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Being in Cosmos: Sergei Dykov's Visual Exploration of the Spirit of Altai

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Abstract: This article focuses on how shamanism and animism, two important features of Altaic ontology, can be expressed in art. This is discussed by exploring the art of Sergei Dykov, a contemporary Altaic (south Siberian) visual artist, whose art is part of a wider trend in modern Siberian art of rediscovering the conceptual potentials of indigenous Siberian values. Dykov is one of those artists whose fascination with Siberian culture is not limited to formal inspirations but who also seeks how to express these indigenous values in contemporary art forms. Drawing on Altaic folklore, its myths and beliefs, including shamanism, as well as ancient Siberian art forms, Dykov searches for a new visual language capable of expressing the Altaic perception of the world. For him, therefore, painting is significantly an intellectual project involving an attempt to understand the indigenous ontology of being in the world. The key concepts around which his art revolves are thus human-animal transformations, human and non-human beings' relations, and the interconnectedness of the visible and nonvisible. The study was based on an analysis of a sample of his unpublished artworks.

Keywords: Altai/Siberia; contemporary art; heritage; shamanism/animism; Sergei Dykov

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1. Introduction

The past and tradition are important aspects that shape modern perceptions of Siberia, and they are also significant in ongoing cultural processes. One of these processes concerns contemporary art in Siberia which, over the last two to three decades, has found new sources of inspiration in Siberia's past and the indigenous culture of the region. The religious legacy of indigenous Siberian peoples, with prehistoric and historic material culture being part of this heritage, has become one of the major inspirations for some of the artists in the region (Kichigina 2007; Nevolko 2011; Korobeinikova 2012; Chirkov 2013; Shishin 2015; Churilov 2017; Rozwadowski and Boniec forthcoming). It has manifested particularly strongly in southern Siberia, where this artistic journey, following the cues of the past and tradition, has also inspired exhibition projects, which additionally united artists who shared a common passion for the spiritual legacy of Siberia. The first of these was a series of exhibitions entitled "Trace", initiated in 2000. In the following years new projects appeared: "Perpetumm Mobile" (2010), "Chronotop" (2011), and "Siberian Neoarchaic" (2013–2014) (Chirkov and Galygina 2011; Chuiko 2006; Galygina 2010, 2011, 2012, 2015).

Interestingly, artists exploring Siberia's past and traditions are of indigenous as well as non-indigenous Siberian ancestry, the latter being most often of Russian–Slavic origins. This artistic trend of exploring native Siberian culture has not, therefore, been a burst of indigenous identity, as was the case, for example, in Canada in the second half of the 20th century, where the past and tradition became the subjects of art drawn upon exclusively by First Nations artists (Sinclair and Pollock 1979; McLuhan and Hill 1984; Southcott 1985). Furthermore, the very term "indigenous" has more than one meaning in Siberia. In addition to its most common use to describe individuals "whose familial ancestors have always, as far as is known, inhabited the specific places that their present-day descendants still

live in" (Benjamin 2016, p. 363), the Siberian term of "Sibiriak" is also sometimes used in the sense of "indigenous" in reference to people descended from historical newcomers, but already born in Siberia. It is worth emphasizing that almost all the "non-indigenous" artists associated with the Neoarchaic art trend are Sibiriaks, i.e., persons born in Siberia, who grew up here, and who, thus, feel and have the right to feel a strong connection with Siberia, which is also considered by them to be their homeland. The distinction between indigenous and non-indigenous does not, therefore, fully reflect the complexity of contemporary Siberian society.

Consequently, although the term "Siberian Neoarchaic" was coined in academic art discourse and the first aforementioned exhibitions were dominated by "non-indigenous Sibiriaks", the movement has never been exclusive or positioned itself in opposition to indigenous artists (although the indigenous artistic perspective of this art has yet to be studied). Rather, the explanation was the search for new artistic inspiration, and as found in my conversations with people engaged in this phenomenon as well as the description of this movement presented by Chirkov (2013) (see also Chirkov in the documentary *Sibirskaia Neoarchaika* (*Siberian Neoarchaic*) 2012), it is the importance of the desire to produce their own art, situated here within Siberia—an art that is a testimony to Siberianness, which at the same time would be an alternative to art created in the European part of Russia. Interestingly, in the last decade of the 20th century, there were also indigenous artists who produced works drawing on the past and Siberian indigenous culture, though they were not connected to the "official" Neoarchaic mainstream. Such artists were, for example, Alexandr Domozhakov and Alexei Ulturgashev in Khakassia (Rozwadowski and Boniec forthcoming). Thus, inspiration from the past and indigenous Siberianness neither had a single source nor did they concern a single artistic milieu. An important factor was definitively the general atmosphere of the ideological thaw in Russia at the end of the 20th century and the eventual dissolution of the USSR, which became the impetus for returning to local history and native culture in various spheres of social and religious life (Zhukovskaia 2001; Halemba 2003; Lindquist 2005; Pegg and Ugdezhekov 2005).

The phenomenon of art seeking inspiration in the local Siberian tradition to some extent noticeably mirrors the colonial history of the region, i.e., the fact that professional art was introduced to Siberia along with incoming culture and was first associated with Russian artists. This is, of course, a widespread phenomenon characterizing art in other parts of the world with colonial histories such as briefly noted above in Canada. The problem is, consequently, complex and dynamic and will doubtlessly be the subject of further studies. For the time being, however, a clear division between indigenous and other arts does not seem to be acknowledged in Siberia; for example, exhibitions promoting contemporary art (e.g., the series of exhibitions "Siberia" or "Form" held in Novokuznetsk in Kemerovo Oblast–Suslov and Chepis 2019) have been jointly attended by artists from different ethnic backgrounds.

How all of these different artists draw on Siberia's past and tradition, including beliefs, ethnographic and prehistoric art forms, and ritual practices is a topic that would exceed the capacity of one article. Each artist has developed his/her own de facto way in which they have engaged with prehistoric and indigenous Siberia (Galygina 2010, 2011, 2012, 2015; Chuiko 2006). Without going into detail, at a certain level of generality, it can be said that some artists focus on universal (pan-Siberian) themes, like mythologemes and archetypes, which have been particularly popular in Russian scholarly discussions (e.g., Al'bedil' and Savinov 2016); others approach this spiritual legacy based on local traditions and usually the place where they live. In practice, these two perspectives often intertwine, as the Siberian heritage involves many features which cross temporal, spatial, and ethnic boundaries with shamanism being one of the most important and consistent of these traits. It should be emphasized here that a Siberian understanding of shamanism often differs from its use in Western society. In Siberia, including Altai, it is perceived rather as an indigenous religion, a legacy of ancestors (Halemba 2003; Rozwadowski 2012, pp. 455–57; Połeć 2013).

In this article, I present local explorations of Siberian spirituality, namely, that of Altai. Altai itself is a mysterious and powerful place that attracted the attention of numerous artists throughout the 20th century (Vinitskaia 2012, 2017; Vinogradova 2015). An undisputed pioneer in depicting this spiritual dimension of Altai was Choros-Gurkin (Grigory Ivanovich Gurkin, 1870–1937), the first professional Altaian painter, who was not only an artist but also an ethnographer of Altaian culture (Erkinova 2008; Goncharik 2011). Formally, his pictures followed the canon of realistic landscape painting, which was a dominant trend in Siberian art throughout the first half of 20th century. Underlying this, however, was the spiritual nature of Altai (see e.g., *The Night of the Sacrifice–Shamanic Séance*, 1897; the famous *Khan Altai*, 1907; or *The Lake of the Mountain Spirits*, 1909). Explorations of the spiritual dimension of Altai in Siberian art has, then, a long history. In this paper, I focus on its most recent stage through the prism of the art of Sergei Dykov, the artists from Gorno-Altaisk, where he was born in 1957 and where lives and works, who in Chirokov's words is "fully indigenous Sibiriak" (Chirkov in the documentary *Siberian Neoarchaic* 2012). From the point of view of the content of his art, Dykov follows Gurkin's path, but from a formal viewpoint, his art differs considerably. The originality of form that Dykov developed[1] to expresses the spirit of Altai was decisive for his art being being "attached" to most of the exhibitions promoting the Neoarchaic art trend include the "Perpetuum Mobile" (2010, Novokuznetsk), "Chronotop" (2011, Kemerovo, Karsnoyarsk, Irkutsk), and "Siberian Neoarchaic" (2012, Novokuznetsk). His visual language, indeed, is distinctive and is what makes Dykov's art so original: the way he links the form with the content. How Dykov draws upon prehistoric and ethnographic sources as well as how he tries to capture the indigenous ontology of Altai, including animist and shamanist thinking, in his work are, thus, the focus of this paper. I present a formal and semantic analysis of his art, exploring how the motifs and themes resonate with specific mythological themes within the broader frame of Altaic ontology. This visual analysis is supported by interview data conducted in Gorno-Altaisk in August 2019, when the artist and I discussed some aspects of several of the artworks examined in this article. Before moving on to Dykov's artworks themselves, I first outline the Altai heritage, which is the main source of his artistic inspiration.

2. The Altai Heritage and Its Spiritual Essence

The ethnographic and archaeological heritage of Altai is a significant inspiration for Dykov. In terms of the former, for the artist mythology, epics, cosmology, ritual, and material culture are recognized as being interwoven by a shamanic thread. The historic presence of Buddhism has also been cited as an influence by Vinogradova (2015), who points to the stylistic and color similarities between Dykov's art and Lamaist ritual masks.[2] In terms of prehistoric sources, the main source of Dykov's inspiration is ancient art, which is particularly rich in Altai. This includes impressive complexes of rock art, mostly in the form of petroglyphs, the oldest examples of which may date to the Upper Paleolithic, while the youngest relate to historical times (Devlet and Devlet 2005; Kubarev 2011; Devlet and Jang 2014; Jacobson-Tepfer 2015, 2019; Rozwadowski 2018; Molodin et al. 2019). Other spectacular archaeological features of the Altai landscape, which Dykov draws upon as well, are stone stelae, or just standing stones, scattered across the vast territory of the steppe, from the Scythian deer stones (Lymer et al. 2015), dated primarily to the late Bronze and early Iron Ages and connected with the "civilization" of early nomads (probably Iranian speaking), to the *balabals*-human shaped stones (Kubarev and Kubarev 2013), the latter already associated with the tradition of the Turkic peoples, who dominated the Altai region from around the first centuries AD and have remained its main ethnic component to this day. Other ancient Altai art include burial paintings (Bronze Age Karakol tombs); wood, gold, or bone sculptures; tattooed imagery which flourished in the times of the early nomads in the 1st millennium BCE (Iron Age) (Pankova 2017).

Altai heritage is thus a fusion of different ethnic, economic, and religious traditions. When in the 19th and 20th centuries it began to be documented by ethnographers, an important conclusion emerged from their research: for all its diversity, the Altai appears to

its inhabitants as the Khan-Altai (cf. Choros-Gurkin's painting), i.e., "Great Altai"/"King Altai", that is, one great and sacred organism in which every mountain, river, lake, spring, tree, or plant is its living part, each of which has its spiritual host, and where a human is only one of many beings inhabiting this entity. Khan-Altai elides ontological boundaries between human and animal worlds, is where physical and spiritual realms are in constant interaction, and where the physical landscape cannot be separated from its spiritual agency. Being in such a world, hence, means being in constant interaction with the spirits, in Altai commonly known as eezi, hence, the region's indigenous name: *Altaidyn eezi*[3] (Potanin 1883, pp. 123–30; Anokhin 1924; Potapov 1991; Sagalaev 1992; Halemba 2006; Dyrenkova 2012[4], pp. 131–88; Smyrski 2018). Since the will of the spirits cannot be fully understood or predicted, the important role of the intermediary "thread" between the visible and invisible worlds is the shaman, in Altai known as *kam*.

Of course, ethnological conclusions about historically documented indigenous worldviews cannot be simply translated into the deep archaeological past. What is possible, however, is to look through the archaeological data to find some clues that might substantiate an interpretation about similar perspectives in ancient times. One of these clues can be seen in the anthropo–zoomorphic transformations present in different art forms dating to the Bronze Age (ca. 2nd millennium BC) (Rozwadowski 2015, 2017), one of the most spectacular examples of which are hybrid images painted and engraved on grave slabs of the Karakol burials (Kubarev 1988, 2009). No less important observations can be made in relation to early nomadic culture of the Iron Age (ca. 1st millennium BC) in which other signs of human–animal relations can be noticed. This applies to the funeral context associated with Early Nomads' barrows, where buried individuals were accompanied by horses, as in Pazyryk (Rudenko 1970), for example, which may testify not only to the particular social status of the buried humans, but also to the special status to the animals themselves (Argent 2010). Horses' "decorations", involving embellishing them with images of other animals, the most spectacular examples of which are deer masks put on the horse's head, point to their species ambiguity, their transmogrification, passing from one being into another or simultaneously being in two forms. This idea is furthermore complemented by the tattoos embellishing the bodies of the individuals buried in these barrows, whose main motifs are also animals, again often deer, which for those early nomadic societies possibly stood for a kind of an animal *de passage* (Lewis-Williams 1981, pp. 72–73), bounding humans with other-than-human beings. Importantly, deer were also engraved upon the aforementioned Saka-Scythian stone stelae (Jacobson-Tepfer 2015, pp. 231–33), which as their form suggests, were arguably materialized models of persons. It is important to reiterate that this animal–human interdependence is at the crux of animist beliefs and shamanic practices, which are well documented ethnographically.

The finer details of scientific investigations may not often engage contemporary artists. From their perspective, the past is, rather, a holistic category in which archaeological "signs of the past" are symbolic markers of the place where a given vision of the world is manifested today. For Siberian artists, prehistoric art offers a visual affirmation of the assumed continuance of an animist perception of the world from earliest times to the present, and this can also be seen in Dykov's art.

3. Picturing the Altai Cosmos

How to graphically express a holistic idea of Altai, the *Altaidyn eezi*, is, as Dykov pointed out in my interview with the artists, the main thrust of his art practice. He stresses that the problem which bothers him particularly and which he tries to solve in his art is the question of "space" (Russian *пространство*). He did not develop this in the interview, but the very term "space" in Russian does not refer solely to physical surroundings. It is also used (particularly in anthropological studies, e.g., Nanzatov et al. 2008) to express space which is sentient, that is not only seen but also felt and experienced. During our conversation it then became clear to me that Dykov's understanding of the "space" was precisely this sentient one, i.e., the *space* that consists of both visible and invisible entities,

including spirits, energies, and powers that determine not only the physical appearance of the space but also its functioning (Humprey 1995; Smyrski 2018).

As the artist himself proposes, his art began to gain legitimacy only when he understood this animistic nature of Altai, that its whole, its *Altaidyn eezi*, possesses agency, that the air, rocks, and water are themselves agentive persons, invisible to most outsiders but obvious to native inhabitants of the land (Beriazev 2012; Smyrski 2018). Although Dykov did not use the terms "agency" or "agentive persons", this is actually what can be seen in his works: that Khan-Altai is breathing (see *Lady of the Lake* (Figure 1) and *Almys Women* (Figure 6)), watching (his eyes emerge from various points in space, for example, in the work *Star Settlement* (Figure 2) and *Almys Women* (Figure 6)), hearing (human, animal, and plant "voices"), and has its own bloodstream consisting of underground water veins and streams (*Entrance to the Lower World* (see Figure 5)) (these agentive features of Khan Altai are listed by anthropologist Smyrski (2018, p. 251) in his study of Altai ontology). In the following Section, I explore how Dykov portrays this animate spirit of Altai in four of his paintings. My discussion is partly informed by my interview with the artist in which we discussed certain paintings but not all of them and not in full detail. Only some aspects of the paintings were then informed by the artist himself, and to make it clear, I mark such situations in the exegeses of given works by "(SD)". I focus upon these four works, in order to demonstrate how Dykov expresses the Altai cosmovision with its middle, upper, and lower worlds, complemented by the ambiguity of the beings inhabiting the Altai.

3.1. Lady of the Lake—*Water*

The lake is a multifaceted cosmological symbol. On the one hand, it denotes the structure of the world because as an element situated between the upper and lower worlds, it stands for their symbolic link. On the other hand, it evokes the essence of the shaman's practice, as it is the shaman who has the knowledge and skills allowing him to move between these realms. These ideas are encapsulated in the painting entitled *Lady of the Lake* (Figure 1), with Dykov's typically bold use of color and affective figurative and symbolic elements which draw upon Altaic themes. The lake itself is expressed by the dominating blue pigment of the background. The Lady of the Lake is one of the *eezi*, and as a liminal being, she unites human and animal nature. Her double nature is revealed by her yellow face, which is repeated in the form of the tail of a black fish. The latter also stands for new life as white dots on her red underbelly signify roe (SD). The Lady also embodies the importance of shamanic helping spirits in the form of fish, oft-mentioned spirit-helpers of Altaic shamans, who used to use them in their mystical journeys to other worlds (Funk 2020), which were also represented on shamans' drums (Dyrenkova 2012, pp. 135, 305).

In her dual nature, the Lady also embodies the human world. In the background one can see a green land, a forest, and on the horizon of this land, dwellings. The smoke coming from the central and the biggest yellow yurt is shown against a blue background, which from a human point of view seems to be the sky, while from a cosmic perspective it is also the water of the lake. Once again, the two worlds merge into one. An analogous idea can be seen in the cap of the Lady which takes the form of a two-headed bird and upon which a tree is depicted. This cap resembles the caps that adorned noble persons, often women, buried in the barrows of early nomads dating to the Iron Age, which were often decorated with zoomorphic motifs (Polos'mak 2001). An association can also be found in the two-headed handles of shamanic drums, on both sides crowned with the heads—one of the shaman's ancestor, the second of the shaman (Dyrenkova 2012, p. 292; Potapov 1991, 1997) or widespread in Siberian beliefs in the double nature of non-human beings (Sovetova and Shishina 2019, pp. 191–94). The hand and arm, depicted as a curve to the lower left of the painting, softening the square of the frame, are like a wave, imitating not only the flow of water but also the form of Altaic ornaments. Significantly, the arm appears to extend both from the "body" of the Lady and that of Taian Khan (SD), the

mythical lord of the seas, wearing his red cap. The picture, therefore, encapsulates not only the Lady of the Lake but also the cosmic ocean of Taian Khan.

Figure 1. Sergei Dykov, *Lady of the Lake*, 2017, 43 × 61 cm, painting on paper. Photo: Andrzej Rozwadowski.

3.2. Star Settlement—*Sky*

The leitmotiv of the painting entitled *Star Settlement* (Figure 2) is the celestial, upper world and its interface with the middle world. The stars inhabiting it (SD) are analogous to earthly beings because, like humans, they are shown living in yurts (SD). The yurt in the tradition of the Turkic–Mongolian peoples is another powerful cosmological symbol. Far beyond being merely a dwelling-place and domestic space, it serves as a model of the cosmos (Wasilewski 1976). Being at home thus replicates the idea of being in the cosmos, a concept that can also be found in shamanic ritualism. When performing a ritual inside the yurt, the shaman used to enter the upper world through a smoke hole in the vault of the yurt. It is no coincidence therefore that the smoke billowing from one of the yurts in the painting is crowned with a spiral on which stands a man surrounded by animals, most possibly representing a shaman's journey to the celestial world accompanied by his auxiliary spirits.

The idea of mutual interdependence of the different spheres of the cosmos can also be seen in the way the yurts are depicted. Although Dykov did not explain these details, each of them seems to have its subterranean counterpart, as if they were rooted in the black abyss of the lower world. Just as on both sides of the door of the yurt schematic trees are depicted, analogously green lines appear under the yurts suggesting they have roots in another world. Cosmological symbolism can also be found in the oval form shown in the center of the painting. Reflecting upon Dykov's fascination with prehistoric art, which he often draws on but never coping with those ancient art forms (SD), it may be suggested that this image in fact is his interpretation of certain ancient art forms, in particular, stone oval sculptures known from the Minusinsk Basin, dated to the Bronze Age (Esin 2010, p. 94), often described in the archaeological literature as models of a cosmic egg. This prehistoric egg-shaped sculpture is very unique and, thus, famous in artistic circles; it inspired such Siberian artists as Alxeandr V. Domozhakov (*Timless Egg*, 1989) or Alexandr I. Kotozhenov (*Forgotten God*, 1989). The possibility that Dykov has also drawn on this

prehistoric art form cannot then be ruled out. A tree topped with a bird, incorporated into this oval shape, additionally completes the cosmological–cosmogonic interpretation of this "egg" as such bird-topped poles are well-known elements of shamanic rituals (Grusman and Konovalov 2006, pp. 39, 43; Dyrenkova 2012, p. 308).

Figure 2. Sergei Dykov, *Star Settlement*, 2017, 43 × 61 cm, painting on paper. Photo: Andrzej Rozwadowski.

From this central "egg" protrude three wooden hitchracks. These are used to fasten horses (Figure 3), but in Altaic culture they encapsulate a broad range of cosmological meaning, extending from family lineage to the axis mundi. In Altaic legends, stars are identified with celestial horses and the hitchrack itself with the Polar Star, to which these horses are tied. The horses ascend to the sky and turn into stars (Dyrenkova 2012, p. 206).

Each of the hitchracks in the painting are topped with three white dots, anthropomorphically suggestive of two eyes and a mouth. An archaeological inspiration for these can be found in a number of stone stelae, such as the one from Adyr-kan in the central Altai, located close to the main route through the Altai (named Chuiskii Trakt) leading to its southern borders with Mongolia (Figure 4). The stela is well known to local people, having been reproduced in various accessible publications. Another inspiration might have been the spectacular anthropomorphized Okunevo stelae from Khakassia (dated to the 2nd millennium BC, Esin 2010) or sculptures of spirits made from a piece of tree branch in which only the face has been marked (Grusman and Konovalov 2006). The central elements of the composition are surrounded by stars shining against the background of the night sky and four mountains watching the world through their eyes (SD). As such, the painting offers a clear example of how Dykov's work expresses indigenous Altaic ontology, drawing upon ethnographic and archaeological traditions.

Figure 3. Horses fastened to a wooden hitchrack, central Altai. Photo: Andrzej Rozwadowski.

Figure 4. Prehistoric stone tone stele in Adyr-kan, central Altai. Photo: Andrzej Rozwadowski.

3.3. Entrance to the Lower World—*Transgressing the Worlds*

The painting entitled *Entrance to the Lower World* presents a cosmovision centered around the theme of transition to the lower world (Figure 5). This painting was not a subject of my discussion with Dykov, so the following interpretation is based on my own

reading of this work through ethnographic data on Altai cosmology. The sinuous blue line running across the lower part of the composition is my initial clue for reading the painting. Based on ethnographic data, this line can be interpreted as a river, recognized in Altaic ontology as a living being and a potent symbol of a path to another world. Crossing a river in Altaic perspective conceptually is parallel to passing from one world to another (Tadina 2011, p. 150). The blue line in the picture can be then read as a boundary between the lower and upper worlds, as well as between the visible and invisible, or more accurately, a connective link between these realities. This is reinforced by the anthropomorphic figure on the extreme right of the composition. This blue line is its integral part, forming attenuated "arms", suggesting that the figure simultaneously traverses both the upper and lower worlds. Furthermore, accepting that rivers in Altaic ontology are animated entities, the river in the picture offers a line of life/death through the anthropomorph. Three white wavy lines penetrate the torso of the anthropomorph, which are analogous to the lines emanating from the hands of a shaman-like figure shown in the bottom left corner of the painting.

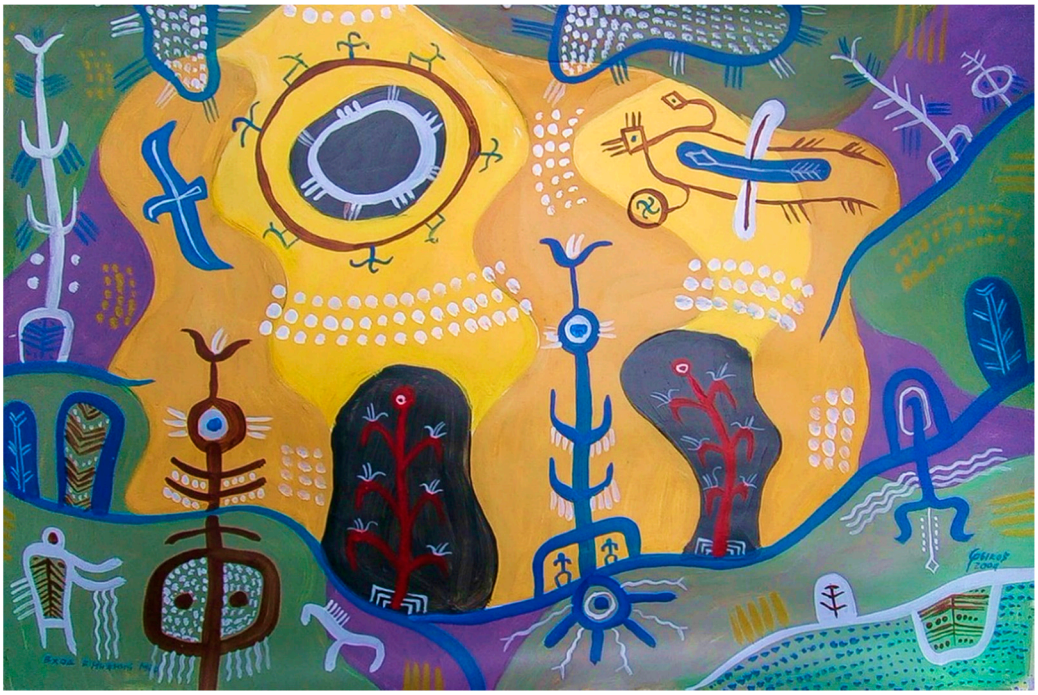

Figure 5. Sergei Dykov, *Entrance to the Lower World*, 2004, acrylics on paper. Courtesy S. Dykov.

The identity of this figure as a shaman is supported by several features. First, the herringbone motif infilling the torso of the figure, which resembles a tree but also the common shamanic ribs motif, and its association with shamanic initiation ceremonies involving dismemberment. Various ethnographies record how spirits would strip the flesh from a candidate in order to verify, based only on the skeleton of the initiated, whether the candidate has a special bone believed to be a sign of shamanic calling (Dyrenkova 1930). The so-called X-ray style, which is believed to be visualization of this theme in Siberian art, is found on a variety of objects used by shamans in their rituals, including the breastplate of the shaman's coat. It also features in rock art images (Devlet 2000). In *Entrance to the Lower World*, the shaman directs his hands towards an enigmatic vertical object, probably manifesting a cosmic tree, topped by a bird, comparable to those depicted in the aforementioned painting, *Star Settlement* (Figure 2). In Altaic tradition, a tree is a link to other worlds. The dead were often buried beneath trees, and trees were planted on graves. The remains of the deceased deposited at the base of the tree were thus united with the tree through its roots, and the crown of the tree blossoming above ground was a symbol of offspring (Sagalaev and Oktiab'rskaia 1990, pp. 43–62). Taking into account then that a tree is a link

between worlds, seeing the tree in the painting in analogous way seems reasonable; its upper part can be read as located in the human world, while its roots are set in the lower world. The shamanic focus of the painting is further strengthened by the image of a white horse pictured to the right of the tree, opposite and facing the shaman. Horse sacrifice, involving the horse being fastened to a tree, was a significant component of shamanic ritualism in the Altai (Anokhin 1924; Potapov 1991; Dyrenkova 2012). Interestingly, a further relationship is made between the horse and the shaman, in the form of the erect white mane which is analogous to the lines emanating from the back of the shaman's body.

Against the yellow and tan background at the center of the composition, another shaman is depicted, this time flying. He is holding a drum and a drumstick, and no less important an attribute is an arrow painted against the blue schematic bird inscribed onto his body. In Altaic shamanism, the arrow is anthropomorphized, a frequent motif painted on shamanic drums, and is also a weapon with which the shaman fights the unfriendly spirits he encounters during his voyages (Dyrenkova 2012, pp. 261–76). As ethnographic records testify, some Altaic shamans performed their rituals exclusively with a bow and arrow (Potapov 1934). Thus, some scholars suppose the bow and arrow is a more ancient attribute than the drum (Devlet 2001; Rozwadowski 2017). The drum and the bow are also metaphorically interchangeable. When the shaman fought evil spirits and used a drum to do so, he might refer to the drum as a bow from which he shot the arrows. The drum was, then, a metonymy of the bow (Frolova and Yamada 2013, p. 67).

The "armed" shaman in the painting is heading towards a series of circular forms composed of a white ring with protrusions upon a grey center, surrounded by a brown ring with birds and other animals circumventing its edge. Most likely it is the eponymous entrance to the lower world, which in Siberian beliefs can be located in different places in the landscape, e.g., in a cave or a mountain; it could also be a "simple" opening in earth (Rozwadowski 2017, pp. 68–81; 2019). The focus of the painting, then, relates to a shamanic journey across the spheres of cosmos. The individual images of humans depicted in this painting may therefore be personifications of one and the same person at different stages of his/her shamanic experience. The painting thus seems to encode not only the idea of the cosmos and the passage to its lower sphere but also the temporality of shamanic experience.

3.4. Almys Woman—The Fluidity of Being

The final painting by Dykov that I discuss, *Almys Woman* (Figure 6), develops the themes of Altaic animic ontology and shamanic practice which address the significance of human–spirit relations. More specifically, this painting concerns indigenous multinaturalist ontology, according to which humans and other beings share personhood (culture) but differ in their outward appearance or physical manifestations (nature). For Altaians, being-in-Altai involves being in constant interaction not only with invisible spirits but also with spirit beings that may appear to people in the form of a human, animal, or object. Human people, then, cannot be sure in these interactions if they are engaging with the thing which they see or spirits cloaked in another form. One of these such beings are *almyses*, which are found in the beliefs of all the Turkic peoples of the Altai (Doronin 2016b), but the genesis of this being may be more ancient, before Turkic times in Eurasia (Sherstova 2015). The *almys* is a demonic creature inhabiting the underworld, who from time to time, however, permeates into the human world and remains there for a while, adopting a human, animal, or material form. *Almys* sometimes appear semi-transparent, revealing their non-human personhood, for example, if in a female form perhaps only the breasts may be transparent.

Among the most frequently mentioned material guises of the *almys* is that of a beautiful young woman (Doronin 2016a; Iadanova 2009; Sherstova 2015), and it is to this embodiment of the *almys* that Dykov refers to in *Almys Woman*. The woman in the painting is another example of a liminal entity, so characteristic of Dykov's artworks. Only small details reveal her non-human nature. These are her fangs, which she cannot fit in her mouth, and her iron or copper claws, which she tries to hide in the long sleeves of her dress (as

legends say–Iadanova 2009). Similar to the Lady of the Lake (see Figure 1), she is enclosed in a lake, and the waters and mountains surrounding her emphasize her immanence in the natural world of which she is a part. The animated and breathing mountains (SD) surrounding her develop into fully anthropomorphic forms, each with a head, two eyes, a mouth, and a forked tongue, reinforce the animacy of the Khan-Altai. The concentric semi-circles with dots, seen in the background of the mountains, are derived from the traditional iconography of painted shamanic drums (SD), where they usually symbolize a rainbow, the symbol of contact with the spiritual world (SD). In the case of this painting, these rainbow-like designs evoke also caves, which *almyses* use to pass into the world of humans.

Figure 6. Sergei Dykov, *Almys Woman*, 2017, 43 × 61 cm, painting on paper. Photo: Andrzej Rozwadowski.

4. The Spirit of Altai—Form and Content

The paintings discussed encapsulate an understanding and visual expression, by one artist, of the indigenous Altaic cosmos with its upper, middle, and lower worlds as well as the permeability between these realms. A key feature is the animacy of these worlds and the importance of the shaman, a human figure capable of mediating between these realms and their human and other-than-human beings, some of whom, such as the *almys*, transform into others. Dykov's depictions of the Altaic "space" and its resident beings are not naturalistic in the sense of the traditional European landscape or still life but encapsulate a non-Western vision of the world. Bold colors and abstract forms, which are interconnected, express an indigenous understanding and tradition which transcend a materialistic world and biological species boundaries: a human becomes a fish, a mountain, a bird, or a lake, while these latter entities freely transform into other forms. The bow is a drum, and the drum is an animal on which the shaman rides, transgressing the vertical and horizontal boundaries of the cosmos that are fluid and subject to the perspective of each entity in the mix. How to see, mediate, and negotiate between these boundaries and beings is the skill of shamans. Non-shamans know that beings other than humans can infiltrate from another world into the human world at any time, as the *almyses* do, but only shamans can see words' boundaries, and only they know how to transgress them. Humans,

therefore, ultimately do not know whether the beings with whom they interact on a daily basis are fully human or are spirits deserving of caution, respect, and the intervention of shamans.

The conceptual fluidity of boundaries and beings in indigenous Altaic ontology resonate with the formal fluidity of Dykov's drawings and paintings. The figures merge with one other, giving the impression of uniting numerous elements into larger wholes. The iconicity is thus subject to an animistic and holistic perception of the world. It is impossible, therefore, to find a perspective or horizon in Dykov's works, because the wider importance is that perspective is key (Grebennikova 2007), the viewpoint of each agent, their way of seeing each equally significant. This artistic perspectivism, moreover, is not only the result of the artist's exploration of Altaic ethnography but also its prehistoric art including rock art.

As the artist himself states, for example, ever since his first encounter with rock art (when he was a child and visited museums), he has wondered about how the images were viewed and understood in the past. After years of experience, not only with museum exhibitions but mainly based on his personal observations of rock art in situ, the artist notes that images carved or painted on rock surfaces can be viewed from different angles (SD). As he remarks, with multiple possible viewing points, interpretations too can be multivalent (cf. Rédei et al. 2020). Dykov acknowledges that their size changes in different lighting conditions, for example, also their relationships to other images and the landscape. One may look at them from above, but if one's view is level with the rock surface, the petroglyphs appear against the horizon at the interface between earth and sky. Assuming that rock art was more an expression of ideas than of objects or phenomena, Dykov's position is (SD) that rock art was a form of image-based understanding of the world which he too is trying to capture in his art. Taking all this into account, the artist does not look kindly on artists who choose attractive petroglyph motifs and just weave them into their art projects without trying to rethink them so that they lead to new art forms. Simply copying petroglyphs and incorporating them to artworks is, according to him, repeating what has already been done. This is the reason why, although rock art is a great inspiration for him, obvious rock images, as I have already pointed out, cannot be found in his works. Both prehistoric and ethnographic art forms are always conceptually and graphically interpreted in his works, like the X-ray motif in *The Entrance to the Lower World*, semicircles inspired by shamanic drum paintings in the *Almys Woman*, the cup of the *Lady of the Lake* (based on the cups of the persons buried in the burrows from the Iron Age), ayes of the hitchracks or the central oval form in the *Starry Settlement* (possibly based on the Bronze Age sculpture).

During my meeting with the artist, I was able to examine his research sketchbook in which he has collected numerous motifs from prehistoric and ethnic Altaic and Siberian art and which he rethinks to develop them into new forms in his artworks. These can be completely new shapes or figures, and features of original ancient of ethnic art forms can be incorporated into other images. It is worth noting that even though Dykov had been invited to and took part in exhibition projects of Siberian Neoarchaic (as mentioned in the introduction: "Perpetuum Mobile" in 2010, "Chronotop" in 2011, and "Siberian Neoarchaic" in 2012), he does not hide his critical stance towards at least some of the work identified with this trend, criticizing them for their often too obvious use of prehistoric art motifs. On the other hand, he considers the phenomenon of Neoarchaic itself valuable, seeing in it the ferment of a local, Siberian trend of art which is original and different from the Moscow center.

To a certain extent, Dykov's art formally resembles Altaic craft art. But drawing on this established tradition is a deliberate strategy for representing an indigenous understanding of the world, formally (thus replicating the folk stylistics) and conceptually. The visual elements in his paintings and their interactions are not, therefore, illustrations of natural phenomena, but expressions of a wider than human world in which discrete animate beings are interdependent. Vinogradova (2015, p. 89) points out that Dykov's paintings are not only visual but also evoke other senses such as sound. Images and their fluid relationships

can express movement and sound, such as the wind, bringing viewers even closer to the multisensory being-in-Altai. Dykov's paintings are thus vibrant, living *manifestations* rather than *representations* of indigenous Altaic ontology.

It is worth adding that Dykov's artwork extends beyond painting. He is not only a painter, but also a stage designer, ceramicist, and a poet including the work *Poems* (*Стихи*, 1991) and *Siberian Book* (*Сибирская книга*, 1991). In the volume *Lifeline: a Book of Poems and Drawings* (*Линия жизни: книга стихов и рисунков*) Dykov makes the important statement that poetry and drawing are one and the same for him (Dykov 1994, p. 8). For the artist, the drawings accompanying each poem in this volume are not just illustrations to poetry, but their graphic complements, perhaps even complementary entities. Grebennikova (2014), who analyzed Dykov's poetry, has drawn attention to the importance of the theme of dreams in his poetry, which for him holds the key to the invisible world. The inspirations of his art then include also personal experiences. If one treats dreaming as a spiritual experience, then in this sense Dykov's work also relates to, at least some, aspects of the Altaic being in the world, like shamanic calling (Dyrenkova 1930).

5. Conclusions

Dykov's art has never been cataloged; there is no archive of his works. The artist has only an inventory of some of his works, and he has no photographic documentation of them.[5] The works presented in this paper constitute then only a small part of his art in which the Altai plays a crucial role. In the works analyzed, I have referred to Dykov's thoughts only at certain points that have helped to clarify some details of his imagery. The reading of his works presented in this article has significantly been based on my personal understandings of Altai culture (informed by ethnohistoric sources), which is, however, thoroughly known to Dykov. It is worth mentioning that he translated from Altaic into Russian the texts of shamanic mysteries by Tanyspai Shinzhin (Shinzhin 2009). He also collaborated on the publication of the book *Altai Pantheon: Gods, Spirits and Cults* (in Russian, see Grebennikova [2014] 2018), which he illustrated. Thus, the issues of shamanic journeys, shamanic transformations, and human–spiritual relations are well known to him. Questioning the artist about every detail of his paintings would, therefore, be awkward, and this was the impression received during my meeting with Dykov. Larisa Pastushkova, another artist associated with Neoarchaic art, who lives in Barnaul, Altai Krai, and who is also strongly influenced by the Altai culture, says similarly that she does not create any instructions on how her art should be read; everyone can read it according to her/his competence (Pastushova in the documentary *Sibirskaia Neoarchaika* 2012). The title of a series of her works is very symptomatic of this point of view, it is *A Free Reading of Mythological Graphemes* (2005–2007). This is, after all, a feature of all art, as it eventually must speak through its own language. Despite the obvious fact that we are dealing with an individualistic vision of the Altai cosmos, the language that Dykov has developed to express this cosmos seems to resonate with the indigenous understanding of being in Altai *space*. Being-in-Cosmos, thus, ultimately duplicates the being-in-Altai that is found in Dykov's paintings. The ontological parallelism of the visible and invisible worlds, the intertwining realms of humans and spirits, and the spiritually charged materiality of things and beings are then the threads that inform Dykov's works discussed in this article.

Interviewing the artist, I asked him if he creates his art with a view to preserving Altaic heritage. His answer was: "Heritage does not need to be preserved; it lives its own life." Perhaps such an opinion stems from the fact of his shorter familial history of living in Altai (cf. Section 1) or perhaps from his conviction that this heritage holds a potency of its own, a power which determines its permanence (though not its invariability), which in fact is the essence of Dykov's works. Regardless of which answer is correct, or possibly both of them, it seems that Dykov's art is a means of preserving this heritage—this time in a new form, which brings together an individualistic vision, an indigenous perspective, and the contemporary world.

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Notes

1 His formal originality, however, is not free from outside influences, and Dykov has acknowledged inspiration from European modernism including work by Gauguin, Matisse, and Picasso.

2 Despite the fact that in terms of religion, Altai is strongly situated in the shamanic tradition, Buddhism is also intertwined in its history since at least the 17th century when Altai became a part of the Dzungar Khanate. Even though Buddhism was not as influential in Altai as strongly as in other regions of Siberia (such as Tuva and Buryatia), in a crucial historical moment for Siberia, the disintegration of the USSR, it became one of the topics around which a national, indigenous Altai identity was discussed (along with shamanism and Burkhanism or Ak Jang, a local, syncretic form of Buddhism and shamanism (Bat'ianova 2007; Halemba 2003; Kos'min 2007).

3 This term is popular in the Russian part of Altai. In Mongolian Altai, its equivalent is *Altai Delkhii* (Smyrski 2018, pp. 244–83).

4 It is a volume that combines posthumously and previously unpublished articles and field ethnographic notes on the history and culture of Turkic peoples of Sayano-Altai by Nadezhda Petrovna Dyrenkova (1899–1941).

5 Even when he submitted his works to exhibitions, they were usually not returned. While contrary to the norms of the global art market, until recently this was a fairly common way of organizing exhibitions in Siberia. Artists often sent works to exhibitions with the knowledge that they would not return them. The opportunity to present their work in an exhibition was for many artists a sufficient form of recognition, and it was often accepted that sending work was a form of payment for the opportunity to participate in an exhibition.

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