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FRAGmentality

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FRAGmentality

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Art

by

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Bachelor of Fine Arts, 2012

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This Thesis is approved for recommendation to The Graduate Council.

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ABSTRACT

Contemporary art is dedicated to the conversation between the past and the present, the established and the experimental; it becomes more and more trans-border, as life itself. Nowadays, people live in the world, where their beliefs, ideas, politics, and religion are constantly colliding. The more people expand boundaries and develop connections, the more complex and tangled our society becomes as a system.

FRAGmentality presents a set of mixed media pieces incorporating painting, weaving, embroidery and three-dimensional elements dedicated to these contradictions in the modern society. It deals with structures within social relations and human nature.

Being a representative of a small indigenous ethnic group called Udmurts, Elena Volkova has always been interested in the astonishing correlation between one's ability to segregate from the others and, at the same time, the instinctive desire to belong to a group, which is indissolubly bounded with the idea of home and belonging. The show investigates the complexity and fragmentation of human memory and perception through personal multicultural experience.

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DEDICATION

This Thesis is dedicated to Udmurt people and everyone who has faced problems of multicultural experience throughout their life.

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INTRODUCTION

Many centuries ago the idea of people being social animals was postulated by the Greek philosopher Aristotle. Human beings are highly connected to one another. We learn, develop and act through the prism of social networks. However, every human being retains a strong sense of individuality which represents one of the most distinctive features of mankind. This astonishing combination of the ability to segregate oneself from others and, the instinctive desire to belong to a particular group (or several groups) is not only the key to our survival as a biological species, but also the source of the identity problem. The question “Who am I?” is equally important for both a 5-year-old child and an adult of the age of 30. It launches the fundamental process of defining our own personality and gaining awareness about the interaction between the individual and society that continues throughout a lifetime.

ARTIST’S BACKGROUND AND DEVELOPMENT

Though the evolution of personality continues throughout our lives, changes tend to be more obvious and faster at a very young age. The stage of cognitive development, in other words, the transition from sensomotoric functions to the internal or symbolic functions, that lay the foundations of abstract thinking and perception, occurs between 2 to 11 years of age. I have always been interested in this subject matter and the inner conflicts it induces. Partially, the reason for my curiosity lies in the time period when I was born and held the most significant part of my childhood. The 1990s, decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, was a period of instability and loss of vital reference points. After the power shift and separation of Soviet Republics the old system was broken, the new had not yet been built, and therefore people did not know what to expect of the future. Such circumstances affected my perception of the world. A transformation of the socio-cultural environment and living within

a transitional period of an entire country resulted in the emergence of my interest towards internal contradictions.

Another important influence comes from my academic background. Through the study of Russian Philology, I gained a tight connection to languages and the understanding of how the languages we speak affect our attitude toward the world. Representatives of cultures with their own national language speak and think differently. Even newborn babies from different countries cry with their own significant intonations. Choice of a language can act as a signal for switching from one system of ideas to another; it can influence the shape and construction of the speech, and even affect the decision-making process. This phenomenon is called "frame shift" and implies an ability to embrace the foreign system of values, to some extent, simply by speaking the language.

However, most of us do not think in mere words. Thoughts, as a rule, appear in a form of a flurry of concepts, images and ideas that make their way through our synapses. There are whole levels of information and additional meanings that cannot be transmitted through verbal systems of communication. Language is the most common, but not the sole means of human interaction. All human relations are based on communicative systems, and their variety is enormous. Perception, a process of receiving and processing information absorbed by the brain through the senses, completes the formation of ideas. Pursuing my Art degree, I came to the realization that we are surrounded by symbols in everyday life. Letters, numbers, images, music notes, patterns and many other things can be viewed as units of information still in use or sunk into oblivion long time ago. Similarly to words, some of those "hieroglyphs" are based on the combination of older elements, some of them are familiar only to certain groups of people and some of them leave room for personal interpretations depending on specific experience. Increasingly, I began to wonder what other "languages" exist in addition to speech.

My previous education in the Art field was built mainly on a classical approach to the process of learning. Being more traditional it concentrated on painting from live forms and study of the human body, which has helped me to develop the ability to observe and analyze. Combined with my other propensities I started to pay more attention to people's behavior in an attempt to understand their motives and desires. Simultaneously, it pushed me to experiment with the ways of portraying existing objects and ideas without having them actually depicted in the piece - through an altered perceptual approach and the use of various pictograms or abstracted imagery.

Drawing and painting have always remained important practices and greatly affected my work but, in more recent projects I decided to combine traditional painting with other means of expression. I explore new methods, including combination of materials, in order to create a stronger connection between the medium I use and the relevant concept. However, painting and printmaking are the two main areas of concentration for me. Even now, while I incorporate other elements, for instance, wood and fabric, my approach to all of these segments still remains more painterly, than three-dimensional. The materiality of a piece and the process of creating have acquired a bigger significance for me. I meticulously work on texture and color of the surfaces, even if I do not apply a layer of paint on top. I combine a variety of materials such as wood, flexible, delicate paper and fabric, and apply multiple layers and painted patterns to create a sense of fragility, impermanence and fragmentation.

Marks, such as brush strokes and stitches, are also extremely important, since they are a part of the visual language associated with traditional occupations. Additionally, I selected these techniques because for the artist such a long-term activity of creating becomes an experience itself. Whether it is a weaving or embroidery, texts and patterns are used as markers of culture and substitutes for the people, without showing specific individuals.

Layering is a practice I took from printmaking and some painting styles, and made it even more physical in order to imitate the similar process in our brain where memories overlap.

The last, but not least aspect informing my work is cultural environment. Cultural imprint and historical background play a fundamental role in forming one's mentality. Nowadays, we live in a world where people, their beliefs and ideas, politics and religion are constantly colliding. The more we expand boundaries and develop connections, the more complex and entangled our society becomes as a whole. The process of cultural absorption is profound for many communities, as similar trends can be observed in various groups of people. Each person consists of a unique combination of many identities (sexual, religious, political, ethnic, etc.), and each one makes him/her a part of a certain social group. On one hand, this tendency corresponds with the aforementioned pursuit of an individual to be a part of something bigger, but on the other hand, it creates the conflict between "us" and "them".

INFLUENCES FROM THE UDMURT CULTURE

By virtue of my personal multicultural experience, I address events that are still relevant today for a particular community. Nevertheless, the topic applies to the current situation in many other societies. Being interested in the relation of national affiliation and identity issues for a long time, I started noticing similar problems in various countries, from Great Britain to South Korea. After three years of residence in the United States, one of the most diverse countries, I came to a realization same questions are also relevant for today's American society. Such conclusion made me interested in bringing more attention to the representatives of indigenous communities, the group I belong to myself. Being half Russian, half Udmurt, I am profoundly aware of the significance of one's roots in relation to current environment. I simultaneously act as an outside observer and an insider. It makes me question my own identity and position.

Udmurts are part of the Finno-Ugric peoples. The main area of residence is Udmurt Republic and neighboring regions (fig.1). Despite the fact the territory now known as Udmurtia became inhabited about 7000-8000 years ago, there's not so much known about Udmurts even nowadays.

Historically, many indigenous communities have encountered the conflict between Pagan beliefs and Christianity. As the Slavs and other nationalities with an ancient history and culture, before Christianization, the Udmurts were pagans. Their paganism has similar features with the ancestral beliefs, but differs from other pagan traditions of Central Russia in many regards.

The ancient religion of Udmurts is characterized by significant development and complexity. This is evidenced by numerous gods, special clergy and places of prayer, and elaborated rites with strictly regulated cult rituals. All aspects intended to provide an ideologically functioning system "man - society - nature." This system has been developed throughout thousands of years of history and as a result of ethnic and cultural cooperation, acquired enormous amounts of "images" and "symbols". This variety required corresponding comprehension, interpretation, and developed norms of religious etiquette.

The individual components of the religious and mythological complexes of Udmurt paganism can be combined into two groups: traditions related to the relationships between family members and tribal agrarian beliefs. Family-related beliefs were subdivided into two branches: the institution of tribal shrines and the cult of ancestors, with appropriate maternal and paternal segments. Therefore, the idea of a house and a hearth has always been crucial in the system of values, which is common for many pagan religions.

After the adoption of Christianity, paganism merged with the new religion, creating a dual faith, where it is still possible to trace the ancient beliefs and concepts that have survived

virtually unchanged. Udmurt cosmology is dualistic; there is an eternal conflict between good and evil, light and darkness. Udmurt Paganism, being one of the most complete pagan systems, has experienced massive destruction due to the process of Christianization. However, by the virtue of fact, Udmurt people has always lived in isolated forest areas, the original religion was subjected to eradication to a lesser extent. Christianity came to these regions in the XIII century, but the first documented act of baptism took place only in 1557. Starting from the XVIII century there were constant and more successful attempts to eradicate paganism, but such a late infusion of new teaching helped to save Udmurt paganism almost in its original form. Even more than 200 years of oppression and inciting ethnic aggression, which led to the reduction of population could not affect ancient Udmurt beliefs. Even nowadays a large part of Udmurt everyday life is influenced by pagan traditions. Orthodoxy has always remained alien to Udmurts, and they preserved their rituals and continued to perform their prayers in the sacred places, sometimes replacing the old names of deities with the names of Christian saints or timing their prayers to the church calendar. However, Christianization brought in an individualist conception of a person, and affected the original calendar system by introducing a linear time scheme to the original circular chronology.

Between 1922 and 1991, during the Soviet Union period and its rule of atheism under the slogan of combating cultural backwardness and insularity, the majority of traditional Udmurt institutions were destroyed, many sacred sites have been demolished, and prayer participants were declared as "enemies of the people." Udmurt religion acquired almost clandestine nature, becoming a kind of "pagan sectarianism" and was deformed in the minds of the people. At the present stage Udmurt religion can be characterized by the acquisition of very complex forms of syncretism, including not only intertwine elements of the actual

religions (Christianity and Islam – the most active religions in the area of conflict), but also fragments of unstructured scientific knowledge.

The unique Udmurt writing system, based on pictograms, went through the process of alteration and was completely replaced by Cyrillic alphabet as a result. Nowadays, the knowledge of that writing form is almost completely lost. The concept of family and the idea of communal society have also changed.

Every nation has its own set of rhythmically repeating color patterns that convey a massive body of information. Ornament is a code, a symbolic language that can describe both the entire ethnic group and a particular individual. The history of the ornament and the history of the people are inseparable. This visual language is a common part of our everyday life, it might appear seemingly simple, but at the same time it is something mysterious, mystical, and almost eternal. It is not just something primordial or original - it is also a consequence of migrations and economic relations, the evidence of historical cultural dialogue. For example, some Udmurt ornaments have traces of Jewish elements, which appeared as a result of trades with the Khazar Khanate, a large state existed in 650-969 AD and extended its borders from Eastern Europe to the Volga region. Nowadays it is the territory of Caucasus and Kazakhstan and despite impressive distance, Udmurts still share some symbols with the descendants of nomadic people of Khazar Khanate.

Any ornament can be read like a book, it has its own "alphabet", it tells stories, describes the history of the nation and the attitude towards the world. For instance, just by the look at embroidery on apron of an Udmurt woman it was possible to tell from what village she is coming from, if she has children, and by the whole costume - her age, marital and social status. Udmurt embroidery (fig. 2) is characterized by a relatively small number of colors, and the predominance of darker, saturated shades. The color palette of Udmurt patterns is predominantly red, black and white; contrasting colors are the most frequently

used ones. The interaction between dark and light, the idea of negative and positive aspects is sufficiently expressed in Udmurt ornaments through the combination of those colors.

Southern Udmurts are prone to use brighter colors due to the influence of neighboring Turkic-speaking people: Bashkirs and Tatars. Therefore southern embroidery has become more polychrome, with introduction of green, orange, and purple. In general, the majority of the elements are geometrical and stylized. Diagonal rhythms provide the sense of motion and change down to minute details. Some of the ornamental elements have a tight connection with the ancient writing symbols.

CONTEMPORARY ART INFLUENCES AND CURRENT BODY OF WORK

Last semester the central topic of my work was the complex relationship between suppressing Slavic community and the oppressed Udmurt community. The process of disintegration within last generations was depicted via disappearance of tribal symbols on a traditional wall carpet (fig. 3). Similar application of national patterns and household items can be found in works of Faig Ahmed, an Azerbaijani artist, who changes traditional rugs into eye-tricking compositions in order to connect historical heritage and contemporary realities (fig. 10).

My current body of work continues to touch upon the decay of the culture, but takes this idea to a broader picture. I combine iconographic elements of cultures I lived in order to create visual experience, where each part acquires new interpretations. I am impartially cataloging “precious”, “personal” objects. At the same time, none of those objects are real historical artifacts, and one more layer of contradiction starts to arise: the sense of absence and presence, verity and illusion.

In many countries the traditional culture of small nations is divorced from life and people: fewer representatives speak the language, know the traditions; all this is recorded in

books, but ceases to be manifested in life. All of these things are sometimes perceived by the current generation not as functional elements, but as a part of an ethnographic museum exhibit. To make a reference to this approach, some objects in the show are placed on shelves or inside cases (fig. 4, 5, 6), but the way of presenting contradicts with the museum-like environment: being part of the pieces, they are also subject to alteration. It can be seen as a recognition of an inevitable future, a denial that culture is something that belongs only to the past or a suggestion to take action. These possibilities coexist because all of the processes are happening simultaneously and each viewer needs to find their own answer. Through the cultural prism, I address relation between an individual and the society, a part and the whole.

“Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes,” – wrote Walt Whitman. Whether it is War and Peace by Leo Tolstoy or Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein’s monster, it is a story of a person, who tries to pull together contradicting personality traits in order to create a gestalt of unity we call an individuality. How does it feel to consist of those conflicting parts? How do I feel being in the same boat with the rest of mankind?

Working with the content of cultural disappearance in the course of previous semesters, I became very interested in the idea of intentionally using symbolic messages almost no one could read to emphasize the fact that discrimination usually stay unnoticed or ignored by bigger social groups. The conflict of defining myself as a part of Udmurt culture and yet – similar to other representatives of the prevalent Slavic community - not possessing the ability to speak the language or translate those messages without external references put me in the position, where I am both accepted and rejected by each group. My hybrid-cultural feelings are a profound illustration of cultural integration problem, which is a historical tendency with no beginning and no end, an experience that becomes a given reality for people all over the world, especially when accelerated by globalization. I realized that instead of being just an observer of a specific problem, I can make a connection to the impact of a

culture on one's life, going from the personal to the universal point of view, and therefore more people can relate to the topic. With this in mind, I started to concentrate on finding paradoxes and conflicting or controversial areas within my own experience. I touch upon various spheres of life where experience and memories can be gained: perception of family, geographical location, history, and culture. Probably, every person has been in a similar psychological state; in the United States it can be observed by the example of Native Americans, local traditions of the Ozarks or other smaller communities.

Suh Do-Ho has always been one of my biggest influences; his vision of how constant geographic relocation and exposure to various cultures connects to the idea of "home" as a universal archetype informed my personal attitude towards emotional connection with space, environment and feeling of nostalgia (fig. 11). Since the concept of "home" is extremely prominent in Udmurt beliefs and at the same time is something anyone can address, I selected it as my connecting point. In this body of work my goal was not to assemble individual pieces together into an imitation of a physical living space, but to create a metaphorical interior, that acts as a self-portrait, by transmitting the features of a person in the work. I attempted to portray a person without depicting the body, constructing the meaning through objects and images. Structural component of my work was highly affected by Josh Faught (fig. 12): fragmentariness became one of the most important characteristics for me: each piece resides on the concepts of perception, memory and experience; the parts are put together according to principle of kaleidoscope, a puzzle or a crazy quilt. This feature is present in all of the pieces, but finds the most literal fulfillment in the works such as *In.Out.Then.Now.* and *Frag.ments* (fig. 7,8). Another contradiction lies in the contrast of the public gallery atmosphere versus the fragility and intimacy of a living space, which brings in the conflict of comfort and discomfort.

Intersection of shapes supports the idea of continuity and fragmentation: parts interrelate and collide, covering the previous layers. When blended with other symbols, each element gains additional meanings, and some of them stay hidden under the surface. For instance, *Region-47* (fig. 9) creates several transitions between corporeal and immaterial, past and present, external and internal. The piece acts as a window, but it is unclear, if the viewer is looking from outside or inside. My personal idea of “home” - a specific geographic location referenced by the shape of Udmurt Republic or Region-18, according to the governmental register - combines with the universal concept of “home” a shelter and a place of comfort. But the notion of peace is disturbed by the image of AK-47, a gun developed by Udmurt constructor Mikhail Kalashnikov. It is a symbol of armed conflicts for the majority of people, a constant reminder of the horrific events of the WWII for every Russian family and an object of both pride and guilt for Udmurt people. The red lines on the map depict railways – the main way of distribution of the weapon. These connections place Udmurts into a bigger picture. Marks, threads and stitches serve as a physical effort of putting those intangible elements together, occurring in different dimensions as a combination of multiple systems and creating paradoxes.

There are several ways to manifest the paradox of dematerialization of an object and materialization of an idea – a concept discussed by many art critics, for example, Lucy Lippard, in relation to conceptual art pieces, such as *One and Three Chairs* by Joseph Kosuth (fig. 13). Perception and memory always, albeit in varying circumstances, have a moment of subjectivity: what one sees depends not only on what actually and objectively exists, but also on the personality, past experiences, habits, fears and hopes, and even the mood. Memory is a complex mental reflection of previous encounters with reality, human interaction, and information. Memory integrates experience, ensures the continuous development of human culture and personal life. On the basis of memories and experience gained with the help of

perception a person navigates in the present and anticipates the future. Salvador Dali's *The Persistence of Memory* created in 1931 (fig. 14) portrays this instable relationship of space, time and a person. His melting watches symbolize the non-linear, subjective nature of time.

In my work I use two-dimensional pieces as references to three-dimensional objects, combining characteristics to emphasize the non-representational nature of them. The objects are a part of an imaginative experience that exists only in the artistic context.

The experience of creating a piece itself and hand-made elements are also important. The process of making and the materials play a big role in representing the categories of time and impermanence. They also help to build a connection with the traditional practices: every pattern has its meaning and appears to be a part of visual symbolism present in the culture. A lot of artists I look up to enrich the meaning of their work with the use repeating patterns as cultural references: Kehinde Wiley (fig. 15), Ana Teresa Barboza (fig. 16), Emily Feather (fig. 17) and many others.

Since cultural experiences equally involve both men and women, my work incorporates both embroidery, which is traditionally viewed as a female occupation, and woodworking – something that is coming from male domain. Instead of grounding the contradiction on gender roles, I tend to base it on broader categories like tenderness and harshness. The materials and color choices are balancing between traditional and modern, in order to form an intimate, domestic atmosphere that gets interfered with brighter spots. I use dull, washed-out colors to support the sensation of decay, obliteration of both culture from the world and memories from one's mind, silencing and melting the imagery together, but in some areas, where the connection with the contemporary situation is prevalent, they tend to be more saturated.

I believe, contemporary art is dedicated to the conversation between the past and the present, the established and the experimental; it becomes more and more transborder, as life itself. The example of Udmurt people illustrates problems happening everywhere. I record national elements and traditional patterns as markers of culture in attempt to tie together parts of people's life that struggle to coexist in the today's world.

CONCLUSION

Within the course of the Master of Fine Arts program in the University of Arkansas, I have been working with the topics of structures within social relations and human nature. Being a representative of a small indigenous ethnic community, I have always been interested in the correlation between one's ability to segregate from the others and, at the same time, the instinctive desire to belong to a group, which is indissolubly bound with the idea of home and belonging. My show presents a set of two-dimensional mixed media pieces with three-dimensional elements dedicated to these contradictions of an individual in modern society. Through the objects I aim to portray and create a feeling similar to the moment of entering a house, as if the owner has just stepped out and the viewer can comprehend the occupant's inner world in conjunction with the surrounding reality from the indirect hints observed from the objects around. Being an owner of one of those "houses", I record my own journey with a desire to support the capacity to connect for people with different backgrounds and their ability to relate by creating associations through personal experience.

I investigate the complexity and fragmentation of human memory and perception through my personal multicultural experience without an attempt to provide a didactic statement, but rather in order to encourage a discussion and invite contemplation of foregoing topics.

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ART WORKS

Ahmed, Faig. *Carpet*, 2014. Handmade woolen carpet.

Barboza, Ana Teresa. *Bordados*, 2008. Embroidery and transfer on canvas.

Dali, Salvador. *The Persistence of Memory*, 1931. Oil on canvas.

Do-Ho, Suh. *Seoul Home/L.A. Home/New York Home/Baltimore Home/London Home/Seattle Home/L.A. Home*, 1999. Translucent nylon.

Faught, Josh. *Triage*, 2009. Hemp, nail polish, spray paint, indigo, logwood, toilet paper, pins, books, plaster, yarn, hand made wooden sign, denim, and gloves.

Feaver, Emily. *Fishing Net*, 2014. Screenprint.

Kosuth, Joseph. *One and Three Chairs*, 1965. Wood folding chair, photographic panel, text panel.

Wiley, Kehinde. *Alexander I, Emperor of Russia*, 2013. Oil on canvas.

FIGURES



Figure 1: Udmurt Republic on the map of Russia



Figure 2: Udmurt clothes and patterns



Figure 3: Elena Volkova, *Tapis*, 2015. Screenprint on suede

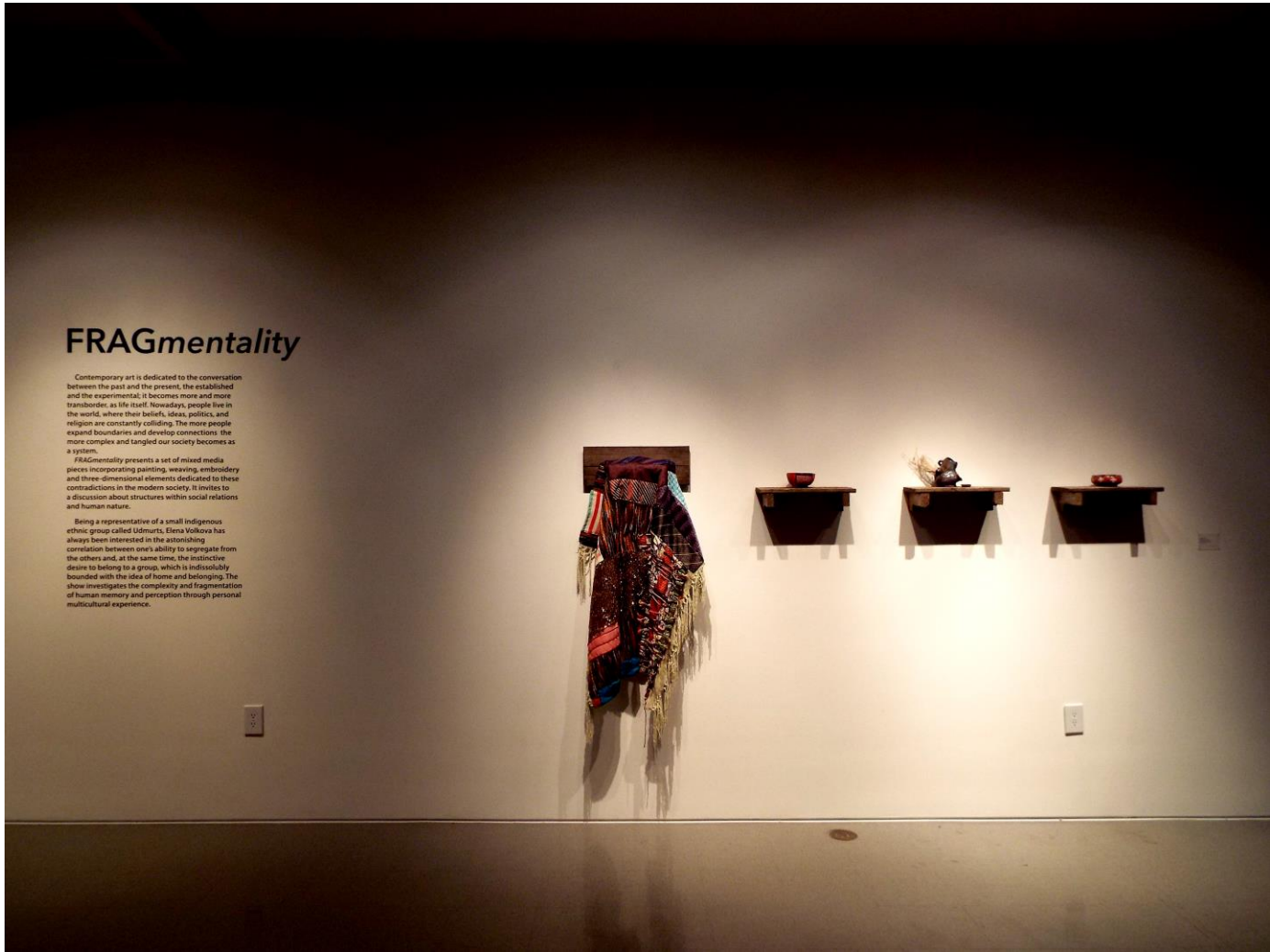


Figure 4: Elena Volkova, *Adust Memories*, 2016. Mixed media.



Figure 5: Elena Volkova, *Adust Memories*, 2016, fragment. Mixed media.



Figure 6: Elena Volkova, *Inmar*, 2015-2016. Mixed media.

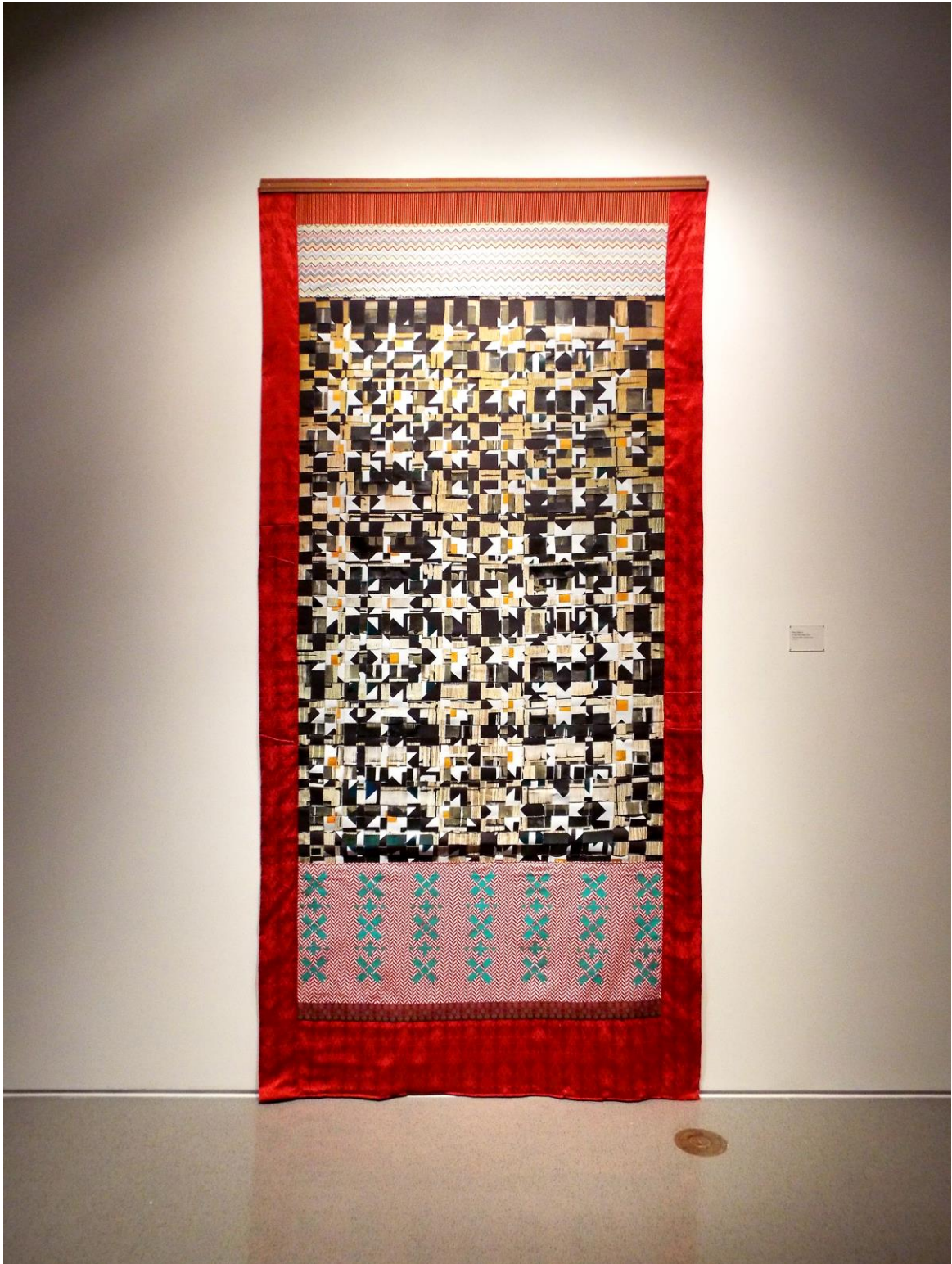


Figure 7: Elena Volkova, *In.Out.Then.Now.*, 2015-2016. Mixed media.



Figure 8: Elena Volkova, *Fragments*, 2015-2016. Mixed media.



Figure 9: Elena Volkova, *Region-47*, 2015-2016. Mixed media.



Figure 10: Faig Ahmed, *Carpet*, 2014. Handmade woolen carpet



Figure 11: Suh Do-Ho, *Seoul Home/L.A. Home/New York Home/Baltimore Home/London Home/Seattle Home/L.A. Home*, 1999. Translucent nylon



Figure 12: Josh Faught, *Triage*, 2009. Hemp, nail polish, spray paint, indigo, logwood, toilet paper, pins, books, plaster, yarn, hand made wooden sign, denim, and gloves



Figure 13: Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs*, 1965. Wood folding chair, photographic panel, text panel

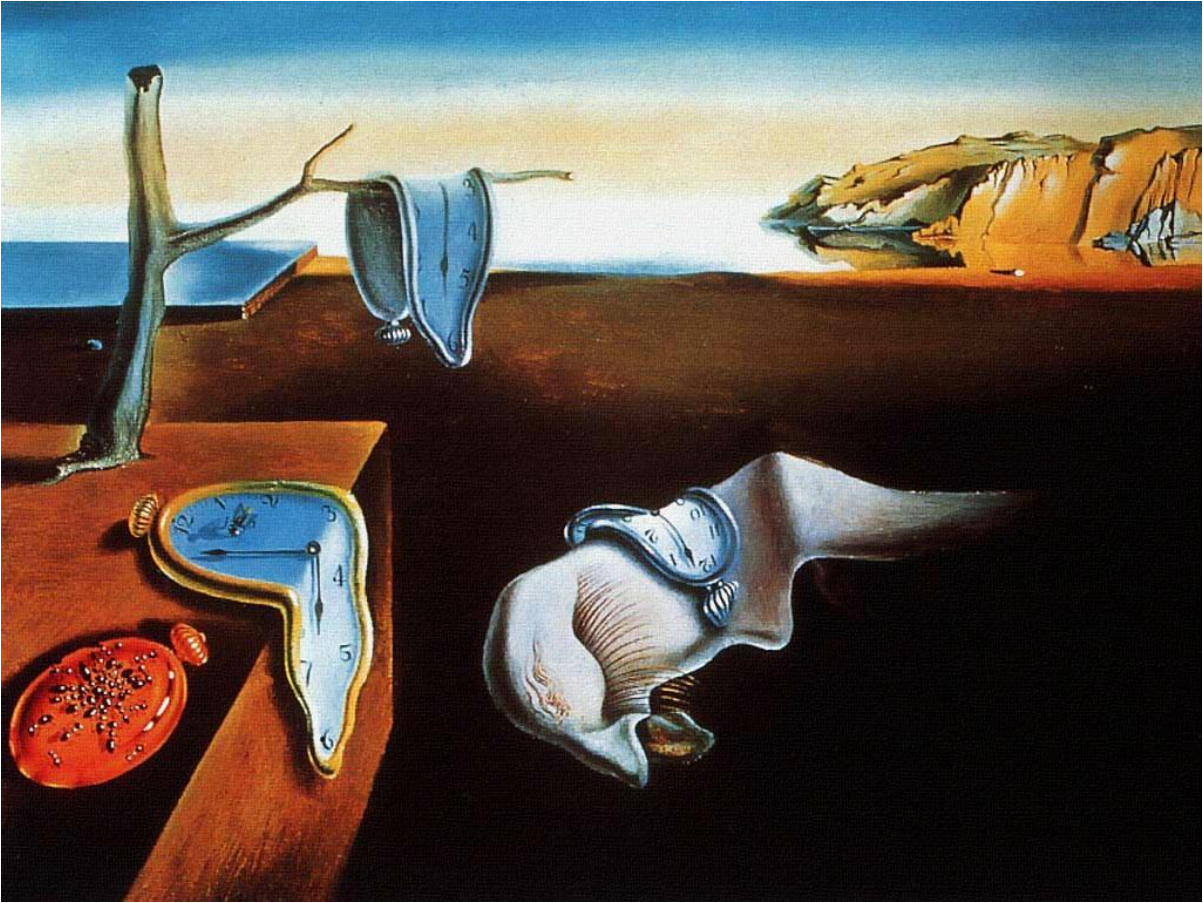


Figure 14: Salvador Dali, *The Persistence of Memory*, 1931. Oil on canvas

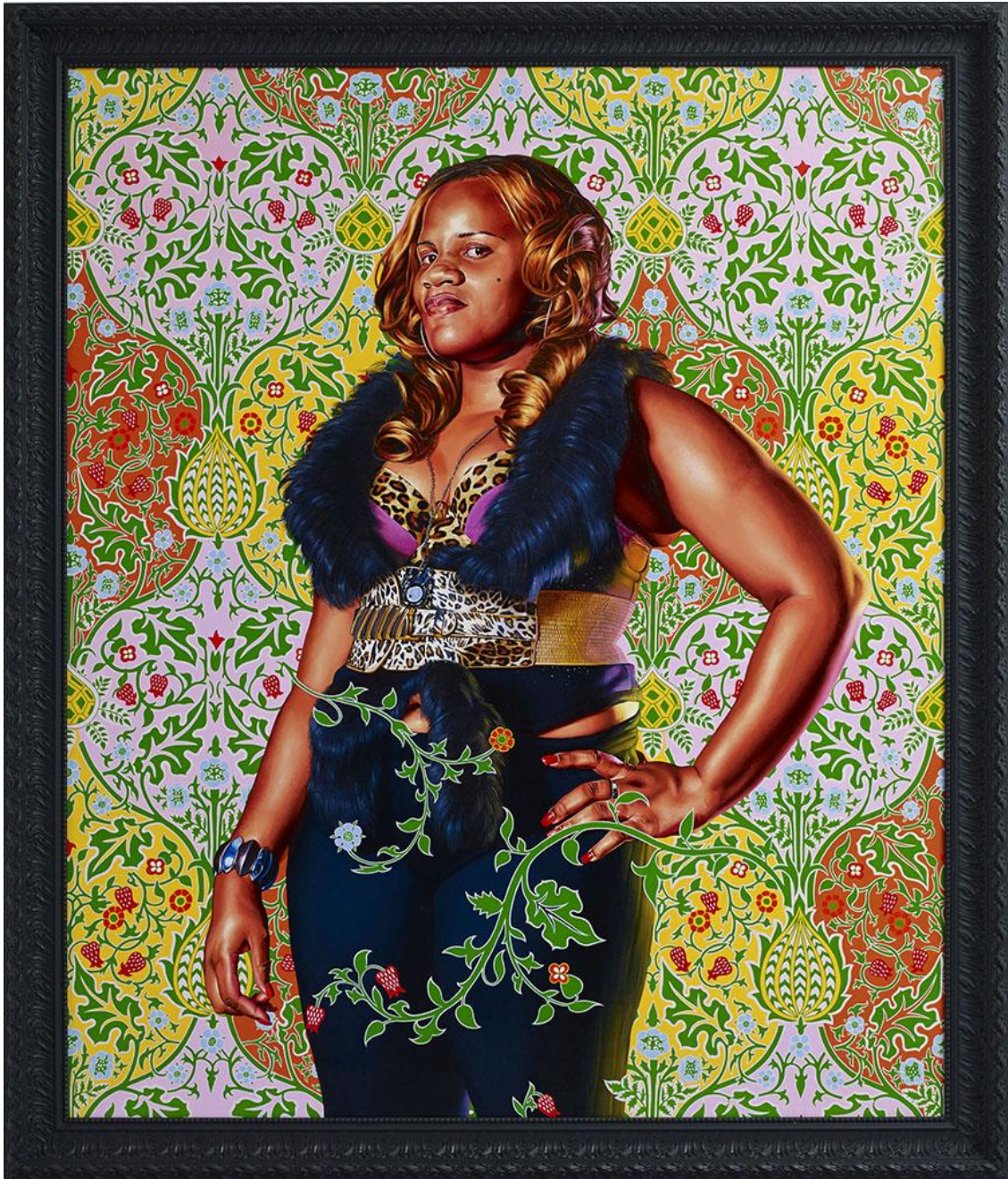


Figure 15: Kehinde Wiley, *Alexander I, Emperor of Russia*, 2013. Oil on canvas

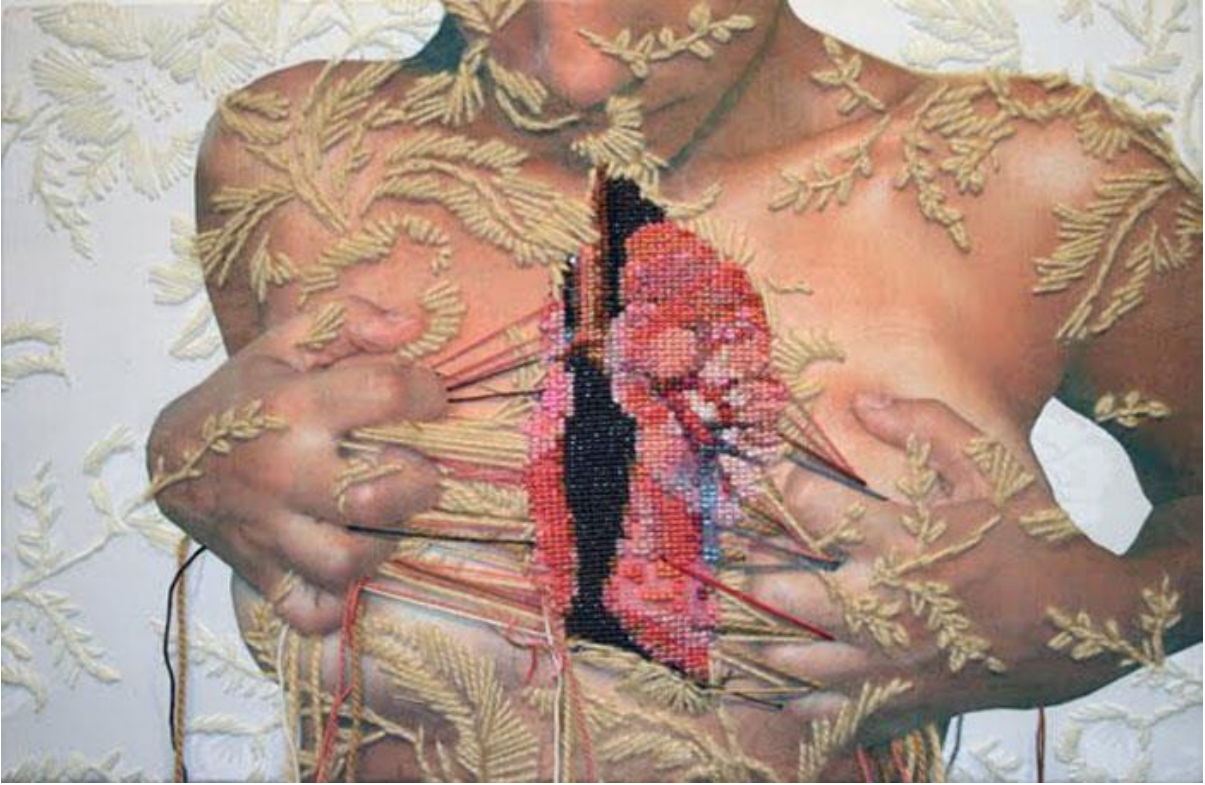


Figure 16: Ana Teresa Barboza, *Bordados*, 2008. Embroidery and transfer on canvas



Figure 17: Emily Feaver, *Fishing Net*, 2014. Screenprint