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## Fenced by the red thread

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# Fenced by the Red Thread

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the  
Master of Arts  
degree in Art in the  
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The University of Iowa

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## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

As a first-generation Georgian to be born the year after Soviet Union collapsed, I carry the weight of the uncertainty and the shared memory of the years before my birth that is engraved in the minds of the people around me. Through the years of chaos that had to come later, I always thought that me and my country grew up and matured together, as the peers of same age. Transition from a strictly Atheistic society into predominantly fundamental Orthodox Christian nation has been the process that I witnessed while growing up. Being raised by an Orthodox iconographer father, working on frescoes and icons have left the permanent mark on my identity as an artist.

My work, through the range of media, deals with this clash of radical ideologies, while drawing from Orthodox iconography and compositions, I transport the images into a neutral, sterile state where they are re-examined and re-evaluated. Even though my work deals with social issues in Georgia, I see most of it as an autobiographical narrative that addresses the local space that I come from.

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## Preface

In the summer of 2018 I re-visited Georgia for research purposes. My research centered mostly around the Georgian Orthodox ecclesiastic art and frescoes from three different schools of Iconography present in the region such as the Svanetian (Archaic) School, David-Gareja School and Byzantine school. I visited the Svaneti National Museum in Mestia, Svaneti, one of the most isolated mountainous regions in Georgia that has preserved Archaic iconography from as early as 9<sup>th</sup> century. I visited three more churches in the Eastern Part of Georgia: the Anchiskhati Basilica (6<sup>th</sup> century), Svetitskhoveli Cathedral (11<sup>th</sup> century) and Alaverdi Monastery (Completed in the 11<sup>th</sup> century). I recorded audio in all three of these places that has become important part of my sound compositions and inspiration behind my recent paintings.

Being a woman comes with limitations of moving around Orthodox churches. During the liturgy, one must stand on the left side of the altar (Northern part of the church, since the altar in Orthodox architecture is always built facing the East). Under no circumstances can women be allowed to enter the altar (the Eastern part of the church that is separated by three steps of stairs). Even while visiting the old ruins of churches, the place where the altar would have been is marked by a red line, so that women can avoid stepping on those parts of the ground.

These experiences made me question my place in my own culture and religion. What are other imaginary red lines that I need to avoid and navigate around? This is where the concept for the “Fenced by the Red Thread” originated.



Figure 1 Alaverdi Monastery 11th century.

## **Fenced by the Red Thread**

It was unexpected to discover that my trip to Georgia had transformed my practice and my work tremendously. Even though I grew up there, one year apart from that familiar space has changed me into a more attentive observer. This mental state of distancing myself from my culture and my typical environments is transformative for my work. Before the trip my work was more about social commentary and direct activism against Theocratic and Patriarchal society. This mindset can be seen from one of my first installation in the University of Iowa – “Men’s March” which was made in response to the US Women’s March. The installation included a TV screen, placed in front of a mirror, that showed the footage of thousands of conservative men marching in the streets of Tbilisi demanding strict immigration policies from the government as well as limitations on the rights of LGBTQ community in Georgia. This event took place in July 2017. Being a witness of this march myself, I recall it as one of the most terrifying of my life. The installation had a sound element of chants and prayers composed by me.



Figure 2. Installation shot of Men's March. Mirror, TV Display, Speakers.



Figure 3. Men's March (Video Still)

My recent work still deals with the same frustrations with patriarchal society as presented in “Men’s March”, but most of the ideas become abstracted and framed in more autobiographical context. I have started using personal narrative to address social norms in Georgia with my personal experience as a central motif. The female body, censorship and self-censorship remain main themes in my work. Creating the contrast between new media and archaic art practices is an aesthetic choice that I make to address the marginalization of the generations in Georgia: extreme right, that is conservative, patriarchal religious fundamentalism against radical liberal ideologies of millennials born in free Georgia.

The most recent series draw some elements from old traditions of frescoes. I create shapes from plaster that are painted on while still wet. Using tempera and raw pigments. I paint

on wet plaster and later wash it off to gradually create layers of depth. After the painting is done, I sand it off gently to create the same aesthetic that deteriorating frescoes have and that obscure parts of the image. These objects, while mounted on the wall look like they were displaced from another architectural space.

Red line keeps repeating in most pieces, always as one continuous gesture. It is usually in direct relationship with the figure as well as interacting with other abstract objects and architectural elements in the pictorial space. Painted red line creates an imaginary boundary, same as the thin red thread at the medieval ruins that warns you that there's no place here for you.



Figure 4. *I'll wait for you to sleep*. Video Still of a dancer-me performing while black rectangle covers one third of an image, revealing only shadows and reflections of the body. Video accompanied by electronic club music.

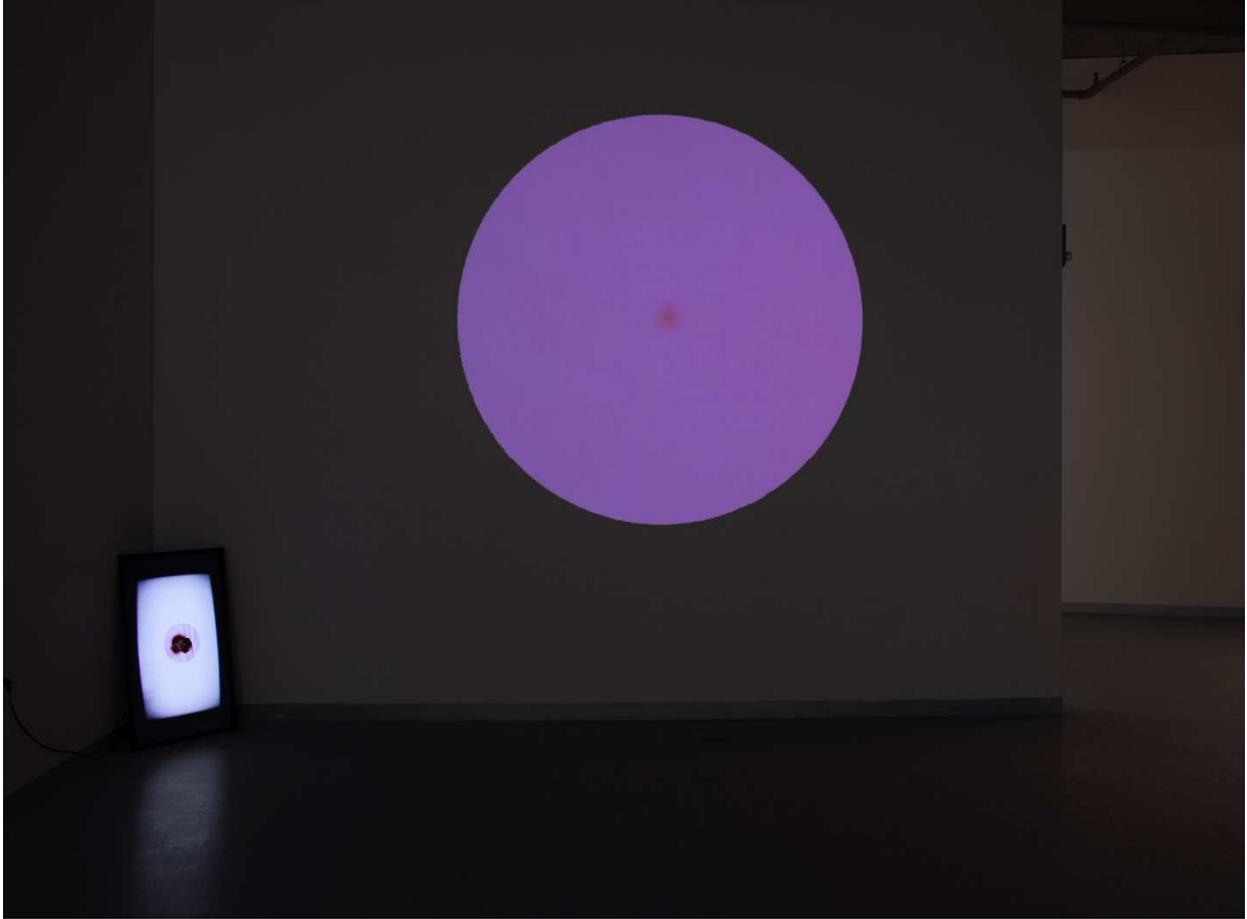


Figure 5. Fenced by the Red Thread MA Thesis show. Installation view.

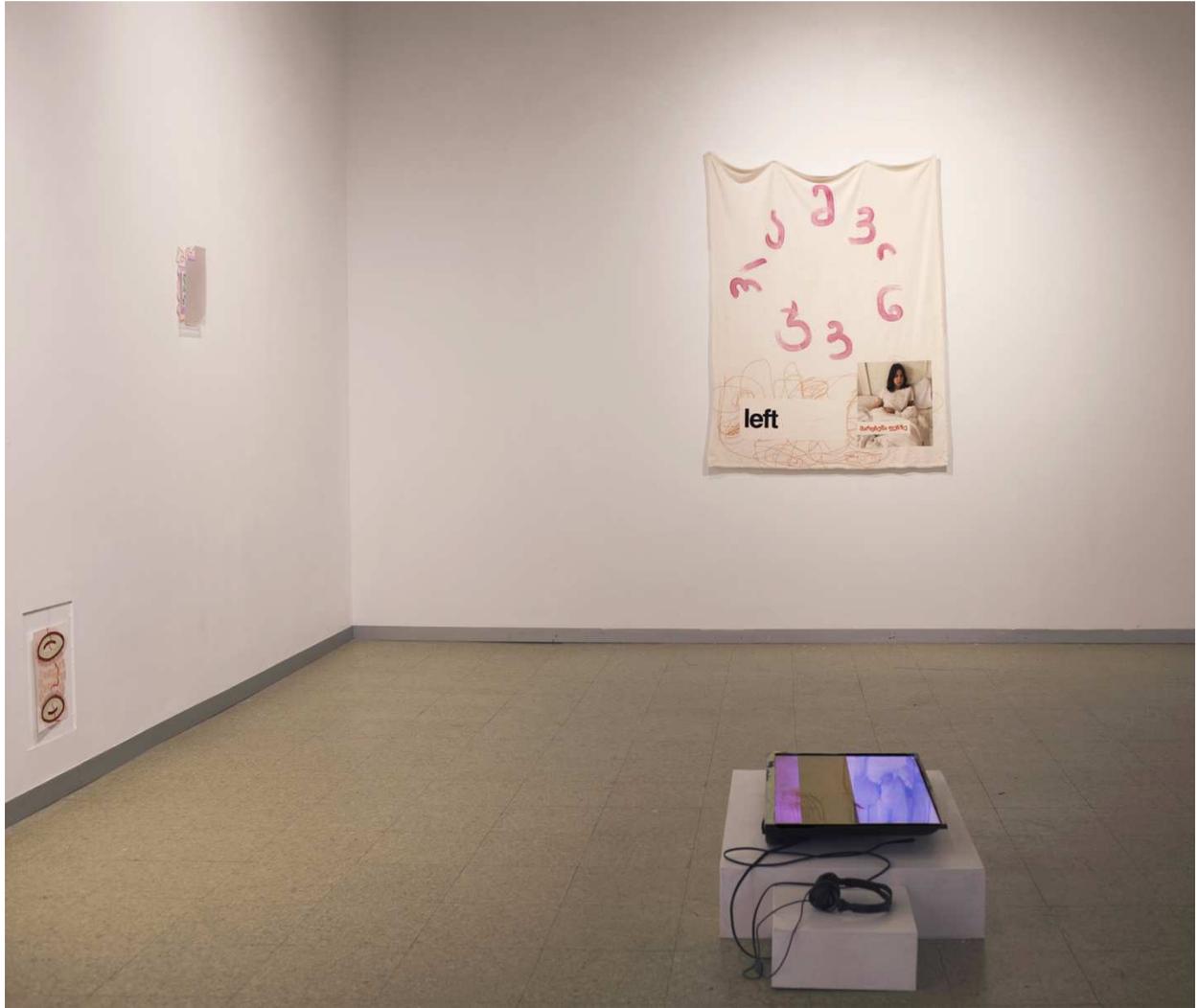


Figure 6. Fenced by the Red Thread MA Thesis show. Installation view II.



Figure 7. Untitled I. Pigmented plaster mounted on Styrofoam. Tempera, raw pigments



Figure 8. Untitled II. Pigmented plaster mounted on Styrofoam. Tempera, raw pigments.