Talking about Angels with Demian Schopf

An interview with Elena Agudio. January 2009

Elena Agudio: Symbols are the highest and most evocative distillation of the culture of images. Layers of significance, webs of meanings, they can speak secret languages and pass silently through history, though their nuance only grows over time. Ambiguity is their power, and the ambiguity of their interpretation is the key to reading them. Demian, your harquebusier angels are symbolic images, icons of the contamination between colonial culture and the indigenous tradition, religious and revolutionary iconography, the Baroque language and contemporary media. How important is it for you to work with memory and archetypes of Latin American culture? And what do you feel Latin America is? Is it just an abstract geographical concept or a cultural reality?

Demian Schopf: That is a very difficult question to answer. I believe that on this continent, on the one hand you can find general features of “Latin Americanism” and general features of “Catholicism,” which may also be found in Spain and perhaps in the Philippines, as well. And then on the other hand, you have the general features of what we’d call “indigenous.” You also have places with a significant African influence, and others with almost none at all, like Chile, Paraguay, Bolivia and Argentina. During the nineteenth century there were substantial migrations from Asia and Europe to Latin America (the Chinese in Peru; the Japanese in Brazil; the Italians in Argentina; the Germans in Chile, Paraguay, Bolivia and Brazil, etc.). There has also been significant internal migration (Peruvians in Chile and Argentina; Colombians in Venezuela; Bolivians and Paraguayans in Argentina; and so on). Despite these differences, as a member of the so-called “Latin America” as a unit or celebrate this continent as the new Babylon—just as we cannot speak, either, of “the European,” “the African,” “the Asian,” or “the Polynesian.” Paris, London and Berlin are also similar to New York or Los Angeles. Migration has been a constant throughout world history and it has certainly accelerated during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Specifically with regard to Latin America as a homogeneous cultural unity, I’d like to offer one example: the Baroque art produced by Franciscan and Jesuit missions in modern-day Paraguay. During the Paraguayan Baroque, a curious phenomenon occurred. I owe my knowledge of this to Ticio Escobar, the current director of the Paraguayan Ministry of Culture. He explained to me that when the Franciscan and Jesuit missions started functioning in Paraguay, Guarani art had long been characterized by a strong vein of geometric simplification, so a Baroque style emerged that was infected by these elements that were, in fact, almost antithetical to it. The reason was the Baroque “pearl” and the Guarani “geometry.”

The symbol of the angel, on the other hand, has been found in Sumatra, Borneo, Greece, Italy, Rome and, and you do expect them a bit (as the Church did) in Pre-Columbian America: on the “Gate of the Sun” in Tiwanaku, in the petroglyphs of the Paracas culture, in the Amazonian shamans, in the Quechua Viracocha and Quetzalcóatl, the “Feathered Serpent” in Mesoamerica (which, moreover, recalls the Chinese dragons...).

I think the common pattern here, then, is the combination of something “Pre-Columbian” (or African) with the Spanish Baroque, which is very different from the German or Italian Baroque. History is a sum of layers, of veils—I cannot describe them all. I will focus on the painted apocalypic Angels and Archangels of Cuzco and on my rather more modest work. I proceed in a very typically literary method (since archangelic painting is extremely literary). And I do something similar to what the missionaries did: I transcode. They turned Viracocha into the Archangel St. Michael commanding a celestial army. This was a silent revolution. Transcoding means using a change of code to change the meaning of something. This can be a gathering of different codes, interweaved in one piece, and it is possible to displace this concept from the historical to the visual to the auditory. The harquebus with a sign that mixes a camouflage fabric, a pitchfork and a scythe painted in red or a cross held as a sword with a pitchfork inserted in its bottom, or an M-16 or a sport fishing harpoon—this is transcoding. Other names are associated with heraldic and numeric signs. The name, in this work, is the “Book of Dreams,” in which Enoch describes the androgynous factor that links angels and plastic materials. This leads to the following enigma: if one of the most common questions raised by the Colonial painting of angels and angels in regard to the apocalyptic nature of their names, why aren’t they limited to the seven angels of Palermo or, if not, to the twenty-four names? Does this mean that, for example, that the indigenous and “mestizo” painters were not fluent in Hebrew or Latin (and sometimes not even Spanish), and could have written the names wrong, thus multiplying the angelic pantheon, I, however, am not satisfied with this answer, except in specific cases.

Regarding the influence of my parents, they are both literature professors, yes, and I always had a good library at my disposal. I imagine that by osmosis this may have influenced me as well as my siblings. Regarding the relationship between “theory” and “art,” for me it is not something complementary, a bureaucratic step or a simple procedure to fit into a certain post-Conceptual art system (or market). It is a real need. I am currently working on a doctoral dissertation in philosophy with a concentration in aesthetics and theory of art.

EA: The fourth book (ca. 93 - 90) of the apocryphal text is the “Book of Dreams,” in which Enoch describes his allegorical dream to Methuselah. Four white men—anarchies—come down to Earth, tie up the stars and throw them down the abyss. Elephants, camels and donkeys fight among themselves. A white ox is destroyed. Noah returns to the return of the Messiah. This poetic tale, imbued with Surrealism, is called the “Apocalypse of the Animals.” Did this tale inspire you to create these images so filled with animals and so redolent of apocalypse?

DS: The role of animals in Catholic and Jewish iconography is well known. It is difficult for me here to expand on all the ways in which animals have been used. I will focus on the Colonial-era painting of animals. The symbolic and apocryphal nature of their names, why aren’t they limited to the seven angels of Palermo or, if not, to the twenty-four names? Does this mean that, for example, that the indigenous and “mestizo” painters were not fluent in Hebrew or Latin (and sometimes not even Spanish), and could have written the names wrong, thus multiplying the angelic pantheon, I, however, am not satisfied with this answer, except in specific cases.
In Peru, we find something even more radical: Santiago Matamoros, the Spanish symbol of the fight against Islam, who is also frequently represented as Santiago Matamoros the jaguar (or puma). Something similar occurs in the Amazon with the jaguar and the tiger. As we know the lion (or tiger), for example, is associated with Saint Mark, the snake with Lucifer, the fish with Saint Raphael, and the big fish with Leviathan, etc. I’d like to reserve a special place for the motif of the ape or monkey. What I am about to say about monkeys I learned from my friend Constanza Acuña, PhD in art history from the University of Bologna. In medieval bestiaries the monkey was always associated with evil and the figure of the devil, and depicted as its disrespectful, frivolous character. And yet Teresa Gisbert, who has been extensively quoted in this interview, explained that for the Pre-Columbian Chimú culture in Peru, the monkey was apparently considered a “sustaining god,” a sort of “Chima Atlas.” Gisbert, in her book Iconography and myths of Indigenous Art, quotes the observations of a Jesuit missionary named Amígada, who in his Extirpation of Idolatry (1621) describes the motif of the monkey in response to the Colla and Cueva’s seeing in Huanca “In the windows of the church we came across two wooden monkeys, and suspecting what they were, we found out that they were revered, and they were placed there to uphold the building. There was quite a long history about them.” As Acuña says: “For the Monkey story we explain in part why this motif of monkey columns survived in the Andean region until the eighteenth century. This is evident, for example, in the column of the choir of the Church of Santa Cruz de Juli, where one may observe a monkey at the base of the pillar.”

EA: Demian Schopf’s works are refined reflections on the history of colonization through evangelization in Latin America, and his relationship with the local indigenous culture. The iconography of apocryphal angels with weapons is a topic that the Andean painting of the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries received from European painting brought to the New World. It was thus not until the starting point of the modern age to be the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, despite the existence until

1 T.N. Translated as Saint James the Moor-slayer (also known as “San Tiago de Matamoros”) is a famous Spanish mythological figure who helped the Christians defeat the Muslims in battle.

2 T.N. Translated as Saint James the Indian-slayer.
was an important art movement producing protoconceptual works that were so difficult to interpret that the authorities at the time never even noticed them or realized their hidden subversive messages—at least, to the best of my knowledge, none of these artists was ever imprisoned or censored. However, despite this contradiction, this movement, known as the Escena de Avanzada, is possibly one of the most important formal modernizations in the history of Chilean art. My generation owes a great deal to the Escena de Avanzada. This sense of obligation with regard to what “political art” (as it is often dubiously labeled) “ought to be” is something of a relic of what we inherited from the academic art schools of the Escena de Avanzada in the post-dicatorship period. I was trained in one of these schools and, of course, I must acknowledge receipt of that sense of what political art “ought to be,” with all its attendant idiosyncrasies. As I did at the beginning of this interview I will refer to one example, which is related to the title of the series, La revolución silenciosa (The Silent Revolution). I spoke earlier of transcoding. Well, the first instance of transcoding was to call this set of operations a “silent revolution.” This inevitably points our attention to the appropriation of a reference that is as undesirable as it is necessary. There is a book entitled Chile: Revolución Silenciosa (Chile: Silent Revolution). Its author is Joaquin Lavín, a disciple of the economist Milton Friedman of the Chicago School that, as many people know, had a decisive influence on the economic policies of the Pinchot government. Joaquin Lavín’s “silent revolution” is essentially a justification for the institutional reforms undertaken by the military dictatorship. I chose this title not because I wanted to parody or undermine Lavín’s analysis: the genesis (in chronological terms) of this title arose from the need to replace the archangelic weapons with other objects and to contextualize this operation in a broader and less contingent field of meanings. The following paradox explains the use of an object that replaces the harquebus, the most obscenely categorical and explicit reference: in Chile the political forces that gained power through a revolutionary act were not the political forces that traditionally use revolutionary rhetoric: it was, in fact, a group of reactionary forces that caused a revolution through a coup d’état—one that was not at all silent. Lavín’s analysis does not make mention of the genuinely repressive methods that made the so-called Silent Revolution possible: the systematic use of terror, disappearance, and torture; the dismantling of the State, public education, and the civic space in general; and the imposition of new institutions through electoral fraud. Chilean sociologist Tomás Moulian calls it, in contrast, a “right-wing capitalist revolution.” Looking beyond Lavín’s vulgar rhetorical fraud, I prefer to focus on other possible ways to bring meaning to this veritable oxymoron that seeks to capitalize, through an advertising formula, on the forward-thinking nature of revolution with the discretion of silence.

I think scythes and pitchforks painted in red are signs that are associated with certain ideologies. Yet they find a surface for inscription in Latin America that is different from that of their places of origin (and of their history of art). This is what the Lavinian euphemism of “silent revolution” blatantly seeks to channel in such a twisted way. Combining these signs with others (such as camouflage fabric or the Catholic cross) places them in a context in which they function in relation to the things they have been arranged with. In turn, this hybridization is also an operation of transcoding in that it replaces the harquebus, in one case, or the sword of the Archangel Michael, in another, with a cross that ends in a red pitchfork. Following the same argument, but in a second sense, there are other meanings to be gleaned from the formula of the Silent Revolution, beyond the Chilean paradox and the delayed modernity of Latin America. Silent Revolution can also be understood as an apologetic moniker for the many processes of colonization and cultural transfer, among them, for example, the Colonial painting of apocryphal angels and archangels. A specific symptom of these processes is the way in which names and their virtues are inadvertently misspelled—this is what Ramon Mujica Pinilla supposes, and I think we should at least admit the possibility that in some cases it happened. This, nevertheless, does not exclude the possibility that the Book of Enoch has been used in Upper Peru as De Mesa and Gisbert think. In both cases, these errors occurred slowly, beyond any kind of “intentional consciousness.” It is a collective phenomenon that occurs silently, without any idea or project of subjectivity, like the accidental lack or surplus of names and virtues. To put the term “silent revolution” before the apocryphal titles and names, sometimes poorly written, is to work with naming, and to transcend in a literary sense. This is to say that history and the future unfold in fits and starts, in ways that are uneven, slow, unnoticed, inaudible...