

Mladen Kunstic

173 Cathedral Variations

Dr. Christine Vogt

Were there only a single truth, painting a hundred pictures of the same subject would be impossible (Pablo Picasso). This insight is strongly reflected in the project Cathedral Variations by Mladen Kunstic, an artist who has set himself the task of painting 173 variations, taking as his subject a building, a holy place. For Kunstic, this represents an immense challenge, both on a personal and artistic level.

Triggered by a very significant personal experience which happened to Kunstic there in the spring of 2006, Aachen's cathedral building has continued to exercise such a fascination on the artist that, with great passion and enthusiasm, he is devoting himself to revealing more and more new perspectives and perceptions of this historic building.

This work-in-progress involves a particular kind of progression, in which, picture by picture, Kunstic is creating parts of a larger entity. To date he has completed 55 of the 173 cathedral variations, which, in this first exhibition, provide an introduction to the project and the special features of the man's art.

Kunstic points out that the creative process which the total project, whose completion he believes will take about three years, is both a process of self-discovery in which his atelier becomes his retreat, and an intense period of self-examination. These personal and emotional elements give the paintings their special energy and atmosphere.

While completing the process of painting, Kunstic will seek to address many different questions. While focussing on the history of the period, German and European history, as well as philosophical aspects, the artist is also concerned with theology. The insights he thus attains and the discoveries he makes are translated onto canvas in color, shapes and lines, a many-layered process, which meshes in the creation of the paintings. In the three years over which this work-in-progress is to continue, the contrasts and tensions between the first and final paintings will become apparent.

The starting point for Kunstic's variations is Aachen Cathedral as we currently see it. A number of the paintings are also inspired by previous images of the building. Realistic or historic reproduction of the cathedral is in no way his intention. Kunstic expresses it thus: *„I do not reflect what I can see. Rather, I see this process as one in which I bring out from the darkness something which was previously concealed from me.“* His quest for multi-dimensionality in his art and in his life is that which finds

expression in the road he seeks to travel. It is thus no accident that after some brief years devoted to painting, in his quest for learning the understanding of things Kunstic turned to sculpture. Sound sculptures, often crafted in harmony with nature, defined his artistic approach to sculpture, with the observer frequently invited to unlock the sounds from the sculptures himself by touching them.

On his return to painting in the mid-nineties, and after much experimentation, Kunstic created his own technique, deciding, as base material for his pictures, on one involving the collage of *objets trouvés* salvaged from our everyday cultural environment, with a predilection for glossy art brochures, and also books and printed material, which, using a special technique, he applied to his canvases. „*My work focuses on things universal, which is why an essential guiding thought behind my art is the idea of painting my pictures as pictures of pictures, thus always creating new distances to reality.*“

In these pictures, the complexity of the setting and its transcendent character abstract themselves from the perception of reality. The thoughts which have shaped the building and are expressed in it, such as numerical mysticism, are also encountered in the number 173. Erich Stephany, vicar capitular at the cathedral, insists that the clarity of structure of this building is rooted in harmony and proportion, and the „holy numbers“. Thus, the number one may be regarded as standing for the divinity, seven for the days of the creation in Genesis (or also, among other possibilities, for the number of sacraments). The addition of one and three results in four, which might represent the four apostles. One and seven add up to the eight sides of the octagon, God's holy eight-sided space. At the same time, the number three, representing the holy trinity, is the most Christian of all numbers.

„*Things whose value remains undiminished throughout the centuries have an enormous strength,*“ explains Kunstic. That the ensemble of Aachen Cathedral is unique is not only demonstrated by the fact of its being added to the UNESCO list of world cultural heritage sites. The architecture of the cathedral brings together two different styles of architecture, the expression of which could hardly be in greater contrast.

To the massive walls of the Carolingian octagon, its central solidity and its obvious pretensions to power, was later added the high gothic glasshouse, a transparent choir, whose delicacy and lightness could hardly be surpassed, and which extends eastwards. Charlemagne had the Carolingian part built in honor of the Virgin Mary, finely decorated by Italian craftsmen with bronze, marble and other materials. Charlemagne chose this place as his last resting place, ostentatiously ornamented by later generations. It was thus that upon his death Charlemagne left the town of Aachen an immortal legacy: since 814 the palatine chapel is his sepulchre, becoming

the emperor's cathedral. Since the 14th century, the „glass shrine“ of the cathedral houses the golden tomb of the emperor. Viktor Gielen talks about Charlemagne in his „Im Banne des Kaiserdomes“ (“Under the Spell of the Emperor's Cathedral”) published in 1978 as follows: *„The lighthouse of Europe“ is a fitting epithet for Charlemagne, the man who put his stamp on the western world. Don't the many thousands of pilgrims who flock to his sepulchre every year do so chiefly because of an unconscious desire for a system of generally common values, for a unified Christian empire, for which Charlemagne himself was seeking? Isn't it because they feel something resembling homesickness for God's kingdom on earth, for the kingdom of peace, both image and model of the heavenly Jerusalem, which Charlemagne was seeking to portray in his cathedral?„*

In his typically expressive language of forms, Kunstic constantly opens new ways to viewing the supposedly known. It is frequently his contours which mark the outline of the silhouette of the cathedral in yellow, red, black or blue. At times it appears as if the contour of the cathedral is overlaying an abstract *Weltanschauung* (Variation Nos.15, 20). The associations are many. One variation (No. 5) seems itself about to turn into a golden shrine. Illuminating not only the choir, in Kunstic's picture the entire south view seems to become a golden shrine. This picture translates the idea of preciousness, brightness and light.

Thus beams the cathedral, illuminated from the interior, in festive light (Variation No.12). The expressive, yellow and orange lines leaping from the windows suggest fire. Although Aachen cathedral has survived such hazards over the centuries, the townspeople remember the great fire of 1656 and its destruction of the center (except the cathedral and the town hall) of the middle age town. Likewise the bombardments of World War II, which, as if miraculously, the cathedral alone endured without large-scale damage or destruction.

Historical and Christian ideas are bound up in this building. Mankind admires this architectural work, this church born of profound belief and, which, at the same time, reveals the history of Christian, Carolingian and German power.

As Leo Tindemans, Belgian prime minister, remarked on receiving the Karlspreis, Aachen's international prize, in 1976: *„European history provides unequivocal evidence of the decisive role played by ideas in the destiny of man (...) Rather than political and military power, it is the spiritual force emanating from the church which has given Europe its strength.“*

Rendering visible the invisible

In his variations, imagination and intuition provide the fulcrum around which the work of Kunstic centers. For more than twelve centuries, countless people have visited this

site, experienced this building, prayed within its walls and expressed their prayers as hope in pictures and ideas. The 173 cathedral variations now under creation are a modest enterprise, an attempt at approaching all these many images; a limit imposed by Kunstic in terms of number and achievability.

Whether 173 pictures can disclose the invisible is questionable. Yet these pictures provide a starting point for fresh insights and also serve as a mirror for the images in the mind of the observer. Moreover, in today's secular society, there is a need for spiritual stimulation, in the absence of belief, creating time and space for those seeking meaning and mystical experience. Kunstic's paintings extend beyond the boundaries of actual space into something imaginary. They allow the observer to immerse himself in both himself and secret and magic inner worlds. The paintings are never restricted to the exterior, but through the exterior of the cathedral tell us something about its interior. The exterior reflects the interior.

Mladen Kunstic sees Aachen as a focal point of Europe's creation. It is thus planned to take the exhibition to various European countries. Aachen's cathedral and the 173 variations could thus become a symbol for a united and peaceful Europe.

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