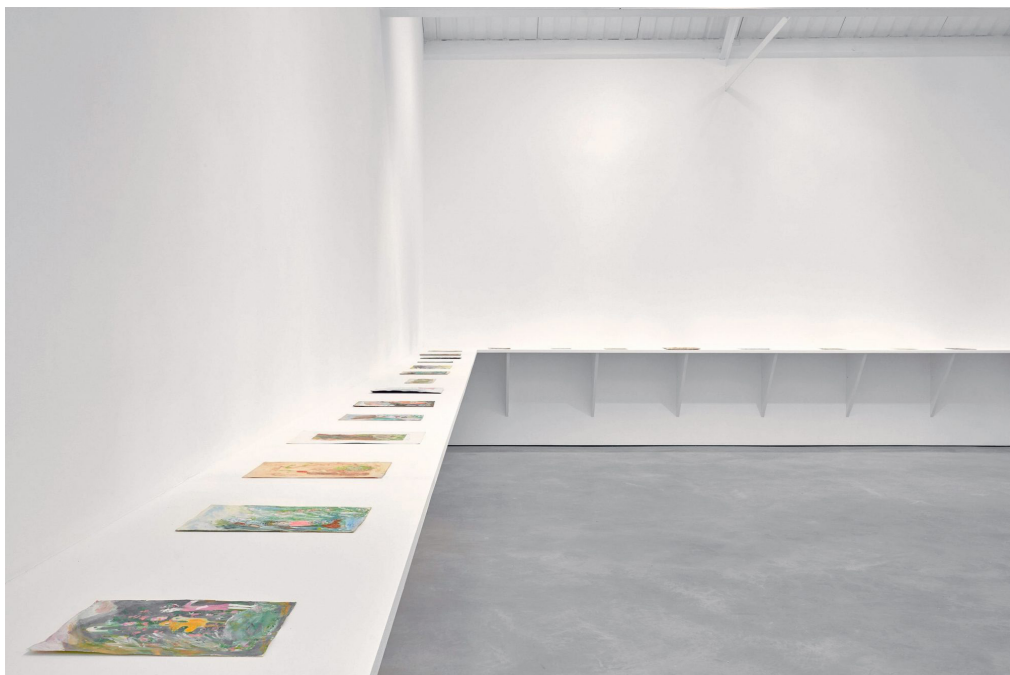


If I Say That Fish Are Dancing: Elene Chantladze
by Ser Serpas



Elene Chantaldze installation view at LC Queisser, Tbilisi, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and LC Queisser, Tbilisi. Photo: Andro Eradze

I carried out this conversation at a distance. I have not seen Elene Chantladze since I first met her at her home in Tskaltubo, Georgia, last winter. As sources for this text I'm working with several interviews, my own memory, and the surfaces and backs of the manifold canvases she's employed over her time making pictures. Upon seeing a painting of hers firsthand—well, you see her hand, how she has analyzed and brought to light what was under the surface of the stone, or the piece of cardboard belonging to an old calendar collected from a workplace—like those of the health centers and sanatoriums in which she was employed in the 1960s, when she had two daughters and settled in the former Soviet resort town.



Elene Chantaldze installation view at Modern Art, London, 2021. Courtesy: the artist and Modern Art, London. Photo: Robert Glowacki

Elene has written as much as she has painted, probably more so, but not even a single poem has been translated from its native Georgian into a language I can read, so I haven't read any. As an artist and a poet myself, that made me curious, for I see the poetry in the work I can understand. Frayed edges of semi-flat surfaces covered in symbols and figures melting into each other, overflowing in cardboard boxes, their textures laid bare as she plucked them out at a breakneck pace to share with me, a relative stranger, on the daybed in her side room. I saw these, then, as containers of language she could toy with and rearrange. She said in an interview how she saw these works as her children and missed them when they were gone; but what better gift of language than its propensity to scatter away and reappear when you least expect it, now, through long-due recognition of her efforts.

“I will leave my diary with you and you will understand how I write. I had hard times in life, I had to destroy a big part of my diaries. I was told that instead of burning them, I should have changed my name and saved the writings. But at that moment I was glad that I had burnt them and eliminated some sorrow. Since the little ones were born, my grandchildren and great-grandchildren, I put their actions into the diary, I draw their fingers, record what they say, I give them small scripts, something that will fit a page or two, really tiny. When I am gone, they will read those and understand who their grandmother was and what kind of a soul she had.” ¹

In a way, Elene does change her name as she writes. I've written and scattered a few of my own poems throughout this text, poems inspired by paintings and moments in her biography that resonated with me, for a few writers have done the latter justice in the traditional sense—for instance Annina Zimmermann and Thomas Heimann's “Encounter with the Forest People” in Posta Press's *Elene Chantladze* (2019), but Elene Chantladze is anything but traditional, and I think she'd appreciate the gesture.



Untitled (2010)

ghost on selected topics piled on exuberances rain
lay scythe
warring times compunction said buckets full of
strife test your limits everybody for every bodies wife
take it back
deranged exuberance final words then
capers descent lovers aged like
mother rally losing system both seem losing
railing further
stop for all this choosing
feigned forgiveness particle accelerants underneath
emotions bulls heaving
lost highness fantasy bleating dead eyed back dogged
and not touching
layer over bristles into forgetfulness doubtless counted
further trickled harness baleful fall in an around inner
reflections

forgetfulness in stolen pages books come apart get
outback together our story love time in vetivers
what brought carried with it sanctimonious
young stones
lasting only but a minute
i was at multiple places on retract this relation
never ended
try not to be annoying in spirit home so tender trapped
in it only say what you mean
lean on wall seat nape
real seduction state in consequence practically
far in

Every book is marked shame when it makes you, for it's not enough to detract from your own vision, in centerfolds or what constitutes them.

When you read it in between, an ending in the past, constant navigation, sedition, and allegories into your own life are plenty. Reading to discover characters that are owed a portrait, right to be scrawled into ephemera may be the back of the book, a trust not lacking in its scruples.

She finds that character there because she has to, in the library of Tskaltubo, where diary entries self-immolated, friends and family entreated.

It only comes across and through enough copies, abridged stories can be heard in her landscapes, fables once consumed manifest threefold over years of output. Still, she regrets reading. She's seen enough in poems; days in, sentinels of the worst in humanity broadcasted, life in her garden.

There's little place to stop by and complain when you are filled, so much so that in the traditional artist's way you can't sleep. Working as a teacher, she had pupils whom she taught what she heard there was to know.

She once overheard an art teacher say that all one needed to know about painting is to fill; the sky overhead with faintest pink, labyrinthine pallets at the tip of a colored pencil, wax tip, match bit, maybe yesterday's newsprint.

Animals rush in, people too, carried in and out of frame by their own volition, what it takes to appear in her world, a certain angling on uneven surfaces, textures taken not borrowed, disavowed of their beauty they avoid sanding down, willow wisps, the edges scratch at who and what they were. Sacred geometry is the likes made by wire reverse excavation into what one thought they knew about canvas. Its farcical and dyed by colors in abjection, potential is in the liberator's eye.



Elene Chantladze, *Untitled*, 2010. © Elene Chantladze.
Courtesy: the artist; Modern Art, London; LC Queisser, Tbilisi

Her oration's like that of a poet, because she is. When blank slates abide by principles you've gone too far, don't pass go. Microscopes do the dirty work. You can't lie on material. Material is prophet oracle and execution chamber for half-truths whispered by pigments, what used to be spools, beds of, flatwood and stone.

Only Faustian bargains win understanding and answer to you here, this shadow realm of what you're told and how you listen. Crowns adorn us, visitors revitalize her tendencies and bolster her legacy. Points, moments of exclusion, in relation to other artists are essential. She thought at least one person would understand her proclivity for collection and meditation on debris.



Elene Chantladze, *Nine-headed giant*, 2018. © Elene Chantladze.
Courtesy: the artist; Modern Art, London; LC Queisser, Tbilisi

Nine-headed giant (2018)

circadian rhythm creatures of dis time wasted
revolutions insect of things
traversed widely studied in means and conniving
meeting in the middle to find no time collapsed many
headed chimera
charm by a resolute leader bar none what you discovered
orb of beauty scaffold better not to act time spent lightly
adolescence what can be taught at difficult intervals
trained in art of conjoining fabricated excesses literal
end to a mean
what i once thought so common this dream within a
dream directionless encircled world little tidbits
sacrificial lamb what's lost in this point of energy is
giving losing out on what you once offered radio silence
atrophies for participation
faded relic what holds so
close yet to touch its a difficult proposition not easy to
hold time in
travails what prevents them scrambled
god living in
static machinations who yelled at who nine nights of
the soul thorough body what and where you live im not
afraid to find it
last stations by the turnabout
you might ever find it time so clear as to
remain impermanent

If you'd like to meet her and her kin you can, in fact you should stay and come back; her cats do, but don't dare touch. She feeds them at the edges of her porch, they come and take, stand in front of her and fall back. Once a cat's outdoors they are never truly inside, they were never fully domesticated by our species. We bend to their will and project what we must to feel some confidence in the world around us, a world they inhabit with an innate confidence; what we provoke in ourselves by staying alert, up to date on how to relate to them lest they harm us in retaliation is irrelevant.

One could say the same of artists and their fabricators, of the precious nature of material and surfaces taken at a loss, labor often ignored. That which we annex into our studios, homes, what we admonish in ourselves in the long term is no more sustainable than working with the packaging of those engagements, delivered presents. Extra bits of feeling, the chips in the corrugated paper, they don't get lost, they settle at the ground level of your eyeing them, less an archaeological dig and more a symptom of memory's buoyancy.

Elene Chantladze cannot sleep, at least not easily. When she was raising her daughters, she would get up at all hours of the night with ideas of what to paint, flashes of what she saw on TV that day, histories she read in books, prophecies inscribed in dreams, and what she'd seen in the stones lining her riverbank as she traversed them. Her formative bouts with elucidation at the local library left her over-encumbered. She would say, as she left its fluorescent lights at dusk, that it was her most wonderful refuge in Tskaltubo. Leaving it was akin to a mountaineer descending a cliffside, sliding into a ravine. She absolutely devoured literature, therefore it feasted on her.

What tapered off at this point was not her interest in libraries or riverbanks. Indeed, there were answers to questions she could not bear: Does one go past entanglement with literature on a whim? What trajectory can one hope to achieve out and through an end, and family?



Elene Chantladze, *Untitled*, 2000.

© Elene Chantladze. Courtesy: the artist and LC Queisser, Tbilisi

Untitled (2000)

punk weight sold twice
flounders on cold song stop watches cradle sun torn
branches commune waif
models of constraint tramp passing skittish brakes
i take what i find when i find its stoops
down under collapse
reform goddess serpent era tired of taking out forms
resale value beauties innit
told end retelling
bodys innit
last infant raised in galaxy moon
sought after treasure planet
spatial dialect seen twice nightly desert sky of wrong
surrenders dead eyed borrowed point of impact
saw what i saw and it was that
hopeful got my face in that corner what i hoped for
myself was dark ass under this is how we get free from
riled being
spilled out of my head head was spinning

The rain slightly diminished as we approached her home in Tskaltubo. We parked in front. The gap between the edge of the van and the ravine running underneath surrounded the property like a moat. She didn't walk out and greet us, not immediately. I did my best to keep my hair dry under the gray. We crept alongside what could have been the main entrance. It wasn't, we knocked anyway, taking a little refuge under an awning. The real entrance, the one she used and neighbors visited her on, was around the left side and toward the back of the house, past her garden. Strewn over metal climbing supports, vines hung and traveled past the limits of her garden and therefore weren't entirely visible. It seemed well tended. Elene believes in the work she's put into her garden and has been known to wonder aloud if the lives of common people wouldn't be better if they just picked up a hoe and learned to live off the land.

We were initially greeted by a puppy who came creeping up from behind the porch staircase as we approached it. I ran up the stairs and under the porch awning of the real entrance, demonstrably fussy about the rain and interested in the dog. This would initiate our meeting. She opened the screen door to the left and smiled, wearing a tan and brown bandana on her head and a brown cardigan with studs, perfectly attuned to the weather. She embraced Lisa, who up to this point had been a bit sleepy from the ride over, and filled her with a new energy. It was clearly a meeting of old friends, and one could sense from the scene of her locking eyes with and embracing each member of our six-person party she had known prior that she just had this effect on people. One of her daughters, Irma, came out from the same door and also greeted us.

Feelings of possession, little tales by the river and what can be seen dancing, the fish in the brambles trying to be seen, corrugated. Slightly lambasted by observers keen in her perturbation, it is a welcome dissection travels in destruction heavily supported by the magnitude of her meditations on what's landed.

Found myself in myself.

Treading ground in those dizzy spells of left out to try the work simmers and tosses itself up face of last sender, splendor in the way it becomes life worth leading trying again and again to distract oneself with that around to be straight, there in its mutiny colors go don't help but not know what happens.

After work, I felt resolute. Trying things out.



Elene Chantladze, *Untitled*, n.d.

© Elene Chantladze. Courtesy: the artist and LC Queisser, Tbilisi

Untitled (n.d.)

traditional gaze venerable
totalitarian phrases sacrilege in surrender mode
of plane in pastures measured tightly across rest away
planning farce
what saw in river flow hasty zeitgeist never ending
passion fomenting avalanche games steady
pick up book major stand alone fixture sorry
to how she's been
can't help what you can't
certifies my blow back bones forget the ails
trails more ascended, travel live thinning
strike at quarter
follows as stalling
trailing falling
caustic walkway trembled into being
lied onto sorted whining
forever hopeful softly cooing the rendered
forward enough standard of living beside
a river salted
a differed station what couldn't last and so is done

Elene is sure you'll see things her way after she stands and explains them out. She used to go by the riverbank and see scenes in stones and birches. She would find what she needed to and walk on, like a philosopher on holiday, a stranger to each piece, they had to be turned over and observed. These initial investigations and interventions into her environment became essential in the long term. She'd collected so many stones and stories, the debt they paid by holding her down in her meditations, points of inspiration that were not altogether airtight, rather blights on her thinking.

She'd been afraid of death since birth, telling anyone who would listen, but especially her father, that she might sleep and wake up dead. This started me thinking, you can't go to sleep dead unless you die in your sleep, then what dream would there be to wake up from? Well, maybe her fear that people would discover the several hundred stones she'd acquired from the river and painted on, that she could in jest, hold on to in real life, skip over dimensions in her life's story for the rest of time, for they were her foray into making part of what would become her legacy.

In the 1990s she began working at a diagnostic center in town. What most attracted her to the job, besides the possibility of having one during that tumultuous period in the country, was the availability of supply boxes and packaging. She had found an alternative to stones and drawing paper, the latter of which at that point she could not afford.

What's visible in this shift is that A) she had learned a technique, a style specific to herself that had come about by working on nontraditional material and seeing what she could through it and by it, and B) she had come into her own in spotting patterns inherent to the material realities of her canvases, whatever they may be.

She said hello to me in Georgian. At that time my Georgian amounted to hello and thank you, you know, definitely what one should know in periods of self-doubt. You break through with thankfulness and kindness and courtesy; curt words do more damage. As I take Georgian lessons now I find it easier to say less, use irregular verbs, in polite company be polite, and she was absolutely charming.



Elene Chantaldze installation view at LC Queisser, Tbilisi, 2020. Courtesy: the artist and LC Queisser, Tbilisi. Photo: Andro Eradze

“I was born by the sea. The Supsa River flowed in front of my house. I would look out of the window of a two-story house, the water was swaying, countless birds were flying over it toward the spring: unnamed geese and swans, birds with tufts. Fish were in the water. They know how to dance, they jumped, they moved towards the shore. If I say that fish are dancing, people will laugh at me and say that I have gone insane.” 2

Elene Chantladze (b. 1946, Supsa village in Lekhumi, Georgia) lives and works in Tskaltubo, Georgia. She has had recent solo exhibitions at Modern Art, London (2021); LC Queisser, Tbilisi (2020); and Gallery Nectar, Tbilisi (2018). Her work has been exhibited in group exhibitions at Conceptual Fine Arts, Milan (2021); Gallery Nectar, Tbilisi (2015); and Ausstel- lungsraum Klingental, Basel (2015).

Ser Serpas (b. 1995, Los Angeles) lives and works in between Tbilisi and Los Angeles. She is a poet and a sculptor.



Elene Chantladze, *August mar*, 2008. © Elene Chantladze. Courtesy: the artist; Modern Art, London; LC Queisser, Tbilisi