

GILLIAN PEDERSON-KRAG

Still Life with World, 2016
Oil on canvas, 12 x 12 in



COURTESY WINFIELD GALLERY

A. MOLOTKOV

The Imagined Path

My journey to
discovering myself
as a writer and artist

How do we decide who we are?

It's 1984. I'm sixteen. I live in Leningrad, USSR. My mother takes me to see *Solaris*, a film by Andrei Tarkovsky based on the novel by Stanisław Lem. Popular in Soviet Russia, the book is based on a striking concept: the planet Solaris is occupied by a single living being, an ocean that covers most of the planet's surface. The thinking ocean penetrates the minds of human visitors and constructs replicas of people from their past. The protagonist's replica is a woman who killed herself ten years earlier as a result of their breakup. We are not informed of the personal relationships that shaped two other characters' guests, but we are led to believe that they have to do with conscience.

The novel suffers from pages and pages of excessive world-building—still, the best parts are so compelling I've already read it two or three times. Today I anticipate a treat: a cinematic retelling of this fascinating story. But what welcomes me operates by its own set of rules.

The film begins with several minutes of slow, silent shots: a stream in winter, ice. Leaves, twigs, trees. The character meanders, takes in the scenery. By the time the film is over, it has utilized the best scenes from Lem's novel and improved on their emotional tonality. It concludes with a shot much stranger and more poignant than anything the novel has to offer. The film is the novel refined, elevated.

Solaris shatters me with its palpable tragedy of this lost person whose most significant relationships are with facsimiles of those dear to him. I'm particularly struck by the open-ended scenes that invite the viewer to enter, participate, interpret. Odd images, thoughtful dialogues, tenderly rendered vulnerabilities—the film is unforgettable, even if there is much I don't understand after my first viewing.

The aura of compassion, fragility, the notion of mutual responsibility stay with me for days. I discuss it with everyone I know, going over the details with those who appreciate the film. A divide exists among the intelligentsia in relation to Tarkovsky. Some find themselves on his vibe, others, alienated by his slow shots and enigmatic plot moves. It's not a matter of intelligence, but of emotional sensibility.

I've experienced this powerful impact with some of my favorite books. Novellas by Ivan Turgenev full of unfulfilled expectations and damaged lives, seasoned with masterfully