

LIMITATIONS AND POSSIBILITIES IN PAINTING:
TRACING THE UNREPRESENTABLE

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to Katie and Myszka – my fellow New Jersians.

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The Chasseur in the Forest

“Recognize yourselves and the time in which you live.”¹

Caspar David Friedrich (c. 1830)

Is it surprising that Friedrich advocated contemporary life as integral part of his work in the early nineteenth century? It is insofar as Friedrich has traditionally been understood to have promoted a turning away from the world to face subjective conditions. This tendency is evident in Friedrich’s work whenever his depicted viewers turn their back to us. Often these figures stand on elevated points in which case the world underneath or beyond functions as place of contemplation. With the exception of inner human conditions, Friedrich’s paintings rarely acknowledge anything outside the natural landscape. That said, one wonders if his landscapes replace the world or if they simply contain it.

In 1814 Caspar David Friedrich participated in the exhibition “Ausstellung patriotischer Kunst” (“Exhibition of patriotic art”) which was organized by the Russian prince and Governor General of Dresden Nikolaj Grigorevich Repnin-Wolkonsky. The previous year, the advancing Russian Army had defeated Napoleon at the Battle of Nations at Leipzig resulting in a French withdrawal from the territories east of the Rhine. Friedrich returned to his hometown of Dresden, now under temporary Russian control, and contributed two works for the patriotic exhibit. One of the paintings he submitted was “The Chasseur in the Forest” from 1814 (Fig. 1). Three-quarters of the painting is populated by fir trees traditionally associated with German nationalism. In the lower half

¹ Friedrich, Caspar David. “Observations on Viewing a Collection of Paintings Largely by Living or Recently Deceased Artists.” in *Art in Theory, 1815-1900*; ed. Charles Harrison et al. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005), 52.

a lone soldier stands amidst the forest's glade with his back turned to the viewer. Upon closer examination, the figure can be identified as French dragoon (and not a "chasseur") facing the potential perils of his invasion.

The use of symbolism (forest, tree stump, sky, raven, solitary figure, cross, etc.) in Friedrich's work has been commented on perhaps too many times. It is an undeniable fact and part of his visual practice as early nineteenth-century Romantic and enlightened Christian. But what makes "The Chasseur in the Forest" a striking painting is how he renders a particular contemporary event. If we take Vladimir Ivanovich Moshkov's "Battle of Leipzig" from 1815 (Fig. 2) as a more traditional painting of war, we realize how none of the pictorial conventions in Moshkov's painting are employed in Friedrich's "Chasseur." Apart from Moshkov's questionable skill level and almost cartoon-like portrayal of soldiers, he paints a topographical landscape stretched out horizontally before the viewer and strewn with multiple skirmishes, explosions and other acts of war. In Friedrich's painting no particular place or city is indicated and war is explicitly absent. While Moshkov illustrates the advance of anti-French forces, Friedrich places a single soldier in front of a dense forest who seems not only introspective but even reluctant to cross the invisible boundary made up of numerous, vertical tree trunks.

The dominant verticality of Friedrich's forest in "Chasseur" is rarely found in any other of his paintings. A horizontal orientation in his landscapes usually suggests the continuation or infinite extension of space; it allows the viewer's eye to wander freely and assume nature a boundless experience. Vertical arrangements, on the other hand, create focal points and thereby areas to linger and reflect upon (Fig. 3). This interrelation between horizontality and verticality is always a compositional and conceptual choice.

But in lieu of Friedrich's fervent patriotism and the sheer complexity of the events surrounding Napoleon's defeat in Germany, "Chasseur" points to another possible reading.

As German as a fir tree forest might be, the notion of "nationalism" is too general and vague to be applied to a natural phenomenon alone. In many other paintings by Friedrich fir trees regularly populate the landscape and thus would be equally as "nationalistic" as the trees in "Chasseur." The label of "nationalism" therefore raises more questions than it answers. One of the questions could be as follows: If the forest which stands for the German nation thwarts the French soldier who represents Napoleon's army, what does that say about the relationship between the two? Although the fir trees represent the German effort on a symbolic level, the very same trees designate a point of demarcation in the painting. Their verticality and opaqueness mark an area which may not be entered by the enemy.

Rather than a stand-in for the failed *Grande Armée*, the French soldier constitutes an empowered individual. Accordingly, the dragoon appears to be caught in a moment of indecision. At this point he could proceed further or turn around. This narrative open-endedness and ambiguity in Friedrich's war painting is incomparable to Moshkov's version which features all basic ingredients of a traditional battle painting. "Chasseur" is also oddly retrospective. We look at the member of a defeated army who has not yet entered the premises of his conqueror-to-be. In "The Chasseur in the Forest" Caspar David Friedrich pictures war as site of absence and not as experienced event. Visible consequences of war such as violence, loss, defeat and death are absent from his work. Instead of picturing war, Friedrich questions its representation.

Modes of Whiteness

The semester before I began my thesis project, I made several paintings that had one question in common: how do you go about representing something unrepresentable?

What precisely is being said when it is maintained that certain entities, events or situations cannot be represented by artistic means? Two different things, it seems to me. First, that it is impossible to make the essential character of the thing in question present. It cannot be brought before our eyes; nor can a representative commensurate with it be found. ...The second, by contrast, challenges art's exercise of its power.²

In this excerpt, Jacques Rancière points to a twofold condition of unrepresentability. On the one hand, the subject of representation resists its translation into an artistic medium. On the other, the artistic medium itself poses its own limitations and thus powerlessness to represent an event or situation. Although Rancière refers to film documentaries in his essay “Are Some Things Unrepresentable?,” the questions he raises remain true for painting. Painting offers possibilities and limitations. Why not renew painting's possibilities then by pointing to its limitations? Is not the “unrepresentable” just another word for the “unthinkable”? In that case, painting's strength is its ability to fail greatly in wonderful ways.

My investigation into the question of unrepresentability opened up a new array of possibilities with the paintings “Robe” (Fig. 4) and “White” (Fig. 5). The idea for these paintings was suggested to me by a lecture given by art historian Martin Berger at Rutgers' Center for Cultural Analysis in 2009. He discussed the viewer's inability to perceive modes of whiteness in nineteenth-century photographic landscapes of the American frontier. What makes this realization intriguing is not so much the fact that landscapes can be racially determined, but rather the proposition that the inherent

² Rancière, Jacques. “The Future of the Image.”(Brooklyn: Verso, 2009), 109-110.

structure of “whiteness” is one of invisibility. This idea of a blinded viewer engaging with an invisible subject was the starting point for my Ku Klux Klan paintings.

After I finished my work on “Robe” and “White”, the very same interest in the invisible and unrepresentable continued throughout my thesis project.

Let it not be so now: A Divine Image

“I am ready for death. When I press this button, eternal life in paradise will fill me with God’s reward. There, God willing, I will meet the companions of the Prophet and the martyrs and those who live wholly by the example of the Prophet.”³

Cüneyt Ciftci in a video message shortly before his suicide attack

On March 3rd, 2008 a Toyota Dyna truck drove toward the Sabari district center in the eastern Afghan province of Khost. A video published a few days later on the Islamist website *shadetvakti.com* (now defunct) showed the truck, seen from a fairly distant viewpoint, approaching the building. Suddenly, small arms fire set off followed by an enormous blast which caused the center to collapse. Several men can be heard exclaiming “Allah hu Akbar!” (God is great) repeatedly while the camera zooms away from the explosion to show a valley surrounded by heavily ragged mountains and a low hanging, veiled sun. As many interpretations as the concept of the “sublime” might have received over the last two and a half centuries, here, in this video sequence, it seems to be particularly close to its darkest meaning.

When I came across an article about this suicide attack at the end of March of the same year, I did not expect to read anything unusual – at least nothing which had not

³ Meining, Stefan, and Senyurt, Ahmed. “The Case of the Bavarian Taliban,” in *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, ed. Hillel Fradkin et al. (Hudson Institute: Center on Islam, Democracy, and the Future of the Modern World, 2008), 103.

already been said in one way or another. But as it turned out, this story was entirely different.

The suicide bomber who steered the Toyota into the district center was 28-year old Cüneyt Ciftci, a German-born Turk. Needless to say, this detail caused a sensation in Germany. Never before had a German-born resident carried out such an attack against U.S. forces. How was it possible for somebody who was born and raised in Bavaria to join an Islamist terror organization with the goal to give his life for an idea that is equally rooted in belief and unbelief?

Although an important question to ask, the thought to turn this report and its implications into a painting did not occur to me until after I arrived in New Jersey in July of 2008. I then read a more detailed account of Ciftci's journey to Pakistan and his final destination in Afghanistan. As a result of his attack, two civilians and two American soldiers – Spc. Steven R. Koch, 23, of Milltown, NJ and Sgt. Robert T. Rapp, 22, of Sonora, CA – were killed. I was baffled to find out that Milltown is only a ten minute drive away from my studio in New Brunswick. From that point on, I decided that I had to find a way to integrate this news story into my practice.

In the early stages of my thesis project, the only thing which was certain was that I wanted to paint a piece with a religious subject. In a eulogy by Rev. Edward Czarcinski held for the fallen soldier Steven Koch at a Catholic Church in Milltown, the Reverend compared Jesus Christ to Koch and concluded that “there is no greater love than to give up your lives for your friends.”⁴ Steven Koch was one month away from returning home, and although official military records indicate that he died in combat, he was killed by a

⁴ Joshua Burd, “Patriot is bid farewell,” Home News Tribune, <http://militarytimes.com/valor/army-cpl-steven-r-koch/3409054/> (accessed March 15, 2010).

wall that collapsed on him as result of the explosion's blast. Drawing a parallel between him and Christ invokes one of the most powerful and radical virtues in Christianity: martyrdom. According to the Reverend's logic, both Koch and Christ did not die in vain. They sacrificed their lives for the benefit of others – so too did German martyr Cüneyt Ciftci (Fig. 6). While the former are praised and elevated for their deeds, the latter is condemned. But how do we tell them apart? What are the grounds of our judgment? Is it Faith? Is it common sense? Politics? In relative religious terms both parties are equal. Even the argument that Ciftci committed suicide is not valid since he used his own body as extension of a divinely sanctioned plan to turn against those who have abandoned God. Precisely because of this analogy of the martyr, I decided to root my thesis in what both sides in this war of (rather than “on”) terror have in common.

In Christianity, Islam and Judaism (and in Latter-day Saint theology for that matter) the archangel Gabriel is considered a messenger from God. When we look into the Western tradition of religious depictions, one reoccurring motif which features Gabriel as central figure is the annunciation. On several trips in the summer of 2009, I visited the Louvre in Paris, the British Museum in London, and the Metropolitan Museum in New York with the intention to see as much as possible of each museum's collection on medieval and early Renaissance art. Another location that proved to be crucial for my thesis was the Unterlinden Museum in Colmar, France. When I visited the museum in 2005, Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece had just been restored. Upon seeing it, Grünewald's twisted, agonized, wiry and elongated versions of the human body provided me with a sense of how divine matter turns into profane flesh.

With these images in mind, I started laying out the interior space which would then accommodate my version of the annunciation. The first drawings combined bits and pieces by painters of the annunciation such as Albert Bouts, Melchior Broederlam, Fra Lippi, Sandro Botticelli and Fra Angelico. One of the few elements that remained virtually unchanged throughout the process was the inclusion of a photographic image depicting Cüneyt Ciftci (Fig. 7). Once I had settled on the main design of the space which was distributed on two separate panels, the next step was to think about what figures to use. Because the annunciation space in my thesis project describes a collision of multiple spatial concepts, the featured figures would have to respond to these assembled conditions of the interior. As mentioned earlier, Gabriel was the first figure to be included in my planning due to his prominent role in Christianity and Islam. Mary Magdalene, the sinner, references the martyr Jesus Christ while the Prophet Muhammad holds a more ambiguous position.

In case of the Prophet Muhammad, I had to undertake extensive research. When a series of vulgar and inflammatory Muhammad caricatures were first published in a Danish newspaper in 2005, their reception in Muslim communities throughout Europe and in parts of the Muslim world led to riots, loss of life and culminated in the more recent developments around *Jihad Jane* and *Jihad Jamie* in the US.⁵ It was crucial for me to try to understand the long-standing tradition of depictions of the Prophet Muhammad if I wanted to include a representation of him in my paintings. In that regard Oleg Grabar's book *Masterpieces of Islamic Art: The Decorated Page from the 8th Century to the 17th*

⁵ These colorful names were coined by the media for U.S. citizens Jamie Paulin-Ramirez and Colleen R. LaRose who were arrested in connection with a plot to assassinate a Swedish cartoonist.

*Century*⁶ proved to be enlightening. Even though Islam disapproves of human or animal representation in a religious context, illuminated manuscripts such as the illustrated poems by sixteenth-century Persian poet Nizami point to a tradition that has been widespread in the Muslim world for centuries (Fig. 8). Since the Taliban's destruction of two ancient Buddha statues near Bamiyan in March of 2001, today's misconceptions of what cannot be depicted in Islam seem to have been hijacked by a fundamentalist movement.

An additional and more contemporary reflection on the relation between art, Islam and fundamentalism was offered by the exhibition "Iran Inside Out" which I saw at the Chelsea Art Museum in 2009. Entirely composed of Iranian artists who live either in or outside of Iran, I was mainly interested in the work of Shoja Azari and Shahram Karimi. In their project on display at the show they used Mohammad Modabber's late nineteenth-century painting "The Day of the Last Judgment" which shows a veiled Prophet Muhammad in the context of the Last Judgment. Next to him Azari and Karimi inserted an interactive video playing edited footage from the beheading of Polish engineer Piotr Stanczak who was captured by the Taliban in 2008 (Fig. 9). Clearly meant as provocative gesture, the artists' straightforwardness demonstrates how Muslims today are acutely aware of the schisms inherent to fundamentalist ideology.

Once I had gathered the necessary information on specific conventions of iconography, I started working on the main panels which would later become the back panels in my final installation (Fig. 10). My approach to painting the panels was insofar adventurous insofar as I had only a vague idea of how the final image would come

⁶ Grabar, Oleg. *Masterpieces of Islamic Art: The Decorated Page from the 8th Century to the 17th Century*. New York: Prestel, 2009.

together. First, I started with the architectural elements by creating a somewhat solid framework for the three figures. The colors were mainly in the range of a pale blue, mixed with a yellowish ochre and zinc white. The colors red, green and blue were used in many parts of the interior as well as for what would later become a landscape (Fig. 11). When the entire annunciation space was finished, I started to paint the figures. Beginning with Gabriel's head I got a sense of what color, hue and appearance he would have. I departed from van Eyck's Gabriel because I wanted a fuller, fleshier, Rubenesque version of Gabriel (Fig. 12) – an archangel that is not only earthbound, but who acknowledges his audience by looking out at the viewer. Grünewald's Mary Magdalene followed next and then came the Prophet Muhammad.

While I gave myself several weeks to work on each of the faces, the bodies were mainly done in one sitting per figure. Each figure posed a different set of peculiarities. In case of Gabriel, I wanted to maintain the strict, flattened gothic drapes which undermine any sense of physical presence. Mary Magdalene's already de-boned body had to be decomposed further by using the divide between the two back panels to establish a rupture in her otherwise uniform appearance. With the Prophet Muhammad I decided to take one more step toward a partial dissolution of the represented body. After I had painted the Prophet riding on his mythological horse Buraq, I used pure turpentine to go over the recently finished areas. Slowly, layer after layer was removed and the constellation of horse and prophet turned into one undefined unit.

At this point, I could continue to describe how each painterly decision informed the following one, how the idea to emphasize formal "difference" over "uniformity" means to leave the final painting in an unresolved state, how the applied colors become as

important as the image they compose, why the viewer is confronted with several views of the installation (Fig. 13 & 14) and for what reason a painted wooden box containing three prints on transparent sheets is inserted inbetween the panels (Fig. 15). But what these observations fail to address is the painting's actual challenge. One of the issues I attempt to address with my thesis is what cannot be seen, and what remains invisible rather than what is present. This is not to be understood as some fanciful trickery at the expense of the viewer. The words "invisible" or "unrepresentable" describe the quality of certain images. Looking at Ciftci's image we do not assume that he volunteered for a suicide attack or wonder why he did so. In case of Prophet Muhammad the representation of the sacred (which is considered to be unrepresentable) is addressed through the depiction of a veil. Everything the viewer needs to know is right there on the painted surface. What is not given though is the opportunity to access my work by simply experiencing the wonders of its surface.

In one of the many critiques and discussions which followed the installation of my piece, a person questioned the value of my didactic use of "illustrations." I believe this comment sheds some light on what I said earlier about the "invisible" in my work. We hardly come to this world knowing how for instance Mondrian's concept of figure-ground differs from Cezanne's. On the other hand, when we start making our very first drawings, everybody's house - as long as we were born in a Western country - consists of about the same rectangle with a triangle on top. In other words, we see and draw what we know. And what we know is ever-changing, because we continue to learn.

When we are made to believe that the Islamic terrorist, our twenty-first-century enemy, represents everything we are not, what happens if we learn that he or she is one of

us? Born and raised in a Western country like Cüneyt Ciftci, the Fort Hood gunman Nidal Malik Hasan, Alabama born Omar Hammami, Daniel Patrick Boyd, John Walker Lindh, Jamie Paulin-Ramirez, or Colleen R. LaRose. Do we then still believe to recognize “evil” when we see it?

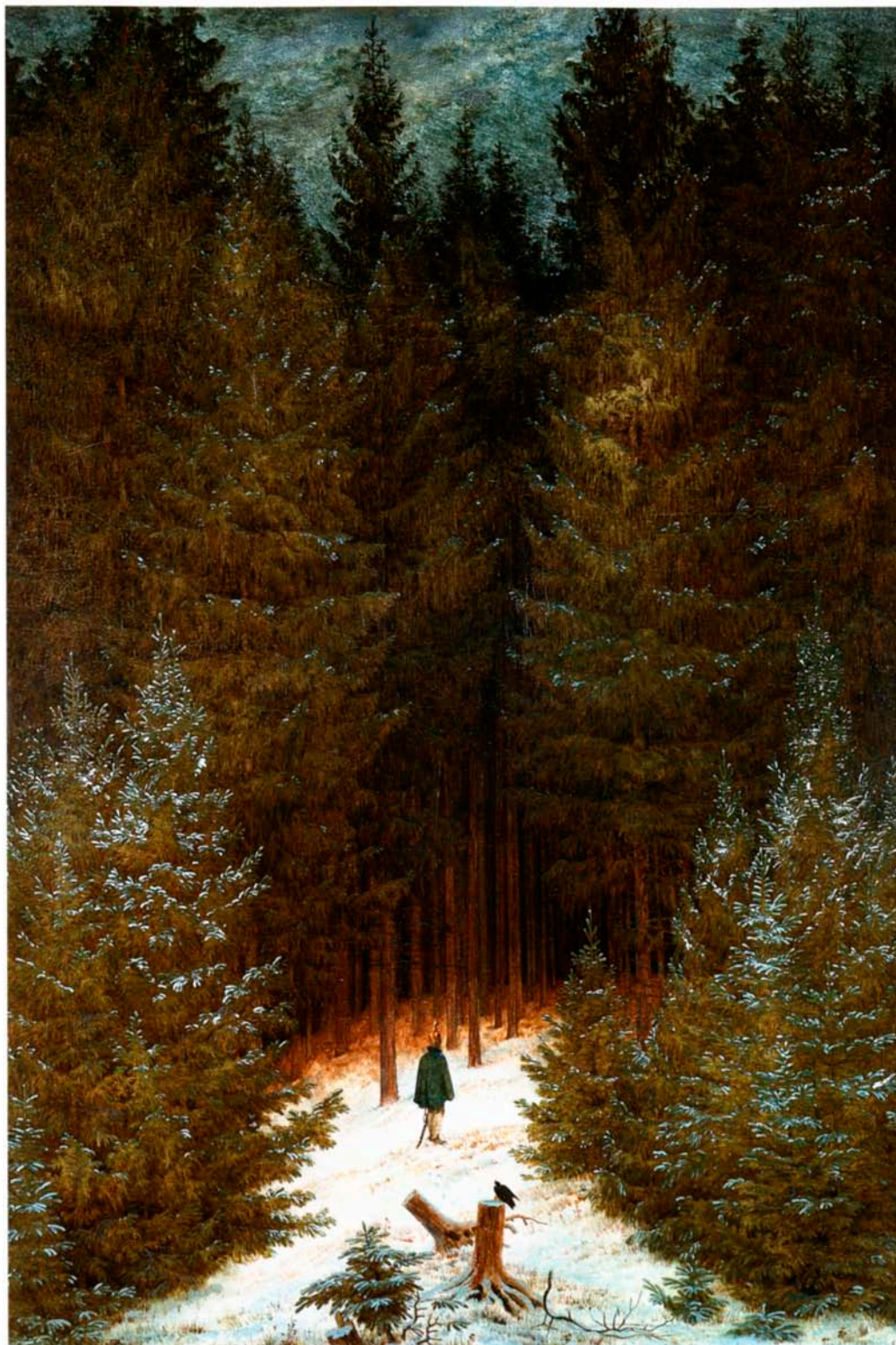
Since we tend to be terribly opinionated and eager to draw conclusions, any viewer will have to approach my work with an unbiased mind – no matter what ideological camp they belong to. In truth, it is unlikely that anyone will follow my own request, but I advise my viewers not to confuse illustrations with iconography. After all, iconography is “that branch of the history of art which concerns itself with the subject matter or meaning of works of art, as opposed to their form.”⁷ Whether we like it or not, the images of Gabriel, Mary Magdalene and the Prophet Muhammad do rely on iconography. If we intend to understand their use, we need to realize what the origins of these images are. Otherwise their meaning will remain invisible and we will be tempted to judge too quickly based solely on what we see and assume to know.

⁷ Panofsky, Erwin. “Studies in Iconology – Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance.” (Oxford: Westview Press, 1972), 3.

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Figures



(Fig. 1) Caspar David Friedrich, *The Chasseur in the Forest*. Oil on canvas, 26" x 18.5", 1814



(Fig. 2) Vladimir Ivanovich Moshkov, *Battle of Leipzig*. Oil on canvas, dimensions unknown, 1815



(Fig. 3) Caspar David Friedrich, *The Solitary Tree*. Oil on canvas, 55cm x 71cm, 1822



(Fig. 4) Viktor Witkowski, *Robe*. Oil on canvas, 40" x 30", 2009



(Fig. 5) Viktor Witkowski, *White*. Oil on canvas, 40" x 30", 2009



(Fig. 6) A picture of Cüneyt Ciftci (to the far right) with two unidentified men taken in Afghanistan in early 2008.



(Fig. 7) Sketch from early August 2009 showing a first layout for the annunciation space with an assumed location for the inserted photographic image.



(Fig. 8) Nizami's Khamsa (Five Poems), *Muhammad's ascent into heaven*, dimensions unknown, Tabriz, Iran, 1539–43



Azari & Karimi - "Coffee House", 2009 - Video painting. LTMH Gallery / © Concept: Shoja Azari - Still from a video installation, detail. Courtesy: East Central Gallery, London

(Fig. 9) Azari and Karimi, *Coffee House*. Still from Video Painting, 2009

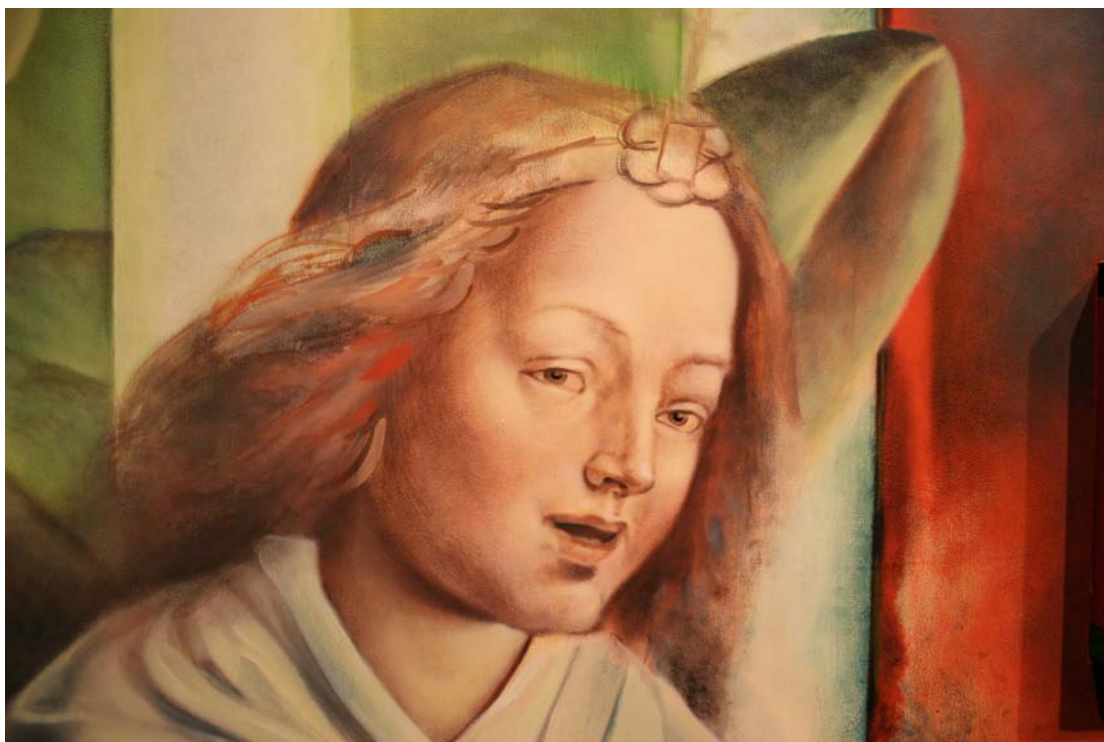


(Fig. 10) Viktor Witkowski, *Let it not be so now: A Divine Image (German Martyr Cueneyt Ciftci with Gabriel, Mary Magdalene and the Prophet Muhammad)*. Oil on wooden panels, mixed media, 2010 – Back view of installation

The installation consists of 2 pairs with 2 panels measuring 8' x 4' x 12" each.



(Fig. 11) Viktor Witkowski, *Let it not be so now*. Back Panels in September 2009



(Fig. 12) Viktor Witkowski, *Let it not be so now*. Detail of Back Panel with Gabriel, 2010



(Fig. 13) Viktor Witkowski, *Let it not be so now*. Installation view of front panels, 2010



(Fig. 14) Viktor Witkowski, *Let it not be so now*. Side view of installation, 2010



(Fig. 15) Viktor Witkowski, *Let it not be so now*. Detail of wooden box, 2010

The wooden box contains three photographic images printed on transparent sheets. The box is placed inbetween the two back panels. It measures 5.5" x 7.5" x 3.5" and is painted in oil.