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# Simmering History

## THE RECENT PAINTINGS OF NATALKA HUSAR

by Peggy Gale

1. Natalka Husar, *The Background That Follows You*, 2011, oil on vintage Soviet lenticular, 33.5 x 25 cm. All photographs: Michael Rafelson. All images courtesy Angell Gallery, Toronto, and Douglas Udell Gallery, Edmonton.

2. *My Guide original tin*, 14 x 19 cm.

3. *My Guide*, 2015, oil on vintage Turkish tin, 14 x 19 cm.

Painter Natalka Husar has begun to infiltrate her oil on canvas with machine-fed cotton stitchery. The buttonhole attachment makes very convincing waves—blue, green, with glints of purple, aqua, yellow and red. But the sewing is all wrong and the machine was undoubtedly wincing at its torturous path, repurposed, slightly curved; not buttonholes at all, but shallow, cup-like forms scattered rhythmically and unpredictably across a painted sea touched with reflections.

The lower verso of handwoven linen tells a further story of knots and confusion; upper threaded needle and lower bobbin have been set *off-balance*, rendering a fine, straight seam impossible. The looped tangles are, however, beautiful though mostly on the painting's unseen back.





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Willem de Kooning might find them especially interesting.

There are zippers, too. In *Bottomless Love*—endless water—the horizon line is a closed, grey, wide-gauge acrylic zipper, inviting escape into an open space between sea and sky. The top portion, once a Soviet tea-towel, reveals the wooden stretcher through worn-out fabric, along with a sunset of three LED lights glowing red behind the clouds. A discreet and clever on/off switch is on the stretcher's right side; very practical.

These new tools and materials are a radical departure for Husar. To an extent, their inspiration flows from her mother—for many years a professional seamstress, a wizard at alterations and repairs for one of New Jersey's best establishments—but what would she say to these depredations of her craft? To the apparently casual mistreatment of her carefully tended professional tools?

Some of these new canvases incorporate plastic, lenticular postcards of winking girls with a come-hither look, or offer a shifting, other-worldly landscape to a woman painted in the foreground. Generic scenes are immediately recognizable, familiar. In one, a mid-size painting of girls hovering near a gaping car trunk under lurid illumination is set in some suburban parking lot—with an unnerving suggestion of kidnapping or

even murder—while, strangely, an exotic pseudo-Arabian genie looks on, a-glitter with sequins. In *Retirement Party*, a group of middle-aged women chat after hours around a table festooned with free-falling ribbons of bright, tangled thread, while a card of sewing needles inset in the shadows reveals the same women 20 years earlier as they trade “jabs” about the guest of honour. An entire history simmers there. Another work centres on a lone woman in the woods, corset-clad with dark stockings and tall boots, her back to the black triangle opening of a pitched tent. Danger is hinted at but never depicted; all these individuals are actors in unknown stories, and surely none has a serene conscience. In a separate group of works, lids from vintage biscuit tins or kitschy, unfinished needlework of unlikely provenance are reworked entirely; the stock-photo of a flirty kimono-clad beauty lingering by a decorative pond is transformed into *My Guide*, a smiling, uniformed occidental with neat glasses, binoculars and pinned plastic ID card. In the new version, the rocks and flowery border of the background pond are identical but for nervous scratches and slightly heightened colour, yet they yield an utterly different symbolic resonance; samples of popular culture, once discarded, are revisioned as ambiguous but evocative new statements. A slight shift

1. *Playing Dead (eyes open)*, 2016, thread and acrylic on lenticular, on vintage German linen towel, 39.5 x 28.5 cm.

2. *Playing Dead (eyes closed)*, 2016, thread and acrylic on lenticular, on vintage German linen towel, 39.5 x 28.5 cm.

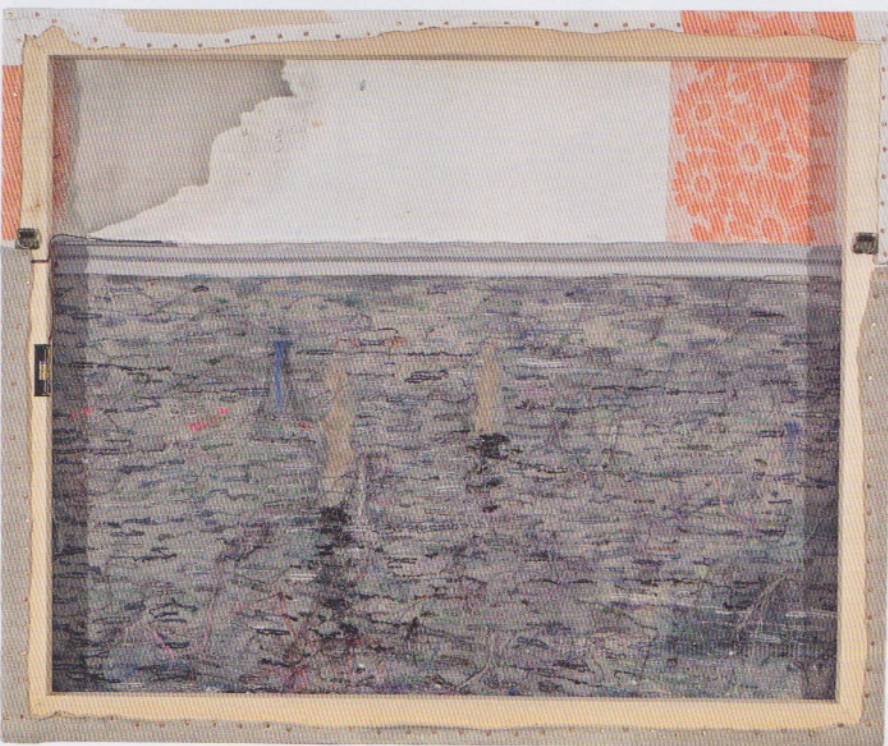
3. *Bottomless Love*, 2013, thread, acrylic and gouache on handwoven linen and worn-out Soviet hand towel, zipper, LED lights, 71 x 86 cm.

4. *Bottomless Love (verso)*, 2013, thread, acrylic and gouache on handwoven linen and worn-out Soviet hand towel, zipper, LED lights, 71 x 86 cm.





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of the hip changes the woman from coyly modest to forward and assertive.

None of the subject matter and rendering of these pictures is “in good taste” for contemporary Western culture. There is too much suburbia, dated references and plebeian entertainments. At the same time these people and places are known to us all from the street, from reality television, tabloids or popular fiction, though they portray no comforting ideal lifestyle.

For Natalka Husar, these various transgressions of taste and expectation permitted a way forward from a crisis of subject. For decades, her figurative, boldly narrative paintings were peopled by a series of beefy, menacing men and frowzy blondes—sultry, resentful juvenile-delinquent types—just arrived from Eastern Europe and warily



re-enacting their past lives in new settings. With Russian invasions into Ukraine having become a more critical, ongoing news focus, Husar came to feel her deep fascination with her parents' homeland and heritage was no longer available to her as subject material or inspiration. What to do? What to think about?

Husar's work remains recognizably her own, but the stories playing out here have an altered underpinning. Eastern Europe has given way to North America, though remnants of visual choreography remain from the old days. Doubling appears in the incorporation of actual lenticular fragments into the painted surfaces, or through mounting partially transparent figured canvases or gauze in front of photographs of the same scene, shadowed, shifted or questioned by their near juxtaposition. Always, we are invited to look more closely, to shift our gaze up, down or sideways in seeing the surface and deducing the storyline.

There is always a storyline, though not necessarily an ending or narrative solution. One analogy might be that of a novelist creating complete backstories for even minor characters in order to lend greater heft and substance to their brief appearances on the page. Objects with implied pasts,

brought forward as a basis for new meaning: doubling again.

Husar's old personal avatars remain accessible: Nurse and Stewardess as caregivers and troubleshooters, public personae with unknowable private lives. After completing her BFA at New Jersey's Rutgers University, Husar joined her brother in Toronto and soon began to show her work and become part of a "scene." Almost as a lark, she worked as a flight attendant for a couple of years while continuing to paint and receive her first reviews and commissions. Flying was a good gig, with convenient schedules, good pay and numerous transatlantic opportunities. Later, she accepted a teaching position at what is now OCAD University, where she continued to teach part-time until only a few months ago. The Nurse role is less literal, but as she told Gerta Moray in the McMaster University Art Museum catalogue, *Natalka Husar: Burden of Innocence* (1996), "I adopted this persona as a stand in for the artist as someone who both probes and heals." Alternatively, we may simply see the Nurse as romantic ideal and an emblematic, socially inscribed role model for women in everyday life as daughter, sibling or wife. Her mother Daria is now a sprightly 97 but increasingly reliant on her

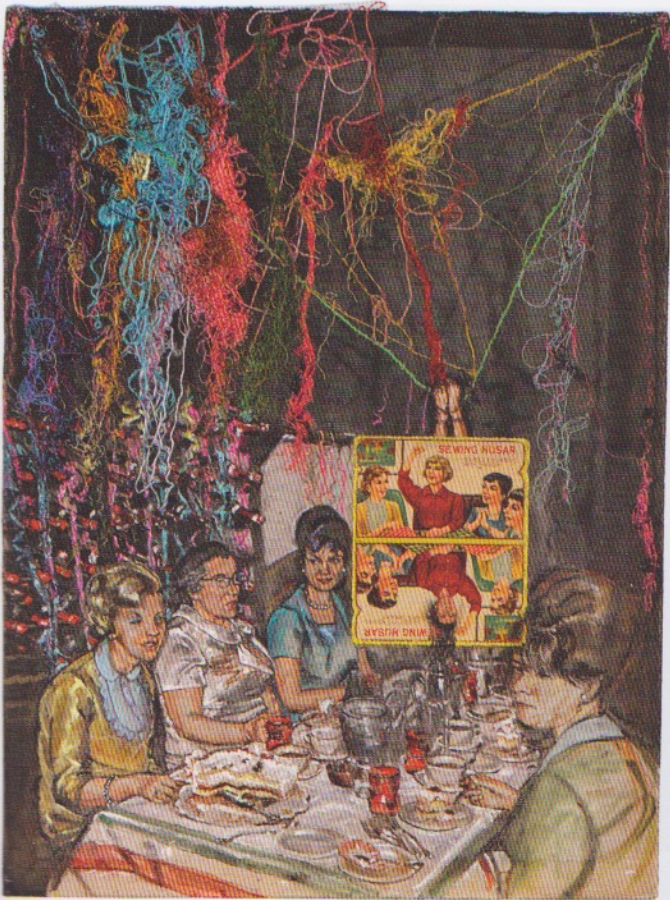


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like found embroideries or needlepoint patterns, handicrafts and folk art decoration, are reworked here to different meanings; magpie-like, Husar has long collected shiny baubles, pulp paperbacks, old tinware, bolts or factory-ends of fine linen and canvas, souvenir tea-towels, various framed mottos suitable for hanging—even, and maybe always—as clichés themselves, elements that speak to us. Originals are transgressed even as they are

only daughter. Perhaps these new works, with their wilfully amateur use of fabric and thread, are in part a tribute to the challenges and quiet triumphs of her mother's long life, still vibrant but inevitably beginning to diminish. Family photographs both old and new offer triggers for settings, for recollection, even for colour and lighting. The past remains ready for use through revision, alteration, transformation into something new. Perhaps the





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1. *Getaway*, 2015, thread and acrylic on linen, unembroidered Soviet needlepoint, metal zippers, 50 x 160 cm.

2. *Retirement Party*, 2015, thread and acrylic on linen netting with vintage needle book patch, 75 x 56 cm.

3. *Retirement Party (verso)*, 2015, thread and acrylic on linen netting with vintage needle book patch, 75 x 56 cm.



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various “means of escape” pictured in the works—the zippered horizon, the open sea, a camp in the woods, a waiting car—are only slightly hidden analogies. Perhaps the dark holes—tent opening, car trunk, obscure landscape backgrounds—suggest difficult times and unforgotten dangers from a residual immigrant past. Love is complicated.

Ukraine and Eastern Europe are no longer in the foreground, but Husar continues to use self-portraiture and alter-egos, suggestive settings and stock subjects as invitations to interpretation: familiar visual anchors for discoverable intellectual underpinnings. Unusually for this artist, she began these works without a fully formed plan. Materials were at hand, the items collected over years now finding their moment of entry: the sewing machine first, then those hundreds of spools of thread, the craft-shop paint-by-number tapestries, petit point or embroidery and traditional folk-art samples and references. There were lots of old postcards—hello from Niagara Falls, think of Laura Secord—and bits picked up from markets or the streets over the years. She makes something out of nothing, as her mother had done, but later and in different ways, for different reasons: inspired by found detritus, or memory, or recalled stories. The familiar is made strange by juxtaposition or detail, excess

decorative work is altered. Also, always—a form of transgression or sabotage, wilful, doing everything “wrong.” Getting more proficient at misusing traditional tools and ideas, moving forward even without (especially without) a clear plan or end point, as each completed work suggests a variation, a complement or its opposite.

Nurse and Stewardess are ongoing participants—divided visions of Nataka Husar and her muses, her history, her commentators and advisors. In *Bottomless Love* the two women stand thigh-deep in the sea, gazing back at us, Husar as both Nurse and Stewardess, yet also the artist and her mother, newly interchangeable. Perhaps as Husar herself ages and her mother returns to earlier memories and events, experience and desire approach and mingle. At the same time, Husar has waded into that endless sea of nurturing, maternal care.

All stories are partial, deflective, masked. All clues are worthy of investigation. There is no direct tale here available for decoding. These compositions both mend and destroy, hide and reveal, invent and/or repeat, differently and the same. Two ways of seeing. At least. ■

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