

Susan Eley
Fine Art

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Spellbound: Recent Paintings by Deirdre O'Connell

March 6-April 18, 2014

Opening Reception: Thursday, March 6, 6-8 pm

Chekhov's work is rich and complicated and he tells such vivid stories. Each time I come back to a Chekhov role, the part changes profoundly for me. This is because I have changed, but also because he wrote so many great, complex people.

Deirdre O'Connell (2007)

We are delighted to present ***Spellbound: Recent Paintings by Deirdre O'Connell***, a solo exhibition of 19 paintings by American artist Deirdre O'Connell. The exhibition opens on **Thursday, March 6, with a reception for the artist from 6-8 pm, and remains on view through April 18, 2014.**

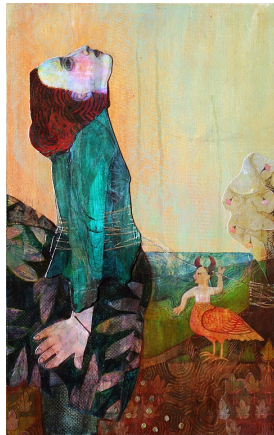
Spellbound is O'Connell's third exhibition and first solo show with SEFA, following on the great success of *Painted Veils/Invented Realms* (2007) and *Illuminated & Adored* (2010). The figurative paintings on view range from the diminutive *Sonya* at 12" x 4" to several 24" x 24" paintings, the largest work ever created by the artist and made especially for this exhibition.

O'Connell's paintings continue to be inspired by 19th-century Russian playwright Anton Chekhov (1860-1901), the writer with whom she has the greatest affinity. Her current body of work depicts scenes and characters from *Uncle Vanya*, *The Seagull*, *The Cherry Orchard* and *The Three Sisters*. O'Connell's depictions of Sonya, Uncle Vanya, Boris and Nina, Masha, Arkadina and others breathe new life into these characters, often misunderstood, lonely and longing for love, while also ferocious, vital and pleasure seeking. Whether or not viewers are familiar with these Russian tales of loss and raw emotion, the themes O'Connell expresses are universal, and her work visceral and accessible.

An Obie-award winning stage actress, O'Connell takes to the stage regularly (she will star in *The Way West*, opening in April at the Steppenwolf in Chicago), but for the past 15 years has been painting, snatching quiet weeks or months between theater gigs. A self-taught artist, O'Connell makes her own rules, applying acrylic, color pencil, lace, glitter, gold and silver leaf to panel. The artist lovingly and deliberately makes careful

choices about the materials and how they will serve and advance the strong emotional themes in her work.

O'Connell applies many, many layers—sanded, painted and collaged repeatedly—to paradoxically achieve a certain flatness of surface. O'Connell's two dimensional, but heavily worked surfaces recall medieval icons or illuminated manuscripts, but which have come to life in 21st-century secular, literary form.



In **Masha and the Golden Chain** (above), Masha from *The Three Sisters* stands upright and arched towards the sky, her head impossibly tilted in longing for the married man she loves. A diaphanous gold chain is wound around her waist and tied to a tree, a symbol of the constraints of forbidden love. The composition is as balanced as a well-choreographed dance. Masha's hand is angled back to echo the position of her head; the landscape is wrought in three bands of color and pattern from the ground cover of brown leaves, to the green grassy patch and blue swirls of the sea, marking the edge of the horizon. The force of Masha's physical presence is balanced by the tree on the far right and the enigmatic half bird/half human in the center of the composition.



In **Sonya and Uncle Vanya** (above), Sonya, ever constant and devoted to her Uncle Vanya, makes a speech that in spite of the challenges in their lives, they must go on living. O'Connell takes an excerpt from this speech, printed in the original Russian text, and cleverly collages it into Sonya's skirts, highlighted against a bright red backdrop. Vanya may be looking away, but the simple and poignant tilt of Sonya's head in his

direction, the splayed hands, and the three lotus flowers connecting her gaze to her uncle say worlds about constant love, devotion and loyalty.



In **The Lotto Game** (above), O'Connell refers to a scene from the final act of *The Seagull*. Sorin is sick and dying, indicated by the three crows crowning his head. An oversized Arkadina, Sorin's sister, cares for him, accompanied by Paulina and Masha. To pass the time they play Lotto. O'Connell ingeniously uses the lotto coins to knit the composition together. Arkadina's meticulously patterned sleeve and Sorin's decorative top, set against the rough-hewn and well-worked gold leaf backdrop, are fine examples of the artist's highly skilled draftsmanship.

O'Connell's passion for Chekhov has been fueled by an annual summer retreat to a lake front home in New England with a group of fellow actors. For each of the past nine summers, the collective has produced a Chekhov play. The many paintings in this series of dancers—**Fish Head Dance** and **Wolf Wedding** (the latter, below) to name two—are expressions of a choreographed dance the actors learned by the lake. The crisscrossing of arms, the turned in feet and tilted heads distinguish these paintings, which are O'Connell's physical mementos of these retreats and pure expressions of the joy she finds in her work, both on stage and in the painting studio.

