

## Toward the Art Subject: An Introduction to Icons in Ash.

By Heide Hatry

For the philosopher, all art is abstract, and that is, paradoxically, perhaps why philosophy begins its historical relationship to art in suspicion and even why the social function of art has become progressively more isolated, or sequestered, from “the real world,” something to look at or to contemplate rather than to experience as full human beings. The artist’s approach to the material order, which for Plato was at best a murky reflection of the true, rendered it all the murkier and less real, while his philosopher strove to purify the mundane and find in it the guttering spark of the ideal with which it was infused – also a mode of abstraction, we might note, although for Plato the ideal was the quintessentially real. So, from the philosophical point of view, wouldn’t it be just as true to say that all perception is abstract, even, depending on how one views the relationship of mathematics to nature, that all being is itself abstract?

As science supplanted philosophy (and theology) as the dominant world-view of the west, even, that is, as recognition that the spiritual has evolved from the physical and not the physical from the spiritual has become commonplace, the irreality, or socially speaking, the marginality, of art became even more self-evident to the ordinary person. If it has become a commodity, it is nevertheless generally regarded to be an inherently useless commodity, ineffectual in “the real world” except as a means of containing “value,” or of igniting very personal and not necessarily very laudable desires. It remains a shade in a world of things and affairs.

For the artist, on the other hand (at least, perhaps, until the dawn of conceptual art, and this fact bespeaks the complexities and pitfalls involved in dividing up the world by means of language), “there is no such thing as abstract art.”<sup>1</sup> Art is first and foremost material that she has shaped in accordance with her vision, slowly elaborated and inevitably altered in the making, the result of an engaged material practice that does not insist upon any specific relationship to “the world” because it is already in and of her world, even as it, like philosophy, takes the liberty of commenting upon it as well.

To see art as surface, and hence as abstract – and even sculpture is essentially surface, its interior basically non-existent qua artwork, but merely an unarticulated armature for the emergence of external form – is the obvious temptation for the passive viewer, not least because this has been the intention of the artist as well. And this has been the principle understanding of the art object during the lengthy post-animist, or historical, period. Even if aspects of its hieratic, ritual, totemic, or communal functions have persisted in the shadows of the mainstream position, even if a sluggish undertow of

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1 Picasso and Dubuffet express the thought in more or less these same words.



Paul Schmid 1931 - 1993

resistance to its increasing social irrelevance has accompanied the enveloping tide of utilitarian realism, the artwork stands to most of us at most times in a merely scopic relationship, as a visual object.

And yet, the barrier between life and art has been a question with which human beings have struggled since they first tried to understand why it was and what it means that we make art, reflecting a basic frustration or urge for transcendence at the heart of all human creation that was already expressed in the ancient Greek myths of the artist, Pygmalion, Daedalus, perhaps Orpheus as well, and in the Platonic antagonism against the poet's simulation or imitation of reality. Material, for what seem to be obvious reasons, has been the nexus of this inquiry: It is the given, the limit of our capacity to create. And we have, accordingly, been content, by and large, to see it as merely the stuff of our art and form as its real content, as the occasion for other purposes and effects, the positive to which the negative of human work or human creation, is applied, which, as Hegel understood it, is the death of nature, its transformation, its subordination to the extraneous and often, as it happens, willful or irrational, and even pernicious, purposes of humanity. If we could not create living things or engage the world in the manner of what we imagined as that of a "true" creator, our every act can and does change, negate, transform, or destroy it. But we have, after all, created the inner world by means of these manipulations, more or less complex, more or less refined, of the stuff of the outer.

For me, as an artist very powerfully, but as a person even more intimately and expansively, the material realm, matter in all its diverse specificity or particularity, is what matters, and my relationship to it, and I believe everyone else's as well, is the bedrock of all understanding, sympathy, respect, decency, and trust. Our distant forebears endowed the waters, the winds, trees, plants, stars, mountains, and their special places with spirit by way of saying that these were the sources of power and mystery that had drawn them out of their animal languor and awakened their souls, that spoke to them in the still remembered language of the earth. For the material to have become mere instrument, or less, commodity, represents the first closing of our eyes to the world, the first turning away from its debasement and our own, from the suffering and destruction of the animate, now also reduced to just stuff, and from understanding our own complicity in that descent.

Over most of the last two decades, the materials I have used in my own art have been fundamental to what is taking place within it, and there is a reason for this. During much of the history of art, the aesthetic object dissembled reality, first to mimic it using materials that had been extracted and refined from it (minerals, soil, plant fibers, pollens, powders, or distillates, animal residues or reductions, etc.), and more subtly and pertinently, to make things appear as they are not or to distract us from what they are: to falsify history, propagate myths, support systems of oppression, reinforce artificial hierarchies as if they were the will of God, and in general, to imply that the way things are is the way things

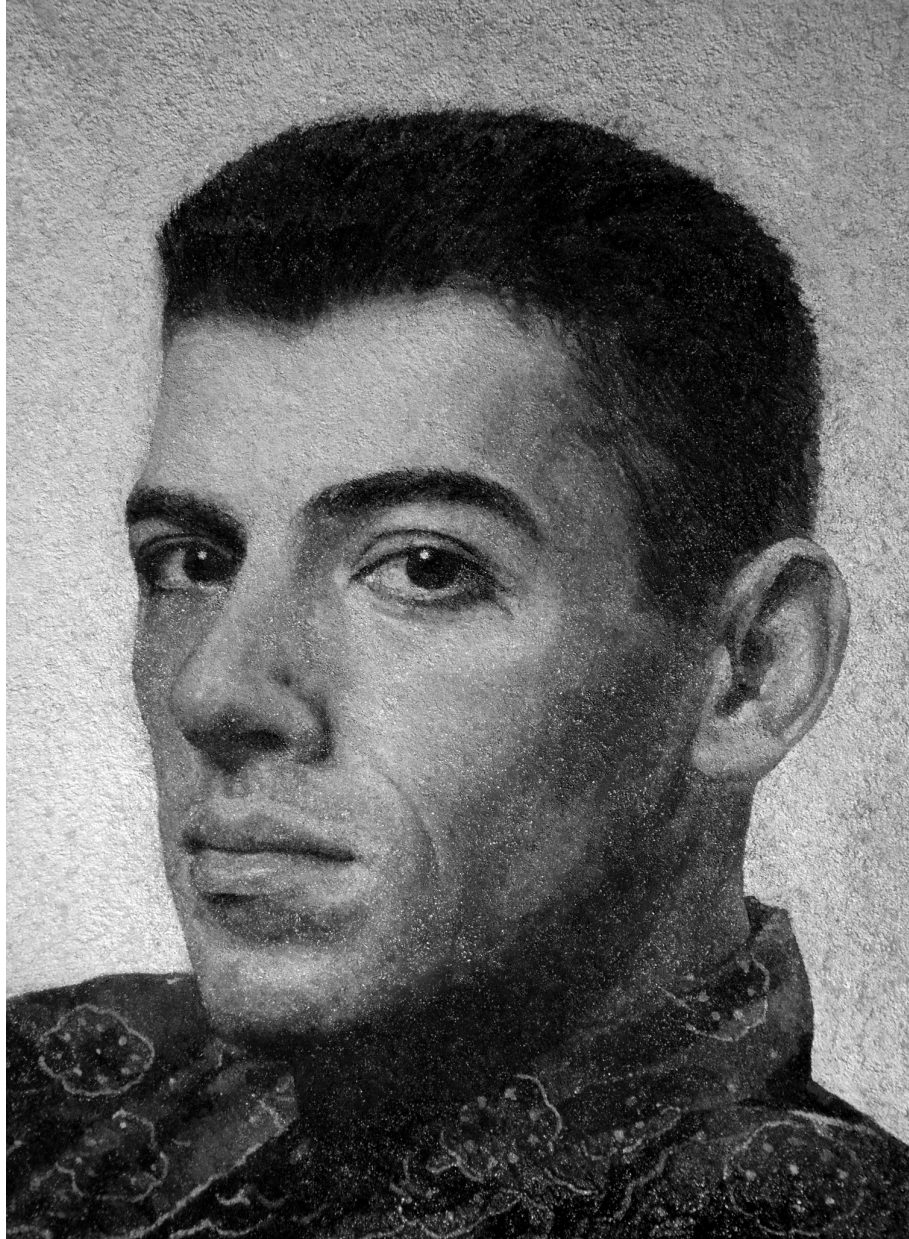


Emily Jordan Boxer 1928 -1994

must be; that we live in a realm of facts; that possibility is dead. Naturally, there has always been a contrary force in art as well, a utopian strain or moment even within art at its most abject, that defies, if sometimes sotto voce or obliquely, the regime of the everyday, and it is here that the material, evidence by turns of the uncorrupted world or of what the world has done to it, can bring to light other possibilities.

In using form, this coded system of illusion, or less generously, deceit, to give voice to my material, which, as the bad conscience of the industrial, consumerist, capitalist, or, ironically, materialist, world, has understandably been suppressed, or rather, to let it speak on its own account, my strategy has been to exploit the disparity between image and material, between expectation and knowledge and, ultimately, between appearance and truth, to compel my viewer to acknowledge some of the unpleasant realities on which our pleasant, smooth-functioning world is built: the ubiquitous deceit, methodical injustice, willing ignorance, and, in the end, the great mass of death in which we quietly acquiesce just in living the way we do. First in the several bodies of work in which I used the dead, discarded, and perforce accusatory remains of the animal slaughter industry to create objects and representations of objects, some overtly disturbing, some ostensibly benign, and more recently, in the textured, resonant, and articulate portraits I have painstakingly re-assembled from the ashes of their erstwhile subjects and which, chemically, genetically, are their subjects, I have been working with a different kind of art dynamic, in which the material substance of the work, both the specific being, the stuff, of creatures no longer alive and in a sense, death itself, lurks within a deceptive amalgam of visual and social expectations only to emerge when once the viewer's defenses have been pacified. These images embody and express a truth in their very substance, the truth of how they have come to be, of what they are. I understand them as art subjects instead of art objects, the story of whose existence is compressed in these residues of themselves and which call for an act of empathy and self-examination on the part of their viewer, of feeling in its place, of drawing the outside into herself, as opposed to the act of imagination or picturing to oneself that is typically invoked by the visual artwork.

When my father died, now many years ago, I was distraught. There was no one to whom I felt so connected at the very core of myself. Though we hadn't been able to spend much time together for quite a while, and certain misunderstandings had colored our relationship, I always expected to fix that when time and circumstances would permit. I couldn't believe that now I would never have the chance to make that happen. It took years before I could even think about him without collapsing inside. And then I was again taken unawares by death: one of my closest friends killed himself, and in a most disturbing way. In my devastation, the still unresolved pain over my father's death angrily returned to reinforce my grief.



John Bernard Boxer 1925 -2004

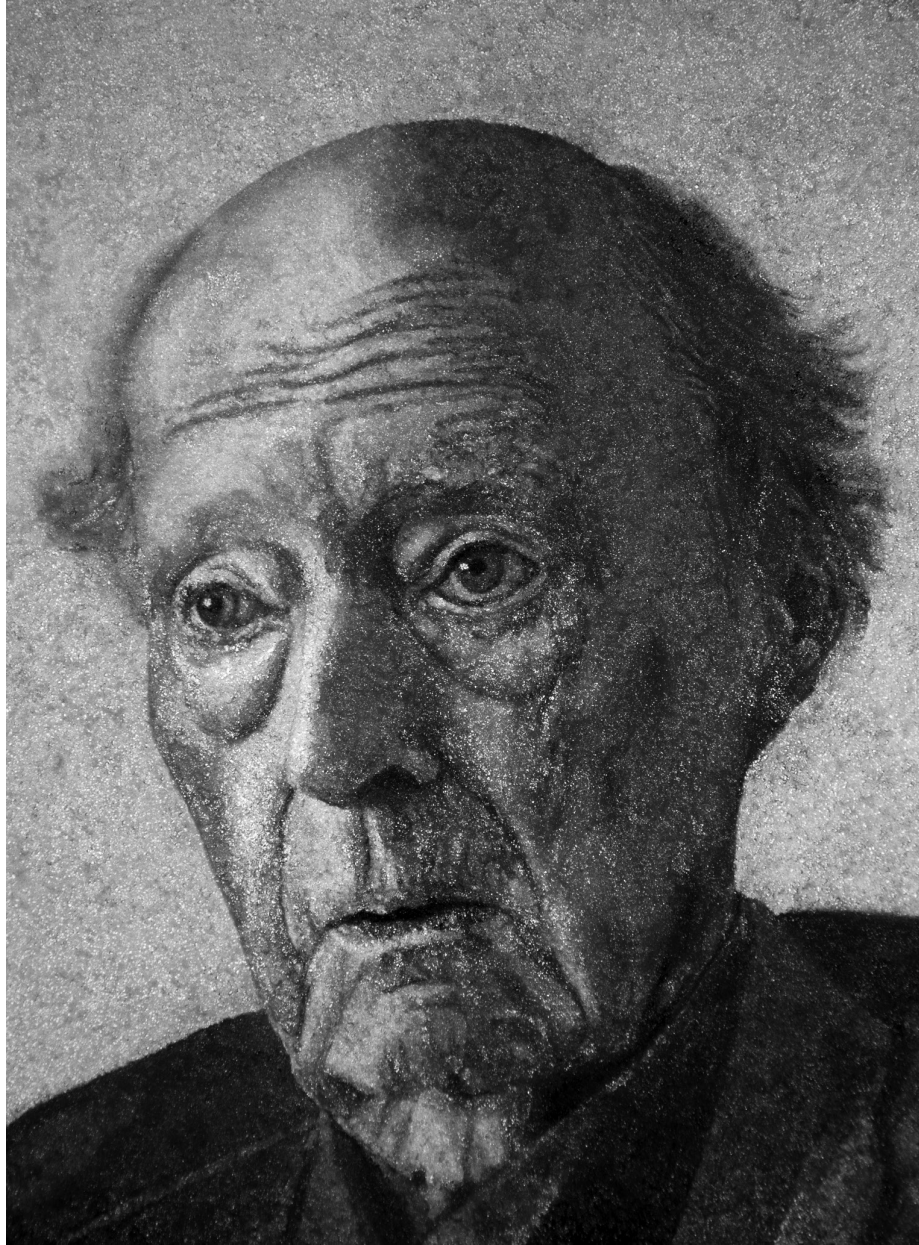
My art ideas usually come to me in a sudden jolt, like a revelation – the solution to a problem I didn't quite understand was a problem. They arrive as if they had been gestating in secret and only now were emerging fully formed. I can remember that I already felt a strange calm the moment I thought: I have to make portraits out of my father's and out of Stefan's ashes. Making the portraits was both comforting and energizing in itself – I felt that it was in some way a shamanic act – and once they existed, I lived with them as if my father and Stefan themselves were there with me. I cried and I screamed at them and explained myself and talked to them and listened, and soon their ethereal presence melded into my life: My connection to the people I loved was no longer broken by death.

Since then, I have made quite a few portraits for others out of the ashes of their deceased for people who were suffering much as I had been or in any number of other ways, and they, too, have experienced a deep solace in communion with these potent images of their loved ones. They often tell me that having them in their lives in this way has been transformative. Some say it was not the "closure" that they had imagined they wanted, but a re-opening, or a sense of continuity that has been extremely important to them; others describe their relation to the portraits as what they imagine holy relics must have meant to the ancient Christians, a powerful, ineffable, and irreducible presence. I have since learned that a very thoughtful practitioner of the funerary trade<sup>2</sup> has observed a similar effect among the bereft she has known who simply stay with their deceased for some hours after death: They integrate the fact of death, come to terms with it, say or think their deepest thoughts in a kind of unhurried farewell and are able to make the transition to a life without them unburdened by the feelings of inconclusiveness and remorse that leave so many in a crippling state of grief nowadays when the first thing on our minds in the face of death is to have the body removed and hidden as quickly as possible, and by unknown technicians whose duty is precisely to sanitize the whole process. We have always understood that the dead do not simply die and disappear and that there is and must be a continuity in our relationship with them, but late in civilization we have adopted an efficiency of death that ignores these truths.

In *Icons in Ash* I want to reintegrate life and death, to touch death, work with death, to be an artist of and for death, to let it speak in its mundanity, its grandeur, its familiarity and its mystery, its uniqueness and its universality, to redeem it from oblivion, to give it its own life again. For me, this is a fundamental act of reconciliation. Though it may be commonplace to say that in the modern era we have isolated or banished death from our lives, that we cannot bear to look it in the face, as if we are embarrassed by it, the simple fact of grief makes it obvious that a different relationship is not only possible, but that it is necessary. Judith Butler observes that the phenomenon of mourning tells us that death is inherently social. If we want to be able to understand and to live with it, we have to reintegrate it into our social being. We have to remain connected to the dead and with

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2 I refer to Caitlin Doughty, author of *Smoke Gets in your Eyes* and *From Here to Eternity*.



James Otis Purdy 1914 - 2009



what they have meant and still mean to us.

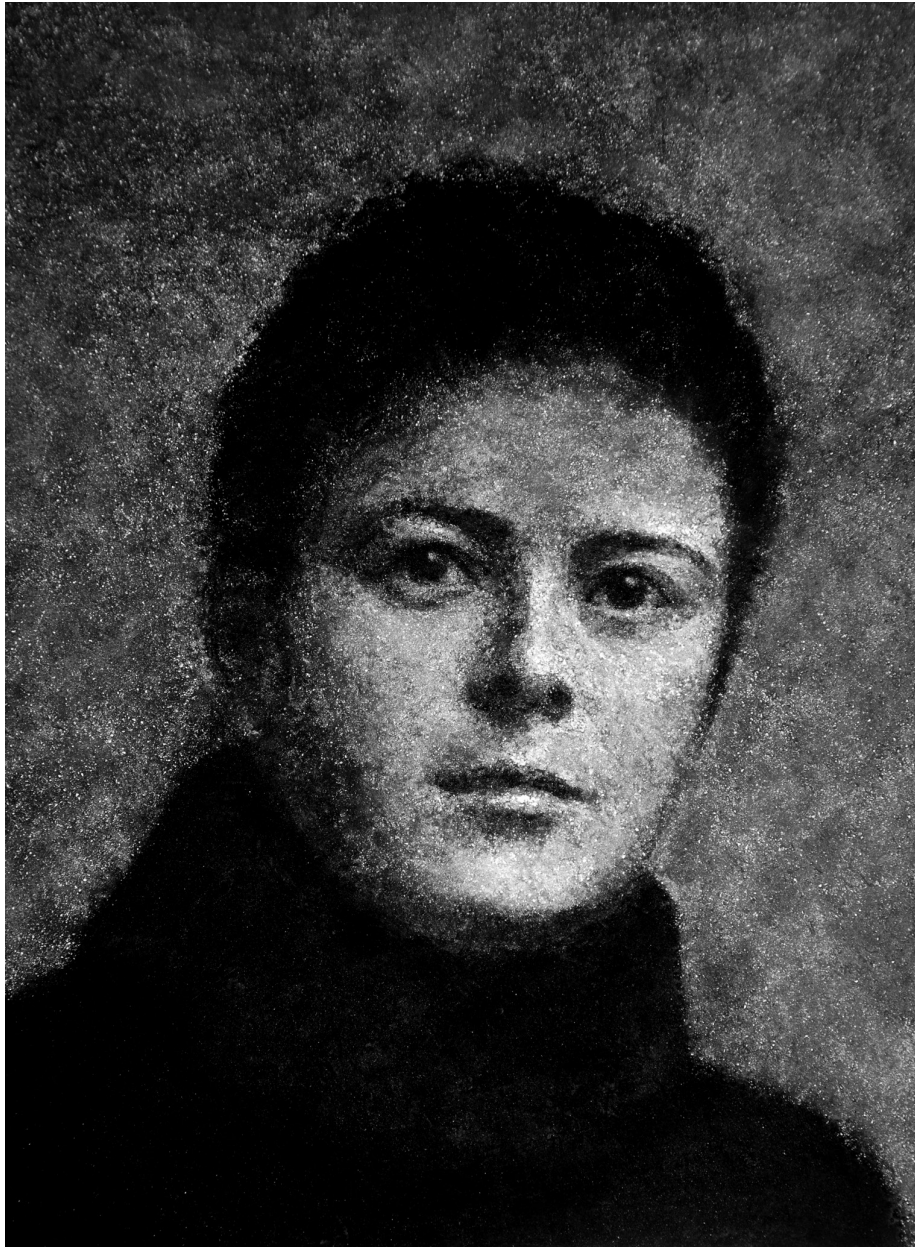
Banal and unworldly at the same time, let's say tenuous, or maybe ghostly, the power of these deceptively ordinary images comes from something beyond their appearance, though that is still quite relevant to their effect, and they look the way they do for profound internal reasons. I would like to say that it comes from their substance, in a quasi-scholastic sense of the word, a notion that late modernist painting acknowledged in its own way in insisting that its images were in fact "just paint." My images, instead, undermine this always somehow artificial-seeming and folksy ethic in being the thing they represent, in embodying the person. The fact that you are actually looking at that person, that person who no longer exists in our usual way of thinking, achieves something that portraiture has never succeeded in doing, though this was always its impossible ideal, supplanted by the notion that "art" somehow shows the "true" person in a way that he or she could never appear in life. Our feeling that the portrait has always held a secret is embedded in the quasi-Platonic truth that the greatest of them transcends by an ineffable sorcery not only the moment, but every moment, that they are their subject: We say, "It's you," when the portraitist succeeds in conveying the essence of the person. But even with the advent of the pure image, with the development of the photograph, which much more so than the painted portrait is always a relic from the past and hence in a profound sense a memento mori, the image is no more than a shade, for the person depicted has already ceased to exist before the image even comes to be. In looking at vast numbers of photographic portraits, we see what is common more than what is individual. They blend into a sort of typical human being, and show us the consanguinity of the race, its common legacy and its common fate rather than its incalculable specificity. We see emptiness; we see death. If they hold a secret, it is this absence, this loss.

My portraits, by contrast genuinely embody a secret, the secret truth of life. Not that we die, not that life is merely the unfolding of death, or that in death nothing remains, but that death is the relationship in which we stand or will stand to everything that is important to us, a relationship of memory, of transformation, of reintegration, and of art, which are in fact the only modes of immortality that we know. Death is our secret, and the way we keep it, the way we are true to it, is art. Art is always created from ashes, from the ashes of our experience, of who we once were, which becomes lifeless, forgotten, anonymous, or futile, only if we fail to make something of it, to tend it, to care about it, to remember. It reminds us that death is a very particular relationship among us, that it is ours, that we are the keepers of life for the dead and of the dead for life. We each have our particular responsibility to it, and only by abdicating that responsibility does death become the sullen and intractable force as which we tend to see it today.



Marie Smith 1862 -1959

In these small, modest images, with which I have now lived for years, images that do not merely represent but which are their subjects, I have experienced an effect similar to what I have sometimes felt in small, dim Russian churches in the presence of subtly radiant icons, the uncanny experience that we are not alone, that our truth is a simplicity that we rarely encounter. The icon is a peculiar object. Although it does not subscribe to what we normally think of as an aesthetic, it nevertheless projects a power that even the greatest artworks seldom achieve. And I think in this respect it is similar to these portraits in ash: It does not so much try to imitate something or to point beyond what it is as to actually be something, not merely to represent it, and that means to be essentially particular. The "veronica," the "true image" - of course the fusion already shows that this is a paradox that will not be resolved - on the Shroud of Turin, to give an extreme and obviously problematic example, bears the trace of the actual presence of its subject. The contact that it embodies mysteriously persists. We remain within the charged field of a lost presence. In these Icons in Ash, our relationship, the profound, ineffable contact we have had with the dead persists, and their life persists in us. This is the mystery that I wish to share; this is something that matters.



Lena Sereda