

A Visual Poet

Managing Editor Elizabeth Herzing interviews artist Simon Toparovsky about his new exhibit, *Vessels and Channels*, a narrative art exhibition celebrating the human spirit and condition.

The exhibit opens November 9, 2014, at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles and runs through February.

Simon Toparovsky is an internationally acclaimed contemporary artist. After art school, he trained as a hand bookbinder and did restoration and conservation work on rare books while creating one-of-a-kind books as works of art. Since moving to Los Angeles in 1981, Toparovsky has focused on narrative sculpture. His work has received extensive recognition and has been acquired by numerous artistic institutions in cities throughout the world.

Q What is your background as an artist and how does it relate to your newest exhibit?

A In 2000 I was commissioned to create a bronze crucifix for the main altar of the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles. I am pleased it is celebrated for its artistry and evocation of compassion. Tens of thousands of Catholics visit and participate in devotion annually. *Vessels and Channels* is another chapter in my relationship with the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels. Throughout my career, I have focused on narrative works with themes and nostalgic components that call for understanding which, by definition, includes the investment of intuition and empathy. This was my first liturgical undertaking. It



was a profound spiritual exercise to devote myself to creating a single work that could portray heaven meeting earth, suffering as part of the human condition, and beauty as an attribute of the holy. And it is a privilege to create a work that would become an icon for the Catholic community and this cathedral.

The theme for *Vessels and Channels* was inspired by the devotional function of sacred images in the exhibition of paintings by Giotto di Bondone—*Florence at the Dawn of the Renaissance: Painting and Illumination, 1300–1350*—which was presented at the Getty Center in Los Angeles in 2013. Contemplating these traditional paintings and sculptures, which are infused with rich references to historical figures, myths, and

symbolism, intended as paths to the divine, led me on another journey—to create an exhibition as a visual poet, with installations of free-standing sculpture and wall works conceived as portals, contemporary paths to the sublime.

Q Explain the mission of the exhibit. What do you hope to accomplish through *Vessels and Channels*?

A With this exhibition, I would like to share the energy of my research and stimulate reflection. The mortal adventure is both difficult and exquisite. Seeking comfort, to experience joy, we find stories that repeat through history—complex, compelling stories that portray courage and vulnerability. Recognizing

and accepting that life includes tragedies and challenges, I wish to conjure scenarios through my art that resonate with an underlying message of optimism and hope. In a world filled with suffering: “It is each individual’s responsibility to find the ability to choose the right ingredients, to create the balance, to keep their critical, creative capacity intact as a productive, loving privilege,” stated my friend, Rev. John McLean. I pose the question: Beyond the ideas of reality and myth, traditional and nontraditional historical accounts—how can we celebrate our spiritual, emotional, and aesthetic aspirations with deep appreciation and gratitude?

Q What has the creation of this exhibit done for your own spiritual insight and growth?

A I have been reminded that my work as an artist is to portray the intensity of the human condition, demonstrating the value of accepting what is dark and celebrating what is beautiful. With narrative portraits of what is broken, I’m able to observe life as a deep meditation. For instance, I’ve depicted martyrs, anguished, rending compassion, and the wonders of nature as proof of God’s genius. Once again, I have had the privilege to find my own intersections with that place of wholeness and love, where heaven meets earth.

Q What challenges did you face bringing this exhibit to fruition?

A After securing the dates for this exhibition, I didn’t sleep well for six months. No amount of focused energy relieved my anxiety. I recognized the broad responsibility I had assumed and questioned whether I could really do my best work. For the next six months I kept a notebook by my bed, to capture thoughts that woke me, aiming to

maximize the energy that bubbled within me. Apparently, sleep isn’t in the cards for me in this cycle. For the last six months, I’ve been getting up at 3 AM, full of strength and excitement to continue my work from the day before. I hope this exhibit will be potent for those who see it. As I envision the completed installations, I recognize this interval as another intense spiritual exercise. It is satisfying to know that I can experience that alignment, stand in that place, immersed as a channel in the ineffable.

Q What makes this exhibit unique?

A I think the best artwork is personal, work that no one else can do. I believe I’m telling stories that no one else can tell. Each of us has a unique path. I attended religious school starting at age five. I was fortunate to have understood independent passion and discipline at an early age. At age seven, I began a serious program in horsemanship—a door that led to my first experiences of immersion—focus, work, joy. I’ve worked on the pages of illuminated manuscripts; observed roadside shrines; viewed glass sarcophagi made by Alaskans newly converted to Russian Orthodoxy; studied sculpture, architecture, and gardens from Meso-America and the Old World; farmed for self-sufficiency in Central New York in the 1970s; sustained work and an Italian life in Milan—all of which influenced my work.

If I’ve been genuine and successful in producing depth with this work, others will be stirred by the energy of my interpolations. I wish to transcend temporal boundaries and connect to “the song of the universe, the music of the spheres” (Joseph Campbell). That is my meditation. For the viewer, I hope to evoke strong inner, private, and emotional experiences. ●



For viewing and further reading

The BBC documentary series *How Art Made the World* (2006) examines the deep-seated and universal human desire to create art.

The scholar Joseph Campbell’s four-volume work *The Masks of God* explores world mythology.

The Sacred Image in the Age of Art by Marcia B. Hall (2001) analyzes the role of sacred art and artists in the Renaissance.

The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi by William C. Chittick (1984) introduces the work of the Persian poet, jurist, theologian, and Sufi mystic.

Zealot, Reza Aslan (2013) portrays the culture of Roman Judea, history and ahistory, in the time of Jesus.

Visit simontoparovsky.com to learn more about *Simon Toparovsky: Vessels and Channels*, the artist, and his work.