

Josef Strau

First, I wished to paint an angel because of the guardian often placed above the bed of children. It could possibly be the first painted image they had seen, and maybe even their first view into an exterior imagination, into another world, or possibly behind it.

At that time, I wanted this imagined guardian to be the first image made for one of my exhibitions. And then I hoped to see what would be “demanded” during and by the process, hopefully more of the same image. After this prototype, the first angel, all the other works in the exhibition would follow automatically through such an exercise.

A prototype is in relation to a serial production where the series is still being made as the application of a certain craft. The long and painful time spent within the rituals before the “birth” of the first image, I tried many times before, but here I followed, although still only a little, some of the rules I had been learning recently from the training of Russia’s mystical icon painters. I understood that somehow I was being restricted by my rejection and fear of idolatry to use the typical Byzantine painters’ subject matter without having their necessary faith and intensity. During my own introspection I found that maybe I could develop such necessary interior faith when choosing to “project” an angel as subject matter. To my surprise, while reading the old icon school books, I learned it was once a rule in the second step of the training that was proposed to the scholar, to paint an angel and only later to include other sacred persons or objects. It should be most natural to almost anyone to imagine the angel and to have faith in it, but as well to invoke one and as a result to establish its presence.

Though, I realized my decision was not to try to make icons, or credulously assuming such a role model for myself too fast, but to, at the very least, to be able to reproduce some sort of reminder or echo, triggering a memory of them, remembering and recounting the model of the truly observant icon painter who isn’t supposed to claim to create icons for one’s own benefit. The fear of doing idolatry and the fear of doing heresy became a balancing act. The idea of the totally obsolete and devotional service of true orthodox icon-painters was somehow the most radical charge to the idea of being the iconoclastic artist I was.

So at last I found the angel somehow, during production strongly and almost entirely framed in the tin metal from contemporary Mexican icon painters during the elaborate work times. The arduous metal appearance of the angels surrounded by the soldered plane more and more felt like a reminder that the angels are contemporarily one of the most harshly drawn subject matters, particularly painted or tattooed by the many inflicted ones, by the prisoners, by people suffering just incredible pains, or the ones feeling humiliated or feeling deeply abandoned and submitted to endless harsh and almost unpaid labor across many countries, those intensely seeking and praying for relief and for charity. Usually such depictions of the angels appear ugly and scary to the proud and educated ones, but paradoxically the harder they are the closer they are in fact to the true angelic spirit of charity.

Once, for one of my exhibitions I felt determined to abandon everything I had done before in order to make space for something new, to make a hard cut with all of my exhibitions from before, at least. But I had to learn by making such grave artistic mistakes, like negating all my existing work modes which led me into a maelstrom, a time of lonely exile, and into a multitude of desperations, and sleepless and dark felt nights. By that time it had all got so oppressive and even physically painful, that when once suddenly I imagined I would do the very same thing as before instead of the new then, as if touched by the sacred fairy both I myself, and even the world around me seemed happy again. In this very moment of sudden relief, my former phantom intentions vanished in the much more far-reaching decision: I will try to produce the same angels again that I tried doing already earlier in the last exhibition and

not make any cut at all. Same as last time, same size, same amount, but with the intention of restoring the former work, to make it better. That should be the real meaning of the term retrospective, to decipher the bad patterns that I involved in my art practice and to confess them by ways of repair.

One day for instance I had none of the tin metal left to use as skin from the former tattoo inspired angel images, only the many small tin metal trash pieces on the still so untidy studio floor that had fallen from the metal cutting. So, I soldered the leftovers together like fabric waste. I used to believe I make echoes of icon paintings, instead I had been using this as an art practice to act out the most toxic parts of my personality. I enjoyed cutting metals without an idea, I raved in stroking and beating them, then I excelled in further trampling on them, torturing them with the knives that I was suddenly collecting. When considering colors, I chose colors but not according to their visual or tonal qualities, but because of their smell, when they are burnt, preferring some chemically ugly enamels, which smell most ugly – sometimes becoming aware of their toxic interior misery, I praised my alchemical acts as necessary ingredients for any artistic creation. Icon painting is supposed to be writing, I claimed with the burning metals and the smoking enamels compounded in the incredible and poisonous stench turning into long garlands of mysterious texts or at least into letters that are being written into my room or spun slowly into the canvas of my lungs.

I did not become aware of the structure of the destructive aspect of my ways of making art for years. If it had been another artist I would have seen and readily despised such expressions of toxic personality traits. As it's famously been said, the devil enjoys it if we reject bad patterns in someone else most of all, and therefore makes it most difficult to detect them in oneself. In simple words, I started to learn from observing the inherent condition of my acts and wanted to listen in search of invoking imminent and sustainable changes. The very day after I abandoned the idea of both the cut in my production and the competitive interior cut I finally left the ex nihilo fantasy behind. I learned even more so that in times of production challenges I incessantly gravel through the ruthlessly harsh closed space of my interior tunnel of work obsessions and most accordingly live in exteriorly narrow closed spaces too often as if they had chosen me. In the moment of revelation, to declare with it the beginning of my new direction, I weaved the tiny metal leftovers together smoothly into new patterns as if following their new qualities. I abandoned the cutting, the trampling, the burning, the hurting.

Early on I remembered seeing older drawings of angels made in an Art Nouveau manner, for instance, a certain angel painting by Simeon Solomon, of an angel protecting three boys, illustrating the book of Daniel and how they are kept mercifully safe from the horrible danger of being killed by the soldiers of the Babylonian king as punishment for their refusal to obey. A story that reminds one that the supernatural angelic spirit blesses such disobedience. Similarly, the meaning of retrospective could materialize the angelic spirit that does not desire to look into the future but turns backwards and attempts to repair what has already been done.

Usually, whenever I met some person randomly who asked where I am from and then later what I do and I saw it was a person with a real job, hard working, I felt I just could not tell them anything about me, as I had not done real work ever, I felt. So I often maneuvered around, stuttered, until they looked at me in this certain way, and then suddenly it was all over, doors closed, chance lost. Loving to meet and open up to people, but feeling so guilty, I know by now how uncomfortable that feels because now it all changed for me as I got the same question again at the corner near my house and this time I just said that I am an artist, and as always the other asked "what kind of an artist?" and then "what do you paint?" I paused with all my courage and said "I paint angels." Finally I no longer needed to hide, I was not maneuvering, not feeling low, and I happily repeated it. Stepping back in excitement, the person on the street said: "That is the most amazing thing I ever heard of." And asked further:

“And you are living from that?” “Yes I live from it.” Since then some people in my neighborhood finally really know about me by now – and since opening up I have no fears anymore about saying whatever I feel, because it is no longer the strange confession of being an angel painter, but the intuition of the to me so unrecognized and earlier perceived as unproductive love that is contained within them.