



AN INTERVIEW WITH ARTIST VICTORIA BRACE

By Marilee Hudon

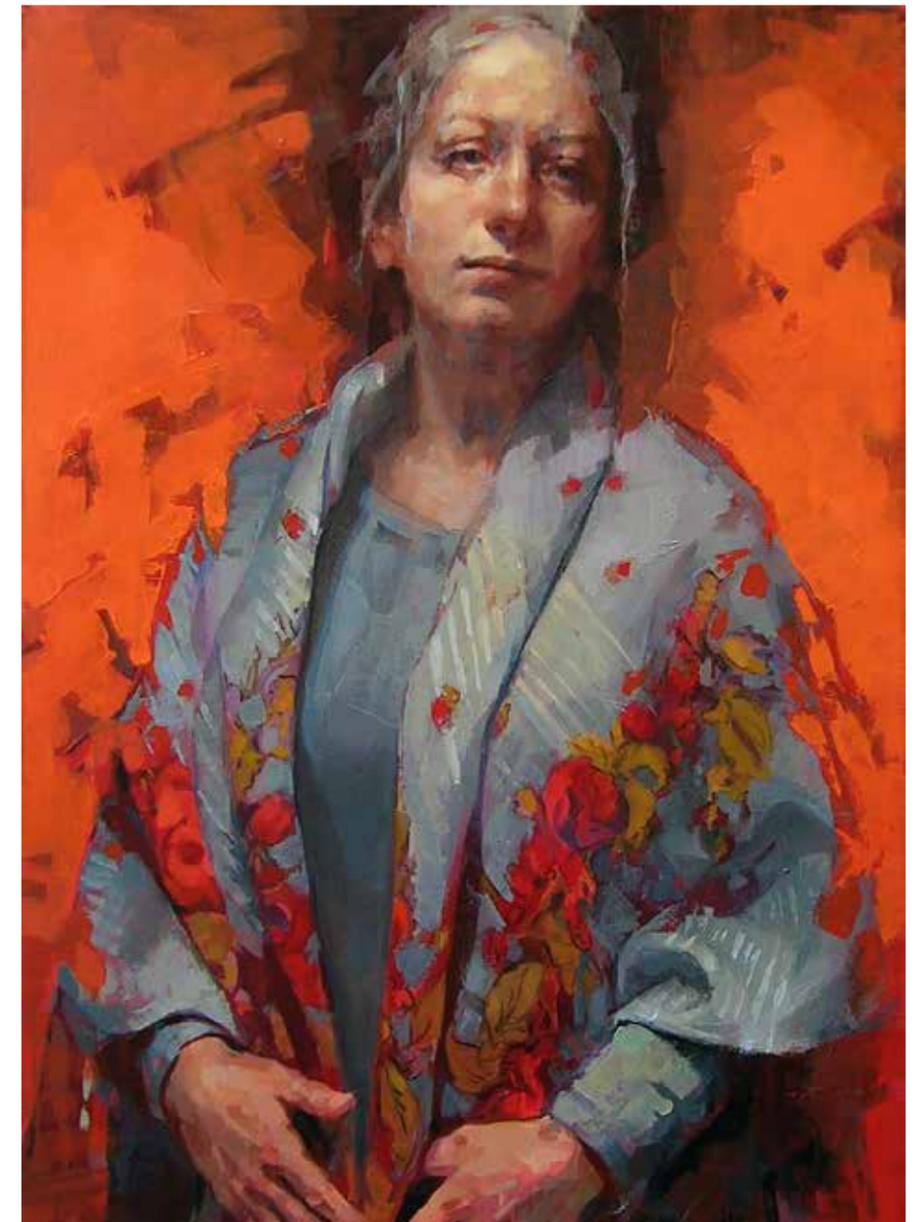
Local artist, Victoria Brace, is a soft-spoken, self-possessed, educated, and interesting woman. An Eastern European transplant to Spokane, her paintings are rich, layered, enigmatic confections for the eyes. They are as deep in meaning as they are in color, and we are pleased to introduce you all to her.

ART CHOWDER: Hello Victoria. Please tell our readers where you are from, and how you ended up in Spokane?

VICTORIA: I'm originally from Russia. I was born and grew up in Moscow. In the late 90s my husband and I moved to the U.S. to Upstate NY, where his family lived. Soon I got a job as a computer graphics artist at Cyan Worlds. A video game company here in Mead, they were the creators of the game *Myst* and its sequel *Uru*. So we moved again, this time to Spokane, and have stayed here since.

ART CHOWDER: Have you always been an artist?

VICTORIA: I've been drawing and painting from the time I learned how to hold a pencil; it was my favorite thing to do. I did not get serious about becoming an artist until my teens. I took all the art classes and after school art programs I could get into, then took private lessons with an artist, and got accepted to an art college. I graduated from Moscow College of Art with a BA in Painting and Art Education.



"Hope"
36 x 24" - oil on canvas

ART CHOWDER: So you were classically trained?

VICTORIA: Yes. The art school in Russia back then was as classical as it can get.



"Nomad"
12 x 12" - oil on canvas



"Pears and Grapes"
20 x 20" - oil on canvas

ART CHOWDER: Okay, and what about after college?

VICTORIA: After college, I worked at a gallery, and organized and taught art classes for children...and of course painted, showed, and sold my works in Moscow.

In the late 80s early 90s I became interested in computer graphics, especially 3D modeling. It was a new and exciting area to explore. Back then no colleges in Russia were teaching computer graphics, but I was lucky to get a job at a company that was looking for classically trained artists and was willing to teach them 3D modeling. Working as a CG artist did not leave much time for painting, but I treated CG as a new medium. I have been lucky that, at all my jobs, I was given a lot of creative freedom. After all, it's the same things an artist has to deal with—look and feel, color, composition, expressing ideas in visual language. But I missed the “real” aspect of painting in oils. Eventually, I decided to go back to fine art full-time and retired from the CG field in 2007.

ART CHOWDER: What mediums do you work in now?

VICTORIA: I work primarily in oils; it's my favorite medium. I also do drawings in charcoal and ink. I would love to work in many different mediums, but unfortunately there are not enough hours in a day.

ART CHOWDER: How would you describe your style of painting?

VICTORIA: I don't really like isms or locking myself into a certain style. My style changes over the years, sometimes becoming more realistic, then more expressionistic; it goes back and forth. I believe a realistic painting still should have a strong abstract concept in it. And it has to express something, otherwise there is no reason to paint it. My formal training gave me a good foundation, but the rest is a life-long process of reading, looking at a lot of art, studying techniques and the thought process of other artists—a lot of observing and analyzing what is around, what really interests me and why. How can I express it on canvas? Every painting teaches me something. I'm always learning, and therefore always changing.



"Pears on a Branch"
16 x 12" - ink and acrylic on mylar



"A Bunch of Daffodils"
24 x 24" - oil on canvas



"Abundantia"
24 x 30" - oil on canvas

ART CHOWDER: Do you paint from pictures, live models, or still life sets?

VICTORIA: A painting usually starts with an abstract idea/composition. An image forms in my head and I start putting paint on canvas. For example, it can be something like, "I want a strong diagonal movement and I want a large area of strong solid color balanced by somewhat intricate details on the left." I move shapes and colors around the canvas, figuring out the composition. Nothing is set in stone at this point, but it's my starting point. The narrative aspect comes later. It can be a figure; it can be a building; it can be a bunch of flowers.

I do use whatever references are available—my sketches, photographs (although photos can be tricky; they rarely show what a human eye sees and I'm a terrible photographer), and still life sets. I even sometimes set pieces of fabric to mimic the folds of clothing for a figure, if I need to understand how the light hits it, or how the colors affect each other. I do a lot of "constructing" reality on canvas; that's where experience with 3D modeling comes in handy. It does not have to be perfectly right, it just has to be convincing.

Regardless of the subject, I like to rely on memory as much as possible. It is said that painting (or drawing) is all about editing—what is important, what is not, what absolutely needs to be on a canvas, and what is distracting. Memory works in an interesting way. It captures the essence of a person, a place or a thing; it does a lot of editing before the brush touches the canvas.

The whole painting process is a lot like jazz for me. Everything can change; nothing is final until the painting is done. Things move around, get painted in and painted out. Most of my works are many layers of unfinished *alla prima* paintings. There is something about building up the texture, the depth of colors, when each previous layer helps the next one.

I keep painting until I hit the right "note." It can be a particular color, a shape, or even a brush stroke, but when it happens, it feels right and it works as a tuning fork for everything else. And then everything starts falling into place and the painting itself starts telling me what to do. At this point, I stop looking at my references, disassemble my still life set and just look at the painting, figuring out what it needs.

A painting, I believe, is very similar to a closed ecosystem. With its own rules, relations between its different parts, and its fragile balance.



"Almost Winter"
24 x 24" - oil on canvas



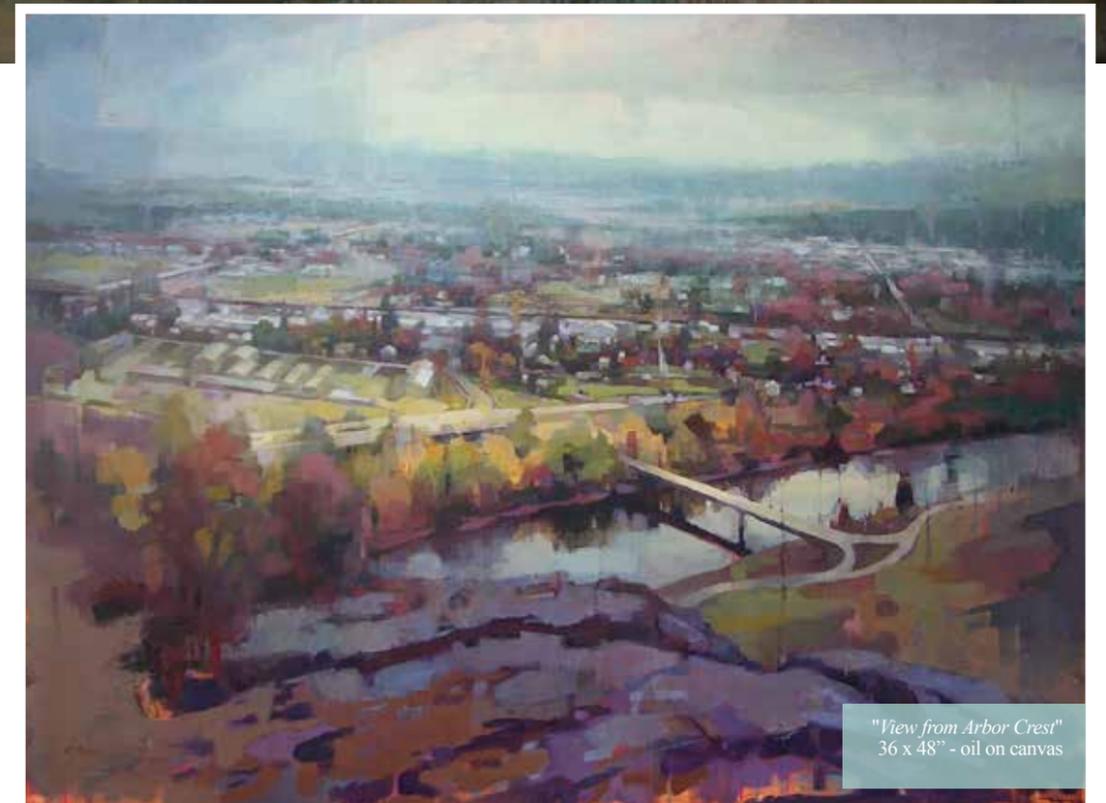
"West Sprague"
10 x 20" - oil on canvas



"South Freya"
36 x 48" - oil on canvas



"City Dweller"
30 x 48" - oil on canvas



"View from Arbor Crest"
36 x 48" - oil on canvas

ART CHOWDER: What inspires you?

VICTORIA: Challenges. I mean, things like: “Can I do it?” “Can I catch a particular feel on canvas?” “Can I break the rules and still make this composition work?” “What if...?”

ART CHOWDER: Do you find the art culture here to be different than in Russia?

VICTORIA: The art culture is very similar, but when I was showing art in Russia it was before computers and the internet. You would get word that there was a juried show; you would take your painting, bring it and set it in front of the jury. They look at it, right in front of you, and tell you nice things or bad things—whether you are in or out, whether you are to leave it at the gallery or take it home. Now, with computers, you send a digital file and wait.

One difference is, in Russia, they are very direct. If they like something they tell you. If they don't like it they'll *really* tell you. In America, when I heard rejections like, “It's nice, we like it, but...” I didn't know what to think. They were kind, but confusing. So I learned over time to understand.



"Pan"
36 x 24" - oil on canvas



"God of Grapes"
24 x 36" - oil on canvas

ART CHOWDER: Do you ever get nervous before a jury or a show?

VICTORIA: Of course. There is always self-doubt. Before a show I'll wonder, what have I done? What should I bring to the show? What if it's bad and I don't see it because I'm too close to the work? It's always about what I wanted to say and what I managed to say in my painting—the feel of a place in a cityscape, the story in a figurative painting, or in a still life. I always try to leave the narrative part open to interpretation, so different people might look at it and tell me different stories. Often they come up with better stories than I possibly could! But I really want the visual story to work the way I intended—to show that first impulse that made me want to paint it. It can be very difficult to keep that first spark of inspiration in there, so people can see it.

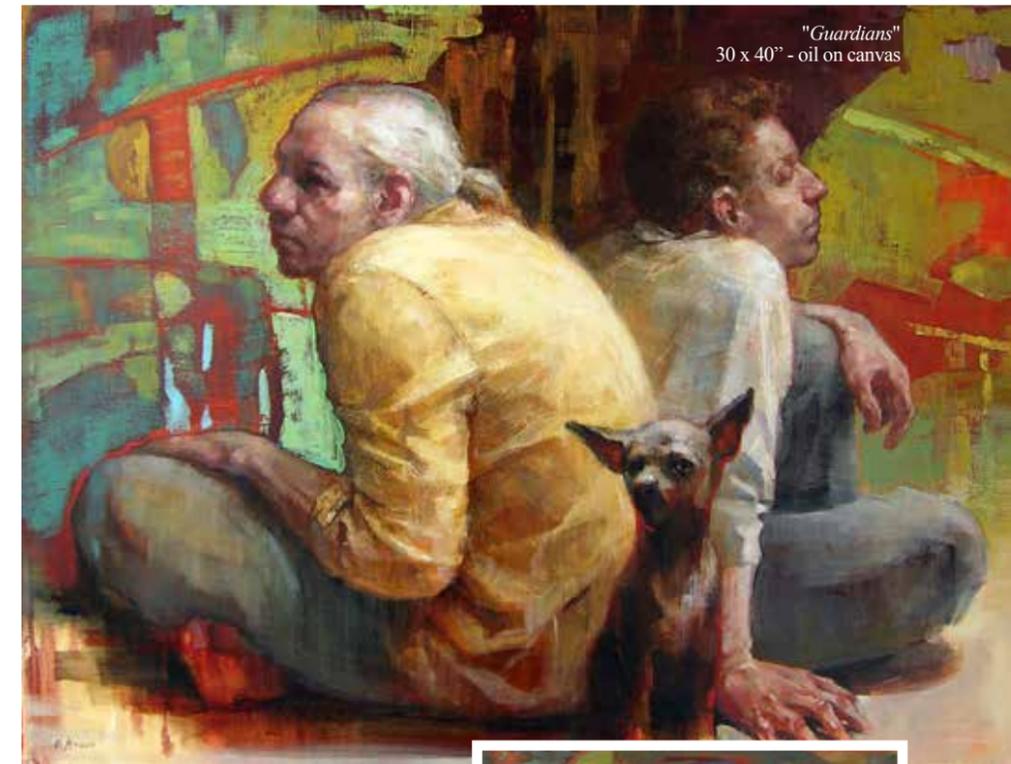
ART CHOWDER: What's been the most difficult thing about painting?

VICTORIA: I think, Robert Hughes once said (not the exact quote, but close): “Painting is difficult. Making a beautiful painting is very difficult.” I wholeheartedly agree.

ART CHOWDER: Any advice for artists new to the U.S.?

VICTORIA: Just keep painting? Some professions don't transplant well; they might be tied to local languages, regulations, and certifications. The good thing about visual art is—it's universal. What you see is what you get, no translation needed.

ART CHOWDER: If you had to describe yourself in five words (or less) what would you say?



"Guardians"
30 x 40" - oil on canvas

VICTORIA: I have no idea—lucky?

ART CHOWDER: How about educated?

VICTORIA: It's never enough. There's never enough education. Perhaps, constantly stressed, but no matter how stressed though, I know it will turn out okay. What is the word for that? Hopeful.

ART CHOWDER: How about brave?

VICTORIA: Every artist is brave. You take your soul and put it out there for everyone to see.

ART CHOWDER: Thank you for sharing your talent with us, Victoria.

If you would like to see more of Victoria's work, you can find it on her website: www.victoriabrace.com or visit *The Art Spirit Gallery* in Coeur D'Alene, ID, *Dodson's Jewelers* in Spokane, WA, or *Art at Work* at the MAC, Spokane, WA.

