

# Elene Chantladze

14 January - 27 February 2021

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## A Tree Will Never Betray You

### The world of Elene Chantladze

By Jennifer Higgin

They're as quiet as a meditation, as swift and smudged as a fleeting thought. Visions emerge from a mix of washy stains and looping lines; details dissolve into atmosphere. Elene Chantladze's fertile imagination drifts between the earth and the sky, between waking and dreaming. Nature, her great solace, is a place of colour and patterns – a leaf, a face, a bird, all hover on the edge of abstraction. Her garden is as much a source of physical sustenance as it is spiritual. She wrote to me: 'Earth gave me potatoes, beans, pumpkins. You have to work to have food.' She lives with four black cats, who often make their way into her pictures, as do her hens.

Anxiety here is the preserve of adult humans. Gardens are abundant, children bloom, joyful dogs, plump birds, frogs, fish and wildflowers abound. A chicken is larger than a baby; a dog is embraced by a dreaming woman hardly larger than his head. In Elene Chantladze's world, a tree will never betray you and an animal will, more often than not, lay its head in your lap.

She lives on the outskirts of Tskaltubo, a once-fashionable Georgian spa town that has fallen into disrepair. She began by painting on cobblestones and 'wooden chips found at the seaside'. She was fascinated by stones, which she describes as having 'the surfaces of foreign universes'. She 'did not have the luxury of a brush' and so she painted with her fingers and match sticks. This lends her pictures a vivid immediacy. For years, she lived in near poverty, supporting her daughters – one of whom was widowed – and her grandchildren. Around 1997, she wanted to see what would happen if she drew on paper but she couldn't afford it, so she used what she could find: old cookie boxes and leaflets from the hospitals and sanatoriums where she worked for decades. She valorises what is discarded: if something is battered it doesn't mean it's not valuable. She discovered the great Georgian artist Niko Pirosami and 'learned that one could use cinder or other materials to produce the works' and so she explored the possibilities of using 'charcoal, the juice of mulberry, Sambucus, beets' as mediums. Along with gouache and pens, other materials have crept in: tar, thread, petrol, elderberry juice, plastic; whatever might spring to mind or hand.

I suspect that Elene Chantladze sees life itself is something of a collage. Non-sequiturs abound, which is apt; it's how we navigate our days: images and ideas jostle for attention. Her wondrous pictures emerge from her imagination unchecked. She says: 'This is how things take their natural flow beyond my control. I don't have a plan for specific things to happen. I don't know myself what my works are about.' Images are born of her daily life: the market, the vegetable plot, a herd of cows, children. Occasionally, animals unfamiliar to Georgia – bears, monkeys, wolves, an elephant – mingle with the locals.

Occasionally, two people – a man and a woman? – merge in horizontal lines. In one small picture, a study in green, red and purple, one person smiles while the other floats above him, her face a study in pale concentration. It's like a merging of psyches. Some other recurrences: startled eyes like blue pinpricks. Faces like masks that reveal other faces. Faces that emerge from a swirl of paint that recalls thick foliage. Imprecise edges: a paint-mark could be the skin of a person or the bark of a tree. Frenzied finger painting. Often, words are scribbled across surfaces, like someone corralling wayward thoughts into tiny visual poems. She dates images like diary entries or shopping lists. Like a modern-day William Blake, she sees the universe in a blade of grass. Art to her is a necessity. She says: 'I am not spoiled as a person with a lot of free time but at least once a day I need to draw like a thirsty person needs to drink water.'

There is, occasionally, a suggestion of weddings but the joy is undercut by something sinister. A child-like bride with a bouquet and a large red head of hair glances out at us; she is escorted by a wild-eyed, devil-like character who looks at her out of the corner of his eyes. He has pointed ears and a long swinging tail. Colours are diluted, washy. The soft palette lends a dreamlike impression to the composition. It's important to remember, she seems to say, that dreams are not always pleasant.

Much of her work is untitled, but occasionally she attaches words to images: in *Politics* (2014) – a high key composition in green, red and black – faces come together like a sick flower; in *Free Drawing* (2017) a red-lipped coquette glances around, as if she can't quite believe her freedom; in *Masked People* (2020) an approximation of a face hovers above a tangled, spider-like body. Occasionally dreadful things creep in: the tragedy of the Beslan school siege in 2004, the Russo-Georgian war of 2008. In 2017, she used tar, gouache and petrol to paint *Fear that Donald Trump will Become the President of America*, a delirious group of three figures, a tumble of messy flowers – as red as bloodstains – a staring worried face and a bird that looks at us from the corner of her eye.

I email Elene Chantladze, via her gallery. Her replies are like short stories, which is unsurprising as she is a poet not only in images but in words: she has written novels, fairytales, children's books and a daily journal. Writing is as important to as her art. She is a constant presence in her local library, borrowing books and attending events. She says: 'Women's Day, Children's Day, April 9, everything important that happened in life was commemorated at the library.'

I ask her what her latest picture is: she explains that it's a painting of a man titled *Contact with the Outer World*. I ask her if she works every day. She replies:

Three days ago I made three scenes: *Year of the Ox*, a little boy making a friend from the snow but instead of a snowman, it's a *kolobok* (Russian fairytale) and a sad man. My neighbour gave me a plasma TV, I threw it from the balcony and it broke into pieces. Gaga (the grandson) wanted to fix it, but I was more interested in the paper that came with it, so I told him to leave it, I didn't want to use the TV, so I used the paper and created four works.

I ask her which artists inspire her. She replies:

Pirosmani, Picasso and animators but believe it or not, I don't think about them. Whenever I have time or whenever I am in the mood of creating, that's when I paint. For example, a few minutes ago, I took an empty chocolate box and have been painting it with pumpkin waste for 20 minutes. It might be a quirk of mine, I don't know, or some kind of illness.

I ask her who her favourite writers are. She replies:

Believe it or not, I regret reading this many books [...] I have not read any literature that did not break my heart, did not leave sadness [...] Why did I poison myself this much? It is the same with TV, and life itself is full of pain; why to add books to that? [...] Painting softens my mood and brings me joy. I used to write; it kept me up all night.

She shares her thoughts on how to paint: namely, that 'nature teaches everything there is to know'. She teaches art to children but she has only two rules: 'to add pink to the sky and to give them space through a frame. That's it.' She adds: 'They are entirely free when painting.'

- 18 December 2020



*Politics*, 2014  
mixed media on cardboard  
38.5 x 28.5 cm, 15 1/8 x 11 1/4 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00001)  
EUR €1,600





*Free Drawing, 2017*  
mixed media on paper  
29 x 26 cm, 11 3/8 x 10 1/4 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00002)  
EUR €1,400

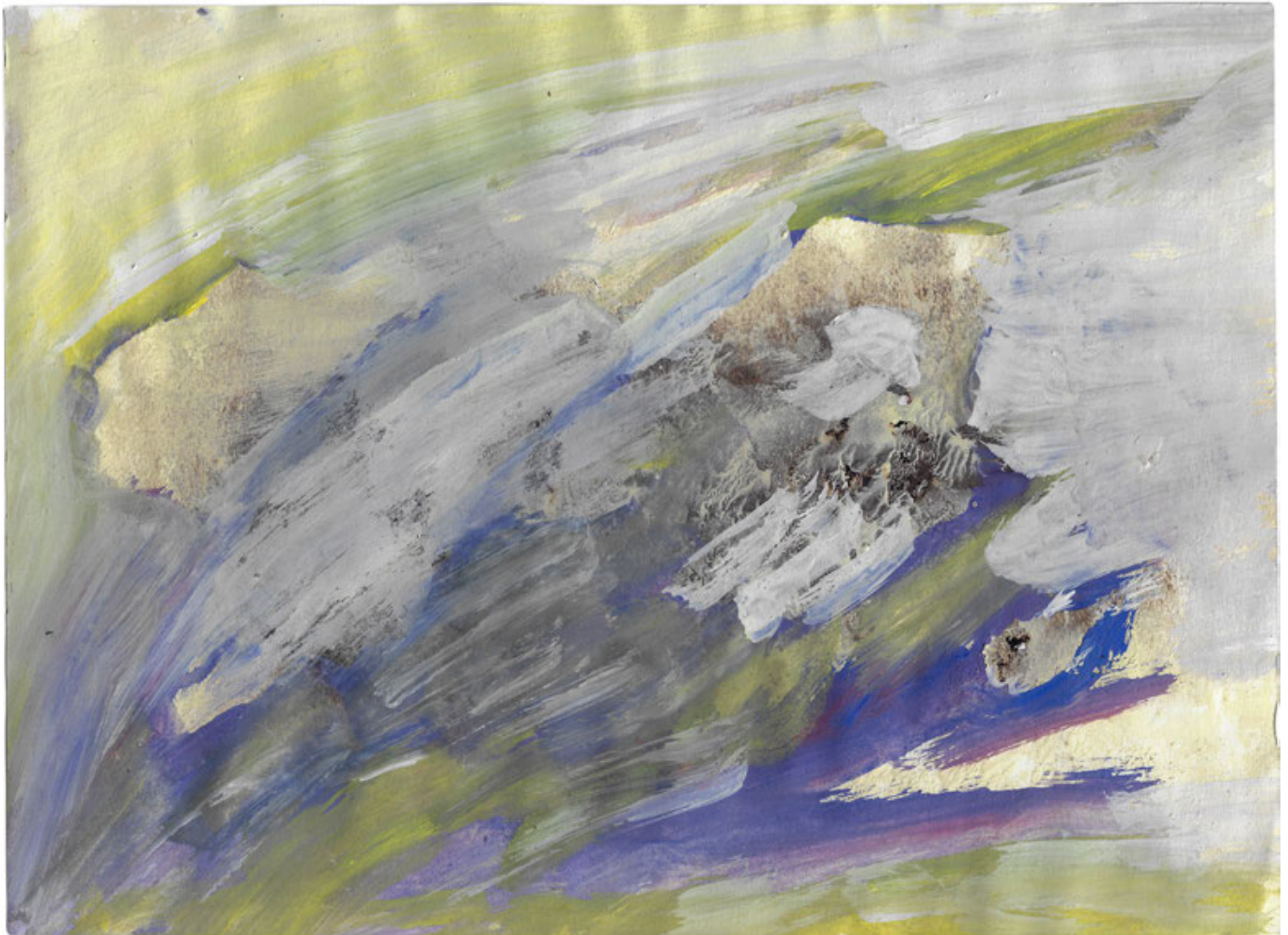


*Red riding hood*, 2017  
mixed media on paper  
27.5 x 32.5 cm, 10 7/8 x 12 3/4 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00003)  
EUR €1,600





Free Drawing, 2016  
 mixed media on paper  
 26 x 37.5 cm, 10 1/4 x 14 3/4 ins  
 (MA-CHANTE-00004)  
 EUR €1,600



*Kidnapping of the moon, 2018*  
mixed media on paper  
24 x 32.5 cm, 9 1/2 x 12 3/4 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00005)  
EUR €1,400





Untitled, 2014  
 mixed media on paper  
 19 x 30 cm, 7 1/2 x 11 3/4 ins  
 (MA-CHANTE-00006)  
 EUR €1,400



*Untitled*, 2006  
mixed media on paper  
32 x 24.5 cm, 12 5/8 x 9 5/8 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00007)  
EUR €1,600







*Miss Breast*, 2015  
mixed media  
26.5 x 26.5 cm, 10 3/8 x 10 3/8 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00009)  
EUR €1,800



Levani, 2018  
mixed media on cardboard  
12 x 13 cm, 4 3/4 x 5 1/8 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00010)  
EUR €1,200





Free Drawing, 2007  
 mixed media on paper  
 26 x 17.5 cm, 10 1/4 x 6 7/8 ins  
 (MA-CHANTE-00011)  
 EUR €1,400





*Flying Carpet*, 2006  
mixed media on paper  
18 x 13 cm, 7 1/8 x 5 1/8 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00013)  
EUR €1,200



*The year of tiger, 2010*  
mixed media on cardboard  
29 x 21 cm, 11 3/8 x 8 1/4 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00015)  
EUR €1,400





*Fun with charcoal and pen, 10 April, 2008*  
mixed media on cardboard  
20 x 21 cm, 7 7/8 x 8 1/4 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00016)  
EUR €1,400





*Dedopali (Queen)*, 2000  
gouache, pen on paper  
29 x 18 cm, 11 3/8 x 7 1/8 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00017)  
EUR €1,400



*Untitled*, 2017  
mixed media on paper  
16 x 27.5 cm, 6 1/4 x 10 7/8 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00019)  
EUR €1,400





*Untitled*, 2018  
mixed media on cardboard  
26 x 18.5 cm, 10 1/4 x 7 1/4 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00020)  
EUR €1,400





*Parliamentarians*, 2007  
mixed media on paper  
28.5 x 20 cm. 11 1/4 x 7 7/8 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00021)  
EUR €1,400



*Untitled*, 2010  
mixed media on cardboard  
30.5 x 21 cm, 12 1/8 x 8 1/4 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00022)  
EUR €1,400

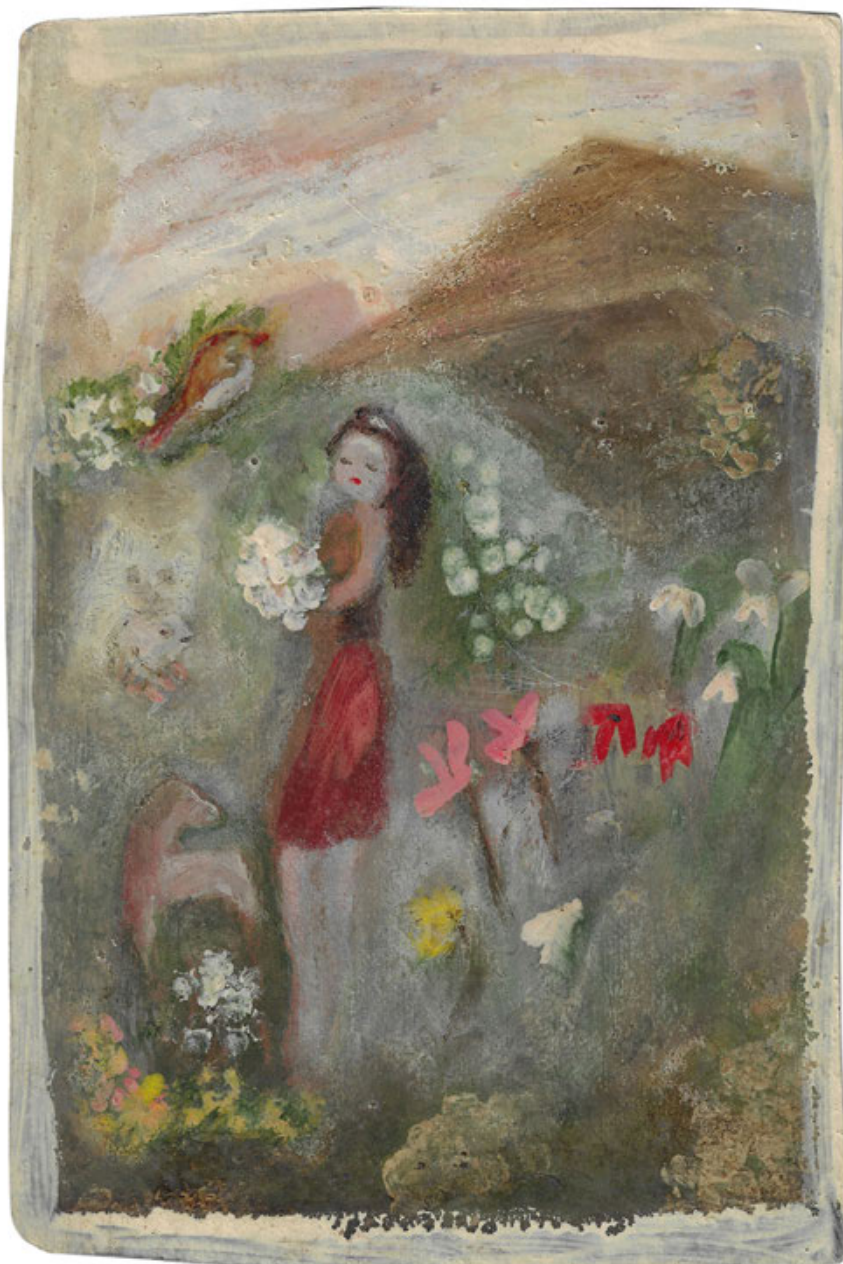


*Untitled*, 2017  
mixed media on cardboard  
30.4 x 19 cm, 12 x 7 1/2 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00024)  
EUR €1,400





*Colorful birds, 2000*  
mixed media on paper  
20.5 x 15 cm, 8 1/8 x 5 7/8 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00025)  
EUR €1,200



*Spring and Tamriko, 2010*  
mixed media on cardboard  
29 x 20.4 cm, 11 3/8 x 8 1/8 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00026)  
EUR €1,400





*Gaseirneba, A Walk, 2008*  
mixed media on cardboard  
21.5 x 18.5 cm, 8 1/2 x 7 1/4 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00028)  
EUR €1,400



*Nine-headed giant*, 2018  
mixed media on paper  
28 x 21 cm, 11 1/8 x 8 1/4 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00030)  
EUR €1,400





*A Child with Birds and Flowers, 2000*  
mixed media on cardboard  
16.5 x 29.3 cm, 6 1/2 x 11 1/2 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00031)  
EUR €1,400



*Spring in the Meadow, my Childhood, 2016*  
mixed media on cardboard  
28.5 x 20 cm, 11 1/4 x 7 7/8 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00032)  
EUR €1,400





*Eleonora's entertainment*, 2006  
mixed media on cardboard  
29.5 x 21.5 cm, 11 5/8 x 8 1/2 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00035)  
EUR €1,400



*How the bear climbs the tree, 2014*  
mixed media on cardboard  
34.5 x 25.4 cm, 13 5/8 x 10 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00036)  
unavailable





*Untitled*, 2019  
mixed media on plastic  
36.8 x 28.3 cm, 14 1/2 x 11 1/8 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00037)  
EUR €1,600



*Untitled*, 2018  
gouache on paper  
29.4 x 20.7 cm, 11 5/8 x 8 1/8 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00040)  
EUR €1,400





*Untitled*, 2016  
mixed media on cardboard  
15.8 x 16.4 cm, 6 1/4 x 6 1/2 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00041)  
EUR €1,200



*Untitled, 2007*  
gouache, pen on cardboard  
29 x 22 cm, 11 3/8 x 8 5/8 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00042)  
EUR €1,400





*How does the bear climb the tree, 2013*  
mixed media on cardboard  
12.5 x 17.5 cm, 4 7/8 x 6 7/8 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00044)  
EUR €1,200



*Dream*, 2011  
mixed media on paper  
24.5 x 17.5 cm, 9 5/8 x 6 7/8 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00046)  
EUR €1,400





*Untitled, 2007*  
mixed media on cardboard  
28 x 16.2 cm, 11 1/8 x 6 3/8 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00047)  
EUR €1,400



*Free Drawing, 2016*  
mixed media on cardboard  
19.8 x 28 cm, 7 3/4 x 11 1/8 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00048)  
EUR €1,400





*Red riding hood*, 2010  
mixed media on paper  
26 x 17 cm, 10 1/4 x 6 3/4 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00049)  
EUR €1,400



*Untitled*, 2009  
mixed media on paper  
20 x 24.5 cm, 7 7/8 x 9 5/8 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00050)  
EUR €1,400





*Rejected people's rights, 2013*  
mixed media on cardboard  
32.4 x 25.6 cm, 12 3/4 x 10 1/8 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00051)  
EUR €1,600



Untitled, 2010  
gouache on paper  
25.8 x 22.8 cm, 10 1/8 x 9 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00052)  
EUR €1,400





*Untitled*, 2008  
gouache, pen on paper  
17 x 36 cm, 6 3/4 x 14 1/8 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00053)  
EUR €1,400



*Untitled, 2017*  
gouache, pen on plastic  
dimensions tbc  
(MA-CHANTE-00054)  
EUR €1,400





*Untitled, 2016*  
mixed media on cardboard  
21 x 15.9 cm, 8 1/4 x 6 1/4 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00055)  
EUR €1,400



*Untitled*, 2018  
mixed media on cardboard  
20 x 25 cm, 7 7/8 x 9 7/8 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00056)  
EUR €1,400





*Mashenka*, 2014  
mixed media on cardboard  
14.5 x 19.5 cm, 5 3/4 x 7 5/8 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00057)  
EUR €1,200



*Street Boys*, 2009  
mixed media on paper  
25 x 19.7 cm, 9 7/8 x 7 3/4 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00058)  
EUR €1,400





*Untitled*, 2008  
mixed media on paper  
15.3 x 16 cm, 6 1/8 x 6 1/4 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00059)  
EUR €1,200



*Fantasy*, 2008  
mixed media on paper  
25.5 x 16.5 cm, 10 1/8 x 6 1/2 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00060)  
EUR €1,400





*Easter lamb, 2019*  
mixed media on cardboard  
30 x 22.5 cm, 11 3/4 x 8 7/8 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00061)  
EUR €1,400



August war, 2008  
mixed media on cardboard  
24 x 16.5 cm, 9 1/2 x 6 1/2 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00062)  
EUR €1,400





*Enjoying the future, 1998*  
mixed media on cardboard  
25 x 17.5 cm, 9 7/8 x 6 7/8 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00063)  
EUR €1,400



*Untitled, 2020*  
mixed media on paper  
29.5 x 21 cm, 11 5/8 x 8 1/4 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00064)  
EUR €1,400





*Untitled*, 2019  
mixed media  
12 x 12 cm, 4 3/4 x 4 3/4 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00065)  
EUR €1,200

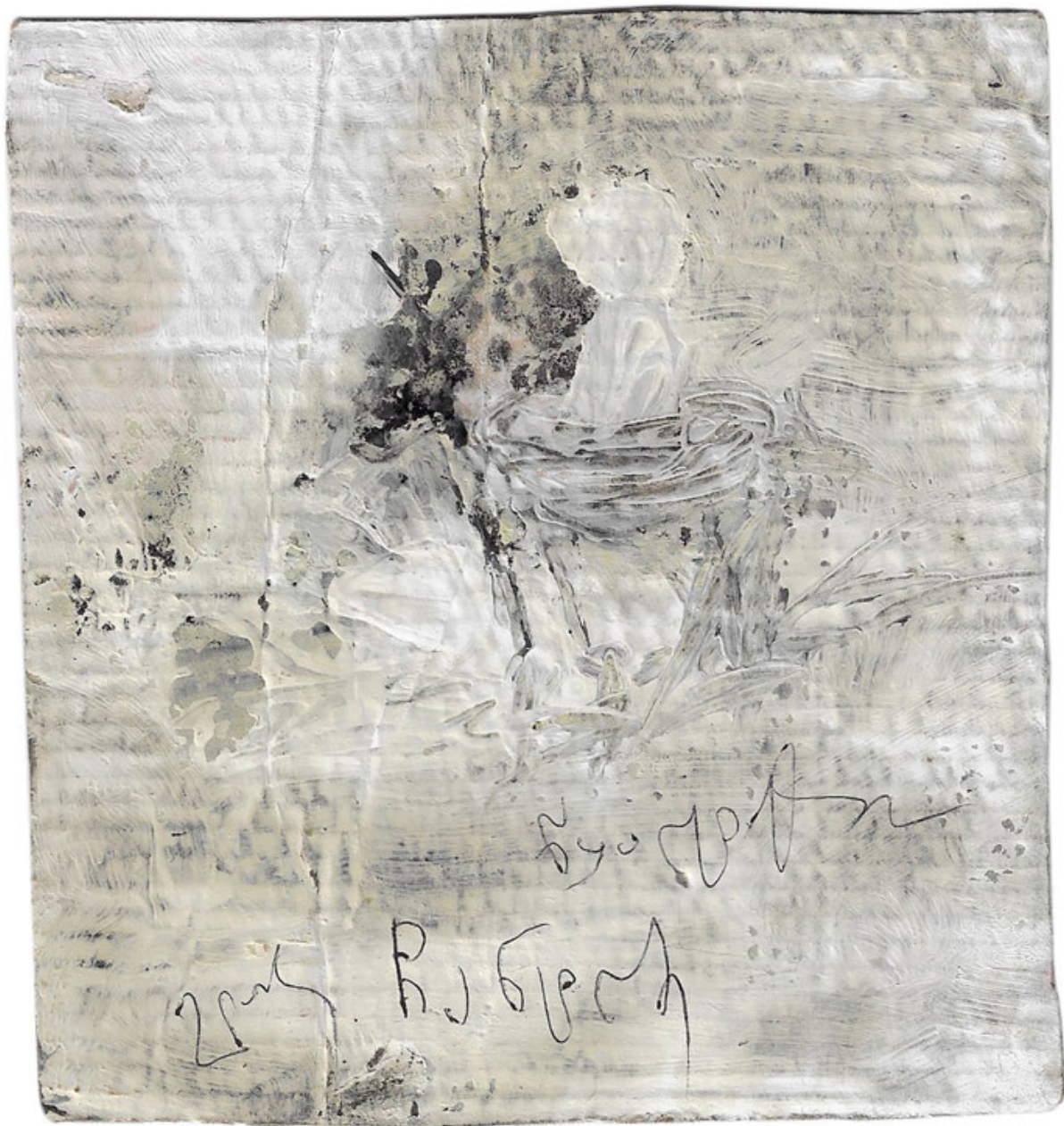


*Untitled*, 2019  
mixed media on paper  
33 x 22.7 cm, 13 x 9 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00066)  
unavailable





*Making a Family*, 2000  
mixed media on paper  
24.5 x 16.5 cm, 9 5/8 x 6 1/2 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00067)  
EUR €1,400



*Untitled*, 2020  
mixed media on cardboard  
14 x 14.8 cm, 5 1/2 x 5 7/8 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00068)  
EUR €1,200





*Untitled*, 2013  
mixed media on paper  
29.5 x 21 cm, 11 5/8 x 8 1/4 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00069)  
EUR €1,400



*Would you like to come with me, 2013*  
mixed media on paper  
24 x 19 cm, 9 1/2 x 7 1/2 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00070)  
EUR €1,400





*Untitled*, 2010  
mixed media on paper  
28 x 13.5 cm, 11 1/8 x 5 1/4 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00071)  
EUR €1,400



*Untitled*, 2013  
mixed media on paper  
12 x 16 cm, 4 3/4 x 6 1/4 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00072)  
EUR €1,200





*Politics*, 2013  
mixed media on paper  
22 x 20 cm, 8 5/8 x 7 7/8 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00073)  
EUR €1,400



*Those left homeless, 1992*  
 mixed media on cardboard  
 31.5 x 22 cm, 12 3/8 x 8 5/8 ins  
 (MA-CHANTE-00074)  
 EUR €1,600





*Untitled, 2012*  
mixed media on cardboard  
40 x 30 cm, 15 3/4 x 11 3/4 ins  
(MA-CHANTE-00075)  
EUR €1,800



*Tskhovreba tsarmavalia chitivit gagvifrindeba, 2000*  
 mixed media on cardboard  
 24 x 16.5 cm, 9 1/2 x 6 1/2 ins  
 (MA-CHANTE-00076)  
 EUR €1,400



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