

The Divine Light of Josef Strau

Strau's collage-paintings merge the word and the light, while positing the shared slipperiness of language and faith.

Natalie Haddad

June 15, 2019



Installation view, *Josef Strau: The Prototype*, Gaga, Los Angeles (all images courtesy Gaga, Los Angeles, photos by Michael Underwood)

LOS ANGELES — The two large, antique casement windows on the northeast wall of Gaga, Los Angeles, open to palm trees and a shimmering, placid lake. The view is of MacArthur Park, but, aside from the buildings in the distance, it conjures images of the Mediterranean. Below, a sidewalk preacher bellows Biblical verses to passersby.

The setting seems tailor-made for German artist Josef Strau's current exhibition *The Prototype*. Strau emerged from Cologne's late 1980s and 1990s art scene, populated by figures such as Martin Kippenberger and his sundry assistants, some of whom, like Merlin Carpenter and Michael Krebber, later became successful artists. Strau laid lower, quietly assuming the roles of artist, writer, and curator (from 2000 to 2006 he ran Galerie Meerrettich in Berlin), and creating installations from cardboard, tape, and thrift-store objects, with lamps playing a central role.

The Prototype is a formal departure for Strau. Four gallery walls are lined with 23 mid-sized canvases covered in the thick tin foil used for contemporary Mexican icons. Cut-out lines reveal colored marker on the surface of the canvas underneath, and form the outline of what we learn from the wall text (which doubles as the exhibition's press release) is a simplified angel shape, inspired by the 14th-century Byzantine painter Theophanes.

The wall text, which also mimics Theophanes's angel motif, is composed as a loose first-person meditation on the artist's motivations, as well as the tradition of religious angel paintings and the concept of prototypes. It begins, "The first thing I wished to paint was an angel because it is the guardian above the bed of a child." But as Strau strives to realize his wish by making "prototypes" of painted angels, the sincerity of the image becomes threatened: "the fear of doing idolatry and the fear of doing heresy was becoming a balancing act."

With this admission, Strau invites viewers to question his motivations, and as a consequence, his doubt and potential failure seem to infiltrate the luminous artworks. Yet his statement also opens up another possibility, more remote perhaps, that the artworks are genuine attempts to transcend not only "idolatry," but irony and cynicism as well, modes that have come to dominate the modern, secular world in which Strau operates as an artist.

This invocation of text marks the exhibition as Strau's. A former critic for the journal *Texte zur Kunst*, he regularly integrates writing and art, often engaging the press releases, as he has done here. But his work centers on the relationship between text and illumination, more than word and object. In past exhibitions — for instance *Josef Strau* at the Brussels gallery, *dépendance*, in 2007 and *18INIQUITIES* at Greene Naftali in 2008-9 — lamps and printed texts play off each other, shifting meaning back and forth between two kinds of illumination, light and enlightenment.

With the tin pieces in *The Prototype*, Strau moves beyond this interplay. A cheap substitute for gold and silver gilding, the tin foil is meant to evoke the blinding light of the divine that symbolically designates traditional icons as repositories of God's word. In this comparatively sparse and conventional installation, the ephemeral, ethereal quality of light itself changes the space from a room of canvases to an environment shaped by light and duration. Natural illumination from the gallery windows reflects off the artworks, constantly transforming their surfaces and obscuring the image of the divine intercessor. Literally and figuratively, they're hard to read.

The text here is more a performative device than an elucidation of the artwork. The works themselves are both luminous and discursive, the latter because the image embodies the paradox of representing the divine. In this way, they merge the word and the light, while positing the shared slipperiness of language and faith. On one wall, the black type of the angel-shaped text is repeated alongside each of the canvases, forming "shadows" that cite another intangible effect of light.

Strau positions his works in relation to those of traditional icon painters by emphasizing the former's material imperfections: uneven seams between tin sheets; spots of solder; loose, sketchy lines of pigment delineating the angel forms on the exposed canvas. These elements signal the requisite humility of the icon painter, but Strau's text, in its play with signs and symbols, warns us not to take his words at face value.

The artist's writing practice is essentially diaristic, but his de-centering of the "I," his circular assertions and questions, and disruptive grammatical errors point to the instability of the subject. If icon painters exploit light to remind us of our blindness in relation to the divine, Strau appropriates this strategy as self-reflection — or rather as spectral reflections of himself and other profane mortals obsessively seeking faith and illumination. Caught in our own blinding light, we are blinded in return.