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**The Art of Faith and Faith in Art:  
The Relationship between Byzantine Iconography and  
my Contemporary Art Practice**

**Agapi Nikolakopoulos**

**A Thesis  
in  
The Department  
of  
Art Education**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Master of Arts in Art Education at  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **The Art of Faith and Faith in Art: The Relationship between Byzantine Iconography and my Contemporary Art Practice**

**Agapi Nikolakopoulos**

This thesis examines the efficient, material, formal, and final causes of the art works I created, and exhibited at Gallerie Art en Majuscule on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2002. My works stem from two distinct art traditions: Byzantine iconography and Contemporary art. I recount my process and analyze my reasons for creating in both the Byzantine tradition and in my personal approach that is influenced from contemporary art and Byzantine iconography. I examine the reasons for creating art and go on to associate my results with four teaching philosophies that I believe provide art students and art educators with functional and purposeful reasons for art making.

## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my uncle George Nikolakopoulos whom without I would not have had the opportunity to discover the beauty and sense of serenity that is induced in the art of Byzantine iconography. Working and learning with someone who truly believes in what they do will provide me with a sense of worth in what I do and remembering the experience will always bring a smile to my face.

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Vesna Krstich, and Deena Apel for their help and support throughout my thesis. I would also like to thank my thesis committee: David Pariser, Lorrie Blair and Paul Langdon for being patient, understanding and thorough with their feedback. I am grateful to those who took part in my exhibit, my friends, and family for encouraging me and helping me set up those really heavy art works at the art gallery and all the extras.



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## **INTRODUCTION**

The subject of my thesis lies between the two art traditions that I practice. Byzantine iconography is an art form that was first introduced to me several years ago in Greece by my uncle, iconographer George Nikolakopoulos. The other tradition is a contemporary one, and it was developed through my own artistic experience in my contemporary environment. The final product of a studio inquiry into these two practices was exhibited at Galerie Art en Majuscule on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2002. The exhibition looks at the relationship that exists between two distinct art traditions, and my studio inquiry thesis explores the cultural, educational and purposeful factors that contribute to my artistic creations.

A rather challenging psychological phenomenon occurs in my search to reveal my artistic identity. I feel a clash between the set of traditional values and beliefs I hold as a Greek Orthodox and those I hold as an emerging contemporary artist. Throughout my search, I question my beliefs and undergo a roller coaster of emotional guilt. And though, the images of religious icons are meaningful and sacred to me, I feel and acknowledge that these are images that belong to a different place and era than the one in which I am actually living.

When I create in the contemporary tradition, my main struggle is to separate myself from all established or traditional ways I have been taught; in particular I draw upon my icon learning as the model to which I compare my recent production, and I ponder the intent of each tradition. The romantic notion of preserving tradition, together with my need to explore beyond this notion, compels me to further investigate the conflict I feel about the relationship between these two art traditions.

## **QUESTION**

While I never fully devoted myself to the customs and traditions of Greek Orthodoxy, as the Canadian culture also had an impact in my upbringing, I oftentimes wondered why I got so involved in iconography in the first place. This brought me to the challenge of this research: to investigate both aspects of my art making. Why do I make icons in the Byzantine tradition and why do I have a more personal body of work reflecting my contemporary world? By identifying the factors that lead to my production, I am hoping to uncover the conflict that exists in my artistic identity.

## **RESEARCH PLAN**

In the discussion part of my thesis, I will use literature to provide definitions and historical accounts of the art traditions in question. I will present the ways in which some iconographers modify the Byzantine tradition according to their surroundings and give an account of contemporary avant-garde artists that use religious content in their work.

The literature will assist me in situating my artistic standpoint. It will augment my own personal outlook, which has developed as a result of my ongoing learning process in the studio. In examining my own learning process, I will use a phenomenological, qualitative approach that will complement my studio inquiry. The essays I have written throughout my Masters in Art Education degree are discussions of self-reflection and observations that were made throughout the course of my artistic production during the two first years of my degree. In addition to these, the combination of my memories of my artistic process and my present critical outlook on my works will serve as the qualitative data that I will use for my inquiry.

My research is based on the body of work I presented at Galerie Art en Majuscule in September 2002. The show consisted of a series of Byzantine icons together with contemporary paintings and installations, all of which I began creating during the studio portion of my degree (2000-2002). In Research Practice Arte 682, I developed an interest in exploring the process and purpose of iconography. As I learned then, according to Aristotle, four causes must be present and operative whenever people transform raw matter or material into an artifact. Mortimer J. Adler summarizes these:

1. Efficient cause: that *by which* something is made.
2. Material cause: that *out of which* something is made.
3. Formal cause: that *into which* something is made.
4. Final cause: that *for the sake of which* something is made (1991, p.42)

In other words, when identifying the causes of an artifact, one should ask: (1) Who made it? (2) What is it going to be made out of? (3) What is it that is being made? (4) For what purpose is it to be made? In my inquiry, I will employ Aristotle's four causes as guidelines with which I assess my artistic process and production in both the Byzantine and Contemporary traditions. The categories helped me break down the four main components that contributed to the creation of my work. I will present the four causes in the following way:

In my assessment, I will first present the efficient cause of my work. Here, I will reflect upon my artistic background and education as an iconographer, and as a contemporary artist. Then, with the help of my class notes and recollections, I will recount the technical aspect of my artistic process. This stage addresses the material cause of both the icons and my contemporary works. I will merge the formal cause with the material cause in the

presentation of photographs documenting my works from the exhibition. I will also provide a personal narrative that reveals the meaning I have given to each of my contemporary works. My artworks will be presented in the sequence in which they were made, in conjunction with the process involved in their creation. Altogether, the photographs will comprise 9 Byzantine icons, 6 contemporary paintings, and 6 installations. The icons are: (1) 'Archangel Gabriel,' (2) 'St. John,' (3) 'St. George,' (4) 'Christ the Pantocrator,' (5) 'Virgin Mary and Child,' (6) 'St. Nicholas,' (7) 'St. Faye,' (8) 'St. Sophie and her three daughters Faith, Hope, and Love,' and (9) 'Jesus calling Matthew...' My contemporary works consist of: (1) 'butterfly,' (2) 'dart,' (3) 'excess,' (4) '8 o'clock,' (5) '9 o'clock,' (6) '10 o'clock,' and (7) '11 o'clock.' The installations are: (1) 'cityscape,' (2) 'landscape,' (3) 'building,' (4) 'tree,' (5) 'fish,' and (6) 'treeptych.'

Finally, for the final cause, I will disclose the purpose of my artistic production in each tradition, and show how my work satisfies my quest for meaning and spiritual focus. I will explain how Byzantine iconography has influenced my contemporary works. I will answer the question, "why did I get involved in iconography in the first place?" I will clarify the reason for entitling my previously anonymous exhibition: "The Art of Faith and Faith in Art."

## **DISCUSSION**

The following discussion defines the Byzantine and the modernist and contemporary art traditions; it provides an historical account of these traditions, and presents artists who work in these areas.

### **BYZANTINE TRADITION**

Byzantine iconography is an art form depicting images of Jesus, Virgin Mary, Saints and Martyrs. Weiss comments,

Orthodox Christianity and the Roman Catholicism were both part of an undivided Christendom until a millennium ago, when they split. The two traditions still have much in common, including the use of images in worship, but the veneration of icons occupies a more prominent place in Orthodoxy. (2001, p.2)

Iconography is a tradition stemming from Orthodox Christianity. A tradition is “the handing down of beliefs, opinions, customs, and stories especially by word of mouth or by practice” (Nault, 1985, p.2217). Therefore, it follows that one would have to learn the customs and beliefs implied within a tradition if he/she should want to use it or preserve it. To provide a better idea about the traditions in Byzantine iconography, I present you with Albert C. Moore’s words:

In the developed doctrine of eastern orthodoxy icons are seen as sacred manifestations pointing beyond themselves to the eternal archetype who is unseen in heaven. The icon should not therefore be realistic; anything in nature of statues or 3-dimensional images is prohibited, with tests and limits specified on reliefs to



ensure their flatness; likewise natural light and shadows are omitted from paintings. The icon is regarded as a window or mirror reflecting supernatural light and enabling the viewer to experience the power of the holy from beyond. (1977, p.247)

An iconographer, the maker of icons, must use specific art materials such as a wooden panel, glue size, chalk mixture, egg tempera made with real pigments, egg yolk, water and gold leaf. The preparation, sketching and painting procedures are quite technical and are exclusive key features to making Byzantine icons. Weiss explains, “An Orthodox iconographer must learn the church’s many rules about what icons can and cannot look like” (2001, p.3). The materials used, such as the egg tempera, reflect a preservation of technical durability, which in turn echoes the stability revealed in the resilience of the traditional procedure. Likewise, the durability of the paint metaphorically mirrors the viewer’s eternal faith in the religious figures. Any substitution for egg tempera would not be able to comply with the very task the egg tempera is meant to provide. The next factor in the search for the maintenance and conservation of tradition is the requirement that the artwork go beyond the final product. Hence, the spiritual value accorded becomes the intrinsic value of the work. The use of the traditional materials demands, and accordingly results in, a display of trueness within the artwork.

In countries such as Greece, Russia, or Yugoslavia where the tradition is prevalent, universities and other art institutions include the instruction of this art form on a regular basis. In Canada such a tradition prevails only amongst a small fraction of its people; therefore, icon workshops are more likely to be found in community-based settings.

Having looked into commentaries made by Canadian Byzantine iconographers vis-à-vis their methods, I have taken note that many of them are self-taught. Slavco Protic has made an icon of the Virgin Mary as the “Mother God of Canada,” and he includes symbols of maple leaves. He defends his work by saying “that there is a rule, and the rule is, you cannot take anything away. So you can add, but on the only condition not to destroy the old way” (Owens, 1996, p.15). Within a multicultural society, communities or even individuals of a given culture often feel the necessity to practice the traditions of their culture in order to identify with this group of people. Like iconographers all over the world, Canadian Byzantine iconographers endeavor to pursue and maintain their tradition, so that the spiritual meaning accorded to the icon can be delivered unto a receptive community of faith.

### **MODERNIST AND CONTEMPORARY TRADITIONS**

Images made by avant-garde artists are not intended solely for a community of faith; instead, they communicate to an informed public in order to reveal current social, political, and technological issues. Avant-garde artists are people who are ahead of all others in using or creating new ideas, methods, designs, or styles (Nault, 1985, p.139). Their works may be described as unconventional and experimental, constantly defying the limitations of art, breaking away from the legacy of the past and the conventions of the present: “Early modern artists reconceived their role, not as artists traditionally had - reflecting the values of an established culture predicated upon a continuity with the past - but as agents of a new culture that would forever look toward the future” (Fox, 1987, p.9).

Contrary to the traditional Byzantine iconographer, the avant-garde artist may be said to have faith in him/herself, and is more likely to be an iconoclast, someone “who attacks cherished beliefs or traditional institutions which he thinks are wrong or foolish” (Nault, 1985, p.1047). Furthermore, even though great religious art has shaped much of Western culture, art and religion are not a homogeneous pair as seen by the contemporary world. Artists are often accused of attacking sacred images, insulting believers, or expressing their disapproval of religion (Heartney, 2000, p.57). The view that integrating sacred imagery into contemporary ideals may alter the meaning and undermine a religion’s valued intent is a popular notion, which I also consider in the course of my search due to my unexplored venture of crossing faith in God and faith within.

As I examine the works of contemporary visual artists Lisa Bartolozzi, Matthew Ritchie, and even Andy Warhol, I learn how their creations are inspired by religion. They seek to express faith, use biblical reference as a foundation for their work or disclose a personal statement about spirituality. Artists such as these “range from devout believers to those who are caught in the contradictions between the tenets of the faith in which they were raised and the realities of their lives in the modern world” (Heartney, 2000, p.57). And though the reality of this discrepancy exists amid such artists, it is an actuality of the common person living in today’s multicultural urban setting.

I view the avant-garde artist as a creator of alternative solutions and of faith, for the reason that such artists deal with issues that pertain to the evolving human race. Because it may be a little difficult for non-experts of the visual arts to grasp what I mean, I will give you an idea about how what I view is relevant in the mainstream contemporary music scene: Metallica – a heavy metal band from the early 1980’s- released an album in

2003 entitled 'St. Anger.' Their CD pocket illustrates an unknown Saint-like figure of an angel tied up in anguish. Together with the ochre colored background in which the figure rests, there is a direct suggestion of iconographic imagery. The lyrical content of 'St. Anger' manifests the expression of inner turmoil, as lead singer, James Hetfield's public persona of an anger driven artist and his ordinary side eventually clash, hereby incarnating an icon that is representative of this pile-up (Fortnam, 2003).

## MY ART TRADITION

**EFFICIENT CAUSE**: that *by which* something is made.

The materials we work with reveal what we do, and they can also tell what we are. When someone works with the traditional materials used to create an icon, the *efficient cause* is the iconographer, and when someone works with materials used to make paintings, the *efficient cause* is the painter or the artist. The *efficient cause* of the icons and the contemporary works presented in this thesis is me, the maker: Agapi Nikolakopoulos. However, in respect for the icon tradition and for the purposes of this study, I have separated my role as an iconographer and that of an artist who creates art in a contemporary tradition. In what follows, I reveal how these roles seemed conflicting to me, and chart my process of exploration into iconography. I use the present tense as a way to recollect my journey in the way I remember it.

I learn about iconography during my visit to Greece in the summer of 1996. I walk into my uncle's workshop and am intrigued as I see him create a Byzantine icon. I see other completed icons displayed around the room. He asks me if I know the name of the Saint he is painting. I observe the icon my uncle has been working on: the figure has a

moustache and a beard, and he looks like Jesus Christ. It turns out I am wrong; my uncle corrects me. "It's St. John," he states and then he goes on about the symbolism and meaning of the icon. I am not able to follow any of what he is saying as the terminology does not make any sense to me. This does not bother me because what I am really fascinated with is the process and the perfectly crafted result.

I return to Canada, and I attempt to recreate an icon with the few materials I have: two brushes, gold spray paint, acrylic paints, regular bond paper, and a reproduction of the Virgin Mary and Christ. Considering that I do not have any previous training in iconography, the result is quite satisfactory. I then enroll in a class offered by Montreal's Greek community on the subject of Byzantine iconography. Dr. Hadzinicolaou conducts the lectures, and they take place on Saturday nights. I am the youngest of all who attend the lectures, and I find myself unable to grasp much of what is being said. And though I learn new things, I am disappointed that this is not an actual icon workshop.

The following summer (1997), I get a job at Omer DeSerres, an art supply store in Laval, where I work as an art materials consultant until November 2003. Because of this job, I am able to experiment and discover new art materials, and I am fortunate to gain much knowledge about many materials, tools and their applications.

That same year, I begin my undergraduate degree in Art Education at Concordia University. At the time, I feel that subject matter and meaning are not as important as the practical effort that is put into a work of art. I can only give meaning to my works after they are completed, and only when painting instructors ask me to perform this tedious duty. And so, I continue to make paintings that use time consuming techniques requiring lots of effort in their application. Working in this manner gives me a sense of fulfillment

as the product reaches its final stages. Getting the work done right and beautifying it is my main objective. Throughout my studio courses I realize, and more notably, accept, that technique is not the only important component in art making. Still, I have a difficult time letting go and incorporating this newfound knowledge in my work. The images I create are visually prearranged in sketch form or in my mind, where I can see what the final picture looks like before it is completed. Due to this artistic aptitude, I have no difficulty carrying out the traditional and customary methods implicated in Byzantine iconography.

I finish my undergraduate degree, and in the year 2000 begin my Masters degree in Art Education. In my Studio Inquiry courses, I begin to experiment with new materials and techniques. Components of iconography arise in my personal work. It is the summer of 2001, and I take the initiative to learn more about iconography and return to Greece, where my uncle instructs me in becoming a qualified icon painter. In the small town of Megalo Horio, in Evritania Greece, I become his assistant for two weeks. The assignment is to embellish with Byzantine imagery the walls of Agia Paraskevi, the village's 15th century church. The tasks assigned to me involve sealing the walls with blue paint, coloring in the decorative shapes that make up the ornamental design of the church, applying preliminary coats of paint onto the sketches of the saints, and being attentive to the suggestions and requests of my mentor. As I work in a serene environment, I learn about the church's history, Byzantine design elements, the Saints' narratives, line coordination and color application.

**MATERIAL CAUSE**: that *out of which* something is made.

**FORMAL CAUSE**: that *into which* something is made.

Because my personal narrative of my contemporary work also serves as part of what the work is, I include it in the formal cause prior to presenting the work's photograph. The narrative is presented in italic letters.

In my first year of Studio Inquiry classes at the Masters level in Art Education, I experiment with various art materials in the attempt to discover whether I work more comfortably with one material than another. Also, I want to see if the use of different materials changes or has an affect on the meaning of my work. I rework a self-portrait I had made a few years previously in my Painting 201 class: I add to it a gold leaf background, and it gives off a whole new feel.

I am told during a class critique that my work has a sense of narrative, that the art materials I use are visually exciting, and that my interest in iconography is apparent. I take the feedback into consideration and try to develop a theme. I am unsuccessful, as I am still in the phase of experimenting with materials, and am paying less attention to the meaning of the work.

About this time, a photograph of a butterfly's silhouette that my brother has taken at the Insectarium fascinates me. I return to my Studio Inquiry class with the impression this photograph has left on me. I create a work which I call 'Butterfly' (see Figure 1); it represents a flying human-like figure and is inspired by the photograph. I sketch the figure, and begin to paint it with oils, iridescent acrylics, and transparent lacquers on canvas. I am satisfied with the final product, and become attached to the 'Butterfly' figure.

**Figure 1. 'Butterfly'**



**2000, 20"x 30", mixed media on canvas**

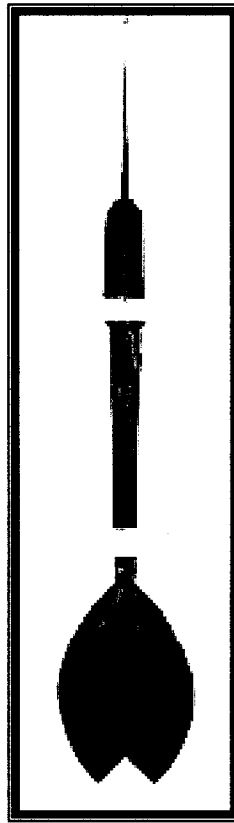
Later on that semester, I go on to create another work that simulates 'Butterfly': '8 o'clock (see figure 7). This piece represents a humanlike figure that could either be kicking or falling into a void. In both paintings, I use light and very dark blue colors, but in the later painting the medium changes. I use a mixture of Caparol glue and powdered pigments, which are traditionally used to paint Byzantine imagery on the walls of Orthodox churches. In practical terms, the pigments may be mixed with any binder. For the icons, however, the pigment is mixed with egg yolk and water because as the yolk ages its binding and resistance capacities strengthen.



In the second year of my Masters program I begin to feel at ease with the process I used for '8 o'clock'. I begin to nurture and impart relevant meaning to the materials I use. The color intensity provided by the powdered pigments represents strength in the figure, and the textured iridescent background equips the figure with a supernatural feel, like that of a superhero. I want to develop a collective narrative with the symbols I have created, and I hope that a set of offspring symbols will soon arise.

I begin another work. 'Dart' (see figure 2) initiates a new process for me. It begins as an experimental work representing a dart cut into 3 unequal pieces of wood. I first sketch out a dart onto the wooden panels with a 2H pencil, I then seal the surface with acrylic medium, and I paint the background with natural ochre pigment mixed with Caparol glue and water. The golden ochre background constitutes a sign of light, similar to the gold leaf background of an icon. I then begin to stain the sketch of the dart with red and green stained glass paint and solvent. I enjoy the process of working the stained glass paint. The result is unusual, yet striking. Due to the stained glass paint's fluid texture, I indirectly work the paint by simultaneously slanting all three boards from side to side. This technique allows for an unforeseen result; it is as if the medium has a life of its own. A different design comes to life as the paint slowly sets. Though I do not use or practice the real method of stained glass, I use an alternative, less time consuming medium - transparent stained glass paint - and transparent lacquers. If painted on a transparent surface, natural light shines through this paint, projecting coloured light into a space.

**Figure 2. 'Dart'**



**2001, 25"x 93", mixed media on wood**

I begin to make an icon of 'Archangel Gabriel' (see figure 3) for my Research Practice class, to show the step-by-step procedure for the preparation and application of materials used in iconography. To prepare the support, I use a plywood panel, rubbing alcohol, heated rabbit skin glue, red and white chalk in powder form, water, sand paper, and a wide flat bristle brush. To transfer the image onto the panel, I use an enlarged version of the exemplar image, graphite paper, a ballpoint pen, and a screw used to engrave the image into the gesso. To apply the gold leaf, I use glue size, a bristle brush, imitation gold leaf (instead of 23 Karat gold leaf), a sharp blade, a flat 2" squirrel brush, and a

burnishing tool. And for the paint application, I use powdered pigments, egg yolk, distilled water, an eye drop container, red sable brushes, a watercolour palette, and a spatula used to measure the quantity of pigment.

Organizing, finding, and employing the materials is a lengthy process, because I want to get it right. Getting the wood cut according to the proportions of the exemplar image involves mathematical calculations and a couple of visits to the woodwork shop. Finding the white whiting for the preparation of the gesso occupies a lot of time. I visit three art supply stores, call five others, and visit two hardware stores, where I finally find an inexpensive alternative material, powdered chalk. The powdered pigments are expensive, available only in art supply stores, and limited in their selection of colors. Fortunately, I am already equipped with the pigments from my last trip to Greece.

**Figure 3. 'Archangel Gabriel'**



**2001, 18"x 33", egg tempera and gold leaf on wood**

'Excess' (see figure 4) is created from a found object, a 9"x 42" piece of plywood with two slits going half way down near the extreme sides. This piece represents an elongated version of the 'Butterfly' symbol. Though the whole figure fits on the panel, the wings touch the slits, therefore cutting off part of them. For the background, I use the same ochre pigment and binder as the 'Dart' work, and for the actual figure I use dark red stained glass paint and solvent.

*As the airborne figure is unable to grasp the whole surface, I see how prospective ends are not always reached, that sometimes we try to accomplish more than we can handle, and how our limited capabilities hinder our desired achievements. The unfastened wings and the desire to distend the butterfly's form represent the urge to reach beyond one's grasp.*

**Figure 4. 'Excess'**



**2001, 9"x 42", mixed media on wood**

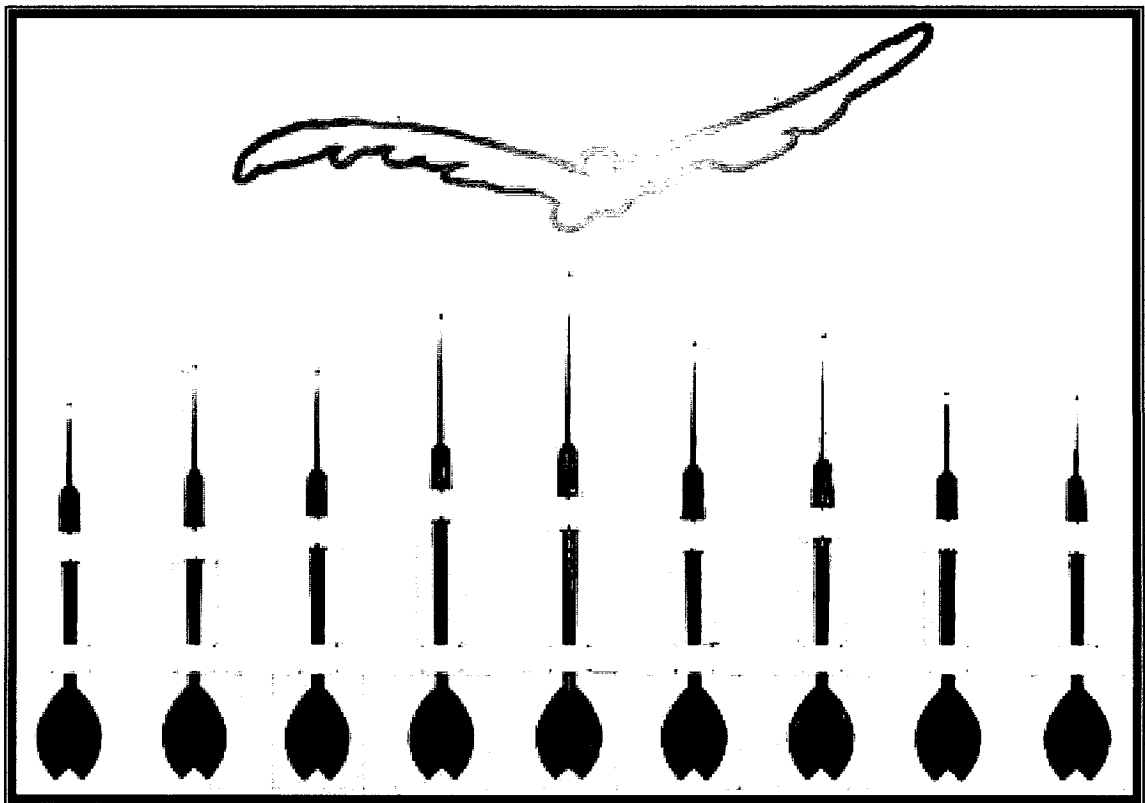
The 'Cityscape' (see figure 5) work is a continuation of 'Dart'. I create another 8 darts in a similar fashion; only the heights of the panels differ. I name this installation 'Cityscape,' because the darts are placed side by side, and from a distance the whole structure looks like a cityscape. I make a separate outline shape of the butterfly symbol. This piece measures 96"x 24" and is painted with iridescent aluminum pigment and Caparol glue. The piece rests above the dart installation and is added in the final stage of the work.

*In this work I convey a message of identity within the metropolitan environment. The 'Cityscape' relies on man's presence and inevitably it endures the absence of nature. The omission of nature within this superstructure is to display man's target or better yet his attempt to reach the unreachable by transforming his mental and physical environment to what suits him best in the present. The dart could only be guided by man hence his presence is necessary for social function. The form of the flying figure is a void symbol representing just that, the impossibility of a higher power being reached by matter, which consequentially counters back to humanity's self-destruction. This work should not be viewed in a negative way, in that humanity will be doomed. Instead, it should allow the viewer to question and review his/her objectives or targets in life, for there is always the possibility of the target being an illusion or a misconception.*

*The saying 'what goes up must come down' breaks even metaphorically and physically in 'Cityscape'. Gravity and despair go hand in hand in this work, as emotional instabilities are replenished by faulty and directionless misconceptions. Taken from the gold leaf technique used in Byzantine icons, the ochre color in the background of the darts suggests an illumination of the objects. The transparent red lacquer allows for this light*

*to shine through it, leaving us besieged by its brilliance and providing only for a shade of the bigger picture, the material object and not the aimed objective.*

**Figure 5. ‘Cityscape’**



**2002, 16'x24', mixed media on wood**

Before I start the next works I do not give much thought to the way I utilize the materials, though I know I will continue with the same method used in the ‘Dart’ work, since I enjoyed it so much. I continue to use opaque juxtaposed against transparent colors to suggest the worship and brilliance of the images, as the icon is regarded as a window or mirror reflecting supernatural light and enabling the viewer to experience the power of

the holy from beyond (Moore, 1977, p.247). Also, the way in which I divide the panels to puzzle up a whole image, suggests how every individual exists within a system that is made up of more than one being (Nikolakopoulos, *Written report for exhibition*, 2002, p.8-9). The separation of the panels in my later work has possibly emerged from the slits in the 'Excess' work.

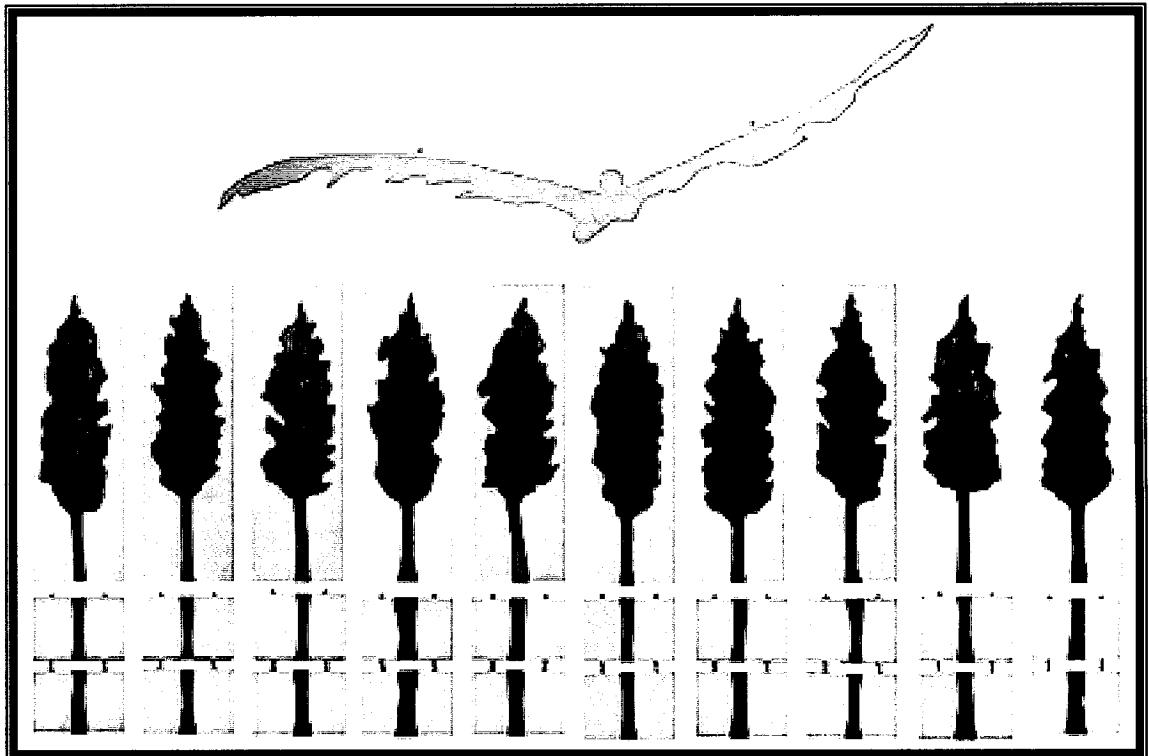
The 'Landscape' (see figure 6) installation also originates from an experimental work representing a tree that looks like a cypress. The luminous and brilliant lacquers sit on the ochre coloured background mimicking the gold leaf effect of icons that illuminate the religious figures, or in the case of this work, the object, which is the tree. This work reflects 'Cityscape'. It is made up of 9 individual tree representations, each one composed of four panels. The top part of the tree is on one panel and the trunk is broken down to three equal pieces. The trees are placed side by side, and a cut-out of the butterfly symbol rests above the 9 Cypresses. The cut-out comes from the interior part of the 'Cityscape' butterfly symbol outline. I paint the 'Landscape' cut-out with aluminium pigment as well.

*The 'Landscape' represents the presence of nature and the absence of man. Man's influence over nature's abilities seemingly provokes an upset of equilibrium and stability within the cycle of life. In this respect nature is given the upper hand in attaining the higher power, if and only if man's objectives do not coincide with the cycle of life. In 'Landscape' the form of the flying figure becomes more tangible; its massive form is present and not just its outline. In this work the trees do not represent a hierarchy; they are not attempting to target the higher power – flying figure- but to just be. The trunks, or*



*roots are grounded, in contrast to the 'Cityscape' work; the trees grow in their natural preset direction and they do not try to transform this cycle.*

**Figure 6. 'Landscape'**



**2002, 16'x25', mixed media on wood**

'Building' (see figure 11), and the '9 o'clock' (see figure 8), '10 o'clock' (see figure 9), and '11 o'clock' (see figure 10) works are the set of prospective offspring symbols that finally emerge from 'Butterfly' and '8 o'clock'. In the '9 o'clock', '10 o'clock', and '11 o'clock' paintings, I continue to use iridescent aluminium pigment, Prussian blue pigment and Caparol glue. The dark blue figures rest upon the iridescent void background.

**Figure 7. '8 o'clock'**



**2000, 30"x 40", mixed media on canvas**

**Figure 8.** '9 o'clock'



**2001, 30"x40", mixed media on canvas**

**Figure 9.** '10 o'clock'



**2001, 22"x 28", mixed media on canvas**

**Figure 10. '11o'clock'**



**2001, 24"x 36", mixed media on canvas**

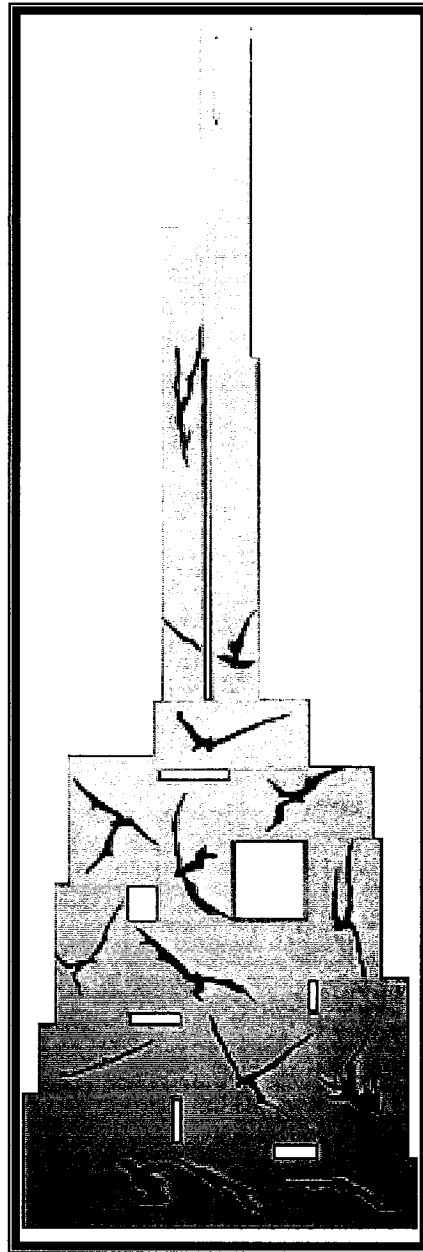
'Building' is painted in a manner similar to '9 o'clock,' '10 o'clock,' and '11 o'clock,' only it is made up of many rectangular wooden panels that form the structure of a building. On each wooden panel I paint a silhouette of a humanlike symbol against an

iridescent background. Many icons are narratives of historical events; the theme of this work is taken from the surreal historical event of September 11<sup>th</sup>. The result is but a personal impression of this event. Throughout the process of making these works I notice certain connections between the materials I am using and the meaning of the work. For instance, the wooden panels in 'Building' are leftovers from the 'Cityscape' work, and that is why I call it its offspring.

*An offspring of 'Cityscape', 'Building' allows us to further analyze our moves within a given social event. The 'Building' work envelops the possibility of chance and ability to withstand our purpose within a social circle. Besides living as a community within our social circles, we also exist as individuals that take on personal ventures, so we learn and exercise to better ourselves and to eventually take on a part within the system we live in. This work harks back to the surreal September 11<sup>th</sup> event in New York City, where people were leaping out of buildings, having no other choice than to be burned alive. In this situation what could and what would we have done?*

*The work proposes a hypothetical situation conditional to each individual's abilities and purpose, examining more than cultural factors in our identities. What then is the purpose of a human being? Within the larger structure of the building, the rectangular shapes are put together in a way that leaves cavities wherever four rectangles join. These void spaces may be viewed as windows and allow for a rebirth of possibilities. The silhouettes of the airborne figures are painted dark and opaque, disallowing any light to shine through them. The illumination of the building remains and is colored blue as is the illusory color of the sky. In this hierarchical structure, the winning target is set by the individual's objective and what he or she will do in order to reach it*

**Figure 11. 'Building'**



**2002, 44"x134", mixed media on wood**

Fortunately I am already equipped with all the necessary materials and I launch into icon production. Though most of the basic materials have been purchased in Greece, I

nevertheless feel the need to examine the accessibility of these materials in the Montreal area. The first store I scan through is Omer DeSerres, known as the largest chain of art suppliers in the area, and since I work there, my search is extended to materials which can be ordered even though they are not available in the store at all times.

Embarking on the making of the traditional Byzantine icons is not a first time experience. In spite of this, I still feel the need to follow the instructions from a book regarding the technique of icon painting, *The technique of icon painting* (Ramos-Poqui, 1999), plus the notes I have kept from my icon training with my uncle in Greece. I choose to make icons of 'St. John', 'St. George', 'Christ the Pantocrator', 'Virgin Mary and Child', 'St. Nicholas', 'St. Faye', and 'St. Sophie and her three daughters Faith, Hope and Love', because they carry the names of people who are close to me. I respect the step-by-step instructions and collect all the necessary tools and materials. Throughout the sketching process I think of the advice given to me by my uncle: to use good references, preferably from the 12<sup>th</sup> century. This time I attempt to use the exact materials suggested, and use a similar approach to that of the 'Archangel Gabriel' icon.

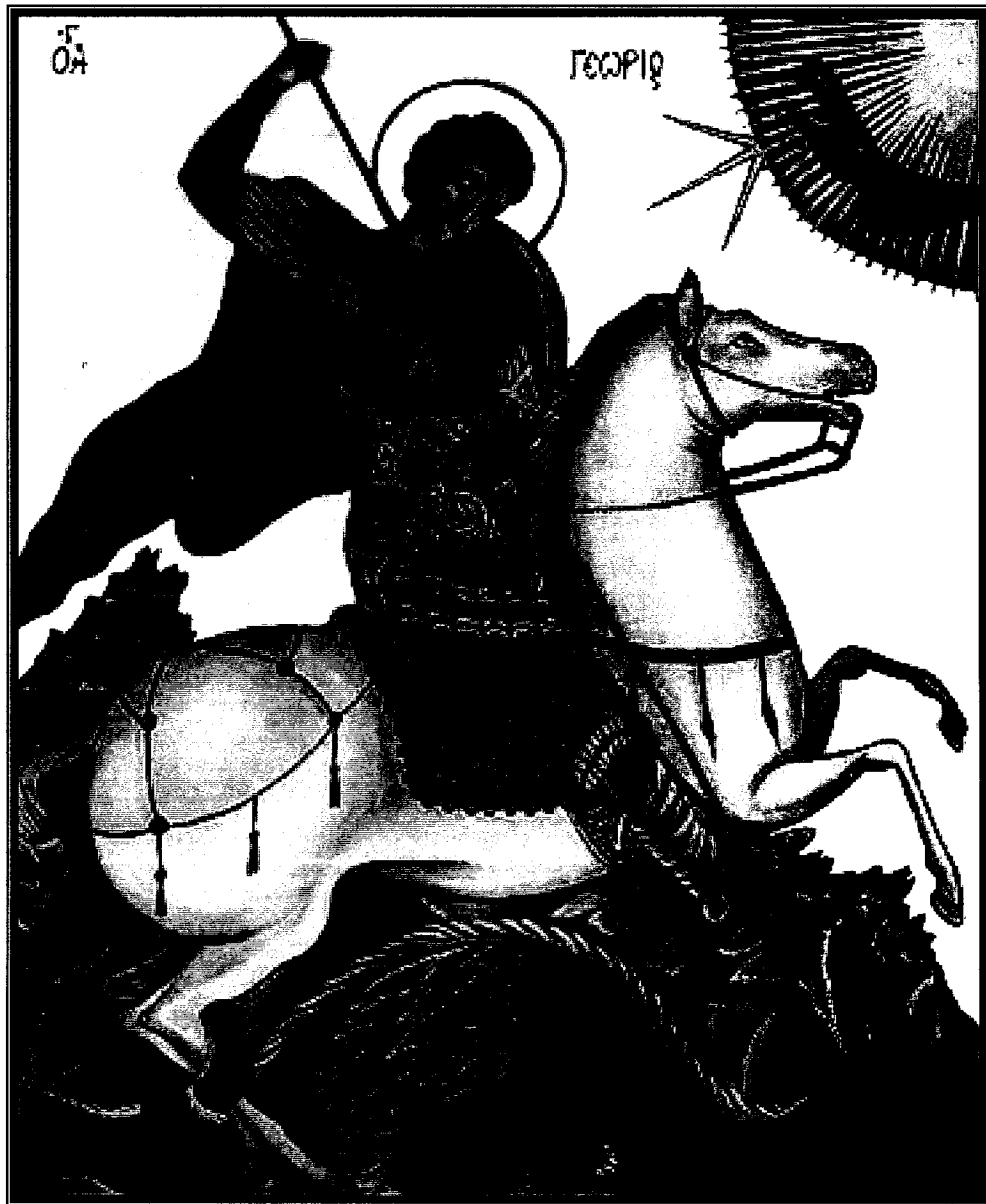


**Figure 12. 'St. John'**



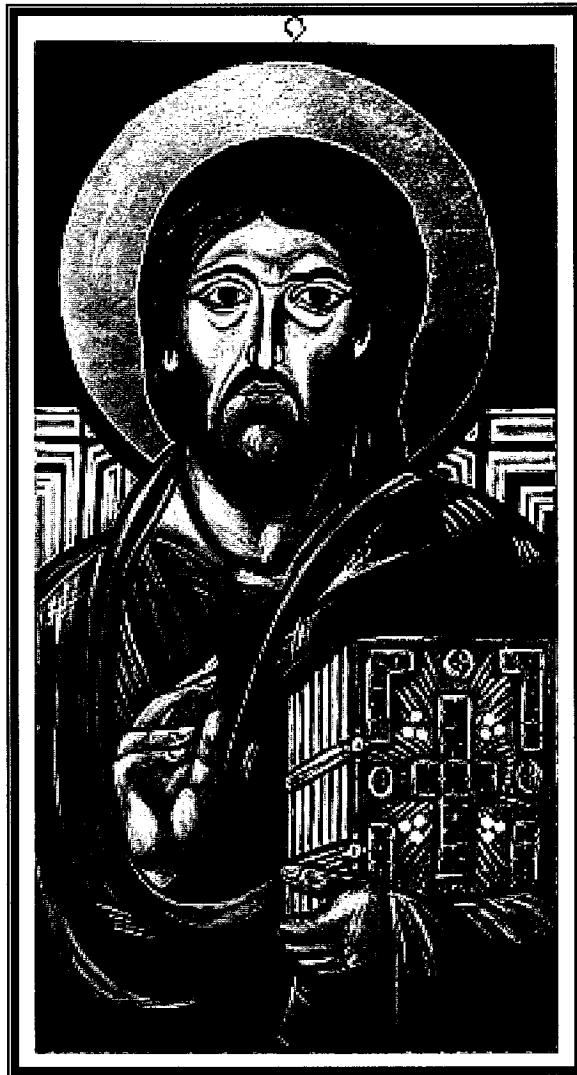
2002, 17"x20", egg tempera and gold leaf on wood

**Figure 13. 'St. George'**



2002, 20"x25", egg tempera and gold leaf on wood

**Figure 14. 'Christ the Pantocrator'**



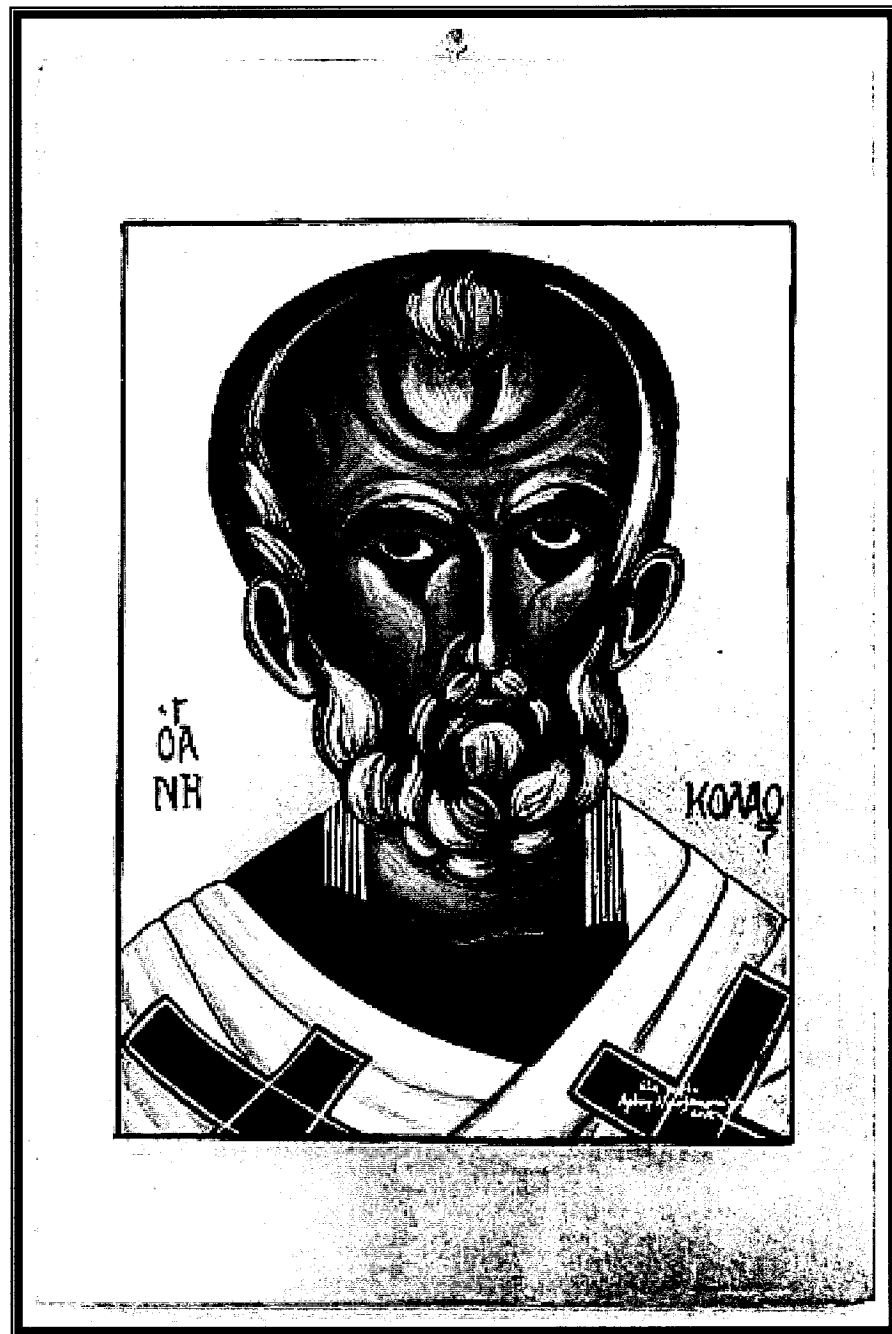
2002, 9"x17", egg tempera and gold leaf on wood

**Figure 15. 'Virgin Mary and Child'**



2002, 16"x25", egg tempera and gold leaf on wood

**Figure 16. 'St. Nicholas'**



2002, 16"x24", egg tempera and gold leaf on wood

**Figure 17. 'St. Faye'**



**2002, 4 1/2"x 15", egg tempera and gold leaf on wood**

**Figure 18.** ‘St. Sophie and her three daughters Faith, Hope and Love’



**2002, 6’x15”, egg tempera and gold leaf on wood**

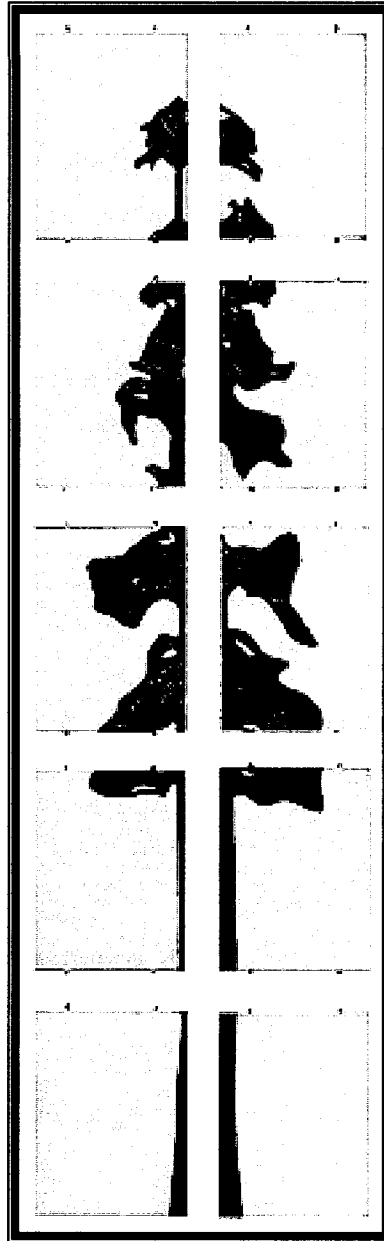
After creating the above icons, I start on a work entitled ‘Tree’ (see figure 19). At this stage of creating, I allow myself to have fun and let go. This time I do not sketch the tree on the panels; I paint directly onto them without thinking too much. However, I forget to apply a sealer on the panels. This mistake delays my process, as I immediately have to remove the fresh paint before it all gets absorbed into the unsealed wood. If the surface is

not sealed with the transparent acrylic medium, the stained glass effect is lost. Due to this technical mistake, the color of the tree turns out darker than what I wish for. Meaning is created by accident also with the way in which crosses are formed in the gaps from 'Tree's' separated panels. Initially, this was not my intention, but the lines were so strong between the panels that I could not help but to reveal it in words. The crosses reveal part of where the work is influenced.

*In this work I have cut up ten equal pieces and joined them together to represent a tree, and, as you might have guessed, it is influenced by the 'Landscape' work. The spaces between the panels of the tree form crosses, and again, these gaps are formed when four pieces are placed together. The work represents a kind of biographical portrait of humanity, and the reason I am presenting the tree as such is to convey the simplicity of nature existing within us, and how our spiritual beliefs assist and support our existence. Nature allows us to go back and reenergize our bodies and souls; an important act, if one wants to live a healthy and sensible life. The 'Tree' is a symbol of wisdom, strength, health, growth, happiness and other positive things.*



**Figure 19. 'Tree'**



**2002, 40"x140", mixed media on wood**

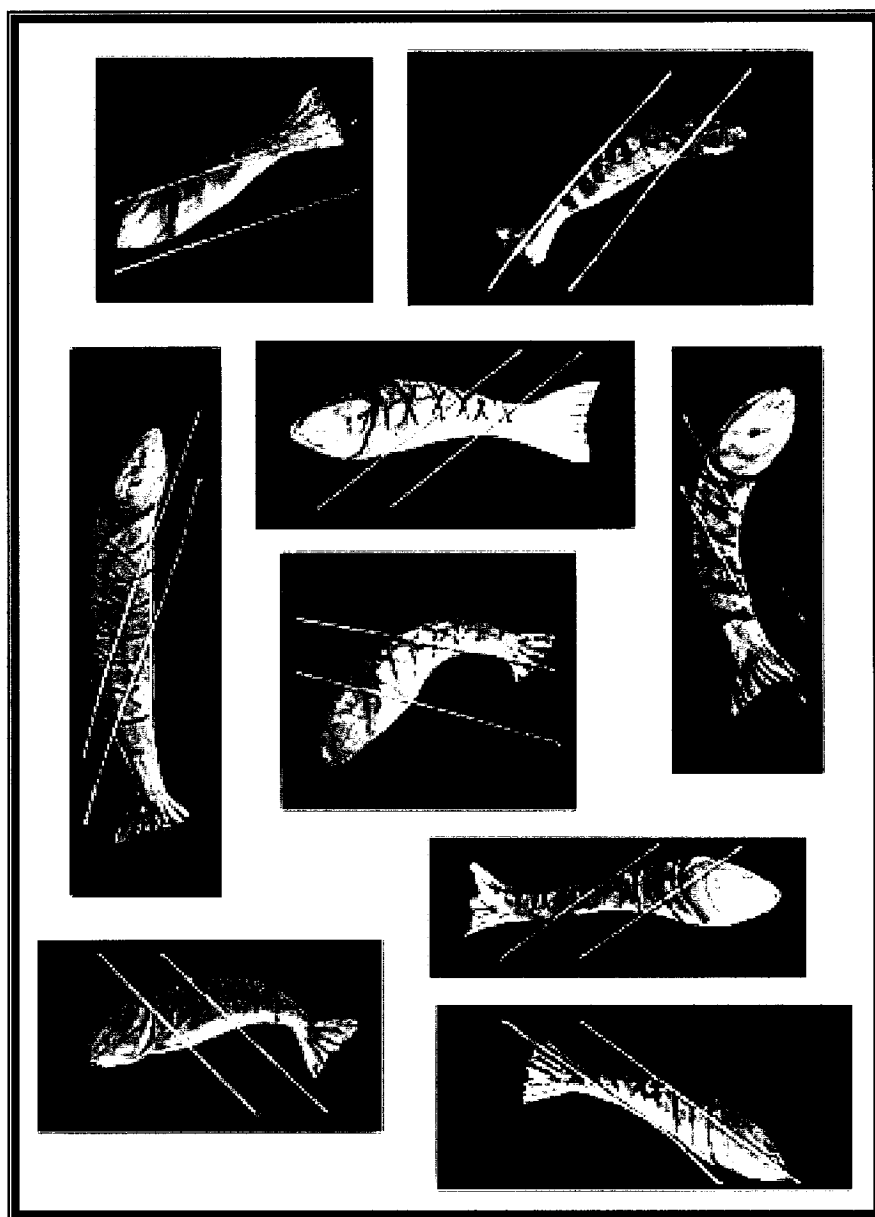
The 'Fish' (see figure 21) installation, and the icon of 'Jesus calling Matthew...' (see figure 20) go together and complement each other in terms of theme and symbolism. The 'Fish' are made with the intent to create something with an aesthetic quality and are initiated as an experimental work. Onto leftover wooden panels, I sketch representations of fish. I apply gold leaf over the drawings and paint the background with a mixture of blue pigments. With a mixture of red and orange stained glass paint, I paint over the gold leaf. I then join the panels with hooks and short chains in order to represent a grouping of fish. The icon of 'Jesus calling Matthew...' illustrates Jesus calling his future disciples while they are fishing.

**Figure 20.** 'Jesus calling Matthew...'



2002, 11"x14", egg tempera and gold leaf on wood

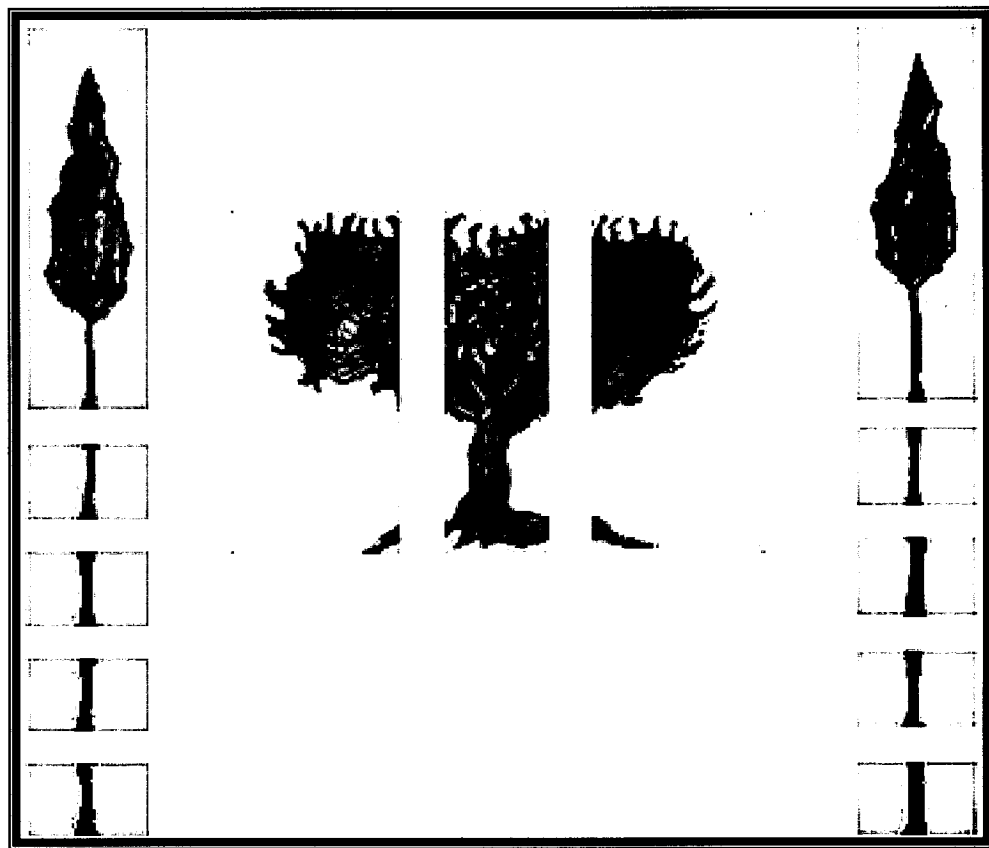
**Figure 21. 'Fish'**



2002, 38"x52", mixed media on wood

I once again allow myself to have fun when I go on to create my next work, 'Treeptych' (see figure 22). Only this time I do not forget to seal the surface. I focus mainly on creating something that is aesthetically pleasing. This is the last piece I create for the exhibition. To it I add two other works, which I do not name. They represent trees similar to those from the 'Landscape' work and are placed on either side of 'Treeptych'.

**Figure 22.** 'Treeptych'



2002, 150"x178", mixed media on wood

**FINAL CAUSE: that for the sake of which something is made.**

The conflict of this thesis lies in the contrasting roles of each practice. Practicing two different art traditions results in a set of inconsistent attitudes. For one thing “the painting of an icon is the opposite of subjective expression since it requires identification with a tradition” (Ramos-Poqui, 1999, p.11). Iconography allows me to create in a methodical, technical and meditative manner, somewhat resembling the ‘flow’ experience described by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (*American Psychologist*, 1999): “The ‘flow’ experience involves one’s complete concentration and mastery of a skill relating to a challenging activity. Through this, one may experience a kind of happiness or positive feeling that is recognized only upon the activity’s completion” (as cited in: Nikolakopoulos, *Response paper*, 2001, p.1). The work of the icons evolved slowly but surely. I felt confident about the end result, because I followed the exact procedures from a book and my notes. I experienced ‘flow,’ as this feeling of certitude allowed my mind to relax and to create in an automatic or unconscious fashion.

Iconography involves the strict adherence to a set of established rules: “One must learn the technical process involved in the making of a traditional icon. This would include learning about the art materials and their properties, applications and procedures, because tradition dictates this. Whereas paintings that follow no tradition leave the maker free to use the medium and technique how he/she desires. The maker is not confined to step-by-step instructions, and may explore creativity and self-expression differently” (Nikolakopoulos, *A study of a current form of expression*, 2001, p.3). Artists who work in a contemporary fashion may also work in a methodical way, which they have discovered on their own, or they may use traditional technical approaches in their work. But again,

contemporary art making allows for this established order to be changed and rearranged according to the maker's intentions.

Compared to icon making, the process of my contemporary work is radical and unique. This intuitive, expressive method allows me to expand my limits both in the selection of materials and also in the construal of meaning in my work. And even though I do experience 'flow' when I create my contemporary work, it differs from the sense of 'flow' I encounter in the production of icons. When I create icons the process is meticulous and gradual. Applying gold leaf for instance requires lots of concentration due to the gold leaf's fragile nature; it can tear or fold just with a single breath. In the contemporary tradition the process is intuitively set and varies according to the materials I choose to work with. I have noticed that in the later stages of my production I am becoming less uptight about both the theme of my work and the manner in which I handle the materials. I feel 'flow' as soon as I begin the work, up until I decide I am satisfied with the end result. I would say that the 'flow' feeling evolves. Breaking away from the accuracy and delicacy required in the making of icons allows me to get accustomed to a new approach and learn to work in a freer fashion. My process deals with a personal reinvention of iconography's task. The way in which I have followed through with this task, escapes the traditional mode of iconography. I have dealt with contemporary issues in my art that visibly enact certain characteristics of the Byzantine tradition, and in doing so induced certain customary symbols and procedures which have influenced my perceptions of technique and materials in my personal art making. (Nikolakopoulos, *Written report for exhibition*, May 2002, p.2,3)

The diverse roles of the two art traditions I employ in my art seemingly bring together the world of avant-garde art and religious imagery. And I now describe my contemporary works as 'hybrid icons,' for the imagery I create has personal meaning and unveils new visions and meaning for me.

I have established that the mastery of technique has evolved out of the icon work and that of meaning from my contemporary practice. I see my work as a series of sketches. It is a process that has developed into that which, I am finally content to say, is a work of art that envelops both meaning and technique. By narrating my artistic process, I have become aware that with every work I create, the meaning of the previous ones change, thus I do not feel stressed about developing a theme in my work. It just happens. " My contemporary work both grows out of my contemporary culture as well as reveals my inspiration and influences from my more traditional body of work (the icons) and the cultural influences behind it" (Nikolakopoulos, 2002, p.3)

My experience in practicing Byzantine iconography in an environment where the tradition does not prevail, attests to the fact that the preservation of a tradition outside of its indigenous environment is a challenging task. Throughout my search I have asked myself and continue to ask, 'How important is the preservation of such a tradition?' The words 'society' and 'culture' are both evident when we speak of one's identity. They are words that either group people together or separate them from each other. 'Society' is "a group of persons joined together for a common purpose or by a common interest" (Nault W.H., 1985, p.1984), and "'culture' is the arts, beliefs, and customs that make up a way of life for a group of people at a certain time" (Nault W. H., p.505). Thus, the commonalities a group of people share indicate in which society they belong and by

which culture(s) they are influenced. (Nikolakopoulos, *Written report for exhibition*, 2002, p. 1) I believe that one of the reasons I began to make icons was to identify myself with the Greek Orthodox culture and tradition. Another reason that still motivates me to make icons is the fulfillment I get to know that I am able to contribute towards my culture in my own way.

Only after the exhibition has taken place am I able to give it a title. My work makes more sense to me now than it did at the time of the exhibition. And though there is a universal meaning attached to the icons, there is also one that is more personal, and I see that as a Greek Orthodox, the icon has been a source of faith to me, and as a contemporary artist my creations have allowed me to believe in myself, therein giving me faith in my art. This is why the title of my exhibition and of my thesis is 'The Art of Faith and Faith in Art.'



## **CONCLUSION**

As I have discovered in my own practice, studio work deals with process; it engages the artist in making decisions about numerous potential possibilities. The aspect of art making that set me off in this thesis examined the choice of art materials and the ways in which I used these in my artistic production. Eventually, this emphasis about art materials branched out other meaningful questions about art making. The choices I made while creating especially in the contemporary tradition, often reside in the dilemma about the purpose and meaning of my work. I question how the application of art materials, different than the ones suggested for making traditional icons (Poqui, 1999), may alter the connotation of the final piece. I say that the dilemma resided especially in my contemporary practice, because this is where I was able to make my own decisions about how and what my work would be. Both methods are equally artistic, but a mark of doubt has been left vis-à-vis the level of creativity and expression that occurs when making icons.

There are many artists and art educators who support the idea that learning about technique and art materials is an essential part of making art. Artist Antoinette Herivel recounts how technical knowledge has helped her clarify the content and intent of what she has wanted to convey. (1995, p.64) “I will attempt to clarify in which cases learning about art materials, their properties and applications is essential in art making.” (Nikolakopoulos, *Final Paper*, 2001, p.4).

Throughout my investigation, the question “Why am I making art?” never stopped circulating in my mind. I believe the purpose of making art is relative to each person’s need to do so. In this respect, both in my own work and in my teaching philosophy, I take

into account four teaching traditions presented by two educators, Maurice Brown and Diana Korzenik, in their book Art Making and Education (1993). Each teaching tradition dictates a different reason for making art. The first uses art making as a way to learn about other subjects, the second allows students to learn the skills of a trade, the third is all about expressing and communicating one's personal experience(s), and the fourth tradition allows students to identify themselves within existing groups, cultures and traditions. Within all four traditions both the educator and the student must acquire the necessary skills to enable them to reach their artistic objectives (Brown, Korzenik, 1993). These teaching traditions are exclusive to art making, and the philosophy behind them is echoed in the theme of my contemporary art works. The theories prompt the artist/student to question their choices involved in art making. They provide to students' needs as well as to their objectives by acknowledging that art making can supply various functions (Nikolakopoulos, *Written report for exhibition*, 2002, p.10). Furthermore, artists should also consider these traditions and ask themselves why, and for whom they are making their art. I say this because in my experience knowing why you do whatever you do employs more meaning in your act. It may seem a little bit rigid to think this way but nobody ever said we cannot have fun doing all this purposeful work. And, just like Canadian self-taught iconographer/artist Edward Hartley admits, "it is evident from the quality of the pictures [that his icons are not prepared according to the Byzantine tradition], but we [he and his wife] have fun. I always say I enjoy my paintings even if nobody else does" (Owens, 1996, as cited in Nikolakopoulos, 2002, p.10).

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