Cultural Hero and Personage: Representation in Contemporary Visual Art of Ukraine

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Abstract

The article focuses on the research of the semantic links between the concepts of a cultural hero and a personage, on substantiation of their existence and representation in the context of social and artistic processes of the visual art of Ukraine. I shall argue that artistic conceptualization of non-hierarchical "personages" is an ongoing issue in contemporary art. Ukrainian artists in their projects continue experiments with the boundaries of contemporary personages. Nevertheless, cultural hero, his main roles and functions become situational and processual these days. It was discovered that representativity builds up and corrects the links between the author and the personage of a visual artwork, through approximation or, on the contrary, distancing the author from the personage, when a certain goal of the artist in this artistic communication is revealed. It was concluded that reconstruction—as a representative strategy—aims to recover the authentic foundations of national identity and form the advanced typology of Ukrainian cultural heroes; while deconstruction is aimed at ruining totalitarian senses of Ukrainian culture and demolishing the figure of the cultural hero of Soviet times. In the latter process, both the artist and the character of the visual artwork are anonymized, so that the new foundations of contemporary heroization could be discovered.

Keywords: Cultural hero, character, representation, visual art, Ukraine.

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Introduction

The issue of cultural heroes is one of the deepest-rooted in art and cultural studies. The very concept of a cultural hero is based on a presumption that archetypes are the fundamental structures enabling the existence of a hero. This, in turn, allows to substantiate the latest modifications of a hero in the field of art. Every historical era forms its unique understanding of a civic ideal through reinterpreting the concept of a hero by each new generation. Identification of a national cultural hero is a process immanent to Ukrainian reality. What gets a shape due to archetypal understanding of the phenomenon of a cultural hero, are the existential paradoxes of a person's being; also, constitutive socio-cultural patterns are formed.

Representation is the key issue in modern art studies. The very space of art requires representation embodied in certain "figures": either of a character/cultural hero or through the author of the work himself. Visual art, just like any other art, is, according to M. Kagan, "fundamentally dialogic in its nature" (Kagan, 1986). Kagan, a well-known theoretician of art, described this communicative narrative as a process where "…aesthetically complete perception of the works of fine art is not limited to their viewing and basic establishment of similarities with the object and positive or negative emotions linked to that …, instead it is an active psychological process of co-creation with the artist" (Kagan, 1986, pp. 154–155.) "Authentic" information indicating the inner world of an author in classical, and even in non-classical fine art, needed an intermediary—a character (or a cultural hero), through whom an author could address a viewer, establishing artistic communication. However, there is a fundamental difference between communication and interaction in art: "communication is non-selective in transmitting the message—it is 'to everyone' who manages to decode it and has a necessary thesaurus to understand the text; while dialogic language of interaction makes it selective" (Kagan, 1986, p. 154).

According to M. Kagan, involving the viewer in such artistic dialog happens in such main ways: from the one hand, the artist creates an image of lyrical personage who directly bares his soul to the viewer as a soul of the artist himself; from the other hand, the personage being created is epic, "detached" from his creator, consequently, he "lives" a life of his own and is identified as a hero who represents certain artistic and social ideal, eventually becoming a focal point of the cultural complexes not only of the author but of cultural trends in general. In the history of art, representativity every time in every era structured and corrected the ties between the author and personage of the visual artwork by approximating the author to his personage(s) or, on the contrary, by distancing them from each other.

Literature Review

Analysis of recent research works and publications proves that the problem of cultural hero received extensive coverage in the philosophical works (Albert Camus, Friedrich Nietzsche, etc.), in anthropological and ethnographical studies (James Frazer, Franz Boas, Joseph Campbell, etc.) and literary history (Mikhail Bakhtin, Thomas Carlyle, Vladimir Propp, Alexander Potebnja, etc.). Aleksei Losev and Aza Takho-Godi studied the problem of "heroic cultures." The structure of mythological heroes was outlined by Jakov Golosovker (1987), Mircea Eliade (1995), N. Kovtun (2007), and others. Sigmund Freud (1995), Karl Abraham (1998), Otto Rank (1997), Carl Jung, and other scholars contributed to psychoanalytical studies on heroism.

Oleg Babebko (1999), Maria Loshmanova (2006), and others (Busova, 1998) in their dissertations turned to the problem of hero and heroism. Loshmanova, defining the concept of a cultural hero, puts an emphasis on its wholeness that, "…changes and maybe constantly regenerating

in the range of problems of social philosophy, history, ethics, and aesthetics. … It may be concluded that the concept of a hero is a dynamic formation directly connected with other concepts that actively function during a certain stage of social development" (Loshmanova, 2006, p. 19). The cultural hero of epos has distinct features of a national hero, as at certain periods he becomes a focal point of national identity (Babenko, 1999). Nevertheless, heroism in art receives very little attention from art historians; and the studies of hero in contemporary visual art are quite scant. Despite the fact that contemporary visual art of Ukraine has been extensively studied, the problem of cultural hero lacks systematic research.

The aim of the article is to analyze the semantic links between the concepts of cultural hero and personage, to substantiate their co-existence in the context of social and artistic processes happening in the visual art of Ukraine.

Methodology

The culturological approach to the problem allows to reveal certain universal patterns; also, it makes it possible to define features of cultural heroes and explore their representation in different periods of world history. Art historical approach enables examination of semantic links between the concepts of cultural hero and personage and substantiating their existence in the context of social and artistic processes of the visual art of Ukraine.

Results and Discussion

The correlation between cultural hero (heroes) of every nation with the personages in the artworks became topical in Europe as early as in the late Renaissance and the Age of Enlightenment. Cultural heroes included a pattern of certain "ethical role model" and artistic clichés that were used to form the concept of the hero of that age, both at the level of sense and form (Abraham, 1998). Humanism of the Renaissance age contributed to the historical and social environment, so that in the Age of Enlightenment fine art, the cultural hero is not a perfect and elevated figure, but is perceived through the realities of his life, with regard to his physical and spiritual nature (ethical manifestations, suffering, and doubts). In painting and sculpture of the time, one can see not the generalized figures and faces with little details; instead, there are detailed forms, presented against a complex and specified background, in the interior or exterior that are filled with symbolic features to the maximum possible extent.

Therefore, in the visual artworks of the early seventeenth century, the process of development of heroic motifs and their transformation into personages of portrait and easel painting began. The inclination of the early Enlightenment artists for picturing corporality and certain specificity aimed at ruining an aura of heroic perfectness, typical to the early 17th century. Corporality of plastic realization, emotions, and theatricality contributed to the blurring of boundaries between the viewer and the personage of the artwork. Emotionality of the modified heroes in the paintings of the Age of Enlightenment ruins perspective boundaries, reveals inner conflicts, both of the artist and the viewer. New social types—metaphysician philosopher, explorer, voyager—arise as the modifications of the cultural hero of modern history.

During this historical period, an artist actively contributed to the dynamic processes of forming a civil society that emerged in Europe at the time. Therefore, the process of creation went according to the laws of rationality and being a "fortunate genius" when not the normative images of the mythological and epic cultural heroes of the past were embodied in the visual artworks, but the specific features of the contemporary historical process. These figures—embodied in the works of fine art— became personages of the modern time. Dictate of rationality that was typical for that time, meant for the author and his hero the need to quickly assimilate their being with intellectual and ethical norms

of society and with the natural laws of the Universe, sometimes defying their own intuition and sovereign identity.

The Romantic era in European art was marked with growing manifestations of individualism, subjectivity, and idealization of not only the cultural hero as Nietzsche's *Übermensch* (2005) or Camus's "rebel" (1990) but also idealization of the personages of the works of art. Moreover, the whole system of personages' imagery is being formed, with the author himself self-identifying with them (Bakhtin, 2000). A vivid example of these trends is the active development of the self-portrait genre at the time. In self-portrait, the fact or creativity and imagination resonates with the facts of the author's own biography, with its interpretation that, consequently, provided a dynamic boost for the process of "auto-heroization", typical for the following centuries. Cultural memory of the author as a creator to a certain extent reduces normativity of the images of the cultural heroes of the past. Thus, during the modern time, in the range of modern culture, the cultural hero, his main functions and roles become situational and depending on a process. The boundaries of a cultural hero as a socially significant figure, hence, would be defined discretely, depending on a whole "palette" of identities that "unfold" in time and space, producing difficulties in hero's identification.

Forming a figure of a cultural hero in the Soviet fine art, as it is well-known, was carried out in the framework of socialist realism that was the main artistic method for depicting reality. In fine art, the cultural hero of the Soviet era existed in the public space only. He always was just a particle in the "collective consciousness" whose psychological realization relied on communist ideology. Ukrainian scholar Glib Vysheslavsky points out that, "… the magic of collective ideology offered instead of personal growth should be transformed in real heroism—heroism of self-awareness of everyone, based on creativity in the broadest sense" (excerpt from the review of the *Cultural Heroes* exhibition at the Soviart Center for Contemporary Art, 2002) (Vysheslavsky, 2002, p. 158). During the Soviet era, the authentic foundations of Ukrainian national consciousness were ruined or functioned as quasi-cultural initiatives supported by vulgar sociology.

National, gender, subcultural and other identities of cultural hero (heroes) of the twentieth century that form its essence, become more and more "blurred" since the latter half of the century. Modern synthesis of the visual sphere becomes more profound regarding the trends of its development and in the second half of the twentieth century results in emergence of visual art with dissipative morphological boundaries that transgress at any given period (Alfiorova, 2019). On the other hand, the figure of the cultural hero acquires dissipative and transitive traits.

Ukraine as a state undergoing a postcolonial transition period is no exception in this process. A number of public figures of Ukrainian contemporary life (from politicians to figures of moral authority) already have features of non-normative characteristics of a "cultural hero" as such. That is the reason why visual art is oriented towards the personages of Ukrainian politics, culture, sport, and other spheres of social activity (Busova, 1998).

In his time, Joseph Campbell, anticipating the future modification of a cultural hero, defined the latter as a "hero with thousand faces" (Campbell, 1999). Campbell implied that there are different versions of cultural hero resulting from the changes in its functioning within the time–space of history. Nowadays the generation living in virtual spaces and gadgets produced myriads of personages providing them with contemporary notions of heroism. Among the variety of personage's images in contemporary visual art of Ukraine, there are "freak personage," intellectual personage, hipster personage, anti-globalization personage, patriot personage, etc.

Nevertheless, an artist may consciously reject to present his personage in full as, for instance, does Illya Chichkan in his series *Sleeping Princes of Ukraine*. In the series, "embryos" of unborn babies become an "anthropological sketch" of sorts for the future of the country. Similar senses also form a

"cue personage" of *Roksolana* by Oleg Tistol. It is evident that contemporary artist may reject any marking of his personage at all. This is the idea, which the author of this article attempted to fulfill in his multimedia and synthetic project *Millstones of Time* (Image 1 and 2). Yet, repudiation of the Soviet metanarrative actualized not only the attempts of reconstruction of the national identity of Ukraine but also inspired the processes of understanding the universal human values and metaphysical senses. As Oleg Sydor-Gibelinda notes in his project *Ritual Dances* (Image 3), "bleak mechanicalness of the mass gatherings" as if "colored the artist's own dream" (Sydor-Gibelinda, 2006, p. 29). Analyzing the core ideas of the *Authentication* project (Image 4), Oleksandr Soloviov, a prominent Ukrainian art critic, puts emphasis on the "boundless anthropomorphism, … naturalness of the sculpture part of the project, on it being as if a plaster cast" (Soloviov, 2006, p. 35). "The use of people as a plaster cast" in this installation is the essence of the author's attempt to form his own boundaries as specific limits for "unstable" substance of creative act, stresses Oleg Sydor-Gibelinda (2006, p. 31). The traits of "total non/personages" of a contemporary man, existing beyond the boundaries of cultural heroism, are used in the installation. It is not random that the artist mentions in the summary of the project that, "immortality is granted only to a handful of people—from the epic heroes of antiquity to the characters of popular TV series, as only them are able to bear the weight of immortality" (Sydor-Gibelinda, 2006, p. 29).

The search for the boundaries of contemporary personages, set out at the start of this study, is carried out in the *Levitation* project (2009) (Image 5), *Ultra-S* (2010), *Depersonalization* (Image 6), *Witnesses* (Image 7) series, and in other newest visual concepts. As it was previously mentioned, "personage is a person who not only pursues his search for space but also the one who came closer to understanding the inefficiency of his previous mental constructs … this is carrying out the search in certain social and personal zero-gravity, while being detached from what is known" (Sydorenko, 2012, p. 9). Focusing on the failure to apply the criteria of reasonableness/rationality to assessing the contemporary processes which are already underway, one may only resort to detached observation and, thus, witness both the collapse of these processes and the triumph of modern individualism in the state of "'post' culture times." Mental conservatism, inherent to Ukrainians, forms a sense of "certain stability" in the rapid "flow" of thousands of contemporary personages in the works by Vasyl Tsagolov, Oleg Tistol, Arsen Savadov, Oleksandr Hnylytsky, Roman Minin, Victor Sydorenko, Boris Mikhailov, Sergey Bratkov, Igor Gusev, and other Ukrainian artists who try to "capture" non-hierarchical personages of contemporary time in its various visual forms. However, the contemporary personage, marked with aspiration to become a glorified "hero," arises in the space of culture as an unstable image-concept of sort that reflects human yearning to overcome his limitations through balancing between many ontological contradictions.

Deconstruction as a strategy representing cultural hero in Ukrainian visual art of the late 1980 through the early 2000s, using vitality and irony as the inherent traits of Ukrainian mentality (Nikolai Gogol), was aimed at ruining existing pictorial and ideological stereotypes. The Strong-Willed Face of National Post-Eclecticism group (Konstantin Reunov and Oleg Tistol) "actively implemented the principle of 'turning to regional values'" (Burlaka, 2003, p. 14) through its characteristic "transavantguarde grotesque Ukrainianness" (term coined by Victoria Burlaka). Decorative baroque expressiveness of some personages of Ukrainian figurative fine art of the period, typical to the experiments by Valentin Rayevskiy, Oleg Tistol, Oleksandr Roytburd, Vasiliy Ryabchenko, and others, was combined with the "entropy" of ideological and artistic "markers." For instance, Oleg Tistol in his *National Geography* project researches the issues of national identity. Tistol's *Aliens no. 5 with an Umbrella* (2012), a project-"distinction" of sorts, pictures exotic foreign men and women framed in stylization of Ukrainian embroidered *rushnyks* and Petrykivka ornaments.

"Anonymization" of the artist (according to Victoria Burlaka) and, thus, of cultural hero as well, is the next stage of this programmatic "entropy." Analyzing the works by Oleg Holosiy, Victoria Burlaka refers to him as "the most indicative figure among the 'New Wave' artists" (Burlaka, 2003, p. 17). Holosiy's *Boxer*, *Sehiyko*, and his other personages "fill in the neutral void" (Burlaka, 2003, p. 17) of the painting space; this brings the space of a painting closer to photography, however, not the portrait photography, but photojournalism. Hero becomes as if irrelevant, as well as the "anonymous" artist who presents him in such a way.

The series by Oleksandr Panasenko, symbolically titled *The Factory for Transformation of Visual Images* (1998), formally presenting unrecognized personages, do not hide this destructive formality. Meanwhile, encrypted programmatic nature of the *Legs* (1998) painting by Igor Gusev is formed around deconstruction of the pretentious figure of the cultural hero of the previous era. Vasyl Tsagolov's "detached" painting style of the period (*Ukrainian X-File* series), *Be Seen* series by Volodymyr Kozhukhar, Arsen Savadov's miners-themed series amplify deconstruction, according to Victoria Burlaka, with the "modernized 'Gogol's spirit'." It should be added that the image of the man in pants, used by the author of this article in his own painting series, as an element of representation and deconstruction, was motivated by the author's "transgression to discovering the new foundations of existence of Self" (Ziborova, 2009, p. 7). Pants, in this case, are the specific artifact that united society: a totalitarian piece of closing, worn by everyone throughout the 20th century: from soldiers to civilians, from jailers to "prisoners"—as a symbol of commonality of fate of the whole generation. Thus, this transitive personage is identified through the epitome of the "man without qualities" as a reflection of sociocultural identifier roles of reality.

Modern and postmodern intentions, combined in contemporary Ukrainian culture and complex and intertwined consonance of different lines of its development contributed to the fact that representation strategy of game and forming so-called "fantasy being" turned out to be quite productive for the visual art of Ukraine in the new century. While playing, artists constantly "re-identifies" the topos of their existence that requires collaboration of several representation strategies. Maryna Protas defined them as "contemporarity as a state of mind of certain individual that could be compared to mysterious ramifications of self-resembling multitudes" (Protas, 2003, p. 61). Upon the background of psychoanalysis' focus on the external "manifestations" of personages, often eccentric and unpredictable, and of diverse "collaborative practices"—synthesis of various representation forms solidifies: when photography, street art, installation, video art, etc. are merged together.

Contemporary projects of Ukrainian visual art show certain bent for technologies as opposed to generating new senses (Tofan, 2019), while their media component, according to Victoria Burlaka, "is a part of informational technoculture, aimed not at searching for truth but for maximum success and efficiency, which turn against them." In this context, it should be noted that Ukrainian visual art has not experienced such a significant process of computerization, which caused certain "virtual chill" in the Western art (Sydorenko, 2005, p. 61). However, simulative representation strategy spreads in contemporary visual art not only under the influence of technoculture but also as a result of further "development" of postmodern and post-postmodern "rhetorical" practices.

Conclusions

Studying semantic connection between the concepts of cultural hero and personage was illustrative of the fact that in the contemporary visual art of Ukraine glorification, inherent to socialist realism, is no longer topical. Currently, the main functions and roles of cultural heroes are situational and processual. A cultural hero as a socially significant figure is open to changes, motivated by a whole constellation of identities that are "developed" in time and space and produce new possibilities for hero's identification.

It should be noted that there are several strategic ways of a cultural hero's representation in the space of contemporary visual art of Ukraine. *Reconstruction* as a representative strategy aims to restore the autochthonous foundations of national identity and form the new typology of cultural heroes of Ukraine. The fulfillment of this strategy is slowed down by the influence of the trends of contemporary culture. Deconstruction as a representative strategy is aimed at the destruction of cultural heroes of the Soviet times and the newest figures of mass culture. Deconstruction anonymizes the artists and personage of visual artwork, allowing the artist to search for other forms of identity. Simulation as a representative strategy often equalizes a cultural hero and a machine, simulating "human nature" and agency of the latter.

The prospect of further research may be studying the paradigms and representation of cultural heroes in contemporary Ukrainian cultural and artistic process.

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Appendix

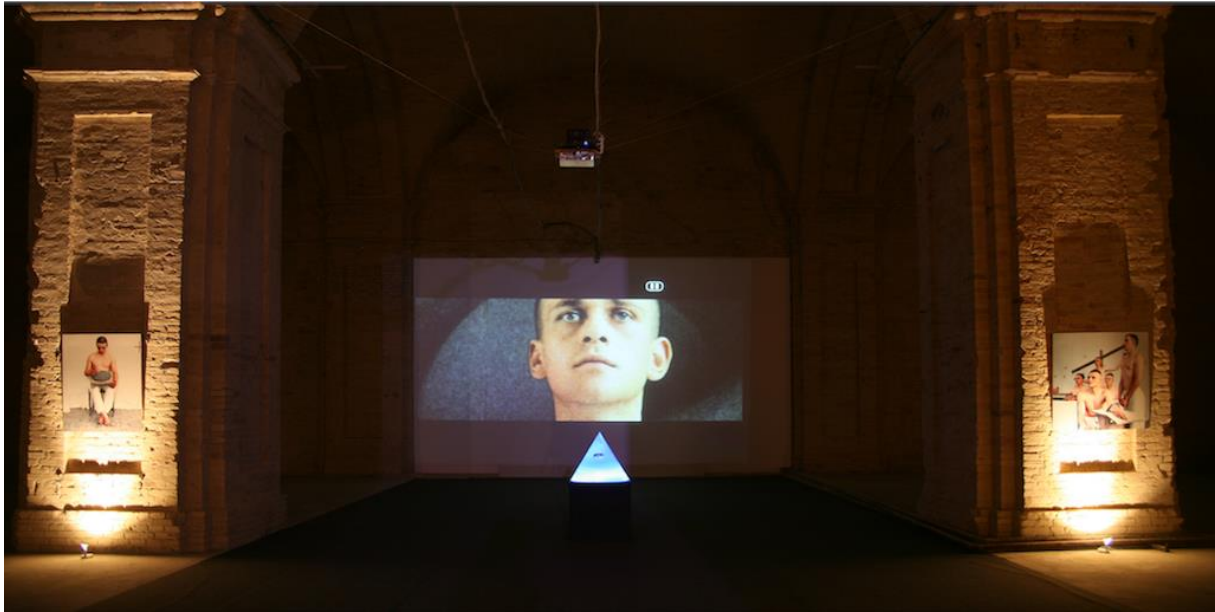**Image 1. From the project Millstone of Time, 150 x 130 cm, digital print, 2003**

Image 2. From the project Millstone of Time, installation, 2003

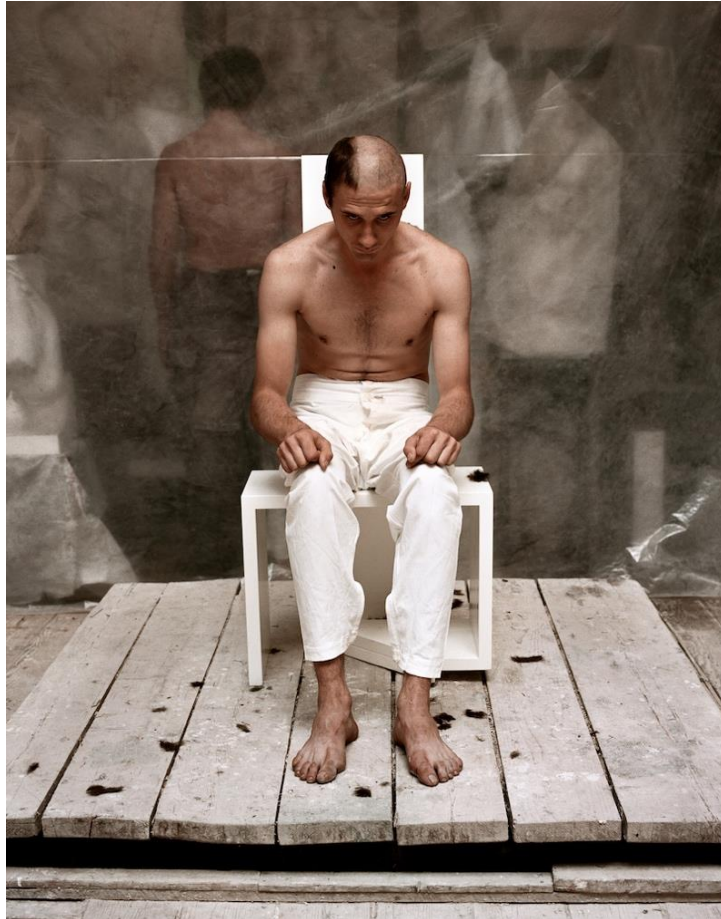**Image 3. Ritual Dances, 350 x 350 cm, oil on canvas, 1997**

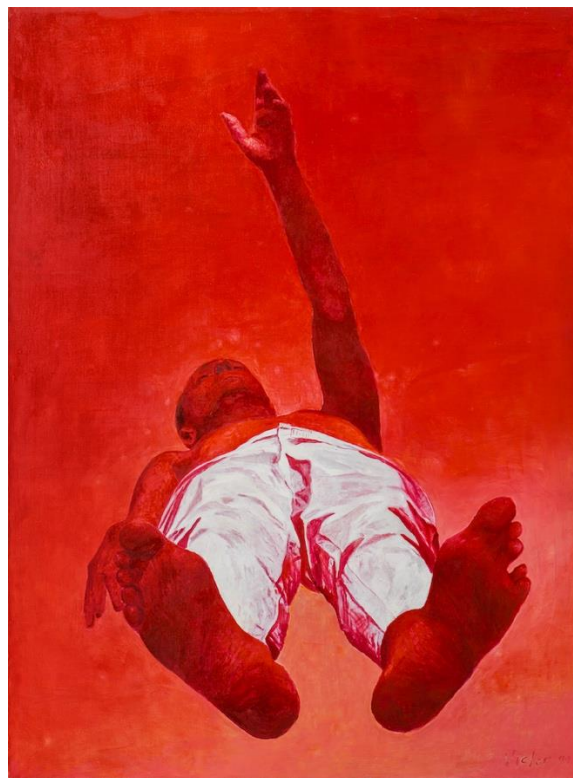**Image 4. From the project Authentication, 150 x 117 cm, digital print, 2006**

Image 5. From the series Levitation, 200 x 150 cm, oil on canvas, 2009

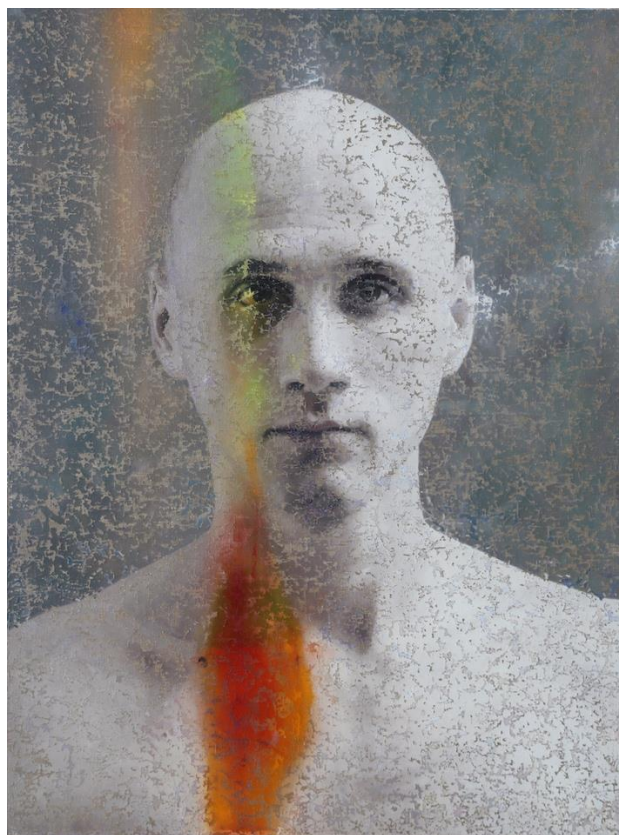**Image 6. From the project Depersonalization, installation, H (figures) = 180 cm, 2008**

Image 7. From the project Witnesses, 200 x 150 cm, 2015