

Odyssey

images and
voices of return



14 paintings about Homer's Poem



by Mariella Bertolio

We shouldn't regret too much of having lost many secrets of the myths, although we have to educate ourselves to perceive the lack, the wide unknown..

We can't see the Syrens anymore, as well as we cannot distinguish the Heavens.

Nevertheless, we can still wrap in that shredded cloth, in those incomplete stories of the Gods.

And within the world and inside our mind, that cloth goes on weaving...

(A. Calasso "The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony" - Adelphi Ed. MI - 1988)

Why the Odyssey?

Because it's the first Comeback Story of the Western Literature.

Cunning, suffering, stubbornness - but also tenderness, loyalty and intuition: these are Ulysses traits which struck me the most; deeply human and strategically fundamental individual qualities. Citati called Odysseus a "colorful mind"; but not just that: it is also an ecological and strikingly modern one, as we can see from the harmonious use he makes of this palette.

During his journey Odysseus is actively losing and then catching back the connection with his roots, he reaches places which do not pertain to the human sphere, places of the visible and of the invisible, in and out of space and time.

The encounters

Penelope, his Spouse, Telemachus, his Son, Laertes, his Father; and then Circes, the Sirens, Calypso, Athena and the others... They are all fascinating and rich characters, mysterious while "familiar". Some meet Odysseus only once, as incident line. Some follow him, as parallels. Some others, they wait...

I think every person you meet leaves a mark in your life. Sometimes is so beautiful, generous and colorful that you can imagine him or her on a portrait. Even when the place of the meeting is uncommon. May be the jail, the street, a crowded apartment for refugees or a shelter for homeless people.

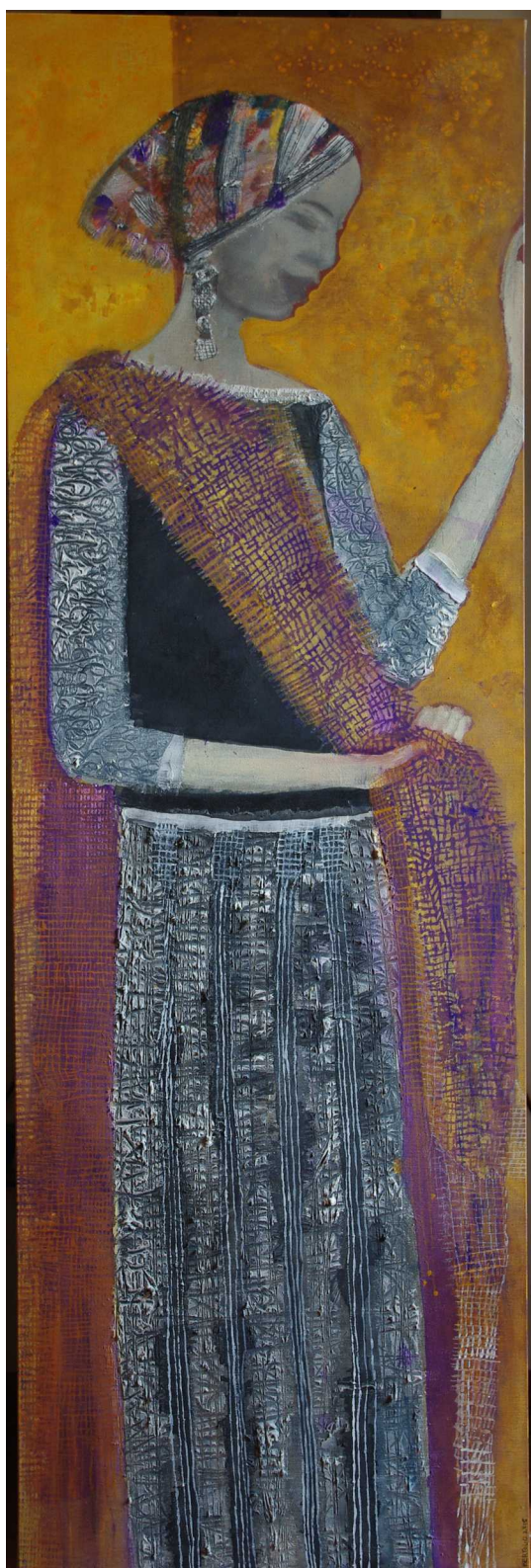
It's a gift, for a painter, to be thankful for. And a good exercise for a social worker, too!

In this work, some characters have faces of people I met, and voices I heard through Homer's words and others more accessible to our modern ears.

I might call this an attempt to explore the "deeply Human and Sacred wrapped in a shredded cloth".

Not so important I think a rigorous unraveling of the structure but feeling the warmth it gives.

Penelope



Acrylic on canvas
50x150 cm

Memories

Of him, Odysseus, who runs fast and strong. Of my father Icarius, not happy at all for this marriage. But I did not give up: I am a stubborn duck! Of that time, when I threw myself to the sea, in despair - they falsely told me that my husband was dead. But I was saved by a flock of feathered ancillas. They followed me down to the waters, they kept me in their beaks by my sodden dress.

Sleep

That of Athena: she pours it on my eyelids. And then it releases me and it ties me, to my reasons, to my will, to my groom, to my son Telemachus, to my home.

I think something else

Just like my husband, one thing I hide behind my heart, one other I say. So that the deceitful casket cloth for Laertes I artfully weave, grows and shrinks like waves: I do for the sun, I undo for the moon.

When Odysseus was back

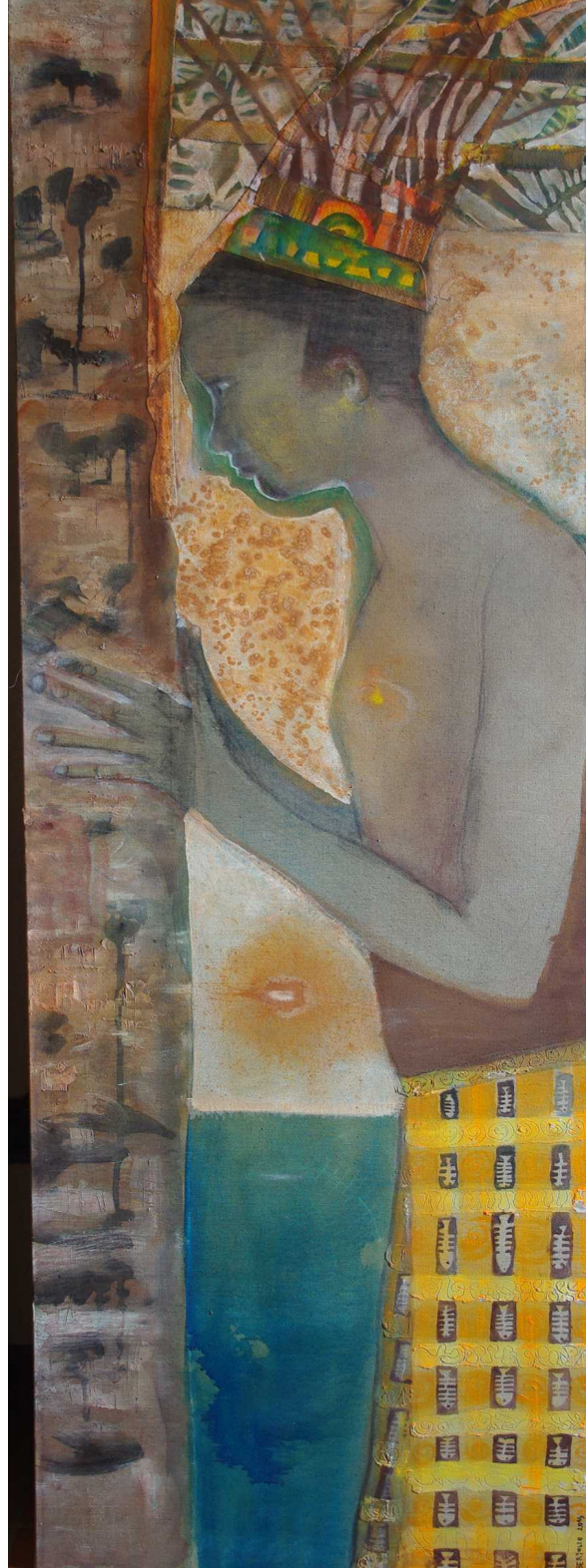
He, just like me, understood that he needed to overcome his own last, most difficult, task: that of the "signs", that he and I - only us - know. That of the big olive tree bed, fastened to the ground, unmovable.

And then, with joy and details, he described how he built the bed with his own hands, how he carved it out from the majestic olive tree, root and centre of the wedding room. He is now returned to this roots, perhaps to leave again, and I with him!





Telemachus



Mixed Technique
(acrylic and collage) on
canvas
50x150 cm

If men could choose each and every thing, I would choose, first and most important to me, my father's return.

Because of this I am the son and the proper heir. I search for him, for no father should ever spare his son the responsibility of the journey to inherit his future.

So then, before to leave on the search, probing the horizon, I caressed the trunk of our tree, that my grandfather planted

In that very moment, I had the certainty that something comes back from the sea. Always! Indeed, my father came back to me, alive from the sea.

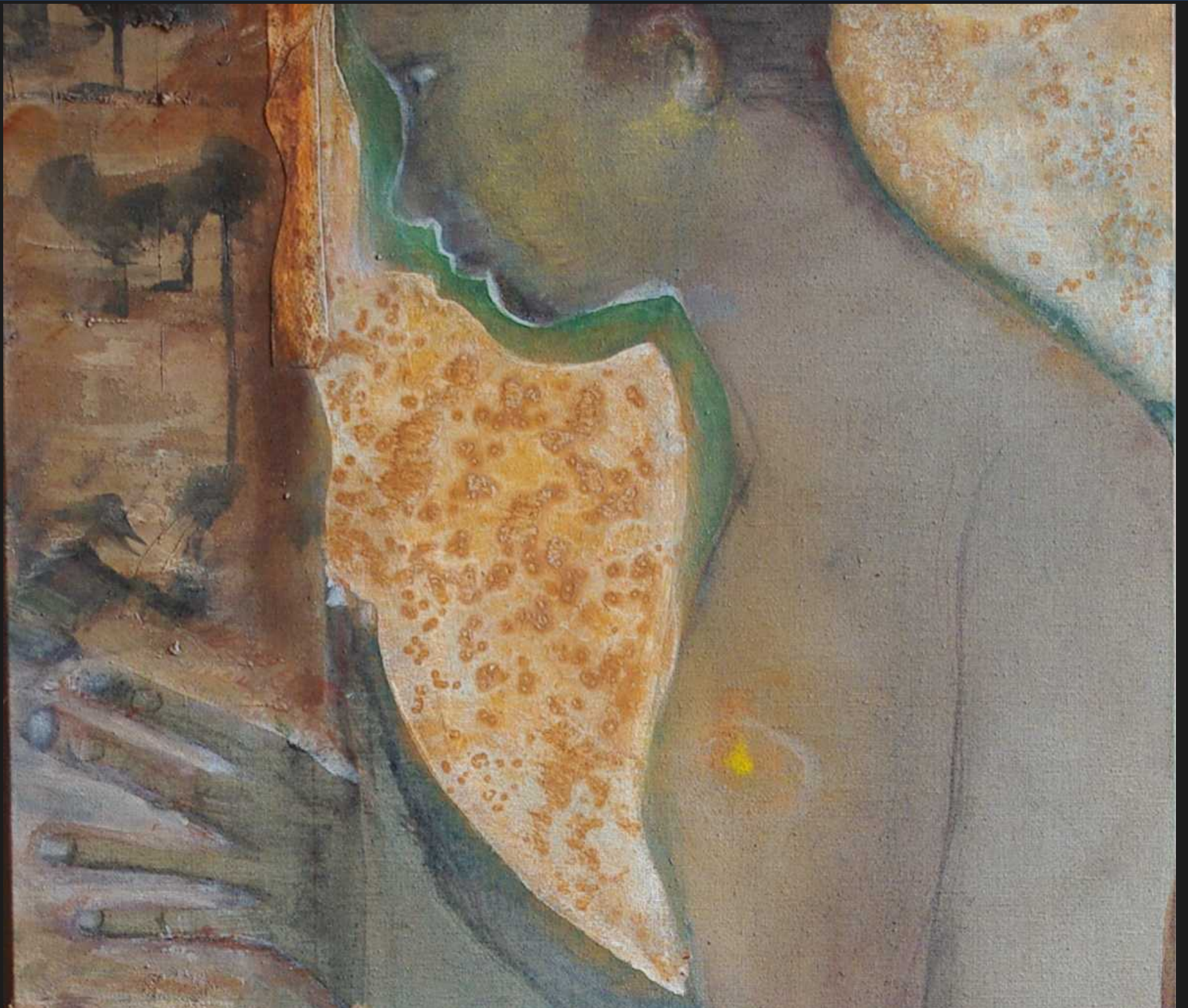
And now try, you, today, to stand here, lining on my tree, looking at the Mediterranean sea. What do you see?

Corpses on the water. A carnage of castaway-travelers with no land where to land, with no one to welcome them.

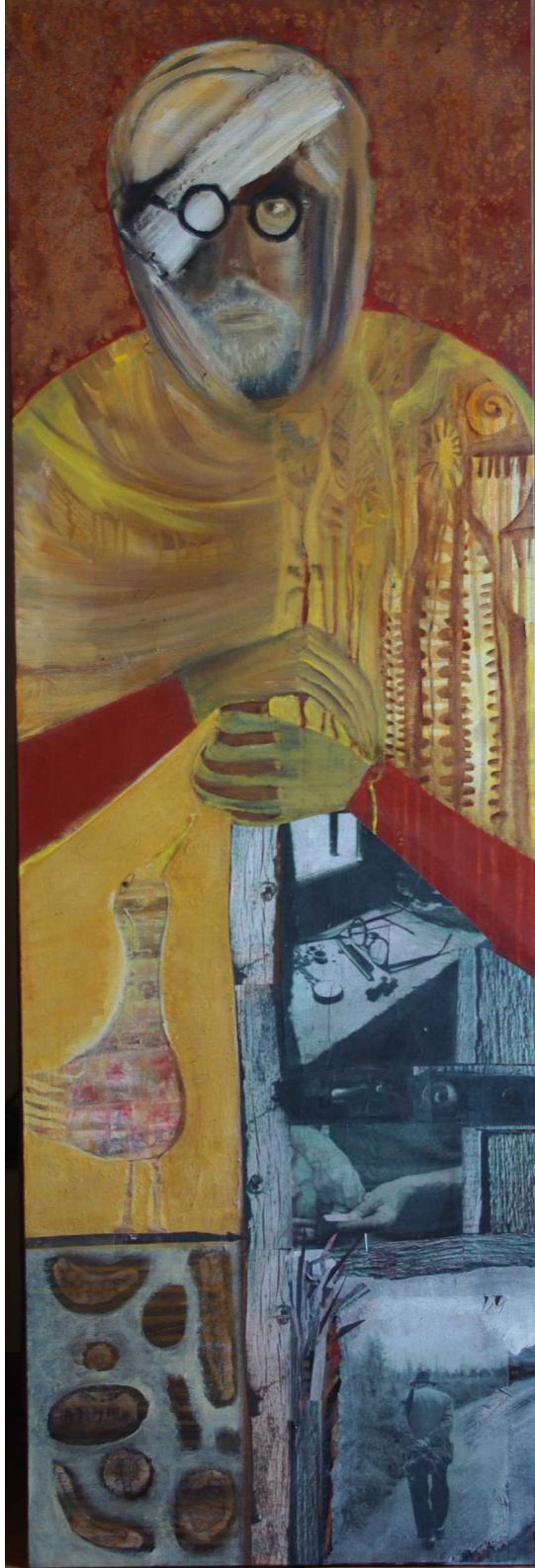
This is your deadly legacy and no son, no heir, no man can sustain the burden without himself drowning.

It is time to start the journey again. Even at the sunset, in this feeble world of yours, look for the Owl of Athena, look, shipwreck, for the shore of the Phaeacians, for Nausicaa glimpse.





Laertes



Mixed Technique
(acrylic and collage) on
canvas
50x150 cm

Hunched, I hoe around a plant. They say I dress in rags: A sordid tunic and gloves against the spines. The rascals shout: 'na-na-na-na-na-na!', whilst hiding behind the olive tree. They make fun of my goat-skin hat, they laugh at they pain, nested in my heart.

Of course, I suffer: for my son, who may be dead; for my nephew, who's in danger; for the ransacked kingdom. Sometimes, the king I once was wakes up in anger, banging his stick, screaming and cursing. But he ceases soon, for anger requires just too much.

The leaves, the buds, the scent of grape trees; the names and numbers of plants and insects roaming in my garden; all this, it brings me peace.

We used to walk through the garden, Odysseus and I: He was small and curious. And I would name, one by one, the leaves, the buds, the trees, the insects. One day I gave him 13 pear trees, 10 apple trees, 40 fig trees, and 50 rows of vines of every kind.

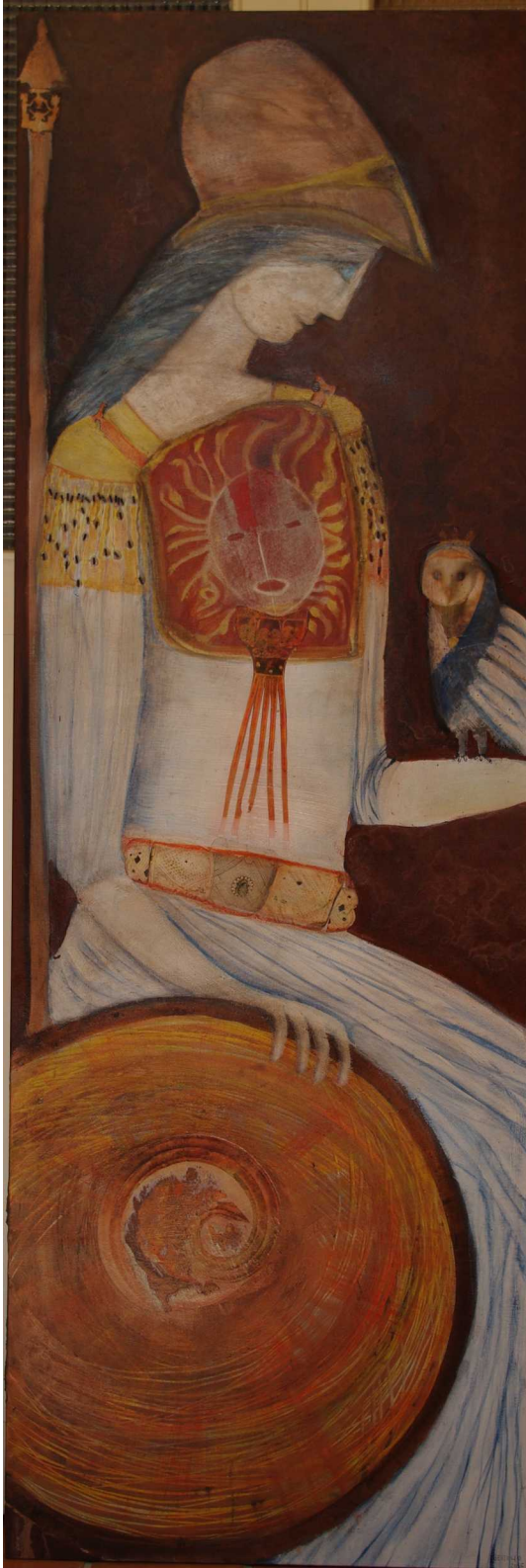
Here I wait for him, for here is his inheritance. If what Telemachus says it's true, if 'what's in the sea will always return', than it shall be in this garden that I will meet him again.



BE RIGLIO 2015



Athena



Mixed Technique
(acrylic, collage and
copper) on canvas
50x150 cm

Zeus, my father, sat on a stool and stared straight ahead. I flowed in his head when he drunk my mother Methis - she was already bearing me.

Gea and Uranus recommended him to do so: They had foreseen that one day Methis would give birth to a stronger God, able to defy him. I already hold his ancient shield, the Aegis, made of skin of the creature with breath of flames

Soon I will be born and I feel his pain, caused by my lance: It scratched his divine skull. I also feel his thoughts, for I live in his head. He thinks that all of me it is sharp: The mind, the sight, the profile of my helmet; he thinks that each one of my feminine curves it is hidden, just like the reverse side of my shield.

The Olympus fears my birth, for it ends and era and it starts a new one. That of acuity and of ideas; ideas which, like me, grow in the head and ripen in the soul.

Strategy, mediation, connection, deferral, waiting: All words born with me.

I will have different voices and different shapes to talk to Odysseus. For he's dear to me, as all the colorful minds.

They will recognize me in the call of the heron or in that of the owl, and they will ask me one thing: 'Love me, Athena, love me once more!'





SANTISSIMO

Elena

Mixed Technique
(acrylic and collage) on canvas
50x150 cm



I am the symmetric image, the perfect figure. I am the beauty, blossomed from the egg of necessity. Menelao knows. I represent the ensign of what is worth fighting and dying for – for then being free to choose

The night when Troy burned, I pushed the danger to an extreme. My voice slid in the trembling darkness of the wooden horse.

I called the Achaeans by the name, as if I was the lover of each one of them. Anticlus could not resist, he was going to reply.

But Odysseus shut his mouth, kept him by the neck, strangling him.

Then, dancing on the acropolis with Troy's women, I gave the signal to the waiting Achaeans ships:
Attack!

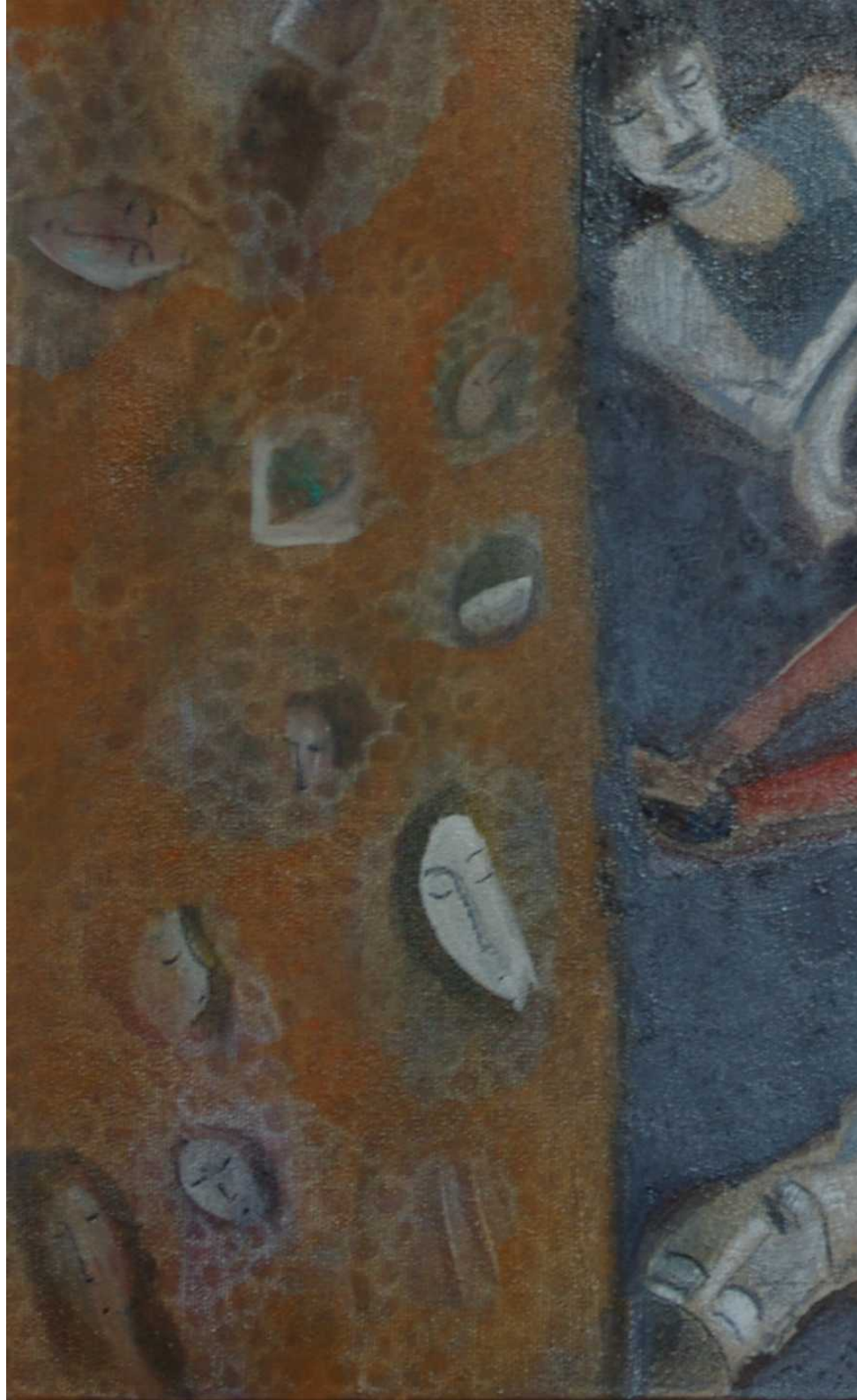
Two incompatible moves, one after the other. The very essence of the Double. That night I fully blossomed and I raised. As a vast toxic moon, I shined on all, impartially.

Why didn't they kill me? I am a glare on water. How to kill a glare, without killing the water? But how to kill the water?





Lotus eaters



We eat lotus, not bred like men. We are the first halt of Odysseus into the unknown, the first step in the Outer-World.

We are the happy inhabitants of the never ending present. No past or future. We welcomed the guests in our dreaming land. There's no meaning, here, for words like memory, past, future, conscience, waiting...

We are the first drop of warning, the foreshadowing of what comes next: oblivion.

Herodotus called us the Sons of the Night. He very well knew that being human means to be in the sunlight. That is, too see the others and to be seen by them; to live with reciprocity, to remember and distinguish the subject from the object.

How powerful, fascinating and embracing is the shadow that we lay on the world?

Its name might be different each time: from Lotus to Pill, to Television, to Facebook, to Stadium, to Bunga-Bunga, to Slot-Machine.

Anyhow, Empty!

Anti-memory food for bulimic hungry ones, and a multitude of sleepwalker dispenser.

Mixed Technique
(acrylic, collage and
wax) on canvas
60x60 cm





Polyphemus's Goat



Mixed Technique
(acrylic and collage)
on canvas
60x60 cm

He was sleeping, that one-eyed man child. And in the meantime, he was playing around with his own hair. He was snoring and burping, too: he had drunk all that wine.

Unaware and unconscious more than ever. Tell me: How similar this candid golden age monster to the sheep he grazes? Cruel and barbaric he is, just like those ogres in the fairy tales; and he eats and dismembers Odysseus fellows.

But also so gentle and understanding with the animals he takes care of. He's natural just like beasts are.

After my shepherd was made blind and during the getaway, whilst feeling this very human weight under my belly, I had a doubt! - I think that was the exact moment when my horns appeared: The sing that I'm, indeed, a goat.

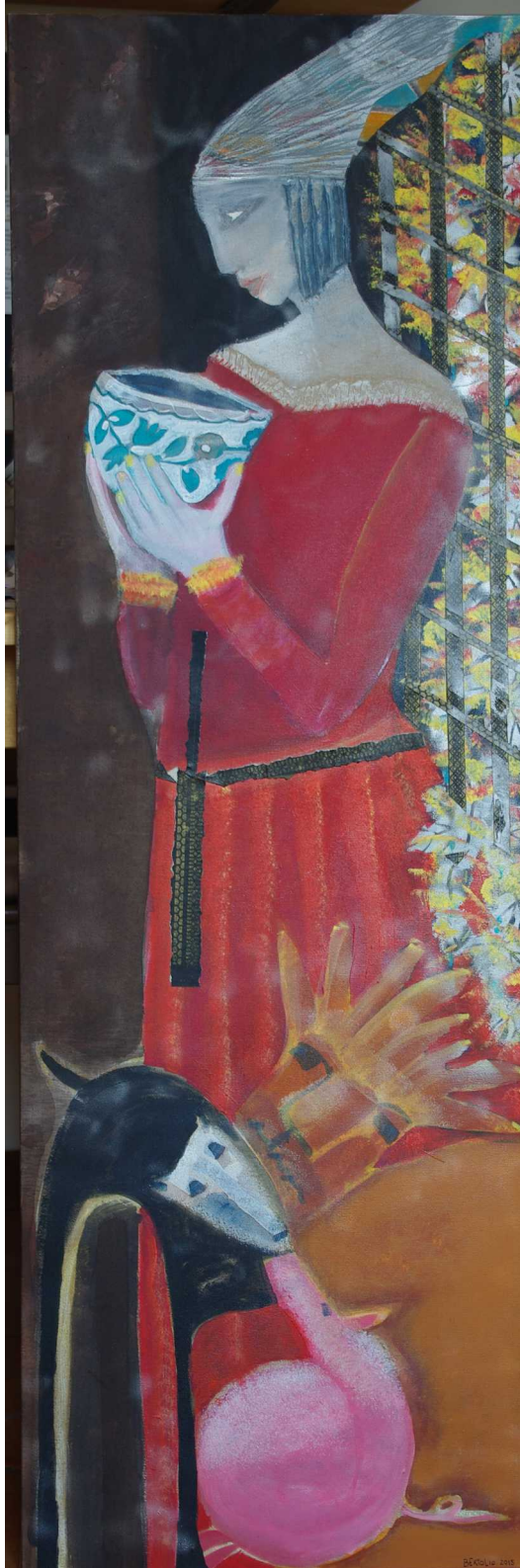
Perhaps Odysseus was not lying when he said to Polyphemus that his name was Nobody. He simply said what Polyphemus was able to understand: to you I am "outis": no-one.





Circe

Mixed Technique
(acrylic and collage) on
canvas
40x120 cm



I am the closing circle, the witch of
metamorphosis, the canceling wand, the
magic herb and poison,
the intoxication that numbs..
No choice for me, as this is my time and
my world.

Odysseus' companions have been for
long my guests,
happier and more beautiful than before,
when I returned them from pigs to
their human forms,
Odysseus came to me with the flower
that protects – a gift of Hermes –
and with the sword that discerns

I sang for him and we loved each other,
till the idyll was over

“Go if you want to” - I said to him, then - “but
first listen to my advice...”

This was my last and precious gift to my
beloved
Let him go and tell him his future!

Will you remember me even for this?



BEKTOLO 2015



Tiresias and the no-named

Mixed Technique
(acrylic and wax) on canvas
60x60 cm



Odysseus has come to Ade
He has slaughtered the ram and now the blood is
drinkable.
He's thirsty to know his future.
We are also thirsty: of that of no name and no face.
We are the multitude of anonymous : the invisibles,
elusive shadows, impossible to hug,
surrounded by a noise that frightens
We would all drink a little of blood there
to be given a brief return to vitality.

My name is Tiresias, Clairvoyant and blind, man and
woman like "Orlando".
I was waiting for you and now – after drinking the
blood – I'll tell you about your next journey and your aged
and peaceful death.

To another great traveler - Marco Polo – I'll ask to tell
some words that can better be heard by modern ears.

Tell me Marco, so fond of exploring and guessing the
signs and maps, tell me where the winds are taking us?
Towards which futures?

Difficult – answers Marco – chart the course and fix the
date of arrival.
Sometimes I feel that perfection will come from lightweight
signals: the glimpse of a landscape, surfacing lights in fog,
the dialogue of two unknowns in the crowd..

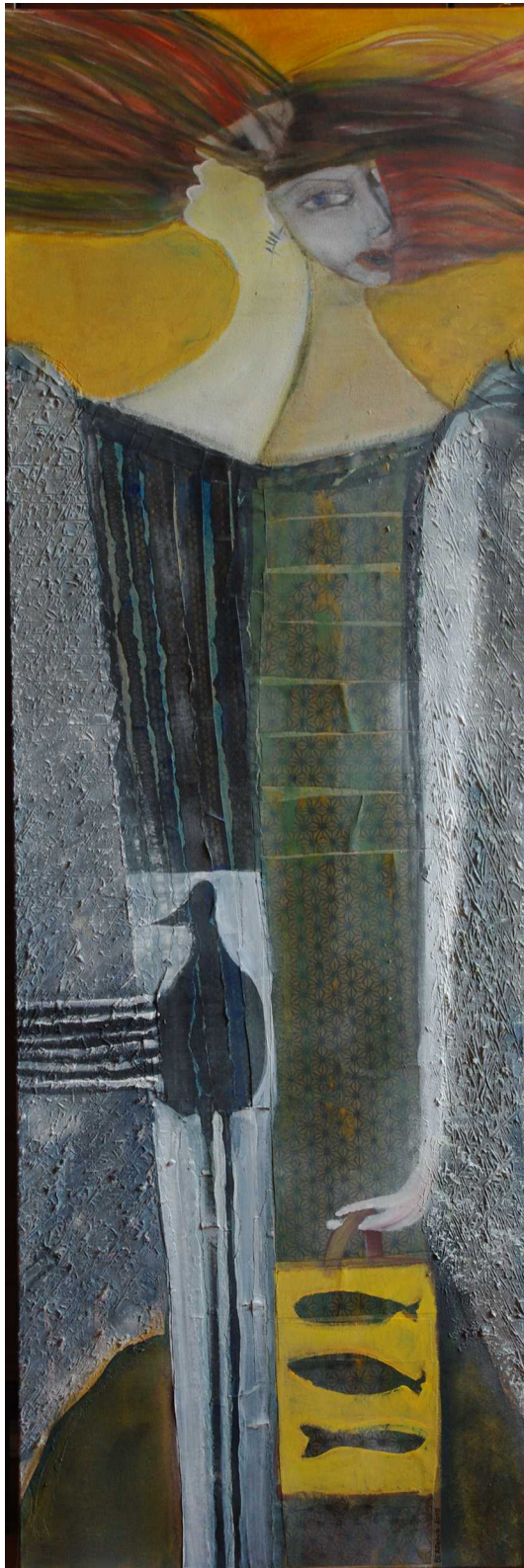
Perhaps a perfect town will come from fragments,
moments and signs that one can just send
No idea of who will collect them.

However this tiring discontinuous journey in space and
time doesn't allow anyone to give up the search.





Sirens



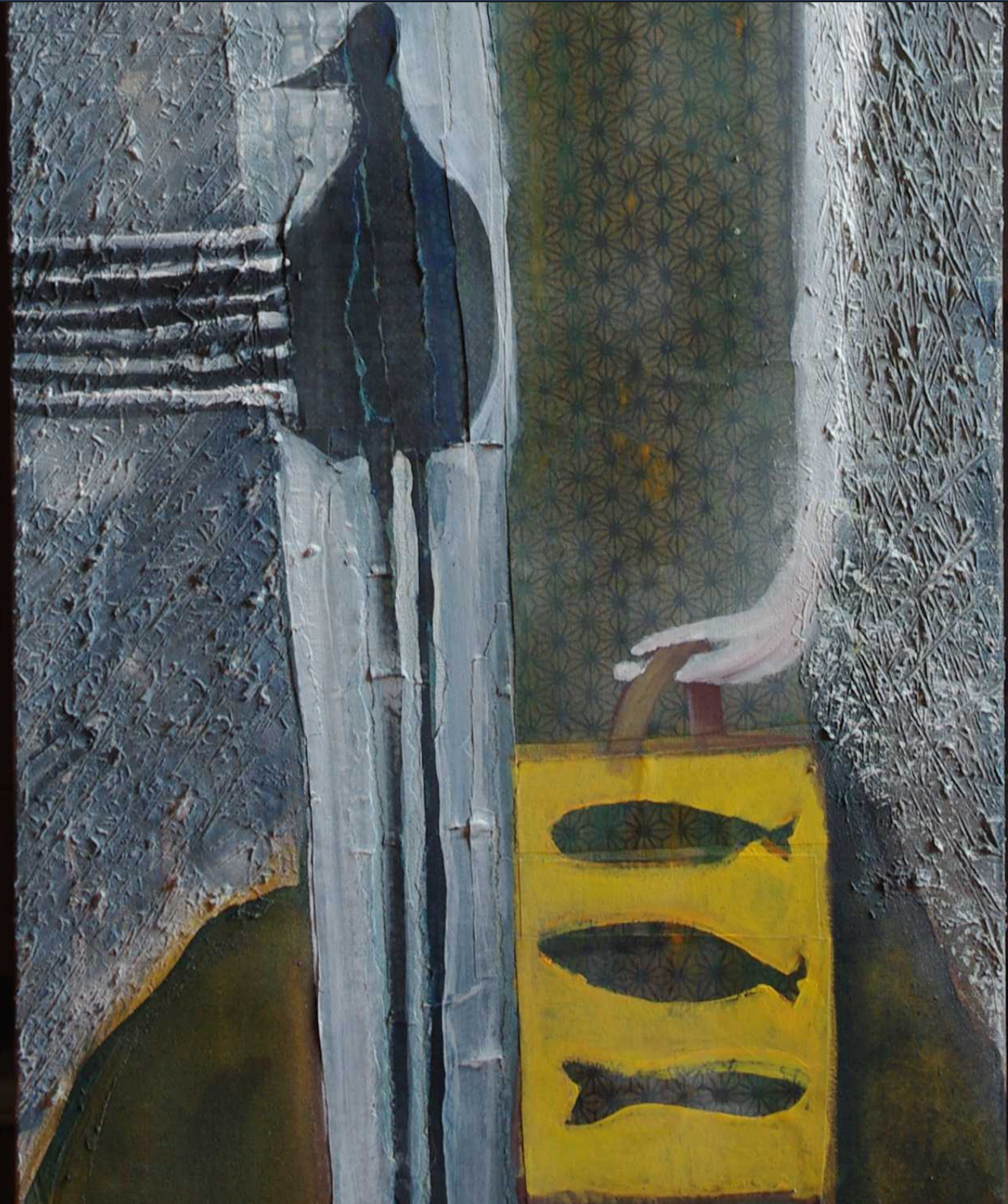
Mixed Technique
(acrylic and collage) on
canvas
40x120 cm

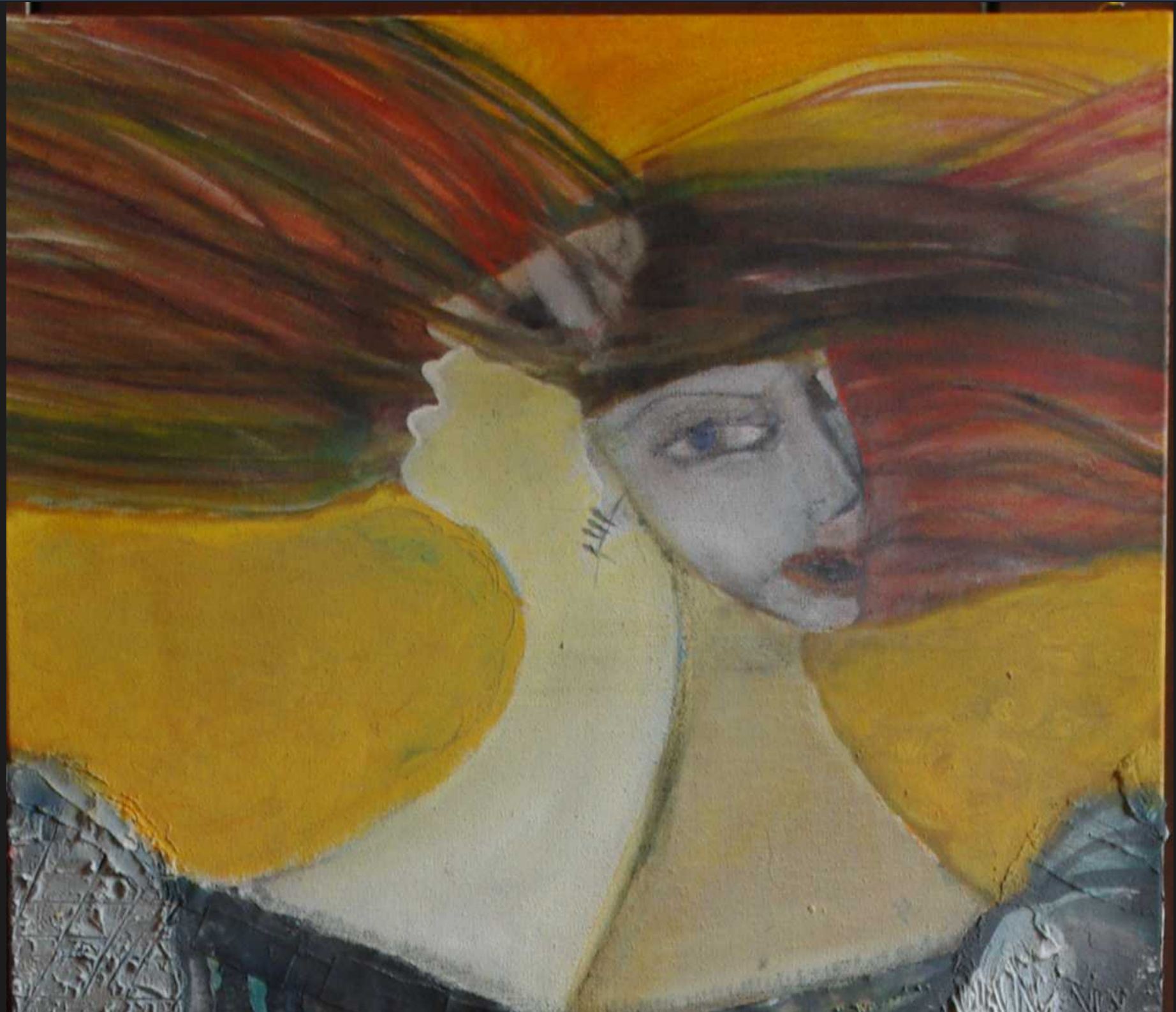
Stop your ship, and quickly
come here, glorious Odysseus,
Odysseus so much loved and
hated
Come. Listen to us. We are
going to tell you everything...
Listen to our singing. Now. In
this time and in this shady
place between “already and not
yet”.

What you're going to hear is
what will be heard about you in
the future centuries.
But now you are the only and
the first one.

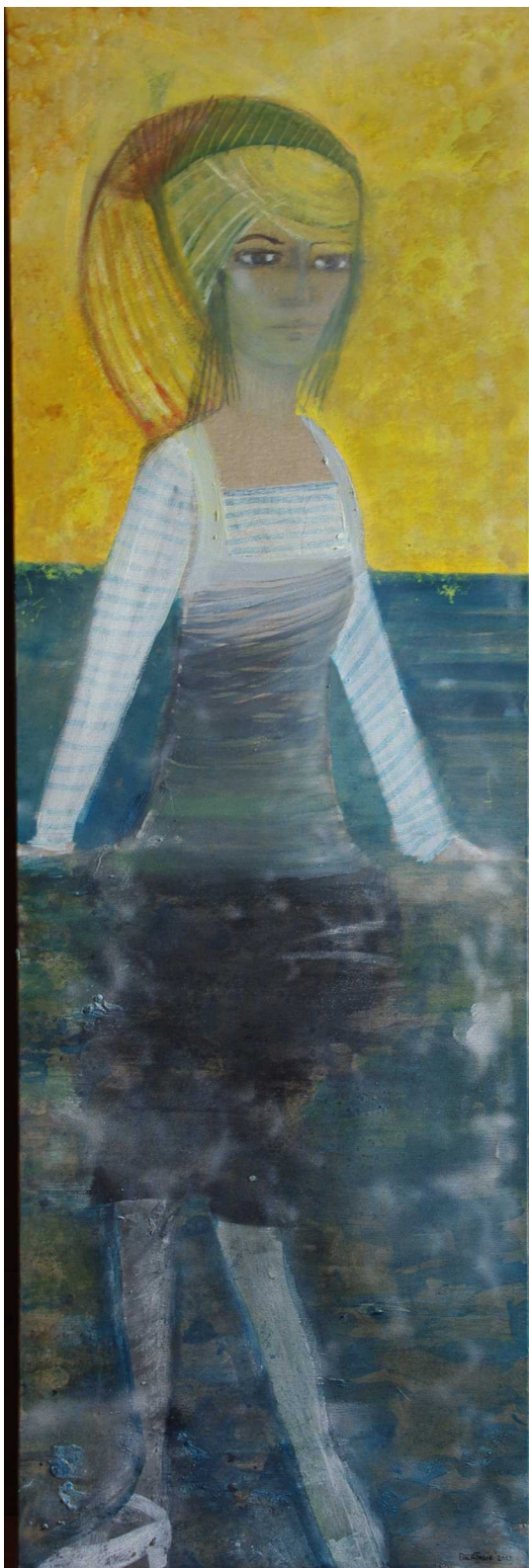
Looking at your ship gliding in
the sea, at the wax in the ears
of your companions, at the
ropes that by fixing you to the
mainmast have saved your life,
we had our deepest omen...

In the future we will be silent.





Calypso



Acrylic on canvas
40x120 cm

Liquid and smooth, as the salted
endless water, beautiful and fearful,
as the archaic goddesses.

I am Calypso, Oigigia, my home, is
the island where I live.
No other place is so isolated and
mysterious: Homer himself calls
it “the navel of the world”

I do not ask myself if Odysseus
loved me. Can you love
somebody that hides you to your
time?

Surely he has known my body and
has made his choice:
Not to stay with me becoming
immortal but to go on
towards Itaca and Penelope,
remaining a mortal.

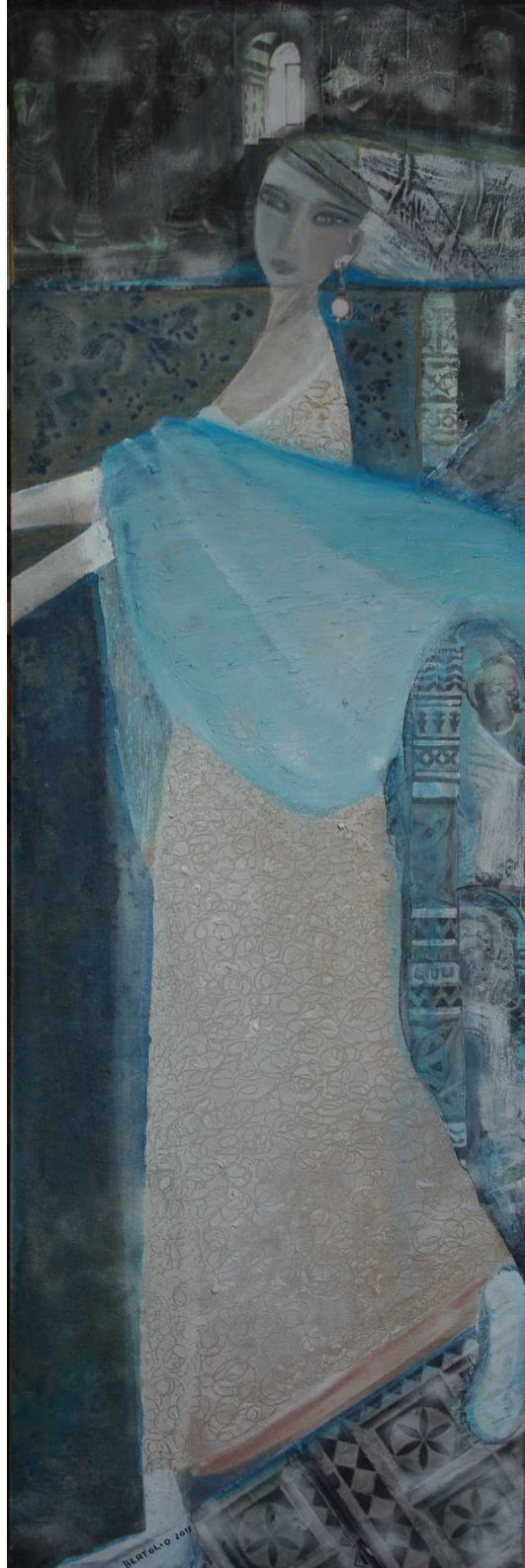
At the end, when he was leaving,
the tears wept were the essence of
his journey

The caress of my hand on his face,
could be my real mission from now
on....
For oncoming guests





Nausicaa



Mixed Technique
(acrylic and collage)
on canvas
40x120 cm

I am the daughter of Alcinoos and Arete that are respectively for my people – the Phaeacians - Soul and Force the one and Virtue, the other.

Although we are a nation of sailors, no captains you'll find among us. Our ships by themselves know human thoughts and intentions, all the cities and the fertile fields in the world. For that they can sail safely through the seas wrapped in a foggy cloud.

No bow with arrows are in the minds of the Phaeacians, but always masts and rowing boats and well-balanced ships. We are the happy ferrymen of all .

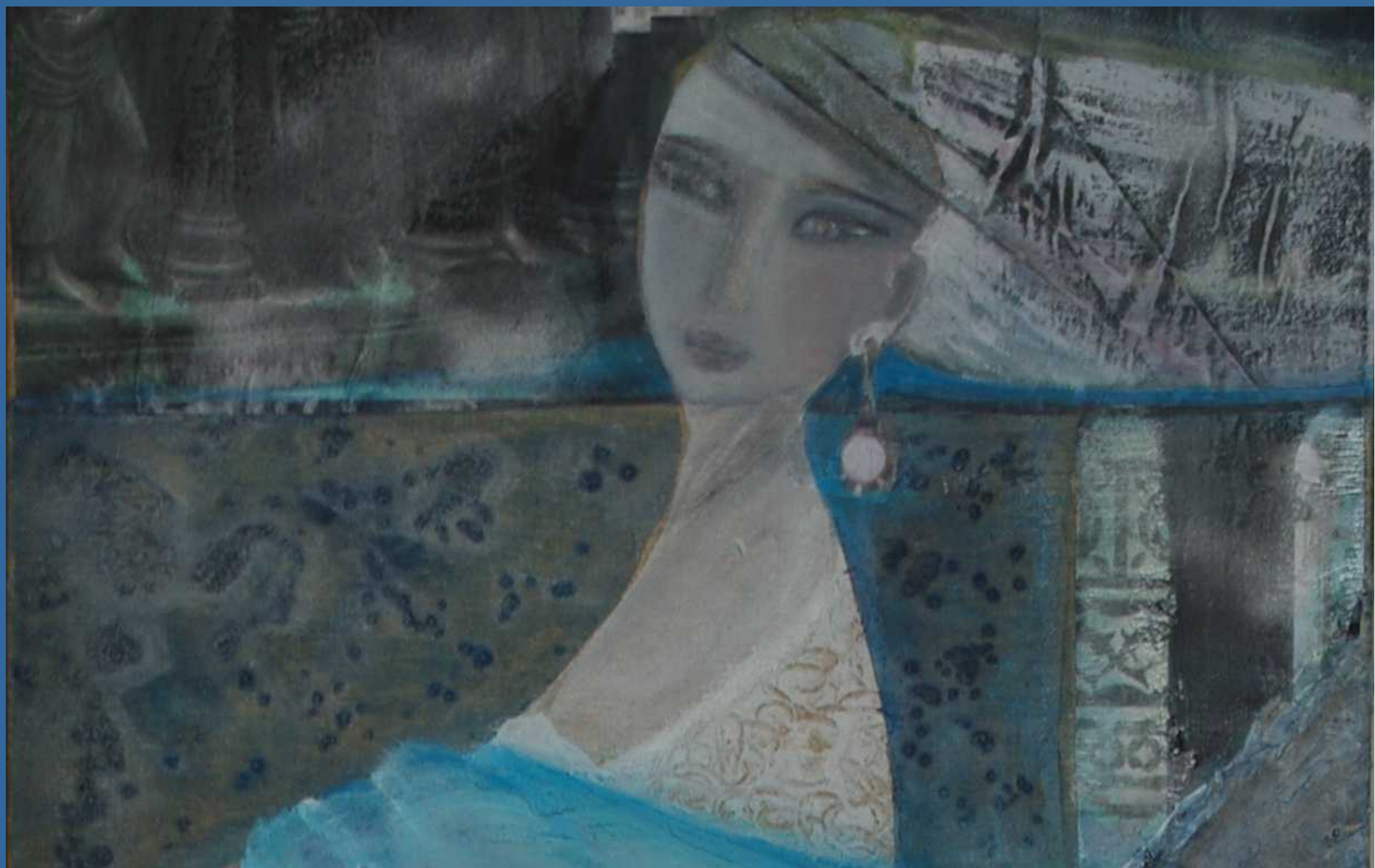
I met Odysseus on the beach while playing ball with my handmaidens, after washing clothes. Horrendous and naked for my eyes but so sweet and shrewd to my ears, I listened to him, and to the story of his Misfortunes.

Foreigner – I told him when he'd finished– you don't look evil or foolish, so please accept your fate. Now you've reached our land and here you'll have clothes and all that must be given to he who has nothing and asks for help.

And you, handmaidens, don't run away, do not fear him as an enemy. Nobody will come to our land bringing war. Take care of him as all the beggars and guests are accompanied by Zeus himself. Hurry up, then and give him food and beverage, help him to take a bath sheltered from the winds.

Cover, place beside him clothes and a cloak and ointment too, in a golden cruet.





Proci's night

Mixed Technique
(acrylic and collage)
on canvas
50x150 cm.



You dogs!
Did you ever think I would be back
home from the land of Troy?

For years you have ransacked my
house, raping my handmaidens,
courted my wife when I was still
alive..
Without fear of the Gods and with
dishonour for men.

Now you're going to die...
As, freshly caught fish, you are
tangled on the sand, longing for the
sea waves and worn-out by the
violence of the sun.

And you, my old nanny Euriclea,
don't shout your joy!
Think that it is always ungodly to
exult for murdered men.

They have been lost by their wicked
actions and fate and by their loss of
respect for life and the dignity of men.

And thus, Proci for all their
wickedness, they have to suffer an
unworthy fate





Back Home!

Mixed Technique
(Acrylic, collage and wax) on canvas
150x50 cm



Penelope,
Twenty years it took to be back in your arms. Twenty crowded years of apprenticeships,
I'm returned from the sea, always with the shadow of Poseidon's trident on my back. Here I am now: as an aged beggar, unknown and unable to recognize my homeland.

You have been waiting for me: fertile, patient and wounded, as the land of my father and the look of our son.
I fought and explored many things: islands, bowels, tombs, dreams, sometimes human and sometimes not,
Perhaps I charted the course for every future traveler in the world...

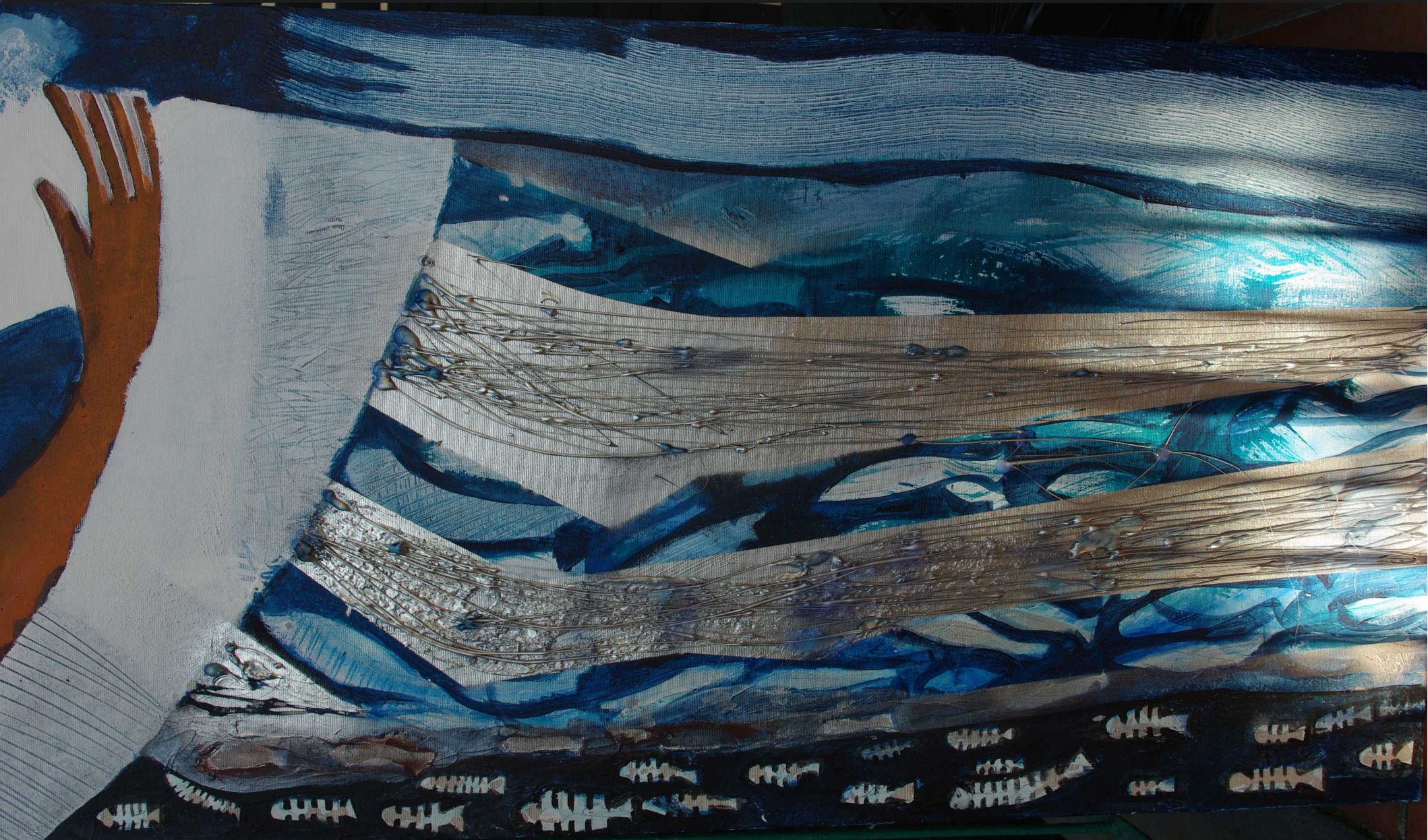
Also perhaps in the future searching, investigating, dissecting and collecting it will be considered as "usual hobbies" and "a lifestyle".
Perhaps men and women will start to ask themselves about the past and the future, trying to have answers for the present.

Welcome curiosity! I say then. I consider it the best gift of the Gods to us, the one that I really appreciate for myself. I pray to Athena to preserve us from incomplete, fragmented and twisted visions that could always appear.

In fact, investigating time is a complicated human matter. Possibly it will be a long task for centuries and a "job" for the "Saints".

I felt the greatness of this thought while holding you in my arms: a sort of peaceful and unified spark, warming bodies and minds...
perhaps this is what we will call in the future "A Sacred Unity".





While drawing up “The voices” of the characters, I availed the analysis of Jean Pierre Vernant, Pietro Citati, Giovanna Bemporad, Eva Cantarella, Massimo Recalcati, Stefania Carosi, Pietro Archiati, Antonio Calasso.

I also had precious initial suggestions by Basilio Luoni, Mauro Vaccani, Letizia Pedretti and “in progress advices” by Serenella Pegna.

Thanks to all of them and particularly to my “beloved art critics” Matteo, Michele, Sofia, Tommaso.

Really much more indulgent than... reviewer!

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