

# In Red the Angels

Ursula Lytton

When asked in October, whether I could give a lecture at the opening of an exhibition at Renate Müller-Drehse's studio, I agreed under the condition that recent paintings would suit my taste. At that time I happened to be translating the "Alchemy of Happiness" by Al-Ghazzali from English to German. As it turned out later the text and Ms. Müller-Drehse's art showed some interesting similarities. In this context it also has to be recalled that both artist and referee are Aachen natives and strongly influenced by the history and traditions of the city. Charlemagne, the so-called founder of Europe, erected his palatinate in Aachen or Aix-la-Chapelle, consisting of a palace and a cathedral, the latter of which became one of the most important places of Christian pilgrimage during the Middle Ages, competing in popularity with Rome and Santiago de Compostela.

When I visited the studio some weeks later, I instantly realized that the answer could only be positive. The atmosphere was inspiring and the dominant warm colours were bound to make any visitor feel comfortable. Furthermore, without any anticipation of things to come, my outfit matched the colours of the paintings perfectly, which were red, orange, yellow and ochre.

To start with, I was deeply impressed by the rich colour spectrum. They had obviously been applied to the canvas energetically and not rarely in several layers. At second glance, the individual layers did not only become apparent, but each one seemed to contain some mysterious motive. Concrete forms appeared to have lost their significance completely, leaving the task of inspiration solely to the energy within the colours. The artist virtually allows the colours to carry her into a different world and, according to Ghazzali, activate the transcendental spirit, the intuition.

## **The Paintings**

The natural process of creation and the artist's thoughts revolving around this topic are expressed in a cycle of paintings called **Flying Creatures**. They almost resemble the cave paintings of Stone Age and remind us of the fact that early men considered caves as birth place of animals and dwelling of deities, utilized for ritual activities. Livelihood was secured by collecting and hunting. After the hunting season drawings of animals were applied to the cave walls in order to take part symbolically in the act of rebirth. Man paid attention to the organic patterns of earthly being and the cyclical nature of coming to exist and ceasing to exist. They were aware of the fact that things received from the earth had to be given back to her. The **Flying Creatures** are an interesting combination of modern art, contemporary ecological ideas and prehistoric motives. Müller-Drehse's creatures are bound heavenward,

birds, eyes, and snakes, representing female fertility and the vital energy Kundalini, are of timeless interest and might well appear in paintings of different ages.

The artist demonstrates her own creativity in tireless work on international stages. Renowned institutions in German cities like Berlin, Düsseldorf, Aachen, Hannover, Wuppertal, and Mönchengladbach housed her exhibitions. Further presentations and events took place in Los Angeles, USA; Cairo and Alexandria, Egypt; Valencia and other Spanish cities; London, Great Britain; Liege in Belgium; Heerlen, The Netherlands; or Basel in Switzerland. Several of these projects were launched in cooperation with the Goethe Institute. Last but not least, an outstanding project in Gaza deserves our attention. Practically in the middle of the desert, the painter organized an event under the motto “Artists for Peace” with deaf Palestinian women, providing all necessary materials herself. Renate Müller-Drehse does not only regard the cycles of nature from a theoretical point of view. Practically, she returns into the cycle what has formerly been gained.

The impressions collected on numerous journeys of the artist are recorded diary-like in the **day-plates**. Painted on small square canvases, they are later arranged to a larger composition. Müller-Drehse regards her travels as an expansion of her environment, materially as well as spiritually. However, this does not only go for her travels, but for her entire life which she considers a continuous process of education. Basically, she is in search for her personal as well as a suitable human standpoint. Thus, the artist is acting according to Ghazzali’s advice, who considers the search for the origin of human beings as well as their destination the basis of spiritual development. Müller-Drehse has thus arrived at the following insight: “Basic knowledge is alike in all cultures. Merely achieving it is described in different ways.”

Ghazzali provides a clear description of the way in his “Alchemy”. He reminds us of the constant observation and final overcoming of the lower, animal faculties which appear to dominate the spiritual faculties. The latter seem hidden and more difficult to perceive. However, their discovery is indispensable for spiritual development and the acquisition of angelic qualities in human beings.

In the art of Renate Müller-Drehse, **angels** play an important role. They are hidden under numerous layers of colours like secret agents, acting undercover. Only those spectators concentrating on the paintings will be able to detect the angels. On the one hand, the artist allows for secret matters to remain hidden, on the other hand she attempts their presentation on canvas. Layers of colours are applied intuitively in order to veil the content. Even the uninitiated spectator will soon perceive the presence of a hidden entity which calls for discovery. Some of the pictures remind of a theatre stage with several layers of curtains, each one slightly opened, the fabric gently moving in the wind. Thus the spectator is animated to begin his search for secret agents and qualities.

## **Conclusion**

For not only according to Ghazzali, but many other eastern theories, it is essential to find a balance between body, mind and soul. The overweight of physical and material faculties needs to be counteracted. In Chinese culture the idea of a balance between opposed forces is expressed in the dual principle of yin and yang, whose conditions are recorded in the I Ging, The Book of Changes. The dual principle makes the basis for all aspects of Far Eastern traditions and is utilized in architecture as well as medicine. In Japanese culture, the Taoistic principle plays a significant role and can be traced in such different traditions as martial arts, flower arrangement or the tea ceremony.

Indian Yoga claims: "It is the nature of human spirit to strive for happiness. Yet man does not gain satisfaction after achieving his earthly desire. After a while, the game starts all over again, because the spirit remains unchanged and his real desire unfulfilled. However, we bear a source of joy and wisdom within ourselves. This source can be recognized by calming down the constant movement of the spirit. If we are able to direct our attention to an internal destination, we shall be able to live in peace." [Source: "Yoga für alle Lebensstufen", edited by Sivananda Yoga Zentrum, Gräfe und Unzer, München 1986.]

The inward focus described in Yoga resembles Ghazzali's theory of turning one's back to the material world in order to detect more satisfactory states of being. He recommends the constant observation of worldly desires and their transformation into spiritual qualities, in order to achieve angelic faculties eventually.