

Human Remains, Healing, and Beauty in Heide Hatry's *Icons in Ash*

Interview with Elisa Massardo and Heide Hatry

EM: What led you to work with ashes?

HH: My relationship to material, even though it obviously addresses complex aspects of the relationship between art and the “real world,” has always arisen from strong personal experience, in this case a few otherwise unrelated events, each powerful in itself, that by chance occurred at around the same time.

In Germany, by law, the ashes of a cremated person must be buried, so I had never encountered the practice of preserving, or scattering, the ashes of a deceased loved one before I came to America. It was in 2008 that I was visiting a friend and noticed on his mantel a peculiar urn, which he told me contained the ashes of his wife, and which he opened and showed me when I asked if that would be ok with him. That experience touched me deeply, both his devoted custodianship of the remains of his wife and the, to me, astonishing fact that I was seeing the residue of what had previously been a breathing, walking, thinking, feeling woman and that they were so silent, so inert and somber, and yet so amazingly present. I felt that this was a holy and a very particular substance.

A couple weeks later I learned that one of my closest friends back in Germany had killed himself. I was completely shocked and emotionally devastated: I had had no idea that his life had become so unbearable to him, and I felt incredible guilt and frustration that he could have been in that situation and I totally unaware of it. I desperately wished that he would have just said something. Fifteen years earlier, my father had died in circumstances that I believed at the time must have been suicide – I suppose that this is the deeper root of the project – and now all of the unresolved trauma of his death resurfaced as well. I felt paralyzed with grief and could hardly go a minute without crying convulsively.

Although in retrospect my artistic decisions often seem so logical as to have been planned down to the smallest detail, my ideas usually arrive in a sort of flash of inspiration. And I now had the clear thought that *I must make portraits out of their ashes* (Stefan's and my father's). I remember that even as the thought filled my mind I felt a strange relief settling over me.

Over the several months it took to figure out a method of using ashes to

make their portraits (as I implied, I didn't have access to their actual ashes, so I was using a substitute, as I tried to create a technique that would work) I engaged in an almost constant dialogue with them, often out loud, and even crying, or yelling. By the time I had finished the portraits, not only was my grief dispelled, but I felt like they were somehow there with me, that there was a presence that goes way beyond the power of art when I was with them. It reminded me of the relics of saints in the Catholic church or the humble glow of an Icon, which is often so much more powerful than even great works of religious art because believers know that it has been blessed and that they are being protected by the saint it depicts, that there is something sacred, and of course invisible, that is inherent in the relatively simple thing itself that gives it a deeper or higher purpose. Amazingly, even those of us who don't believe in the mystical aspect of the work can often feel this eerie presence.

Being an artist, I naturally thought that the effect was caused by the, in this case very lengthy, process of making the portraits, but when a friend, whose mother had died when he was still rather young and with whom he felt that he had a totally unresolved relationship, one that was cut short before they could know each other in the way he now deeply regretted not having experienced, asked if I would do it for him as well – with her actual ashes – I discovered that he had the same almost preternatural experience, both of the presence of his mother, and of an indescribable calm and consolation. That's when I thought that this was a gift that I could

offer to others as well. And it turned out that I knew quite a lot of people who had ashes of loved ones that they felt were almost a burden, or were being disrespected, or shunted aside, by simply being stored in an urn, and over a number of years I made portraits for them as gifts, always finding that their relationship to the deceased also changed or was enriched in a range of interesting ways just by having this renewed contact with what they knew was the actual person they had loved.

EM: How would you describe the inner process of healing as you live with those artworks?

HH: The Heideggerian term “mindfulness,” which has become a catchword in current new age thinking, probably explains best what is happening in the relationship to these works. Just being with them, living with them and actually *seeing* them for what they are: someone I love and who is gone, and whose essence is no different than my own. Knowing that my relationship to them has not died just because they have, and that they live in me in my everyday, ordinary life, that their relationship to me is not just loss, absence, grief, but an ongoing nourishment of my soul, a *re-minder* of who I am, or who we are together – all of this is a normalization of the relationship to death and to the dead whom we love. I feel that it recovers an understanding of death that is embodied in myth and primordial totemic practices, but which the proliferation of the race and changing social and economic structures has obliterated. I always think that the

possibility of healing, of wholeness, is within us, and that we don't require progress to heal ourselves, but we do need to dwell in thought, memory, and feeling in a way that everything around us discourages nowadays. As far as the relationship to death is concerned, it has never been different in the history of the race, only our collective decisions about how to approach it have changed.

EM: How did the creation of the first image originate?

HH: As I said, the proximal cause was the death of my friend, Stefan, but this work addressed a need that had been gnawing in me for a long time already. Although I had in some sense come to terms with my father's death – I mean I could function normally without collapsing in sorrow very often – I always felt that under the surface there was an unpaid debt, a guilt – in German the word *Schuld* means both "guilt" and "debt" – that I had to deal with. Over a number of years my relationship with my father, to whom I always felt extremely close, a spiritual kinship beyond just the father-child relationship, had deteriorated, partly just due to growing up, moving away, and pursuing different paths in life, but I also at least vaguely felt that I had not honored that spiritual relationship or made him aware how much I cherished it when I could have. And of course there were things I did that I regretted, though I always imagined that one day we would reconcile our differences, a possibility that suddenly disappeared when he died. So making his portrait also had a sense of repairing our bond, much as the

whole process of making the portrait was like creating a very slow and painstaking mosaic – I don't actually "paint" these portraits, but assemble them one tiny ash fragment at a time. In fact, the word "mosaic" comes from the tablets of the law that Moses had smashed in his fury, and the process of putting them back together always felt to me like a coming to terms with human weakness and the flaws the repaired tablets embodied like a picture of human frailty, and potential, next to the godly perfection of the original.

EM: Regarding you and your alternate artistic personae: How have you worked with and developed that idea? How do your "others" interpret or represent you?

HH: In my first serious project, which is incorporated in the book entitled, *Skin*, I reflected the fact that, since I had been thinking as an artist for many years but in reality had had little or no time in which to create very much physical work, I had amassed large quantities of ideas that I wanted to realize, which, probably because they went unmade tended not to be unitary, or organic, in the way that an artist who is in the studio every day will generally settle upon a particular practice or even style which might change only with effort and every so often, I appeared even to myself as a confusion of different intentions and approaches to art. It occurred to me that the best way to portray that peculiar existential state was to distribute the work among a number of more coherent and discrete, but fictional, personae, which I enhanced

by creating biographies for each of them out of aspects of my own life that struck me as distinctive and as potential origins for vectors of experience that the choices I have made rendered moot, which a few obliging art historians and critics “validated” with critical engagements. It was really only after that project had been completed that I started to feel that these “other women” had real being, and I would conceive new art ideas under the sway of their personae or see that ideas that I had made sense for one of those particular avatars. Since the ideas they represented were often ones that for some reason or other I wanted to keep my distance from – mostly to prevent my own persona from coloring the reception of the work, that is, to make it appear unprejudiced by what would be reflexively seen as its likely motivation or intention – they actually began *to be* something to which I was not quite connected, that I could not control or influence, and which is, as you astutely point out, a sort of critique, interpretation of, or commentary on me and my “own” work at the same time that it enables me to express ideas that would seem, and I suppose, be, completely different if “I” were their author.

Of course, there is something well-recognized, if perhaps still not widely understood, about the nature of the artist, which for modernism might be dated with Rimbaud’s “Je suis autre,” although the very notion of “genius” – it was originally understood as an external spirit or force that presides over a place or protects it – embodies the sense that we really don’t understand why or from whence our

ideas come to us. Kierkegaard’s pseudonyms, Nietzsche’s theory of personality, Borges’s depiction of the creative dynamic in “Borges and I,” and of course the highly constructed, or perhaps entirely natural personae of Fernando Pessoa, all address and complicate the question of artistic autonomy. I tend to feel that all of that is more along the lines of analogy or metaphor: the artist is a receptive vessel in which any number of strange and disparate voices might arise. Much as we do not control thought, nor decide just how it might arise within us, or from where, don’t know “who” is actually thinking when thought comes to us, when I’m making art I don’t feel like I am “myself” exactly, or I am an aspect of myself that is not usually so clear or focused. Diverse, even disparate, ideas arise as if they are different voices from within me; not that they are mine in any way, they are currents within of an undifferentiated ocean, and I am flotsam that is sometimes taken along with them, as it were.

I see personality as a genetic and social pressure that focuses and streamlines, that standardizes experience and thinking, constantly deflecting, muting, or rejecting divergent tendencies – the vast sea of thought that is inherent in language(s), some small fragment of which has been given voice in art and the sciences and which tells us that we are all potentially many. The special talent of the artist is being open to as many voices as possible, to stay attuned, to continue to hear them when most of us have drawn limits to what we can experience – I don’t mean purposely, of course, as

this is just the normal functional dynamic of individual and society, the way these structures impose order on what they take into themselves. But artists and the mad are spared the normal fate in order to suffer something different, an ecstasy that has its costs. We can all understand this in the way that we are different people in dreams: dream life gives us an inkling of what we sacrifice in becoming ourselves, as mental illness gives an inkling of what we are spared.

Early in his life as an artist, Andy Warhol made a controversial, and, as it happened, briefly career-threatening, comment about other people making his work. It was true in a banal sense – the work was frequently executed by Gerard Malanga or others – and even in the sense that he often simply took ideas others had and exploited them. But it is also more deeply philosophically true, and it suggests that the “maker” is a myth, or at least a misnomer, insofar as the implication of what we understand as agency is concerned. Art comes from an ineffable reservoir of potential, both inherent and historical, within the language and materials it employs, and any individual artist is really “other people.”

EM: What does beauty mean to you? How would you describe it?

HH: Much though we want to say that beauty is a good in itself, it is obvious already in Plato that it can serve any master. This is the reason he tries to distinguish between the natural, and more pertinently, the intellectual, beauty that the philosopher loves,

and the unnatural, merely superficial and even ersatz beauty that the artist creates. Thinking about beauty has undergone many changes since then, but I tend to agree that the notion that beauty is truth, unless understood with the subtlety of a Plato, is a pernicious lie. Beauty is more typically a way of hiding truth, as it is of hiding pain. We even see this in non-human nature: beauty arises as an evolutionary tactic for the propagation of species, merely a show to achieve other quite disparate ends, whether reproductive, protective, or predatory.

The now commonplace idea that art is the repository of the thwarted hopes of humanity, which keeps them alive and subtly inspires resistance, embodies an apt defeatism, which is what society at large needs from its artists. The revolutionary power of the imagination must be rendered subservient, that is, functional, docile, or inert. And to shunt its rebels into a childish realm of self-contained play, much though we see that the power of (their) play often exerts a contrary effect on even the crudest businessman, has been one of the great social engineering feats of the domineering, if cowering, hierarchy. Within that general amalgam, as John Berger beautifully argued, beauty is a tool for the smooth execution of covert agendas. It is a tactic of persuasion and a forum for self-aggrandizement. And when it occasionally outgrows its sandbox, it can be co-opted or absorbed using money and fame.

On the other hand, to create beauty, which of course is always and necessarily imperfect – the fact that renders it so ineffably poignant –

through attunement, mastery, struggle, and sacrifice, seems like something we can all agree is not only valuable but admirable, perhaps the most worthwhile human endeavor, the most emblematic way that we respect what we are as humans, creatures capable of forging our own identity, our own destiny, our own values. To achieve beauty is something different from simply seeing or enjoying it, loving it as it already exists. For me, the real beauty is neither the (not so) innocent beauty of the natural world, nor the given beauty of the historical record, which if we do not enter it in the deepest intimacy remains merely a surface, but the beauty that we create, and moreso, the beauty of that life-long act of creation. It is, in other words, always an effort, and not a thing, whether the effort to create or the effort to understand; the beauty of the thing comes into existence only where this effort attends it. And both of these fundamental human endeavors aim at truth. For me, beauty must be meaningful, that is, rich in meaning, or it is at best mere distraction, at worst harmful deceit.

EM: ... and cruelty? What does cruelty mean to you?

HH: Cruelty is the willful rejection of, the disdain for, even hatred of the mindfulness, imagination, and effort that I see as the conditions for meaningful beauty; it is the rejection of what makes us human in the best sense of that word. I could choose to see you from a human perspective, but I will not. It is my will not to do so. It is a purely negative, destructive impulse. In being cruel, we choose to

be less than human. I fear that this is what we are seeing in a lot of the political and economic life of our time, and somehow its proponents view it as natural. They see the indifference of nature to the individual, “the survival of the fittest,” as a value that can simply be translated into the human sphere, but this happens among us only with the extra application of cruelty, of renouncing our moral obligation. And when I say our moral obligation, I mean not so much specific ways of acting as the general obligation to give our actions value, to act so that we are not mere causes but purposive agents, that we treat others, in the words of Kant, as ends, as things of fundamental importance. To let the “invisible hand” guide our interactions, even to believe that it should, or to “let nature take its course” is to abdicate our particular human virtue.

The idea that beauty abides without effort, without acts of the will is insidious. Beauty is often the way we are distracted from the cruelty of society; we might see it as a form of cruelty in itself, and perhaps the most egregious, because it uses the thing we cherish most to deceive us, to keep us in chains, to dissemble the injustice of the world and the lies of its rulers.

We are inclined by nature to see beauty instead of what’s actually there, and human society reinforces this tendency. Beauty is, therefore, so often the mask behind which violence and injustice is hidden. This is why, in my work, I use beauty, or superficial appeal to draw attention to the truth. I can put harmlessly appealing images in front of people, to

which they are casually drawn, so as to confront them with what is actually there, whether it be the flesh or organs of dead animals, animals we have killed for our pleasure or sustenance or ornament, in the guise of exotic flowers, or in the case of *Icons in Ash*, the most basic fact of all life, which is not merely death, but the transformation of one mode of being into another, and its persistence in a different register, whether that be organic or mnemonic.

The trope, or perhaps the archetype, of the cruel beauty is not merely a curiosity, it is a paradigm. One of the ways we think about beauty, unreflectively, is as cruel, and this is for a reason: beautiful objects, including art, architecture, and the human baubles that adorn their arms, are the province of the wealthy, the rulers, who unreflectively rebuff the attentions of the poor, the uneducated, the unprivileged, who, if they project their hopes onto it, will soon be disappointed. Beauty is the locus of both aspiration and disillusionment.

EM: Is there any substance that you wouldn't work with, considering the unusual materials that you have used?

HH: Material is obviously crucial to what I do. In some sense it is actually the subject of my work as opposed to its mere medium, and, as I have tried to describe it in my introduction to the book, *Icons in Ash* (just out from Station Hill Press)), the work is, therefore, not so much art object as art subject: it has a being that is not subordinate to my purposes as an

artist, but a being in itself which it is my role to help it express. So, I wouldn't say so much that there are materials I would or wouldn't use in my work, though it is clear that I am not squeamish, so much as that I approach the material I use with a respect, even a reverence, that is the opposite of the instrumentality typically implied by the very notion of an art medium, and in doing that I am saying something about the role of material in our lives and in our very selves, at the most intimate level. Material, for me, is a way of opening the artwork to truth that art, in its historical function, has served to obscure, or at best to set in a dialectical motion that creates tension even as it embodies harmony or, if you will, beauty. My relation to material, and I think this is clearly pertinent to the precarious ecological times in which we are living, is fundamentally an ethical matter. In some way I am subordinate to it instead of the other way around: I am the medium through which it speaks.

EM: On the other hand, considering all the work relating to animals, ashes, and organs, what is the connection that artist's books have with your work?

HH: Well, I won't go so far as to say that they represent the plant-based equivalent of the decimation of the animal kingdom for human use, but there are, I think, pretty clear connections to my general art practice. First, they are all unique, that is, not printed books. In some way, then, they are the antithesis of the book, which is inherently multiple, and in another odd way, its apotheosis. By

this I mean that the essence of the book, though it is not normally recognized, is that every reader or user has a unique relationship to it, and this is what makes it interesting and sustains it in the course of history. For post-modern thinkers, and proto-post-modern thinkers, the book really only comes into existence when it is used; otherwise it is an inert, empty, if potentially explosive, thing. For me, this is just what I am saying in my art: if we do not actually look and think into the art, much as in the world of objects and relationships in general, it never achieves meaning. In a way, the more famous a work of art (or more realistically, an artist) becomes, the less we actually see it, or enter into understanding with it. It becomes, paradoxically, invisible, a tendency that I have, as I said, taken advantage of in my work by using relatively conventional imagery, which we “see without seeing,” to open a space in which we are forced to confront actual matter – the material from which it is made – or objects, and how they get that way.

My work is all very specific, made of material that is not fungible, even though we treat it that way and, paradoxically, see it as waste. My books are generally also made of what is viewed as waste. They are typically defective, missing pages or deteriorated. More often they are books that have been (I fear justly) forgotten by history and serve no active role except to occupy space. I rehabilitate them by giving them new purpose, in fact a unique and completely unanticipated purpose, even as I draw on qualities they possessed during the brief moment of their relevance. If the book feels

nowadays like a discarded relic, like the rejecta of contemporary culture, in making these objects I want to compel the eye to return to them and see the prospects for joy, for light, and for truth that they have always held out to us, to recuperate the uniqueness of each one through these special exemplars.

And, indeed, these, too, were something alive, both in the basic material sense and in the human, spiritual sense, which I celebrate in insisting upon their uniqueness, if only through the uniqueness of my use (which is a template for all use). I certainly feel that the reverential treatment that I accord these lost volumes is much like the sort of redemption or resurrection I try to practice in my other work. It is a way to honor what we have ignored or rejected, consumed, or even destroyed in our frantic course.

EM: Is there a dialogue among this range of artworks that are so diverse?

HH: My work always seems to me to be very organic, not only in that it arises from an persistent and focused attention to questions or issues with which I am obsessed, but because, from my perspective, it so clearly reflects my way of thinking, is in fact the occasional evidence of my ongoing interrogation of the world, of art, of beauty, of structures of thought and their social expression, and perhaps least obviously to me, my own life. It might be easiest to connect the different bodies of work by saying that each in some way developed out of the previous one, by engaging with

questions that had been raised both by the process of making what came before and by the response that the work invoked. *Skin*, as I said already, was far more diffuse than any of the others, because it had to contain the outpouring of creative energies that had had little opportunity for expression during the previous two decades, and this is where the question of artistic identity that connects it all arose. With *Heads and Tales* I was still fixated on the question of identity, now perhaps more in connection both with the medium I was using, namely, (pig)skin, and with the violence that seems to me to determine that identity for so many of us women. (I might note that I grew up on an industrial pig farm, so some measure of violence, and the ever impending prospect of death, was part of my everyday childhood life.) As an artist, I have certainly connected the treatment of “husbanded” animals to the treatment of women, even conflated them both physically and philosophically, though much of this was taking place unconsciously in these early bodies of work. Perhaps it would also be relevant to mention that as a young woman, a man I knew tried to murder me, so again, my experience was entering the work, though that wasn’t specifically what I thought I was addressing at the time, and even now I wouldn’t say that there was ever a direct auto-biographical intention so much as that the character of the work was always colored by memories I had perhaps more deeply integrated than most people.) When I saw the way people viewed the “Heads”, before and after they realized what they were made of, I was struck by the fact that the way we

see things is determined by factors that we often don’t register, and that how we engage the world is very much the product of our knowledge or ignorance. This led directly to the *Not a Rose* project, in which I was examining the nature of aesthetic response (specifically in relation to knowledge) as much as anything, while again trying to direct attention to the violent underpinnings of the idyllic lives so many of us live without a thought as to what makes that possible. It was here that I really understood what I had been driving at with my obsessive focus on material in the previous bodies of work and which undoubtedly made it possible for me to conceive of the *Icons in Ash* project. I was always fixated on the possibility of realistic portraiture that was actually true to the complex micro-textures of the flesh, and this certainly led to my experimenting with skin in the first place, but the idea that the material was itself the thing it was “representing,” that the *Icons* were the actual person, became a conceptual Klein-bottle of ineffably elegant involution.

I suppose what I want to say is that there are several levels on which my apparently rather disparate work is both consistent and evolving: its overt social, ethical, and feminist content, the more abstract philosophical examination of the artwork in general, which takes place both on the most fundamental material, we might say ontological, plane and in the relationship of the viewer/knower, and artist, to the artwork, and in the curious and often surprising elaboration of my personal, or multiple, autobiography within it.

EM: Finally, if you had to choose only two artists that the world would be unable able to exist without, who would they be?

HH: Please let me mention four, and I'm not so sure that the world wouldn't be able to exist without them, but at least I, as an artist, would not:

Leonardo Da Vinci, Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer, and Ann Hamilton. Leonardo brought art to life for the first time (though the Greeks claimed that people actually fell in love with the statues of Praxiteles); he made it clear that it was not an ontologically subordinate realm, but perhaps even a greater one than day-to-day life. Without his work, I would never have felt so intimately the passion that has continued to inspire my own work and aspirations. So, if there is only one, it is he. The work of Beuys, Kiefer, and Hamilton has meant a great deal to me, and I see an obvious respect in which I feel allied to them. It is in their attention to, exploration of, and, perhaps most importantly, their loving

obsession with material, especially importing traditionally non-art materials from the "real world" into their work, or extending the work into the real world, making it more interesting, expansive, and thoughtful by the incursion of charged things that it does not contain on its own account. Of course, I love the way that artists like Michael Heizer or James Turrell do that as well. Unlike the previous, ultimately self-contained, efforts of Duchamp, Dada, and then assemblage art and neo-Dada, happening, Fluxus, and conceptual art to eradicate the distinction between art and the world, which I feel still takes place within art alone and rarely did much more than to bring a modest dose of reality into the world of art or to put on a brief and disconcerting show in which the uninitiated – the audience – became inadvertent players, their work contributes something impressive to reality itself, re-making it the way art has always aspired to do, and yes, has actually done in many less self-conscious ways.