

Project Statement: *The Bathers (2006-2009)*

Statement date: 7-21-15

My paintings dealing with the theme of bathing include lovers in domestic settings, Italians using natural, sulfuric baths for healing and recreational purposes, Russian bathhouse traditions, and swimmers. While thematically the series are quite different, they are all unified by an interest in how people interact with each other, often in a ritualistic or ceremonial way in and around water.

One of my first bathing series (c. 2006) was depicting lovers in a domestic setting; specifically, in the shower. The challenge was to depict an intimate or close relationship between two people in a way that was not cliché, pornographic, or overly sentimental. The shower paintings ended up representing couples that straddled the line between closeness and distance, calmness and tension, and trust and doubt. Following this series, I spent two years painting cultural-specific bathing rituals.

I became acquainted with free-to-the-public outdoor sulfuric baths in Italy while I was working for a gallery outside of Rome in the summer of 2007. I have always had bad reactions to Italian mosquitoes, this summer being no different. The family that hosted me suggested my mosquito bites would heal if I bathe in the sulfuric waters that I had only smelled from a distance on the way to Oriolo Romano. The Italians claimed that the springs remedy respiratory problems, skin irritations, sore muscles, and the liver. And thus began my fascination with the culture around, history of, and images of people bathing in these very obscure “terme.” While there are certainly upscale spa-type spots throughout the country, I was only interested in the locations that were unknown to tourists and that were accessible to everyone. The first bath I went to was “Parco Della Mola,” in the south of the province Viterbo. It was just a small pool of stinky water (the Italians call the smell an “odore particolare”) surrounded by horse flies, but it was truly the most amazing and spiritual place I have ever been in Italy. I ended up returning to Italy the following year on a Fulbright Fellowship to visit, document, and paint similar baths. Being part-Italian by heritage and identifying strongly with the culture certainly increased my interest in specifically Italian bathing rituals; however, I opened up my explorations to other cultures and activities as well.

One day on the street of Chicago I randomly opened a newspaper box for a paper that I never read. Inside the newspaper was an image of the longest-standing Russian Bathhouse in Chicago. The second I saw that I knew I had to paint it. While the bathhouse was for men only, I convinced the manager to let me visit, take photos, and I even partook in the bathing rituals during one of several visits. I was interested to learn how different ethnic groups relate to each other, all having their own traditions. I made several large paintings sourced from the photographs I took at this location, and continued to open up my criteria for selecting bathing themes.