. At the time of their creation I was coping with a dismal mood. I yearned for some meaning and religiousness, so I tried to show how I felt at that time. The apples represent some sort of sinful reflections. As of now, I can hardly comprehend why I did this.

In regard to psychoanalysis, I see it as a fine word that may have explained something before, but now I tend to stray farther and farther away from it. Of course, I still analyze my creations. I find this process rather intriguing, but right now those things which defy any semblance of logic or analysis look more thrilling to me. As a matter of fact, my sister and I always leave room for interpretation in everything we lay our minds on. We spend hours just talking over cups of tea, reflecting on things we do, on our dreams and reveries. Maybe it's similar to how other people need time to stay in the privacy of their minds, to be away.





Sin 100x80 watercolor on paper



**David:** Rather than showing any joy your gaunt art is serious and morbid-toned. Your subjects seem numb or entranced, and Olga's tend toward disintegration. Are you two drawn to and expressive of the serious and morbid?

**Volginas:** Yes, we gravitate towards such themes. They seem to originate in our childhood. Since the very beginning we felt this overarching tacit tragedy. It may as well be that, in order to soldier through this inherent feeling, we try to embellish [this tragic feeling], make art out of it, and embed it in the real word through pictures. We tend to think that this feeling is open to interpretation, and that it's hard to pinpoint its exact nature. The tragedy of our characters is confined in their inability to talk; they are essentially mute, just imprints on paper, though their eyes speak louder than words and they have a story to tell, if one would listen. We started creating personal paintings when we understood that there's no point in talking anymore. Moreover, our words are often misinterpreted. (Please consider yourself duly informed.)

**David:** Liza, some of your work depicts weird machinery attached to humans and human/sheep hybrids. And in what seem to be matching portraits, morose women hold a blue snail and a blue seahorse, respectively. How does this stuff relate to your interest in biomechanics, steampunk and cyberpunk? Considering the overall composition of the seahorse piece, particularly the appearance of the hand cradling the creature, I wonder if you were inspired by Leonardo's Lady with an Ermine?

**Liza:** I try to elaborate on the theme of the future in my paintings with machinery and human hybrids. Maybe they are interconnected, but, at the same time, it's not about the future at all: this is all an allegory. It may as well be an effort to correlate people and the world around them, and to show conflict. Surely there is something that distinguishes a person from everything else. It seems to me that my characters understand their own mortality. I would, to put it bluntly, pretty much want them to understand it. Either way, despite everything they go through, they are not machines, they are not animals, they do not grow better or worse in the process of enduring. They have a different task at hand, which is unfathomable to me as much as my very own existence is.

As for the woman holding the cyan creature and Leonardo, of course I saw the painting you're referring to, and I find it rather pleasant that you've managed to capture the undertones. I think Leonardo himself was inspired by something, just as I was inspired by his work. I often try to reimagine classics, for it enlivens me and cultivates imagination.

**David:** What you two share in common most in your respective art styles is focus on eyes and their irresistible, haunting gazing back at viewers. I can't help but notice that your own gorgeous pairs of eyes have similar gazes. Do you deliberately depict your eyes in portraits? Tell us about gazing eyes, and how you two relate and contribute to each other's work.

**Volginas:** We indeed are captivated with the eye, especially at the moment of pause, just like in movies: the awkward moment when the character suddenly notices the observer and looks straight into the camera, catching the viewer off guard. In old masterpieces there is usually a character amongst the crowd that looks right at us. Wise ones say that this character is often the [work's] master himself. We use parts of ourselves to portray our characters as well. We probably do it subconsciously. It may sound haughty, but that's just the way it is, and we fully admit it. Our characters go out into the world not to catch a million looks, but rather to get hold of just one gaze.

If we are to talk about how we influence each other, then we'd say that, undoubtedly, we learn from each other: help where assistance is needed or stain something that needs staining in a proper manner. The moment a painting becomes tainted is the instant we find most interesting. It takes certain effort. In view of this, you probably need to know that we have academic training in the classical school of painting under our belts, and now we want to wreak havoc in everything we have diligently learned to create.





Stalker 40x30 liner and watercolor on paper

**David:** Does any music affect your art? What is some of your favorite art and who are some of your favorite artists (old and new)? And what do you think of American art and American culture in general?

**Olga:** Music has a great deal of influence on our art. For example, getting to know Vladimir Frith (the composer who fathered Reflection Nebula) has opened the whole new world of ambient [music] to us. We find the music he creates genuinely incredible and would like it to be more widely recognized. We see it as an endless plane of infinite images and experiences, so we draw from it like there's no tomorrow.

**Liza:** It's kind of hard for me to talk about music, because the music I pick greatly depends on my mood. Sometimes I feel embarrassed by my music choices. We love singing a duet together as the mood takes us. There was a time when we sang in a church choir, and there was a time when we attended metal gigs. In other words, our view on music is quite diverse. We learned to play accordion in music school (and even managed to graduate), so I guess we owe it for a great deal of this unquantifiable something that we have now. Sad to say, we don't play accordion anymore.

**Volginas:** Movies have their influence on us as well: particularly those of Andrei Tarkovsky, Lars von Trier, Ingmar Bergman and Kim Ki-duk. As for graphic arts, we find it hard to single out any specific individuals. Experience shows that throughout different periods of our lives we held dear a variety of artists. For example, right now we have Egon Schiele as our indispensable guide, yet just a month ago we were caught up in Sally Mann's photographs. Mann is unique and a beautiful example of American art.

While on the subject of American art, we would also like to point out Andrew Wyeth and Jackson Pollock. American culture affects Russian culture. Our generation of those born in the 1990s is filled to the brim with people who grew up on American movies. We feel this special bond right at our fingertips. It was a post-Iron Curtain time stamped with Yeltsin dancing his heart out, terror bombings, armed conflicts. It was all happening while we watched *Beavis and Butthead* and MTV, and dreamed of having a birthday party in a McDonalds. For teenagers of that time, American culture acted as a sort of comfort zone; it let us drown out the noise we were horrified to hear.





Vertical 80x100 watercolor on paper

**David:** Liza, I see in your work a genetic connection to medieval icon paintings. (Think Andrei Rublev.) Considering the Russian past, I'm interested in your and Olga's thoughts on Kandinsky and his theosophical/Orthodox Christian/mystical/color-musical approach to art: spiritual "inner meanings" producing visible beauty (as written in his *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*). With a history in which avant-garde/abstract art (what Khrushchev called "horse shit") caved in to didactic Socialist Realism long ago, how is such art viewed in Russia nowadays? Is there any spiritual, deeper meaning in your worldview and work?

**Liza:** It's peculiar that you've noticed this sort of connection with icon paintings. I wouldn't say it was deliberate; it somehow happened organically. Russian art did have a tremendous influence on us since childhood. For some reason we unquestionably believed in God when we were children, and, besides icons, however amusing this might sound, we were greatly influenced by the Bible in comic-book format. It was some sectarian book [the Andre LeBlanc-illustrated *Picture Bible*, 1978], which somehow found its way into our household. When we were little and just started painting, our favorite characters were Jesus and one politician we saw on TV (whose family name we found pretty damn funny).



To Be Like a Snail 75x75 watercolor on paper

**Volginas:** If we are to speak of Kandinsky, then we would say he's undoubtedly a very interesting artist and theorist. However, we find [Kazimir] Malevich much closer to us, for he liberated art by creating *Black Square* as somewhat of a doorway to the domain of non-constraint, through which everything changed and showed the truth of all that's been happening. In fact there is a symbiotic relationship between Russian icon paintings and avant-garde paintings of that time. Over the period of strict atheism, art pretty much drew near the religious peak. It would be interesting to point out that the greater censorship thrives in the area, the greater the pressure is and the more paralyzed art should probably be, yet we see the complete opposite reaction. We think that Russian art now gets another chance at creating something astonishing.

Certainly socialist realism is still more understandable to a man on the street, while Kandinsky and Malevich are unappreciated. People are scared of the obscure and abstract; it's in our nature. We find [obscurity and abstraction] terrifying because they cast doubt on the very fabric of our perceived reality. Socialist realism undoubtedly depicted those times in great detail; it's not just portraits of Lenin and Stalin. It was oppositional and unflattering as well, while artists like Geliy Korzhev reveal the tragic side of the time.

Right now Russia is on a bewildering rollercoaster going nowhere. Russians tend to frown upon those who shine or try to create something shocking and flamboyant. There are lots of artists who dwell upon Russian identity or any other national theme, and sitting across the table there are people who go to great lengths to produce something extraordinary – yet their efforts essentially fail more often than not. These two developments are of little interest to us. We believe that real art is brought into existence in some dilapidated communal flat or a rundown dormitory by some unknown individuals at this very moment. Masterpieces are materialized in complete silence.

We find it hard to give you a straight answer regarding meanings. At times everything loses meaning; these moments are there to create something truly substantial. Sometimes we look at this huge stack of our works that lies quietly under the bed and think to ourselves: What is the *damn meaning of it all*? At other times it's the other way around: we look at our older works and see something else entirely.

**David:** Kandinsky wrote that "the artist is not born to a life of pleasure" and "that he is free in art but not in life." In *Catching the Big Fish* filmmaker David Lynch says that "the art life means a freedom" – but that pleasure should be part of that life "since the more the artist is suffering, the less creative he is going to be." Where do you two fall on the spectrum? Are dismissal of pleasure and a basic suffering integral to being an artist? Or is avoidance of suffering and maximization of pleasure better for creating better art?

**Volginas:** Of course we wouldn't mind getting more pleasures out of life, and we don't think that that would have tampered with the quality of our art, though this does not apply to seeking pleasure in vodka (though those "in the know" would tell you otherwise). Generally, we tend to think that an artist is like a thorn in the side of society, which does its best to cast out, banish, squelch, starve and belittle the thorn. For some people an artist is like a conduit to transcendence, a portal one may tap into; for others an artist is a parasite, a useless freeloader who does not contribute anything to society. The thought that by only experiencing misery and sorrow one may create something truly significant somewhat scares us. From time to time that eerie feeling gets its cold grip on our minds. In all fairness, this notion is mostly true.

Perhaps we grew tired of this suffering. Of course, suffering ceases in death, but that does not make us feel any better. Bear in mind that if we ever create cheerful paintings, you'd instantly know that something apparently unexpected happened. In the end we tend to think that human life is the greatest masterpiece of all, with its complexity and gamut of experiences. The more this gamut resembles cardiac waveforms, the better.

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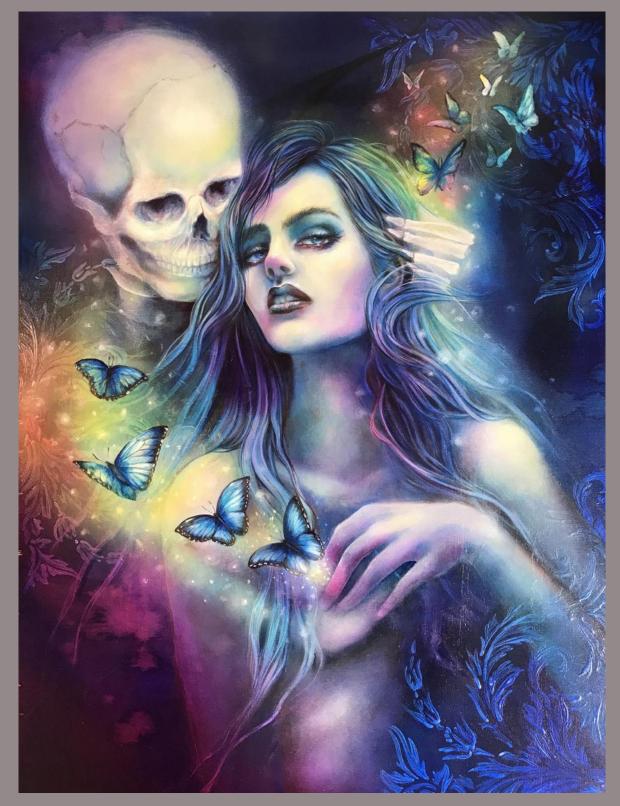
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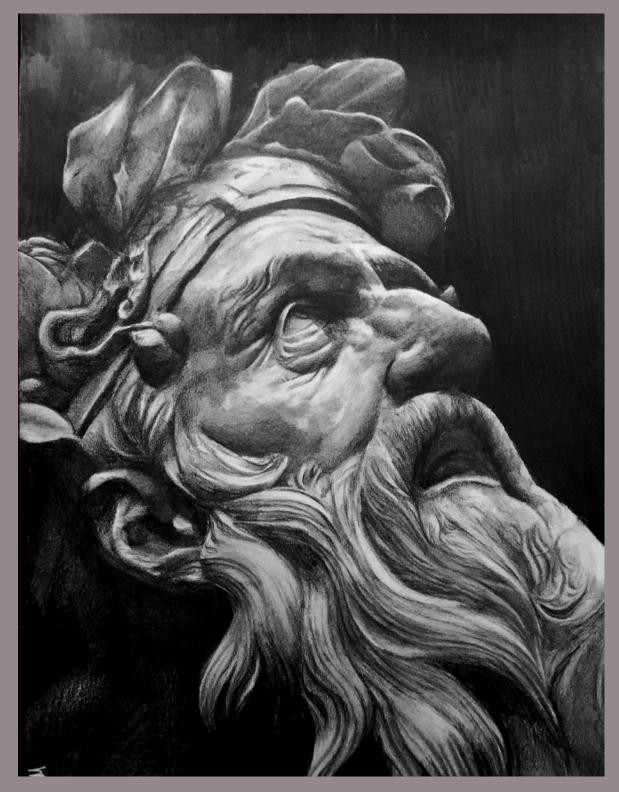
"Mirror", oil on wood panel, 20"x26"





"Death's Guiding Light" Acrylic and oil on wood,18"x 24"

## ARTISTS >>> INDIE MATHARU



"Chryses praying to Apollo", Drawing on Cason paper, 29x42 centimeters





"The Death, Melancholy and Raving Madness" Acrylic and ink on paper





"Velvet Garden" Oil on wood panel 12" x12"





"Angel" Oil on panel 6.5"x9"



## **INTERNATIONAL SURREALISM NOW 2019**

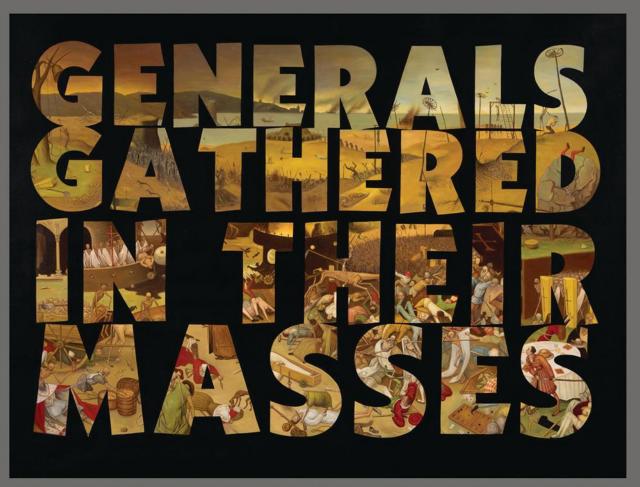
## The 13th edition of the International Surrealism Now exhibition 2019 in the city of Marinha Grande in Portugal has at the moment the participation of 120 artists from 50 countries in the five continents.

Achraf Baznani, Morocco / Agim Meta, Albania-Spain / Aissa Mammasse, Algeria / Alessio Serpetti, Italy / Alvaro Mejias, Venezuela / Ana Neamu, Romania / Ana Pilar Morales, Spain / Andrew Baines, Australia / Aquilino Ferreira, Portugal / Asier Guerrero Rico (Dio), Spain / Brigid Marlin, UK / Bien Banez, Philippines / Can Emed, Turkey / Carlos Sablón, Cuba / C t lin Precup, Romania / Cristian Townsend, Australia / Conor Walton, Ireland / Cynthia Tom, China / USA / Dag Samsund, Denmark / Daila Lupo, Italy / Dan Neamu, Romania / Daniel Chiriac, Romania / Daniel Hanequand, France / Canada / Daniele Gori, Italy / Delphine Cencig, France / Dean Fleming, USA / Domen Lo, Slovenia / Edgar Invoker, Russia / Efrat Cybulkiewicz, Venezuela / Egill Eibsen, Iceland / Erik Heyninck, Belgium / Ettore Aldo Del Vigo, Italy / Fabrizio Riccardi, Italy / Farhad Jafari, Iran / France Garrido, USA / Francisco Urbano, Portugal / Gabriele Esau, Germany / Genesis Cabrera, USA / Graça Bordalo Pinheiro, Portugal / Graszka Paulska, Poland / Gromyko Semper, Philippines / Gyuri Lohmuller, Romania / Hector Pineda, Mexico / Hector Toro, Colombia / Henrietta Kozica, Sweden / Hugues Gillet, France / Isabel Meyrelles, Portugal / Iwasaki Nagi, Japan / James Skelton, UK / Jay Garfinkle, USA / Jay Paul Vonkoffler, American / Argentine / Jimah St, Nigeria / Joanna Budzy ska-Sycz, Poland / João Duarte, Portugal / Keith Wigdor, USA / Leo Wijnhoven, Netherlands / Leo Plaw, Germany / Liba WS, France / Lubomír Štícha, Republic Czech / Ludgero Rolo, Portugal / Lv Shang, China / Maarten Vet, Netherlands / Maciej Hoffman, Poland / Magi Calhoun, USA / Marnie Pitts, UK / Maria Aristova, Russia / Mario Devcic, Croatia / Martina Hoffman, Germany / Mathias Böhm, Germany / Mehriban Efendi, Azerbaijan / Naiker Roman, Cuba / Spain / Nazareno Stanislau, Brazil / Nikolina Petolas, Croatia / Octavian Florescu, Canada / Ofelia Hutul, Romania / Oleg Korolev, Russia / Olesya Novik, Russia / Olga Spiegel, USA / Otto Rapp, Austria / Paula Rosa, Portugal / Paulo Cunha, Canada / Pedro Diaz Cartes, Chile / Penny Golledge, UK / Peter MC LANE, France / Philippe Pelletier, France / Roch Fautch, USA / Rodica Miller, USA / Ruben Cukier, Argentine / Israeli / Rudolf Boelee, New Zealand / Russbelt Guerra, Peru / Sabina Nore, Austria / Sampo Kaikkonen, Finland / Santiago Ribeiro, Portugal / Sarah Zambiasi, Australia / Serge Sunne, Latvia / Sergey Tyukanov, Russia / Shahla Rosa, USA / Shoji Tanaka, Japan / Shan Zhulan, China / Shia Weltenmenge, Germany / Sio Shisio, Indonesia / Slavko Krunic, Serbia / Sônia Menna Barreto, Brazil / Steve Smith, USA / Stuart Griggs, UK / Svetlana Kislyachenko, Ukraine / Svetlana Ratova, Russia / Tatomir Pitariu, USA / Tersanszki Cornelia, Romania /Tim Roosen, Belgium / Ton Haring, Netherlands / Victor Lages, Portugal / Vu Huyen Thuong, Vietnam / Yamal Din, Morocco / Spain / Yuliya Patotskaya, Belarus / Yuri Tsvetaev, Russia / Zoltan Ducsai, Hungary / Zoran Velimanovic, Serbia.

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Artist at work photo



## The Versatility of Robert McNeill

interview by Lana Gentry

California-born painter Robert McNeill worked hard at becoming a traditional artist, but the flavor and direction of his work quite naturally took more twists and turns as time went on. As a fascinating conversationalist and deep thinker, he has remained open-minded while tackling dark, unconventional, erotic and international themes. Also, he's gained a good deal of attention through his drawings and paintings, which include his renowned renderings of women. We caught up with Robert to find out more about his varied creative interests.



My Turn 48x60 in oil on canvas



**LG:** You were born In Berkeley, California in 1951 and eventually became an architect. When did you decide to break away from this traditional occupation and gravitate towards tattooing?

**R Mc:** I started tattooing in 1978 after some heavily tattooed friends pressured me to try it. I worked tattoos on nights and weekends during my 22 years in architecture in San Francisco. My wife and I moved to Coeur d'Alene, Idaho in October 2000 to care for my mother, who was dying of cancer. We were there only two weeks by the time she passed away. There was dispute over her will, which put her property in probate. I was executor, so we decided to stay in order to maintain the property. I did not want to find work in architecture; I was exhausted by it, so I found a job at a local tattoo shop. It's been full-time ever since.

**LG:** A lot of tattoo artists are offended when people ask for standard designs or things the artist doesn't find gratifying. Do you put any restrictions on your clients?

**R Mc:** Restrictions on tattoos? Yes. I don't do Nazi or gang tattoos. I don't do sacrilegious images. As a rule I won't tattoo anything I think is ugly. Honestly, it gets more difficult with each passing year. Custom tattooing has opened a Pandora's Box. Once in an interview I was asked to describe what I do for a living in five words or less. I answered: "I enable bad taste."

**LG:** That's one way of seeing it. LOL! Your tattoo work and your paintings are impressive. I would assume people want a lot of your original work in ink.

**R Mc:** All of the tattoos I do are original designs. I haven't done tattoo flash in over 30 years.





30x40 in oil on canvas

18x24 oil on canvas



36x48 in oil on canvas



**LG:** It takes a lot of study on your end and dedicated clients to achieve the status of only doing one's own work. That's impressive. Your mural work is also impressive. How often do you do murals?

**R Mc:** I haven't done many. Seven so far. I completed the most recent one in late November of this year (2018). The one before that was in 2004.



Ultimate Thrills 36x48 oil on canvas





**LG:** What I have seen made me think you had been doing many murals over the years. They are clean and eye-catching, as well as beautifully executed.

**R Mc:** I appreciate that.

**LG:** You're also known as an incredible painter. It's a trite question, but do you prefer one art form over the other?

**R Mc:** If I had to choose one, it would definitely be painting. It's a very loving relationship I have with paint.

**LG:** I know you married not so long ago. Has falling in love changed your work in any way that you can see?

**R Mc:** Love...yes. It affects my work. I'm more disciplined. I get things done. Knowing I'm not alone makes me want share things. If I were single, I'd be wandering in Tibet, looking for a place to end it all.



48x60 in. acrylic on canvas



Kabuki 1 48x60 in acrylic on canvas



Kabuki 2 48x60 in acrylic on canvas





Flaying of Marsais

## 42 ROBERT MCNEILL



Lotus 36x48 in oil on canvas

**LG:** Wow, that's painfully romantic, even if intense! Who are your heroes in art or otherwise and why?

**R Mc:** The list is long, but I'll keep it down to the most important. First would be Caravaggio, my biggest influence. Second: Velasquez. Third: J.S. Sargent. Fourth: Odd Nerdrum. In tattooing there are no specific individuals, but there are styles. First: Japanese Horimono. Second: Neo Traditional, because it combines the best of traditional Japanese and old-school American tattooing.





Meat 36x48 in oil on canvas



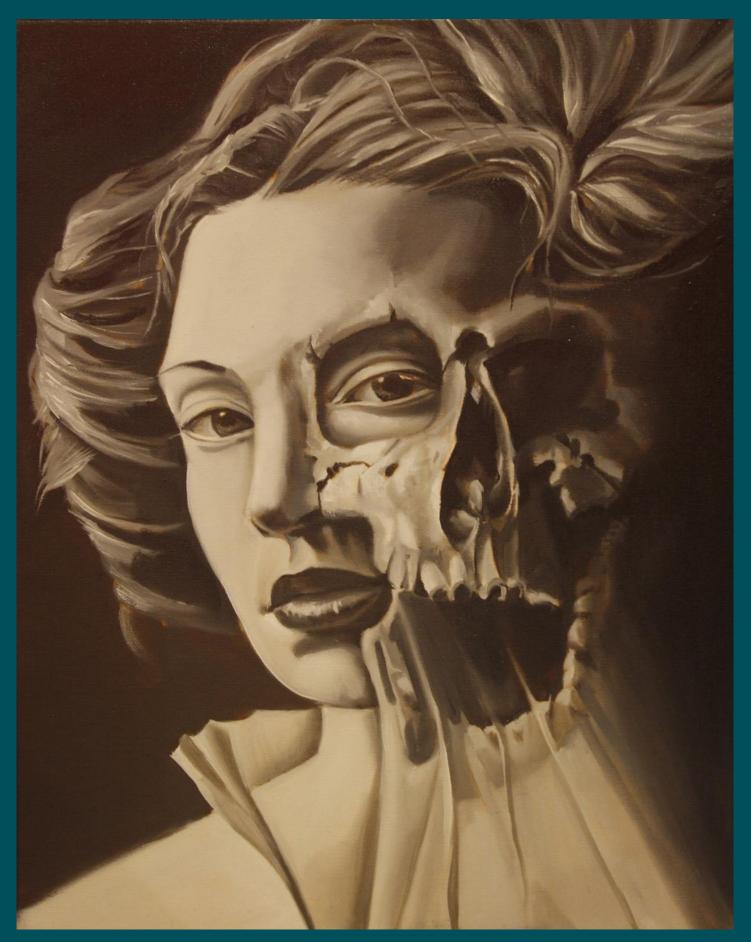
Better Demons 30x40 in oil on canvas



Bare Foot in Hell 36x48 in oil on canvas



Reflection 36x48 in oil on canvas



Victorian 18x24 in oil on canvas





Rose 30x40 in oil on canvas



Liar 36x48 in oil on canvas

LG: What should we expect from you next?

**R Mc:** To begin, let me say that I consider myself a Pop artist intent on social commentary. I'm looking at High Fashion these days. Unto itself, fashion is a type of Pop Art. It is also consumerism at its watermark, and it's exploitive and frequently degrading. It's a culture all its own, desired by many but enjoyed only by an elite few. I see it as field far richer than soup cans or comic books in content.

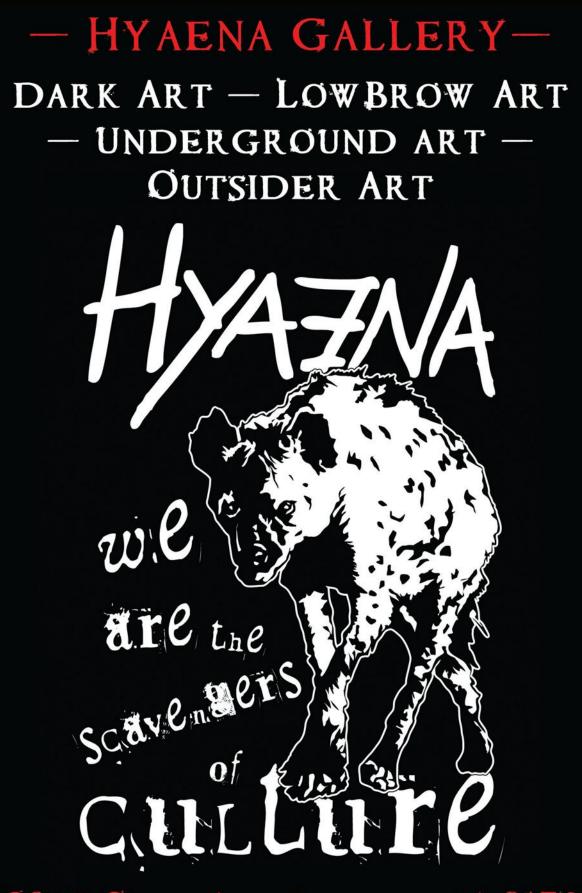
In conclusion I'd like to say that life and art have taught me that it's all about love. We all will see this world one day and realize that "the love you take is equal to the love you make."

LG: And with that, sir, so many thanks to you for taking the time to explain your process.



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