

Alex Lawson Mangum

Thesis Oral Script

Hi everyone, thank you all so much for coming to my thesis presentation. I'm glad you are all here because it makes my \$315 in printer debt worth it. My name is Alex, and for my thesis I have created a twelve month calendar inspired by Slavic myths and folklore as well as Slavic Paganism. The title of my calendar is Pory Roku, meaning seasons in Ukrainian. Because each image in the set is so heavily influenced by seasonal symbols and motifs, I thought this would be the best fit for the title. Each image draws influence from both folktales and deities as well as my own personal family history.

- Context and background:

As many of my peers' thesis projects are, this is definitely a self indulgent exploration of not only my artistic identity and how I want my art to look going forward, but also an exploration of my personal identity and what art means for me. Throughout this semester, I have gained something that I felt like I had lost in the past as I became more fixated on the end result of my work. This caused me to lose the sense of enjoyment that came from the art making process. There is so much fulfillment to be taken from the creating process, and I think I lost it on the way because I became obsessed with trying to be “good enough”, whatever that means, or to achieve the same things as my peers, even though a lot of us are on different trajectories even within the illustration cohort.

I have always been fascinated with making art and seeing others make art. Some of my earliest memories are of me drawing at the little green kids table in my parents house with

crayons and colored pencils. I was lucky enough to grow up in a household that nurtured my love for art, and my parents never forced me into being something I am not.

As I mentioned before, this project is important to me to create for a multitude of reasons, but mainly because I want to be able to pay homage to my Slavic background. My mother's side of the family has Slavic ancestry. My great great grandmother fled Ukraine during WW1 with her 6 siblings and her mother who had just suffered a stroke, acting as the main caretaker to her family while they traveled hundreds of miles on foot to Poland, eventually taking a boat to Ellis Island.

I am very grateful to have grown up with my grandmother who showed me lots of strange and surreal Eastern European films because she worked for the Seattle International film festival. Some of which were probably not appropriate for me to be watching at such a young age. A lot of the content she exposed me to was really formative for me and still influences me today.

In terms of the calendar aspect of the project, my connection to it is a little less obvious. It was clear how my family history influenced my project and idea, but my family also influenced why I chose a calendar as the container for my illustrations. Growing up, everyone in my family had a calendar on their wall. For me it tells not only a story of someone's day to day life, but also the idea of time passing and changing. Whether through the seasons, or through experiences seen written within the squares of each day. I like how it tells a story of someone's year. I also love how it is a physical representation of time and the seasons. Sometimes it is hard to not be engulfed into an entirely digital experience. A physical calendar is one of those things that can be grounding, allowing you to retain that connection to your life and events in a tactile way. I have always proffered keeping a physical planner for school and other aspects of my life. I

like being able to feel the satisfaction of looking back at everything I did that year written down for me to see.

- Influences:

When finding influences for this project, I already had so many artists in mind. I have accumulated quite the collection of artists and images to use as inspiration and reference for not only subject matter, but composition, use of color, pattern, etc. the majority of influences I found are from my research over last semester, where I spent a huge chunk of my time researching about slavic myths and deities, as well as possible artistic influences. Because of this, many of the artists or styles I had included in my proposal as well. Whether it is the more conventional Greek mythology or Japanese folklore, I am interested in all forms of mythology. It is fascinating to me how a story or folktale can be centuries old and still told in different iterations in modern times. I love seeing many different interpretations of the same story. I think how you choose to interpret a certain folktale artistically says a lot about who you are as an artist.

One artist that has influenced me specifically for this project would be Ivan Bilibin. Bilibin is essentially the father of Eastern European fairytale illustration, and paved the way for many illustrators including myself. His work seems more modern than it is, when in reality the height of his career was in the late 1890s and early 1900s. Both his style and subject matter are big inspirations for this project.

Another would be Jim Tierney. I really love how his more editorial style mixes with Greek mythology. His use of color is incredibly eye-catching and his ability to create unique competitions really inspires me to do the same in my own work. I think he has a really interesting interpretation of a lot of the myths he illustrates.

I am also inspired by Slavic folk art. I want to create my own unique look for this project, but I also want to recognize the work from this region and the beauty of it especially when it comes to color and pattern work. I was also really drawn to the patterns and colors in traditional Slavic clothing, especially from Ukraine. Looking at the patterns on sleeves or the colors in headdresses gave me many ideas of how to create interesting color palettes I wouldn't typically think of. In addition to Slavic folk art and clothing, Pysanky eggs were also something I was looking at when creating patterns on clothing and the borders of the illustrations. The Pysanky egg decorating tradition originated in Ukraine and is done by etching colored wax on chicken eggs creating compelling patterns and colors.

I wanted to mention an artist I have found on Instagram called Alba R art. Once again I find myself drawn to their work because of their unique uses of color. They use really interesting shape language and graphic linework that I was inspired by.

I did not just have visual influences, but I also did research through fictional retellings in books and other media. One series I discovered which I now can say is one of the best trilogies I have ever read is the Winter Night series, with the first book titled *The Bear and the Nightingale*. I was really inspired by many of the visual descriptions of mythical creatures and spirits in these books, as well as the characterization of figures like Morozko, a god of winter, Baba Yaga, Resulkas or water nymphs, and many others. Highly recommend this series if you want a beautifully written fantasy series based in medieval Russia.

Finally, and I hope she isn't mad that I am mentioning her, but my amazing mentor Colette Martin. I am so inspired by her and her work, and feel so grateful we got to work together. We have a lot of similar interests and I really don't think anyone else would've been a better fit. I

truly learned so much from her and the way she approaches her own art with a playful attitude and appreciation for the craft.

- Final images:

Now to get into the final images. I did not produce these in order, in fact the first one I completed was December. But I think that doing them out of order ultimately created a more cohesive look across all of the illustrations. I knew I wanted to have some repeating motifs throughout all of the borders, so you will see similarities in the borders that I think gives a nice connection throughout the set. I chose to do borders for a few different reasons. I love how you can hide different elements from the image in them to infer different things about the story and meaning behind the piece. I also love the level of design it brings to the image. Like I mentioned in my influences section, I really love patterns and repeating motifs, it's just something I have been drawn to for a while now. Our professor Zach Meyer has also joked that we are the class of borders, since so many of us have implemented them in our illustrations as of late.

All right, now to start with of course January, I wanted to depict the brother gods Perun and Veles. Perun is seen as the ruler of the Slavic pantheon and is similar to a Zues like figure, and is the god of the sky and stormy weather. Veles is similar to Hades and is the god of the underworld as well as several forest animals like bears, deer, and wolves. He is often depicted as an animal human hybrid which is how I chose to interpret him. The two figures mirror each other in the composition because they are meant to show two sides of the same coin. The tree behind the figures is meant to be the tree of life motif in the Slavic pantheon, representing the heavens, earth, and underworld with its branches, trunk and roots.

February is the month I chose to take inspiration from my own family history because of what the month represents. February is seen as the final stretch before spring time, and it can be a brutal and desolate time of year when very little vegetation grows. I wanted to show an abstract representation of my great grandmother Sonia's journey with her mother and siblings from Ukraine to Poland, walking through the wintery terrain. This isn't supposed to be her and her siblings directly, but more of a piece drawing inspiration from what they experienced.

March represents the end of winter and the invitation of early spring. The natural world is tentatively coming back to life. I chose river spirits called Rusalka to depict in March. These creatures are similar to sirens and are protectors of the river and nature.

April has associations with new life and rebirth so I chose to depict Rod, the first God and the father of the universe, who is said to have created the world and the pantheon from a golden egg. The egg has a lot of associations in Slavic culture and represents all that the spring brings including new life and new beginnings. Firebirds also have a similar meaning.

For May I wanted to show a mother and her daughters. She can also be seen as Vesna, the goddess of springtime, who is associated with youth and fertility. I also wanted a month where I could depict a mother and her children specifically.

June has important ties to the summer solstice and is often associated with solar imagery so I chose to show the sun and moon anthropomorphized for this month. There are separate sun and moon gods, but in many Slavic cultures, the sun is seen as a feminine entity while the moon is seen as masculine.

In Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia, the holiday Kupala night is celebrated in July, so I chose to show two women jumping over a fire which is a tradition that is done for this holiday. Kupala night is a summer solstice festival with pagan origins and is honored by celebrating the elements

like fire and water, as well as nature and vegetation. The jump over the fire is meant to symbolize purification and protection from evil spirits. The act is meant to bring happiness and prosperity. If a couple jumps over the fire, it is said to indicate a strong marriage or relationship.

The name for August in several Slavic cultures is Sierpien, which comes from the word Sierp meaning sickle because of the month's associations with the harvest season and farming. I have farmers in a field gazing at Lady Midday, who is described as a noon demon, praying on farmers and laborers at the hottest point of the day to curse them with heat stroke and exhaustion.

For September, I wanted to do a very fall themed illustration to showcase the importance of the harvest period. There are many different spirits described in Slavic culture, including various tree spirits. This is my interpretation of a fall tree spirit surrounded by women collecting her fruit.

October is a time of changing seasons, and the folktale of Vasilisa the beautiful is definitely a story about coming of age and learning to adapt to change. It is one of the most famous fairy tales to come out of Russia. This image depicts Vasilisa and Baba Yaga in Baba Yaga's forest. The tale has a lot of spooky and dark imagery especially with how Baba Yaga is depicted, so it made a lot of sense for October.

November is inspired by the story of Koschei the deathless, a prominent figure mainly in Russian folklore. He is an evil, shapeshifting sorcerer who is said to be immortal, but can be defeated by destroying the various objects he hides his soul in. In one of the more well known fairy tales he is mentioned in, he abducts the princess Marya Morevna and the Prince Ivan saves her from him. In my version, Marya saves herself by stabbing Koschei in the skull with a flaming sword. Who needs princes anyway am I right?

December is associated with bleak imagery, darkness, and the cold, so I wanted to showcase the goddess of death and winter, Morana. I wanted to include vampires in this month as well, because of their origins in Slavic culture and their associations with death. Because this was the first illustration I had completed, it really set the tone for the rest of the images. I feel really attached to this piece because of this. And it was the one that helped me understand that the process I was planning to do was going to be successful for me. The feeling that I felt working on and completing this image was that of satisfaction and gratification, which indicated to me that I had done something right.

This is one of two postcard designs I did as additional assets for the project. I thought it would be a nice addition to have two smaller horizontal pieces that are connected but also stand on their own. This illustration is inspired by the story of Ivan and the gray wolf. It also has connections to the story that inspired November. Once again I am kind of taking creative liberties with the story and I am depicting Ivan as a woman, or Ivana if you will.

This one is a harpy piece for my other postcard design. I had this harpy design for a while and wasn't sure what to do with it. It's more simplified than my other work for this project. But it is a good example of how I approach a more simplified, more design illustration. For both the postcards, the lineart is done in the same process with traditional lineart, and the colors are done digitally. You can all purchase these at the table over there. My venmo is on the table if you want to support me further. I would greatly appreciate it!

- Evolution of project:

Initially I planned to go about the calendar aspect of the project very differently. My plan was to lay out the grid on top of each image, but I was finding it difficult to do so without obstructing too much of the image and making the grid look cohesive with the image was

proving to be challenging. During my midterm review, the consensus was to change the way I went about doing the grid. Instead I am taking a more traditional approach with the grids being their own separate pages in the calendar to let the images stand on their own in full view. Doing it this way also leaves more room for the blurb explaining each image's inspirations/influences at the bottom of the page instead of finding somewhere to cram the information in.

I had done two illustrations last summer in an independent study with Zack Rau which became the precursor to this project and helped me solidify stylistically how I wanted to go about creating the images for the most part. The first is an image of two harpies, which are popular creatures in Slavic folklore. They are shown circling each other, and the image is meant to represent the balance of nature and the duality of good and evil. The second piece is of the Leshy or forest spirit that is seen as a neutral entity and the protector of the forest.

In terms of the illustrations, not much changed from last semester, except my illustration for March. I had previously done a version of this piece for my advanced illustration class as a test for my thesis to experiment with how I wanted to go about building a process that works for me. This piece did not come out well, especially because I had not established the direction I wanted to go in stylistically. The version on the wall reflects the style of the set much better, and the image flows more naturally. The layout of the original illustration looked clunky and had some perspective issues. You can see the first iteration of this piece in the thumbnail stage on the screen, as well as what it looked like finished initially. Then the last image is how I chose to change up the composition to make the piece stronger.

There were a few images I did not have rough sketches for yet by the time my proposal came around last semester, but I knew what I planned to do conceptually for each one.

Expanding upon this, because I was doing many of these early sketches in my sketchbook, there were images that I had done sketches for with the wrong dimensions which required me to expand upon those compositions or rework them in various ways to fit the ratio I was working with. Overall though, my concept was fairly solidified by focus week last semester. And there wasn't much else I had left to hash out, which was really nice of past me to do that for future me.

- Process:

By the end of last semester, I had developed rough sketches for nearly all twelve months, which set me up this semester to jump straight into the execution of all the illustrations. Additionally, because of the extensive research I did last semester, I had collected hundreds of reference images to use as inspiration for every aspect of the project. However, for the actual execution of each image, I didn't leave much wiggle room. I figured out I would have to complete one image a week for 10 weeks, and 2 images over spring break, and luckily I was able to meet this goal.

Over the course of last summer and the fall semester, I created a bunch of research sketches and concept sketches to include in my proposal. Here is a collection of those images as well as some of the watercolor explorations I had done. For each image, I started with the rough sketch either in my sketchbook or digitally, using what I had done in my research sketching phase. and further refined it in procreate. Then the sketch would be printed out and I would move forward with the linework in graphite tracing over my sketch using a light box. The lineart stage was probably the stage I enjoyed most. It took me back to being a kid when I mainly used graphite and colored pencils, following endless youtube how to draw tutorials.

Then I would scan the finished linework and edit it digitally to prepare it for digital color. After creating a color mock up, I printed the lineart out onto watercolor paper and used the procreate file as a guide for color.

To create the paintings, I used a mix of gouache, watercolor, and colored pencils. This was how I went about creating the majority of my illustrations my first few years at PNCA without any digital elements. But later, thanks to my peers and Zach Rau, I began to understand the benefit of using digital strategies to not only to speed up art production, but also the fact that it allows you to edit and alter images easily to build stronger compositions.

Following the watercolor and gouache stage, I scanned the painting and compiled and overlaid the elements in my digital file. Once I had the image completed, I would start on the border. It made more sense to do the borders as the last step in the process after I established all the colors and textures to ensure more continuity.

This is a comparison of the image before adding the textures and colors from the painting and after doing so. The painting enhanced the luminosity of the image and added a more analog feel overall.

Here are some examples of the refined sketches I was working with, as well as what my process looked like from the traditional lineart stage, to the beginning of the painting stage, to the final painting.

Now that the illustrations were all done. The hard part was yet to come. The most difficult aspect of the process was the designing, which I knew was going to be the case going into this project. I am a novice indesign dabbler, and I wouldn't say indesign and I are friends or even acquaintances, more like passive aggressive coworkers. I have done several final projects with indesign in the past, but this was the first time doing something like this and I felt like I was

going into it blind. It's hard to know what to google when you don't even know what keywords to search. I was lucky enough to have the support of both my friends with better design skills, as well as Zach who I basically go to with every school related problem now as many of us do. Last week, he helped me so much figuring out the layout and how to create a grid template that could be used for all the spreads. He helped me organize the files and package everything so it was easy to link all the documents. He jokingly named a folder we were working on "Zach saved my life", which I have no intention to change the name because it is probably true.

After the evil design phase was complete, my goal for the beginning of this week was to complete the actual calendars. This meant obscene amounts of printing. Thanks to the people in DPS for all their help with these amazing prints. The cost in DPS can tend to be a bit steep, so I knew I wanted to print only one copy of my calendar in DPS as well as the posters, and the rest were to be printed with the 406 production printer. Of course, before every focus week something has to go wrong, and the 406 printer broke which set me back a day or two. Luckily it all worked out and I got everything printed in time. Thank you to my besties Lily and Guidian for helping me painstakingly cut out each individual sheet for the calendars so they would perfectly line up in a stack. You guys kept me sane during that process. Our friend group had a little bet going on to see who ended up with the most printer debt, and not to brag or anything but I am pretty sure I won that so... haha I win.

Shout out to my guy Wes in the screenprinting department for walking me through the process of spiral binding the calendars and troubleshooting that with me. He made a tedious task fun, and now I know how that works moving forward. Once we finally got the spiral binding figured out, they were ready to go! And that leads me here to this very moment. Here is a very instructional video of me showing you how the spiral binder works.

In hindsight, the thing I would want to change the most about everything was the amount of time I gave myself for production and design. I gave myself about 2 and a half weeks for both, which wasn't nearly as much as I should've, and I wish I had planned on working on finishing at least 1-2 images over winter break in order to give myself more time. Of course, everything worked out in the end, and I most definitely learned a lot from the process

- Line of inquiry/physical context:

For the line of inquiry or physical context of this project, I can imagine it being sold in local businesses and gallery spaces around the city. And I could possibly see it in the calendar section at bookstores or other shops. A few I have in mind to reach out to are Crafty Wonderland, Nucleus House, Flutter, and Blind Insect Gallery who I was lucky enough to have my summer internship with. The illustrations also act as portfolio pieces to use for my website and is solid project to pitch myself to clients to show I can complete a project of this size. I am really interested in the prospect of going into book cover illustrations in the future, as well as product design, and poster/theatre illustrations. And the fact that this project is partly design was a great way for me to practice integrating design and illustration when it is ideal to have strengths in both artistic practices.

- Conclusion:

This is part of one of the first drawings I had done in my thesis journal last semester that I had really loved. It is a gratifying feeling to finally start producing work that you like. For the last year I feel like I have ultimately hit my groove. Not to say I won't go through periods of hating my work again. I think every artist goes through a cycle of hating and then liking their

work and then hating it again. But I feel like I am making the work I have always wanted to make, Compositionally and conceptually, but previously did not have the skills to achieve that. I also now know that I do have the capacity to complete a project of this size. And after four years, I have honed my skills in a way I didn't believe was possible for me. There is no end to growth, and I want nothing more than to continue to grow as an artist and as a person. This project helped me see that, and that I am capable of things I often believe I am not.

Lastly, I want to share my appreciation for the people who have supported me through this last year. Since January, I have been dealing with an unknown health condition that has greatly impacted my life. It makes many physical tasks abnormally difficult because I find myself becoming dizzy and lightheaded from simple daily activities that I used to do with ease. I become fatigued quickly and don't have the capacity or energy for many of the things I used to look forward to, like going to the gym or going on long walks. It has also impacted my thesis. I have had all this motivation to work on this project that I deeply care about, but my lack of energy and inability to move around as I once used to has become physically and emotionally taxing. Because of this, I have had to reach out to those around me more and be open with my struggles in ways I haven't before.

I am deeply grateful to my amazing support system during a time in my life of such uncertainty when it comes to my physical and mental health. Once again, I want to shout out my amazing mentor for her artistic wisdom and assistance with every aspect of my project. Her ability to create such a lush artistic environment and atmosphere in both her work and relationships is so admirable.

I want to thank my amazing instructors who pushed my skills and strengthened my ability to see the beauty in my own work. Zach Rau, you already know this, but you changed my

life and the way I see myself in relation to my art. I would not have made this project without you and your continuous support, pushing me in ways that felt extremely wrong at the time, but were also extremely needed for me to grow and flourish as a creative.

I am so forever grateful to my parents, who have always given me unconditional support and love, even at times where I angered them beyond comprehension. I love you so much, and I am who I am because of you. And finally, my friends who have seen me the most throughout my struggles this semester. For coming with me to doctors appointments I was too anxious to go alone to, and for listening to my endless complaining about all the things I used to be able to do. Thank you for filling me with laughter in a time that feels dark and isolating. And thank you again to my audience here today. I am so lucky to have your support, and the community I have built here at PNCA is something I will never take for granted. Thank you.