

Oxana Kovalchuk

Capturing Memories through
Multimedia Collage Art



*Oxana Kovalchuk, Do I belong where I am now?
from the Illusion of Reality series, wood, light, glass,
transparency film, pencils, paints, 13" x 15", 2019.*

by Dr Julie Anne Denton

Glass is such a diverse and versatile medium for artistic expression. Many artists have personalized the medium to reflect truly original signature work. The next up-and-coming artist to grace the world stage of glass is contemporary mixed-media artist Oxana Kovalchuk, who has been working as an artist her entire life but is relatively new to the medium of glass. Kazakhstan was the last of the Soviet republics to declare independence during the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, and in 1979 Oxana was born there, which means her mother tongue and cultural heritage is Russian.

Childhood Influences

Oxana's young experiences of being behind the Iron Curtain had an influence on her later endeavors. "When you are a child there is no assessment of what events are happening around you. Only family and the people near you are important. It was a little later in my early years that the awareness of closed borders and various other restrictions appeared. When I got the opportunity to travel and compare, I realized how rich the Russian culture and language are. I have a strong attachment to Mother Russia."

Oxana made a promise to herself that she would experience the variety of the wider world, and during her 42 years she has done just that. She has lived in numerous places including Omsk and Moscow in Russia, and Oxford in the United Kingdom. For the last six years she has resided in Edgewater, New Jersey, with her husband and three small children.

The artist's romance with art started at the age of four when she received a set of gouache paints for Christmas, and not long after she was enrolled in the Soviet Art Studio for Children. Soviet art school meant crafting dolls of salted dough, painting wallpaper, and using modeling clay to create elephants and giraffes. In her applied arts school, Oxana never copied other artwork, since she always wanted to add her own signature style. One of her paintings took first prize in the German Democratic Republic (GDR) contest and was featured in an arts magazine, which was her first but nowhere near her last media coverage.

In middle school Kovalchuk won a competition beating several applicants to study academic fine arts at the Fine Arts School in her home town of Pavlodar. She graduated with a red diploma, which is a distinction of excellence. In high school she was involved in special projects organized by her teacher, a former ballet dancer. Oxana was designing theatrical decorations as well as creating costumes and makeup styles for stage performers. That influenced her greatly, and the theme of performance is still reflected in her art projects today.

Pursuing a Passion for Professional Art

During her travels, Oxana immersed herself in cultural history, and she traveled extensively around the UK and Europe attending art show after art show. She also frequented prominent museums in the European art capitals—Amsterdam, Florence, Rome, Madrid, London, Paris. “It was a very enriching time for me, since I was meeting with numerous artists and creators while studying innovative new European art trends.”



After moving to New York City with her husband and two children at the time, the artist was impressed with New York, but she somehow felt torn. “The energy and pulse of NYC triggered my creative soul, challenging me to answer new questions. However, I was raising children in a new country. I technically turned into a housewife.

“I’ve always seen myself more as an independent female creator, and I was never obsessed with family life. To diversify this new routine, I found ways to create. Turning to the arts, I drew sketches while waiting for the kids in the swimming pool and created collages using groceries—fruits and vegetables, and even *khinkali*, a Georgian ravioli—while cooking for the family.”

Oxana realized quickly that she must pursue her passion as a professional artist. She immersed herself in New York culture by enrolling in the MFA program at the School of Visual Arts (SVA). She was assigned a studio in the Manhattan campus, a space that turned out to be her creative hideaway. “It was definitely a time of reexploring and reconsidering myself as an artist, as a New Yorker, as an immigrant, and as a mother. These angles of my personality were all overlapping.”



(Above) Oxana Kovalchuk, *Never fully belonging from the Illusion of Reality series*, wood, light, glass, transparency film, pencils, paints, 13" x 15", 2019.

(Left) Oxana Kovalchuk, *Diary of memory from the Illusion of Reality series*, wood, light, glass, transparency film, pencils, paints, thread macramé, 13" x 15", 2019.

(Opposite page top) Oxana working in her studio in the former building of the Neumann Leathers Factory in Hoboken, New Jersey, across the Hudson River from New York City.



Kovalchuk graduated from the SVA in 2019 with her thesis works, which consisted of a series of glass collages entitled *The Illusion of Reality*. This series of works was devoted to the way our memories grasp and remember our experiences. “As we move around the globe, as we grow and evolve and our surroundings transform, m-e-m-o-r-y is the main platform we can rely on, and it triggers us. The ways our memory works and creates reality is a topic I’ve been exploring in my art pieces for some time.”

As I questioned Oxana further on the specificities of how she creates her collages, her eyes lit up and I could see the fire for the process in her belly. “My multimedia collages are made up of several layers of plate glass. Sometimes they can reach up to 25 sheets of glass! My artworks begin with an image that could be a photo I took for a project or a photo of my mixed-media collages. I use a UV flatbed printer to imprint my base image onto the first sheet of glass, and thereafter I build up my picture layer by layer. Collage is the strong driving force in my work, and these multiple strata paintings consist of drawings, paintings, and printed transparencies that are cut out and fixed by the next pane of glass. Over time, these two-dimensional images become in-depth images and transform into a three-dimensional memory.” Upon completion, her works are framed in light boxes.

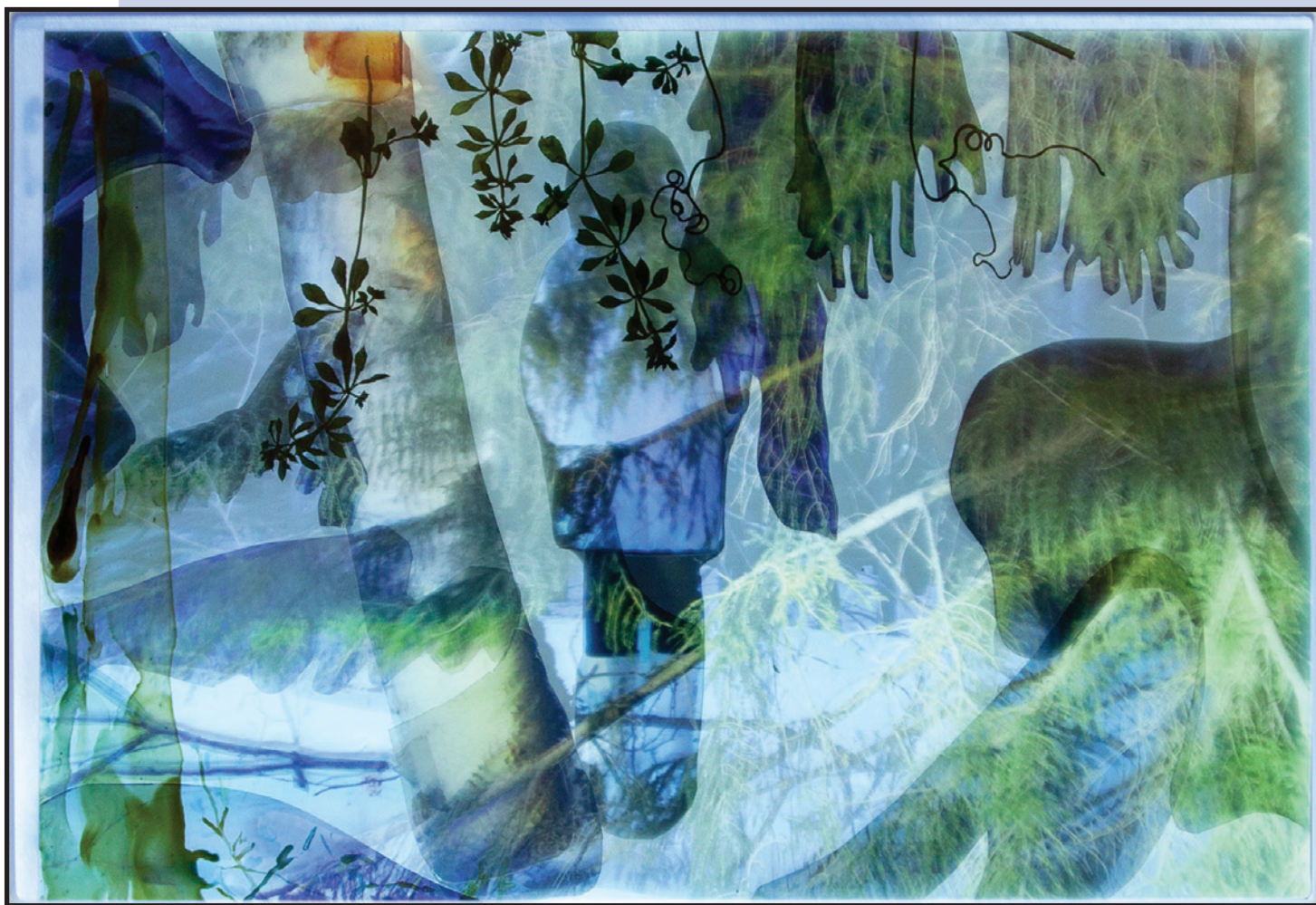
The Lure of Working in Glass

When speaking about her work, I asked Oxana what in particular has drawn her to glass and how she intends to progress. She finds that glass gives her opportunities that aren’t available in other artistic mediums.

“When I made *The Illusion of Reality* project about my immigrant experience, about memory, the idea was to show the layering and multiplicity of images at the same time. I needed to find the right material that met my idea and decided to use glass, which allowed me to make every element of my layered thoughts visible.

“I really love glass as a material. It always fascinates me. I look at it and it is hard, but at the same time it is very fragile. A couple of years ago I took several lessons in glass casting at UrbanGlass in Brooklyn, New York. There I experimented with sandcasting. It is great to work in this material when it is molten. I have ideas that I would like to implement, and I was planning to come back and work on this technique. Covid, of course, made some editing of everyone’s plans, but the ideas that came to me remained. This is one of my plans for the future.”

(Top to bottom) Oxana Kovalchuk, *Rediscovering*, *Time for changes*, and *Back to the family from the Place Yourself series*. Glass Collage (flat sheets of glass; mixed-media collage, printed on glass and on transparency film images; pencils, paints, wood frame, light box), all panels 15" x 20" x 3-1/2", 2021.



Oxana Kovalchuk is primarily obsessed with thoughts, but in glass, she has found the method to give her concepts their voice. "My work usually starts with an idea. I describe these ideas in detail. This is a thought process when I brainstorm and contemplate on a particular topic. During this period of the creative process, I think and read a lot. I find this very interesting. Usually, by the time I start a new artwork, project, or series, I already have my statement ready. The very process of creating works is very exciting as I immerse myself in it. Sometimes the work is very easy, and my projects are completed very quickly. Sometimes it is difficult to find the desired image, and then I suffer a lot! I love to experiment with ideas, materials, and different techniques."

Current Artistic Visions

When asked what she is working on right now, Oxana showed me some of her most recent collages from a series called *Place Yourself*. She referred me back to her collage technique, defining the deeper meaning in relation to her current obsession. These new works were made during the lockdown period of the Covid pandemic.

"The world is changing, and everyone is a part of this shift. Though many of these changes are inevitable, the pandemic has accelerated certain cycles and highlighted places of improvement. Now there is a global restructuring. New habits, rituals, and rules emerge. Absolutely everyone finds himself or herself in this new reality, where they must adapt. Humanity has accumulated a lot of new knowledge and experiences at a rapid pace. The question is how we connect these new skills with the old ways."

Oxana Kovalchuk, Blurring of the boundaries from the Illusion of Reality series, wood, light, glass, transparency film, pencils, paints, piece of plant, 13" x 15", 2019.

"I imagine this process, like the making of a patchwork quilt, is the same way that I create my collages. The best quilts use materials that are both old and new, with different textures and colors, to create something unique and beautiful. I envision us utilizing newfound skills to patch together the new world with the old one. People combine old and new knowledge to find solutions. Sometimes this works and there is a connection, but sometimes it does not fit. Our current reality is somewhat disjointed. Some pieces fit comfortably, and others do not. It is obvious when the old and new ways do not mesh."

Looking to the Future

Oxana shared what she wishes to achieve with her new series of works. "My recent collages reflect the blending of old and new, combining things that fit perfectly with things that don't quite have a place. When I layer the images and glass, I emphasize the visual process and suggest that it remains incomplete. I highlight the imperfections that still exist. The beauty, colors, and brightness give a sense of how beautiful the new reality will be, although we cannot see it all at once."

It is clear that Oxana is a realist who looks at the world with optimistic eyes. Currently she works out of a studio at the Neumann Leather Factory in Hoboken, New Jersey. She has also co-founded an arts organization called StartaArta, a movement that supports artists in New York City. This organization fosters an environment of trust where artists can share their art, gain exposure, and make connections to new communities and industries. Oxana organizes exhibitions, panel discussions, and projects to support artists. StartaArta's exhibition space is located within the Starta Accelerator in the heart of the Flatiron bustling business district, a crossover that provides a forum for collaboration where art meets the corporate world.

In the positive words of a contemporary artist in glass, "Life has changed, and new opportunities have appeared. People have started thinking and acting more collectively, supporting each other by sharing hope and faith. I believe this is what humanity is striving for now—to find the right balance and harmony. This is what unites us as a people. Our new reality will be layered scenes of interaction, love, and coming together. Everyday scenes speak loudly." **GA**

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Dr. Julie Anne Denton received her doctorate in the combination of sandcast and flameworked glass for artists from the National Glass Centre, UK. She has learned from and worked with the best flameworking artists in the world including Emilio Santini, Lucio Bubacco, Vittorio Costantini, Gianni Toso, Shane Fero, Loren Stump, and Sally Prasch, to name just a few. She rounded off her education with Bertil Vallien of the renowned Swedish design house Kosta Boda (est. 1742).

Julie settled in Zürich, Switzerland, in 2010. From the center of the city she runs her design firm, www.Atelier315.ch, and www.ZurichGlassSchool.com, her online learning platform for sculptural flameworking skills. She works with a small team beside her who all care deeply about quality education, creativity, and business.

Dr. Julie creates glass and bronze work that resonates beauty, workmanship, and authenticity. Her key themes are people, folklore, nature, and counterculture. She has also received worldwide recognition for her storytelling skills as an artist and her technical skills as a glassmaker.

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