

Art, Politics & Spirituality

Requiem for an Executed Bird

By Junko Chodos, Artist
Los Angeles

In 1987 I encountered the strangest thing at a junk store in a bright beach town in California. It is a hand-made arch-shaped object about one foot high — a rose tree made of tin, with roses whose ugly pink had turned into the color of rotten meat through age and the accumulation of dust. And its equally ugly leaves which are also made of tin were sticking out from the arch. But the main theme of this weird object is a bird which hangs inside the arched tree, supported on both sides by wire running to the arch.

Here is a bird which is made of plaster, painted dark green, almost black, like a burned chicken just come out of the oven. And there was no head for this bird. When I looked at the part of the neck where the head should be, I saw a glass bottle buried inside of the bird. The bird can turn his neck down when you want to pour liquid from this bottle just like pouring its own blood. This is a wine decanter! Instead of wine, packed with darkness up to his neck, this bird was round and swollen. The old man in the store said to me that it was made for a wedding gift. "Unfortunately," he added, "the cap

war. I re-encountered him in this sick shape under the bright sky in a beach town in California. When I put this object in my studio, the whole studio seemed to darken.

I was a four-year-old child during World War II in Japan, when I encountered an image which haunted me for half a century. Death was everywhere, sirens sounded day and night. One day I came into a room and saw something horrible; a hen hanging upside down from the ceiling, its head chopped off, its blood dripping into a bucket which had been carefully placed on the Japanese straw mat on the floor below. Its wings hung down lifeless, spotted with its own blood. It seemed to me that this bird had been executed—cruelly and unfairly. Created to fly, it had come to this end. I saw it as an execution, a punishment it had to suffer just because it was meant to fly. All my repressed terror of the fascistic government of Japan, of the torture and slaughter which I secretly feared more than I feared destruction by the enemy, found its clearest symbol in the image of this slaughtered hen. From that day on I had an intense phobia of birds of all kinds and I was not even able to look at them.

The bird represents freedom, aspiration and transcendence. And in Shinto, Japan's native religion,



Requiem for An Executed Bird, No. 22, "Bird in the Cathedral."

became associated in my mind with this traumatic scene. As I grew older, my journey towards freedom and being who am became a struggle against this phobia.

In 1991, I was overcome with a desire to paint this bird decanter. As often happens, the process of creating art took on a clear distinctive pattern of going through certain steps, and each step unfolded in that special state of consciousness, different and often conflicting with everyday consciousness, which I call an "altered state of consciousness."

In the space of two months I created a series of 45 works based on this strange object. Piling up stacks of 23"x42" paper I worked for twelve hours a day in my studio on this one theme. First, bloody images of the bird with torn feathers emerged. They stood in front of me, one after another. I followed them relentlessly, with a deep sense of awe. Works kept progressing, my altered state of consciousness ran deeper. When I progressed to the 22nd work of the series, the ugly pink roses of the tin I depicted next to the bird on my paper turned into deep beautiful red roses, and presented themselves to me as stained glass. All of a sudden I realized that this bird was in a cathedral and that I was singing a requiem for him. "Oh God, only you can comfort him. This is a requiem for my bird!"

When I progressed two works more, terror struck me, I felt quicksand under the ground on which I was standing and I felt the ground slanting towards it; I thought that I was pulled into insanity, into a darkness which was darker than any

darkness I ever anticipated, and that I would never be able to climb back unless right now I got out of the studio. Then I noticed that my consciousness had dropped even deeper and my hand started writing on a piece of paper near me: "Draw this melody which rises up towards you from the darkness, and you will know that this darkness is the light."

The bloody red went away from the pictorial space and tones of gold came in its place. The bird was no longer in a building, but in the air, in heavenly air, spinning in circles of gold. He was at last free from his trauma, and so was I: I was free from 50 years of phobia.

Ending the phobia was the collapse of the facade which once protected me from the insanity which I would have been driven into without it, as a little girl who could not confront the terror of being a victim of fascism, Terror, pain, and a sense of vulnerability rushed into me, I experienced them fully consciously for the first time. I started dealing with issues of individuality, freedom and the fascistic mind which exists latent in all of us. A new world of art and thought had opened up to me and many new works have been born since then.

Junko Chodos is a Japanese-born artist who came to America to live over 30 years ago. She has exhibited at many venues throughout the United States, Germany, and Japan. Her book, The Transformative Vision of Junko Chodos, won the Independent Publishers Art Book of the Year Award.



Requiem for an Executed Bird, No. 44.

which is the chopped bird's head is missing, so I would sell it to you at a discount"

A half century had passed since I witnessed the execution of a bird in my faraway homeland during the

the hen is a sacred bird, God's messenger. Later on the many experiences I had of abuse of authority, of violence against the sacredness of individuality, of the taboo against being who you are, all